

# **Jesus the Savior**

## **Introductory Theology, Volume 2**

By Grace Communion International

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# CONTENTS

Introduction .....	vii
<b>Part 1: The Incarnation</b>	
Who Was Jesus Before His Human Birth? .....	1
And the Word Was God .....	9
The Question of Christ's Prayers.....	12
Who Jesus Really Was.....	14
The Incarnation: A Bible Study.....	16
The Incarnation: The Greatest Miracle.....	21
The Real Miracle Story of Jesus' Birth .....	23
What Jesus' Incarnation Shows Us About Being Human .....	28
He Gave Himself.....	31
God in the Flesh.....	33
Who Is Jesus? .....	36
Who Is This Man?.....	40
He Pitched His Tent .....	48
He Gave Himself.....	50
<b>Part 2: The Birth of Jesus</b>	
The Birth of Jesus: A Story of Shame .....	52
Why Jesus Gives Us Hope.....	56
The Miracle of Jesus' Birth .....	61
The Greatest Birth Story .....	67
Emmanuel, Our Redeemer .....	69
Magnificent Joy.....	72

Genealogies of Jesus .....	74
The Prince of Peace .....	76
<b>Part 3: Celebrating the Birth of Jesus</b>	
Is Christmas a Sin? .....	78
Does God Hate Christmas? .....	81
When Was Jesus Born? .....	85
The Date of Jesus' Birth .....	88
Does It Matter When Jesus Was Born? .....	91
A Call for Tolerance .....	94
The First Church Christmas .....	96
Christmas Past and Present in the Church .....	98
Paganism — Where Should Christians Draw the Line? .....	103
What Does Deuteronomy 12:30-31 Forbid? .....	107
Once Pagan, Always Pagan? .....	110
Jeremiah 10 and Christmas Trees .....	114
Paganism, Pagans and Pagan Customs .....	116
Standing in the Light .....	121
Merry Christmas .....	132
Jesus: Merely a Myth? .....	135
The Meaning of Christmas .....	137
Jesus the Double Agent .....	142
The Light of Lights .....	142
Christmas Light .....	144
I'm Dreaming of a Quantum Christmas .....	147
Truce on Earth, Good Will Toward Men .....	151
Using Christmas to Teach Children About Jesus .....	155
The Second-Best Christmas Gift .....	158
What Does Jesus Want for Christmas? .....	160
Discovering Handel's Messiah .....	168
Hark! The Herald Angels Sing .....	172
Oh Come, All Ye Wasteful .....	173
HolidayGreetings.com .....	175
The Tree .....	177
<b>Part 4: The Life of Jesus</b>	
The Message of Jesus: A Bible Study .....	179

## JESUS THE SAVIOR

Playing Jesus— a Discussion with Bruce Marchiano .....	184
Jesus and Women .....	188
Jesus: The Unexpected Messiah .....	195
The Messianic Secret.....	198
<b>Part 5: The Death of Jesus</b>	
Good Friday and Easter Sunday .....	205
Jesus— The Complete Salvation Package.....	208
The Thief's Story .....	212
Would You Have Chosen Barabbas? .....	219
Where Was Golgotha?.....	221
Born to Die.....	226
Why Did Jesus Die? .....	231
Why Did Jesus Have to Die?.....	241
Appreciating Christ's Sacrifice.....	247
Why the Messiah Had to Die .....	251
Two Truths We Learn From Jesus' Death.....	253
A Death in Jerusalem.....	255
Jesus Is Our Atonement.....	270
Christ Our Atonement .....	263
A Closer Look at the Crucifixion.....	269
It Isn't Just About How He Died .....	273
Don't Cry for Jesus .....	275
The Day Christ Died.....	280
Jesus Christ's Last Sermon.....	282
Did God Forsake Jesus on the Cross? .....	286
Jesus Was Not Alone .....	294
Did You Kill Jesus Christ?.....	296
Three Aspects, One Great Event .....	298
Our Strange Dead God .....	301
Commemorating the Crucifixion.....	305
How Long Was Jesus in the Tomb?.....	310
Was Jesus Crucified on a Wednesday?.....	313
<b>Part 6: The Resurrection of Jesus</b>	
Jesus — Alive Forevermore!.....	316
On the Road to Emmaus .....	321
Believing Thomas .....	328
Evidence of the Resurrection .....	334
The Empty Tomb: Reasons to Believe.....	339
The Empty Tomb— What's in It for You?.....	342

He's Alive! .....	347
The Power of the Resurrection.....	352
Jesus' Resurrection Pictured in the Old Testament.....	354
Trumpets: A Festival Fulfilled in Christ .....	358
Rejoice! Christ Has Risen.....	361
Christ's Resurrection: Our Hope of Salvation.....	365
<b>Part 7: Celebrating the Resurrection</b>	
Celebrate the Spring Festivals .....	369
Easter Sunday.....	371
Three Rs for Easter.....	373
Easter in the Church.....	375
Celebrating the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.....	378
The Passover-Easter-Quartodeciman Controversy.....	382
What Does Jesus Have to Do with Easter? .....	386
Is It a Sin to Observe Easter?.....	391
A Note About Easter.....	397
<b>Part 8: The Ascension and the Return</b>	
The Ascension and the Return of Christ.....	399
Celebrating Jesus' Ascension.....	404
Resurrection and Ascension: What It Means to Be 'In Christ'.....	407
Stay Focused on Jesus.....	414
Jesus' Benediction.....	418
The Coming of the Lord.....	421
No One Knows When Christ Will Return.....	425
Here He Comes, Ready or Not.....	432
Advent.....	452
About the Authors .....	438
About the Publisher... ..	440
Grace Communion Seminary .....	442
Ambassador College of Christian Ministry .....	460

## INTRODUCTION

This book is a compilation of numerous articles, most of them written independently of the others over the span of 20 years or so. There is some overlap, and perhaps even some contradictions, although all articles have been edited recently for this compilation. Some of the articles will be more relevant to your interests than others, so feel free to skip around according to which titles interest you. We hope that you find the collection useful.

The articles are arranged in a chronological order, discussing the incarnation first, then the birth, with a section on the celebration of his birth, Christmas. The section on the life of Jesus could be greatly expanded; for additional articles, see our volume titled *Exploring the Word of God: The Four Gospels*. The remaining sections discuss the crucifixion, atonement, resurrection, ascension, and return. The theme throughout is that Jesus acted for our salvation, and we celebrate him for who he is and what he has done for us.





## WHO WAS JESUS BEFORE HIS HUMAN BIRTH?

Did Jesus exist before his human birth? What or who was Jesus before his incarnation? Was he the God of the Old Testament?

In order to understand who Jesus was, we first should understand the basic doctrine of the Trinity. The Bible teaches us that God is one and only one being. This tells us that whoever or whatever Jesus was before his human incarnation, he could not have been a God separate from the Father.

While God is one being, he exists eternally as three coequal and coeternal Persons, whom we know as the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. In order to understand how the Trinity doctrine describes the nature of God, we must keep in mind the difference between the words “Being” and “Person.” This distinction has been put in the following terms: there is but one *what* of God (that is, his Being) but there are three *whos* within the one being of God, that is, the three divine Persons—Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The Being we call the one God has an *eternal* relationship within himself of Father to Son. The Father has always been the Father and the Son has always been the Son. The Holy Spirit has always been the Holy Spirit. One Person in the Godhead did not exist before the others, or without the others, and neither is one Person inferior to the other in his essence. All three divine Persons—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—share the one being of God. The Trinity doctrine explains that Jesus was not created at some point, but existed eternally as God.

There are three pillars to the Trinitarian understanding of God’s nature.

- 1) Only one true God exists, who is Yahweh (YHWH) of the Old Testament or *theos* of the New Testament—the Creator of all that

exists.

- 2) God includes three divine Persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Father or Holy Spirit, and the Spirit is not the Father or the Son.
- 3) These three distinct (but *not* separate) persons equally share the one divine being, God, and that they are eternal, co-equal and co-essential. Thus, God is one in essence and one in being, but exists in three persons. (We must always be careful not to understand the “Persons” of the Godhead like persons in the human sphere, where one person is separate from another.)

God as Trinity transcends our understanding. God is greater than our finite minds can completely grasp. Scripture does not explain how it is that the one God can exist as the Trinity. It just gives us the basic facts: there is only one God, but the Father is God, the Son is divine, and the Spirit is also divine.

How the Father and the Son can be one being is difficult for us humans to understand. Our experience in the created world is that persons are different beings. So we need to keep in mind the distinction the early church made between *person* and *essence*, which the doctrine of the Trinity makes. This distinction tells us that there is a difference between the way God is *one* and the way that he is *three*. God is one in essence and three in persons. If we keep that distinction throughout our discussion, we will avoid being confounded by the seeming (but not real) contradiction in the biblical truth that God is one being in three Persons—Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

A physical analogy, though an imperfect one, might help us understand. There is but one pure light, and we perceive it as white light. But white light can be broken down into three primary colors—red, green and blue. Each of the three primary colors does not exist apart from the other primary colors—they are included within the one light, which is white. There is but one complete light that we call white light, but this light contains three distinct but not separate primary colors. (The analogy fails, as all analogies from the created world do, if we extend it further. Although white light contains three primary colors, it is physically possible to separate the colors, and to have a stream of red light, for example. In the Trinity, it is not possible to separate the Persons, although they can be distinguished from one another.)

The above explanation gives us the essential basis of the Trinity, which provides the perspective to understand who or what Jesus was before he became human flesh. Once we understand the relationship that has always existed within the one God, we can proceed to answer the question of who

Jesus was before his incarnation and physical birth.

### **Jesus' eternity and pre-existence in John's Gospel**

The pre-existence of Christ is clearly stated in John 1:1-4: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life."

This Word (*Logos* in Greek) became incarnate in Jesus. "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us," John tells us (verse 14). The eternal, uncreated Word who was God, and yet was *with* God as one of the Persons of the Godhead, became a human being. The Word "was" God (an eternal state) but "became" a human being. The Word never came into being, that is, he didn't "become" the Word. He always *was* the Word, or God. The Word's existence is open-ended. He has always existed.

As Donald Macleod points out in *The Person of Christ*: "He is sent forth as one who already has being, not as one who comes into being by being sent" (page 55). Macleod further states:

In the New Testament, Jesus' existence as a man is a continuation of his previous or prior existence as a heavenly being. The Word who dwelt among us is the same as the Word who was with God. The Christ who is found in form as a man is the very one who previously existed in the form of God. (page 63)

It was the Word, the Son of God, who became flesh, rather than the Father or the Holy Spirit.

### **Who is Yahweh?**

In the Old Testament the most common name for God is Yahweh, which comes from the Hebrew consonants YHWH. It was Israel's national name for God, the ever-living, self-existent Creator. In time, the Jews began to consider the name of God, YHWH, as too sacred to be pronounced. The Hebrew word *adonay* ("my Lord") or Adonai was substituted. In many English Bibles, we see the word "LORD" used where YHWH appears in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Yahweh is the most common name of God in the Old Testament, being used over 6800 times. Another name for God in the Old Testament is Elohim, which is used over 2500 times, as in the phrase "the LORD God" (YHWH Elohim).

In the New Testament, there are many scriptures the writers apply to Jesus that referred to Yahweh in the Old Testament. The practice of the New

Testament writers is so common that its significance may escape us. By using Yahweh scriptures for Jesus, these writers are implying that Jesus was Yahweh, or God, now made flesh. We shouldn't be surprised that the writers make this comparison, because Jesus himself explained that Old Testament passages applied to him (Luke 24:25-27, 44-47; John 5:39-40, 45-46).

### **Jesus is the *Ego eimi***

In John's Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples: "I am telling you now before it happens, so that when it does happen you will believe that I am he" (13:19). The phrase "I am he" is translated from the Greek *ego eimi*. The phrase occurs 24 times in John's Gospel. At least seven of these are said to be "absolute," in that they are not followed by a predicate, such as in John 6:35, "I am the bread of life." In the seven absolute cases, no predicate follows, and the "I AM" phrase comes at the end of the clause. This indicates that Jesus is using this phrase as a name to identify who he is. The seven places are John 8:24, 28, 58; 13:19; 18:5, 6 and 8.

If we go back to Isaiah 41:4, 43:10 and 46:4, we can see the background for Jesus' reference to himself in John's Gospel as *ego eimi* ("I AM"). In Isaiah 41:4, God or Yahweh says: "I, the Lord...I am he." In Isaiah 43:10 he says "I am he," and later says, "You are my witnesses,' declares the Lord, 'that I am God'" (verse 12). In 46:4, God (Yahweh) again refers to himself as "I am he."

The Hebrew phrase "I am he" is translated in the Greek version of the Holy Scriptures, the Septuagint (which the apostles used), by the phrase *ego eimi* in Isaiah 41:4; 43:10; and 46:4. Jesus' made the "I am he" statements as references to himself because they directly connected to God's (Yahweh's) statements about himself in Isaiah. John said, in effect, that Jesus was saying he was God in the flesh (a point also taught in John 1:1, 14, which introduces the Gospel and speaks of the Word's divinity and incarnation.)

John's *ego eimi* ("I am") identification of Jesus can also be carried back to Exodus 3, in which God identifies himself as the "I am." Here we read: "God [Hebrew, *elohim*] said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: "I AM has sent me to you"' (verse 14).

The Gospel of John makes a clear connection between Jesus and Yahweh, the name of God in the Old Testament. We should also notice that John does not *equate* Jesus with the Father (and neither do the other Gospels). Jesus, for example, prays *to* the Father (John 17:1-15). John understands that the Son is distinct from the Father—and he also sees that both are distinct from the Holy Spirit (John 14:15, 17, 25; 15:26). John's identification of Jesus as God, or Yahweh (if we think of his Hebrew, Old Testament name), is therefore a

Trinitarian explanation of God's being.

Let's go over this again, because it is important. John repeats Jesus' identification of himself as the "I AM" of the Old Testament. Since there is but one God, and John would have understood that, then we are left with the conclusion that there must be two persons sharing the one nature that is God. (We have seen that Jesus, the Son, is distinct from the Father.) With the Holy Spirit, also discussed by John in chapters 14-17, we have the basis of the Trinity.

To put aside all doubt about John's identification of Jesus with Yahweh, we may quote John 12:37-41, which says:

Even after Jesus had done all these miraculous signs in their presence, they still would not believe in him. This was to fulfill the word of Isaiah the prophet: "Lord, who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?" For this reason they could not believe, because as Isaiah says elsewhere: "He has blinded their eyes and deadened their hearts, so they can neither see with their eyes, nor understand with their hearts, nor turn—and I would heal them." Isaiah said this because he saw Jesus' glory and spoke about him.

The quotes above come from Isaiah 53:1 and 6:10. The prophet originally spoke his words in regards to Yahweh. John says that what Isaiah actually saw was "Jesus' glory" and that he "spoke of him." For John the apostle, Jesus was Yahweh in the flesh; before his human birth he was known as Yahweh.

## **Jesus is "the Lord" of the New Testament**

Mark begins his Gospel by saying that it is "the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (1:1). He then quotes from Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3 in the following words: "I will send my messenger ahead of you who will prepare your way—a voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him'" (Mark 1:2-3). The "Lord" in Isaiah 40:3 is Yahweh, the name of the self-existent God of Israel.

Mark, as noted above, quotes the first part of Malachi 3:1, "I will send my messenger who will prepare the way before me." (The "messenger" is John the Baptist.) The next sentence in Malachi says: "Then suddenly the LORD you are seeking will come to his temple." The "LORD" is Yahweh. By quoting the first part of this verse, Mark implies that Jesus is the fulfillment of what Malachi said of Yahweh. Mark announces the gospel, which is that Yahweh, the Lord, has come as the messenger of the covenant. But, says Mark,

Yahweh is Jesus, the Lord.

From Romans 10:9-10, we understand that Christians will confess that “Jesus is Lord.” The context through verse 13 shows that Jesus is the *Lord* upon whom all humans must call in order to be saved. Paul quotes from Joel 2:32 to make his point—“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (verse 13). In the Old Testament passage, salvation comes to those who call on the name of Yahweh—the divine name of Israel for God. For Paul, it is Jesus upon whom we call in order to be saved.

In Philippians 2:9-11, we read that Jesus has a “name that is above every name,” that at his name “every knee should bow” and that every tongue will “confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.” Paul bases his statements on Isaiah 45:23: “By myself I have sworn, my mouth has uttered in all integrity a word that will not be revoked: *Before me every knee will bow; by me every tongue will swear*” (italics added). This is Yahweh, the God of Israel, speaking of himself. He is the Lord, who says, “there is no God apart from me” (verse 21).

Paul has no hesitation in saying that every knee will bow to Jesus and every tongue will confess him. Since Paul believes in only one God, he must be equating Jesus with Yahweh in some way.

One might then ask: If Jesus was Yahweh, then where was the Father in the Old Testament? According to our Trinitarian understanding of God, *both* the Father and the Son are Yahweh, because they are one God. (So also is the Holy Spirit.) All three Persons of the Godhead—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—share the one divine essence and one divine name that is God, *theos* or Yahweh.

## Hebrews connects Jesus to Yahweh

One of the clearest statements that connects Jesus to Yahweh, the God of the Old Testament is Hebrews 1, especially verses 8-12. It is clear from the first few verses of chapter 1 that the subject is Jesus Christ as the Son of God (verse 2). God “made the universe” through the Son and has appointed him the “heir of all things” (verse 2). This Son is “the radiance of God’s glory and “the exact representation of his being” (verse 3). He sustains all things “by his powerful word” (verse 3). Then, in verses 8-12, we read:

But about the Son he [God] says, “Your throne, O God, will last forever and ever, and righteousness will be the scepter of your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness, therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy.” He [God] also says, “In the beginning, O Lord, you laid the foundations of the earth, and the

heavens are the works of your hands. They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment. You will roll them up like a robe; like a garment they will be changed. But you remain the same, and your years will never end.

The first thing we should notice is that the material in Hebrews 1 comes from several Psalms. The second passage in the selection is quoted from Psalm 102:25-27. This passage refers to Yahweh, the God of the Old Testament, the Creator of all that exists. All of Psalm 102 is about Yahweh. Yet, Hebrews is applying this material to Jesus. Only one conclusion is possible: Jesus is God, or Yahweh.

Note also the italicized words above. They show that the Son, Jesus Christ, is called both God and Lord in Hebrews 1. Further, we see that Yahweh's relationship to the one being addressed was: "God, your God." Thus, both the one addressing and the one being addressed are God. How can this be, since there is but one God? The answer is in our Trinitarian explanation. The Father is God and the Son is also God. They are two of the three Persons of the one being, God, or Yahweh in the Hebrew language.

In Hebrews 1, Jesus is shown to be the creator and the sustainer of the universe. He "remains the same" (verse 12), or simply "is," that is, his being is eternal. Jesus Christ is the "exact representation" of the being of God (verse 3). Hence, he must be God as well. It's no wonder the writer in Hebrews could take passages that described God (Yahweh) and apply them to Jesus. In the words of James White, in pages 133-134 of *The Forgotten Trinity*:

The writer to the Hebrews shows no compunctions in taking this passage from the Psalter—a passage fit only for describing the eternal Creator himself—and applying it to Jesus Christ...What does it mean that the writer to the Hebrews could take a passage that is only applicable to Yahweh and apply it to the Son of God, Jesus Christ? It means that they saw no problem in making such an identification, because they believed that the Son was, indeed, the very incarnation of Yahweh.

### **Jesus' pre-existence in Peter's writings**

Let us look at one more example of how New Testament writings equate Jesus with Yahweh, the Lord or God of the Old Testament. The apostle Peter calls Jesus the "living Stone," who was "rejected by men but chosen by God" (1 Peter 2:4). To show that Jesus is this living Stone, he quotes from three passages in the Holy Scriptures:

See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame. The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone, a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.

The phrases come from Isaiah 28:16, Psalm 118:22 and Isaiah 8:14. In each case, the statements refer to the Lord, or Yahweh, in their Old Testament context. For example, in Isaiah 8:13-14, it is Yahweh who says:

The Lord Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy, he is the one you are to fear, he is the one you are to dread, and he will be a sanctuary; but for both houses of Israel he will be a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall [italics ours].

For Peter, as for the other New Testament writers, Jesus is to be equated with the Lord of the Old Testament—Yahweh, the God of Israel. (The apostle Paul in Romans 9:32-33 also quotes Isaiah 8:14 to show that Jesus is the “stumbling stone” over whom the unbelieving Jews had stumbled.)

In conclusion, for the New Testament writers, Yahweh has become incarnate in Jesus, the “Rock” of the church. As Paul said of Israel’s God: “They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and *that rock was Christ*” (1 Corinthians 10:3-4, italics ours).

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*Paul Kroll*



## AND THE WORD WAS GOD

Some people ask how to understand John 1:1, since some people claim that this verse should read that the Word was “a God”—or “a god.” This claim is based on the fact that in the original Greek text the word *theos* in the last clause of John 1:1 does not have the definite article, as it does in the second clause, which refers to the Father. This argument comes from a lack of understanding of Greek grammar and syntax.

It is not true that John 1:1 could be translated: “and the Word was a God.” This translation may be possible in a pagan Greek work, but impossible in a Christian or Jewish writing. The reason is that the Bible teaches there is only one God. The Jewish and Christian religions have always taught this. The translation “a God” implies polytheism and denies one of the most fundamental teachings of the Bible.

The clause “and the Word was God” is translated from the Greek “*theos ēn ho logos*.” In this clause, *ho logos* is the subject, and *theos* is a predicate nominative. In Greek it is not necessary to use the definite article with a predicate nominative in this kind of sentence. In fact, doing so would change the meaning in a way that would confuse what John was saying. Using the definite article in this case would make the clause mean that the Word was the same person as the Father. However, John wanted to point out that the Word was God, but not the same person as the Father, who is the one commonly referred to when we just use the word God.

The word *theos* in this clause is a predicate nominative coupled to the subject by a form of the verb “to be.” An eminent scholar, C. H. Dodd, commenting on John 1:1 explains:

The general rule is that in a sentence containing the verb “to be” as a copula the subject has the article and a predicate noun is anarthrous, even though it be definite. Hence, if *theos* was to be used predicatively it would be anarthrous, without any necessary change of meaning from the *ho theos* of the preceding clause. (“New Testament Translation Problems II,” *The Bible Translator* 28, 1 [January 1977]:103).

There are a number of biblical texts where Christ is referred to as God where the definite article does appear—though with other qualifiers that distinguish Christ from the Father (John 20:28 and 1 John 5:20, and in most Greek texts, Titus 2:13 and 2 Peter 1:1).

Nonetheless, some argue that Jesus was not God, but a creation of God.

This is based on the fact that John 1:1 does not have the definite article with God (Greek *theos*) in the clause “the Word was God.” At least one group of Bible students believes that this indicates the Word is a lesser god. They then speculate that the Word was created. This notion is dispelled, however, by a proper analysis of the Greek. We quote a brief statement by a scholar on this point:

A definite predicate nominative has the article when it follows the verb; it does not have the article when it precedes the verb.... The opening verse of John’s Gospel contains one of the many passages where this rule suggests the translation of a predicate as a definite noun. The absence of the article [before *theos*] does not make the predicate indefinite or qualitative when it precedes the verb; it is indefinite in this position only when the context demands it. The context makes no such demand in the Gospel of John, for this statement cannot be regarded as strange in the prologue of the gospel which reaches its climax in the confession of Thomas [John 20:28, “My Lord and my God”]. (E. C. Colwell, “A Definite Rule for the Use of the Article in the Greek New Testament,” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 52 (1933), 12-21. See also B. M. Metzger, “On the Translation of John 1:1,” *Expository Times*, LXIII (1951-52), 125 f., and C. F. D. Moule, *The Language of the New Testament*, pp. 12-14.)

John 1:1-3 explicitly states that both the Word and God are divine, and the vast majority of major translations have: “and the Word was God.” Greek scholars are in general agreement that the wording “The Word was God” or “the Word was divine” is the correct way to understand the last clause of John 1:1.

Competent scholarship does not support the argument that the lack of a definite article in a predicate nominative indicates an indefinite reference. “To say that the absence of the article bespeaks of the nonabsolute deity of the Word is sheer folly. There are many places in this Gospel where the anarthrous [used without the article] *theos* appears (e.g., 1:6, 12, 13, 18), and not once is the implication that this is referring to just ‘a god’” [*Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Frank E. Gaebelin, editor, volume 9, page 30].

If it were true, as the heretic Arius taught in the fourth century, that Jesus Christ is a god but not the God, that he was created and not God from eternity, then Christianity would be a polytheistic religion. However, polytheism is condemned in the Bible. Scripture says there is one God (Deuteronomy 6:4; Mark 12:29; Ephesians 4:6; 1 Timothy 1:17; 1 John 4:8; 5:20; Matthew 28:1; 2 Corinthians 13:14; 1 Corinthians 8:6).

## JESUS THE SAVIOR

Here briefly are some of the reasons we believe that Jesus Christ was “God the Son”: he is called “God” (Hebrews 1:8-9) and “Mighty God” (Isaiah 9:6); we are told that “in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form” (Colossians 2:9-10). Also, the disciples worshiped him as God (Matthew 14:33; John 20:28).

In the New International Version (and most other translations are equally clear on this point), there are a number of clear statements about the deity of Christ. See for example John 1:3, 10, 14, 18; 5:18; Revelation 1:13-18; 22:13.

What about Revelation 3:14, however? Is there evidence here that Jesus could have been created? In this verse, the word “beginning” is translated from the Greek *archē*, which means “chief” (that from which the beginning is generated and flows). Christ is the originating instrument of creation (Colossians 1:15-17). He is the Chief—the Head and Governor of creation. Revelation 3:14, therefore, does not even hint that Christ was created by the Father sometime before the beginning. He has always existed.

*Paul Kroll*

## THE QUESTION OF CHRIST'S PRAYERS

Some people ask: Since God is one, why did Jesus have to pray to the Father? Behind this question lies the suggestion that the oneness of God does not allow Jesus (who was God) to pray to the Father. God is one. So, to whom was Jesus praying? This picture misses four vital points, which need to be made clear if the question is to receive a satisfactory answer.

The first point is that the statement "The Logos was God" does not assert that God was the Logos. The word "God," in the expression "and the Word was God" (John 1:1), is not used as a proper name. The phrase means that the Logos was *divine* – that the Logos had the same nature as God – one being, one nature. It is a mistake to think that the expression "The Logos was God" means that the Logos alone was God. From that standpoint, this expression does not preclude Christ's praying to the Father. In other terms, there is a Christ, and there is a Father, and there is no inconsistency in Christ's offering a prayer to the Father.

The second point that needs to be clarified is that the Logos became flesh (John 1:14). This statement says that the Logos of God became a human being – a finite man, with all the qualities and limitations of human beings. He had all the needs that come with human nature. He needed food in order to remain alive, he had spiritual and emotional needs, including the need to be in communion with God through prayer. This need will become even clearer below.

The third point that needs to be clarified is his sinlessness. Prayer is not just for sinners; even a sinless being can and should praise God and seek his help. A human, a finite being, needs to pray to God, needs to have communion with God. Jesus Christ, a human being, needed to pray to the Infinite God.

Fourth, there is an assumption that the need to pray is proof that the praying person is not more than human. That assumption has crept into many people's thinking from a distorted perception of prayer – from the notion that human imperfection is the only basis of prayer. That notion is not taken from the Bible or from anything God has revealed. Adam would have needed to pray even if he had not sinned. His sinlessness would not make prayer unnecessary. Christ prayed even though he was perfect.

With the above clarifications in place, the question can be answered.

## JESUS THE SAVIOR

Christ was God, but he was not the Father (or the Holy Spirit); he could pray to the Father. Christ was also a man – a finite human being; he needed to talk with the Father. Christ was also the new Adam – an example of the perfect man that Adam should have been; he was in constant communion with God. Christ was more than human – and prayer does not change his status; he prayed as the Son of God who had become human. The notion that prayer is improper or unnecessary for someone who is more than human is not derived from God's revelation.

## WHO JESUS REALLY WAS

The Gospel of John concentrates on Jesus' divine identity. John says nothing specific about Jesus' birth. His interest is to show the true identity and eternal nature of the One who became the human being, Jesus. John begins his Gospel before time began, we might say, in order to inform us about Jesus' existence. He says: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning."

John next tells us that the divine Word underwent an absolutely radical and unique change. John describes this historical creative act tersely in a single sentence in verse 14: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us."

The divine Word (the Son of God or Jesus Christ) became a fertilized egg in Mary's womb. That cell divided again and again, becoming in time tens of millions of cells, developing into an embryo and then a fetus, and finally resulting in the birth of the infant Jesus, after Mary's normal, nine-month pregnancy.

Words cannot adequately describe the astonishingly infinite creativity and freedom of God to reach down to us by becoming one of us, bringing us the joyous good news of who he is for us and who he has made us to be in Jesus Christ.

### **From infinite power to human cell**

When we turn to the apostle Paul's letter to the Philippians, we find a further explanation of this profound occurrence — the Incarnation — the "infleshing" of the divine Son of God as the man Jesus.

Paul writes, speaking of Jesus Christ: "Being in very nature God, he did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death — even death on a cross!" (Philippians 2:5-8).

Why would the eternal, all-powerful Son of God put himself through such a profound change, taking on our fallen human nature and mortal body? Paul explains why by telling us that this act of pure love was necessary for our salvation. "You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich [in very nature God], yet for your sakes he became poor [human flesh], so that you through his poverty might become rich [receive eternal life]" (2 Corinthians 8:9, italics mine).

## **What God accomplished in Jesus**

There in a nutshell is the greatest story ever told. In this miraculous act of the Word become human flesh, Jesus took on our fallen human nature and recreated it within himself, transforming it into his perfect and righteous human nature. In Jesus' death on the cross, God wiped away our spiritual fallenness and freed us from the sinfulness that enslaves us. In his bodily resurrection, Jesus was the forerunner of our salvation, drawing us into the new life of his resurrection. And, finally, at his coming in power and glory, Jesus will end the stranglehold of human death by redeeming our mortal bodies with immortality (1 Corinthians 15:50-54).

All this stems from God's eternal and inexhaustible love for us. Is it any wonder that Christmas celebration is filled with wonder and awe, as we contemplate the Incarnation of Jesus, our Savior and Lord?

Christian believers do not put their faith in a group of doctrines or a set of logical proofs. They have no faith in fake, ersatz "gods." They place no false hopes in themselves and do not rest on any "good works" that they perform.

Believers believe in a living person — Jesus Christ, who is true God of true God, sent by the Father, and who, with the Father, "lives in" them by the Holy Spirit (John 14:15-21). Each Christian believer says with the apostle Paul: "I am not ashamed, because I know whom I have believed"—Jesus Christ (2 Timothy 1:12).

That is the story of Christmas — the good news of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

*Paul Kroll*

## **THE INCARNATION: A BIBLE STUDY**

Of all events in Jesus' life, three stand out as most significant and most celebrated: his birth, death and resurrection. These are doctrinally significant. His birth illustrates his humanity; his death purchased our salvation; his resurrection illustrates his glory and guarantees our future resurrection to glory.

A Savior is certainly someone worth celebrating. Christians have been celebrating Christ for almost 2,000 years. To commemorate and celebrate the Savior, most Christians have observed annual memorials of various events in the life of Jesus Christ. Some celebrate his birth, baptism, transfiguration, triumphal entry, Last Supper, crucifixion, resurrection and ascension. Scripture tells us when some of these events happened; others are commemorated with dates that have become traditional.

This worship calendar was useful for the needs of the Christian church. Since many early Christians were unable to read the Scriptures, the yearly cycle of worship days helped people remember the biblical stories about Jesus.

In this study we focus on the importance of his incarnation—the fact that he was a human, with human flesh. In order to save us, it was necessary for Jesus to be born and to die as a human.

1. What was one of the specific heresies that John warns us about? 2 John 7. What is the true teaching about Jesus? 1 John 4:1-3. How does John phrase it in his Gospel? John 1:14.

John begins the story of Jesus by talking about “the Word”— who was both with God and who was God (verse 1). The Word was the Creator (verse 3), and he had both light and life (verse 4). The Word came into the world, but the world did not accept him (verses 9-11). But some people did accept him, and the Word enabled believers to be born as children of God (verses 12-13).

The Word, who had life within himself, became flesh. The immortal became mortal. The Creator became as one of the created. These concepts contradicted everything Jews and Greeks had thought about God, and many people could not accept these ideas. They could not believe that God had become human.

Some people tried to resolve the logical problem by saying that Jesus was



not God. Others taught that Jesus wasn't really human. But the apostle John tells us boldly that the Word became flesh. This concept is so important, he says, that anyone who teaches otherwise is an antichrist. This doctrine is one that the New Testament says is essential to the faith.

John is saying that God became fleshly. This is the basis of the doctrine of the Incarnation, the teaching that God the Word was made flesh. Jesus was not only God, but also a flesh-and-blood human—God in the flesh. The Word became flesh— “and made his dwelling among us,” John tells us. A literal translation says that “he pitched his tent among us”—the Greek original uses the word for tent or tabernacle. The Word had a temporary dwelling, a mortal body (Paul also compares our body to a tent in 2 Corinthians 5:1-9).

We have seen the evidence, John says. We have touched him and talked with him (1 John 1:1). We have seen both his humanity and his divine glory.

2. In what ways did Jesus have human weaknesses and limitations? Matthew 4:2; John 4:6; 19:28. What emotions did he have? John 11:33-35; 12:27; 13:21; Matthew 8:10; 26:38; Mark 3:5; 6:6; 10:14; Luke 10:21; Hebrews 5:7. In how many ways did he grow? Luke 2:52; Hebrews 5:8. Did he have to grow in intelligence?

Jesus began life as a fetus, helpless. He lived as a baby, crying when hungry, fussing when uncomfortable. As a child, he had to learn to crawl, and then walk and run. He learned to talk just as other children do. He had to learn words and grammar of Aramaic, Hebrew, and Greek. He had to learn about the physical world around him, farming, weather and the history of his own people. He was human physically, intellectually and emotionally.

In the process of learning, Jesus would have made mistakes. He would fall down when learning to walk, make grammatical errors when learning to talk, make measurement mistakes when learning to be a carpenter. Making mistakes with facts such as these is not a sin, and we have no biblical or theological reason to think that Jesus never made such mistakes. This is part of life in the flesh.

In contrast to factual mistakes, Jesus never made moral mistakes. He never committed a sin. This is a reflection of his divine nature. Although Jesus did not know everything (Mark 13:32), he knew his limitations, and he did not teach errors. He was full of truth; he is the truth (John 1:14; 14:6).

3. Did Jesus sin? 2 Corinthians 5:21; Hebrews 4:15. Is he called God? John

1:1, 18; 20:28; Romans 9:5; Titus 2:13; Hebrews 1:8; 2 Peter 1:1. Is he our Creator? John 1:3; Colossians 1:16; Hebrews 1:2. Does he reveal to us what God is really like? John 14:9; Colossians 2:9. Is he worthy of our worship? Philippians 2:10-11; Revelation 5:12-14.

4. Even after his resurrection, did Jesus have flesh? Luke 24:39. How did he prove it? Verses 42-43; John 20:27. Did he rise into heaven with a body, and will he return in the same way? Acts 1:9-11. Is he even now called a man, a human? 1 Timothy 2:5.

Some scriptures tell us that Jesus is God; others tell us that he was and is human. He was God in the flesh—God made incarnate—a God-man.

Jesus shows us that God is not just an idea or a list of doctrines, but a living being — one who wants a relationship with humans. To make this relationship possible, the Son of God humbled himself to become a human. Jesus is the best example of God we can see in this life—so much so that if we reject Jesus, then we are also rejecting God.

If Jesus were not God, he could not save us. If he were not human, he could not die for all humanity. We may not understand exactly how he atoned for all our sins, but we recognize that our salvation depends on Jesus being both God and human. Let us see some reasons that his humanity is important.

5. Was it necessary for Jesus to be a human? Hebrews 2:17. Does his experience as a human enable him to help us? Verse 18. As both God and human, is he uniquely qualified to be a High Priest, a mediator between God and humans? Hebrews 4:15; 1 Timothy 2:5. Are we made righteous through the obedience of a human? Romans 5:18-19.

6. Does he set an example for us? 1 John 2:6; 1 Peter 2:21. Is he the pattern for our spiritual life? Romans 8:29; 2 Corinthians 3:18; Galatians 4:19; Hebrews 12:2-3. Does his example even carry over into our future glory? 1 Corinthians 15:48-49; 1 John 3:2.

It was as a human that Jesus paid the penalty of human sin. Because he is saving humans, he had to be made like us in every way (Hebrews 2:17). As a perfectly righteous human, and as our Creator, he could atone for everyone's sins through his one sacrifice.

Through his experiences as a human, through his lifelong struggles with temptations, he is able to serve as our High Priest. He was tempted in every

way, and he suffered when he was tempted. We can therefore be confident that he understands us when we struggle with our temptations and look to him for the help and grace we need.

Being human, Jesus could not conquer temptation without a struggle, but being divine it was his nature to do his Father's will (John 5:19, 30), and therefore to resist and fight temptation until he had overcome it. From Gethsemane we may infer that his struggles were sometimes more acute and agonizing than any we ever know. (J.I. Packer, *Concise Theology*, Tyndale, 1993, p. 110)

Jesus is the perfect role model for us. He shows us what it is to be fully human, fully in touch with God's purpose for our lives. When God first made humans, he declared them "very good." Jesus Christ proves that nothing is morally wrong with having flesh, with having weakness, with being mortal.

Jesus had human nature. The reason that all humans have sinned is not because there is anything wrong with the way God made us, but because humans have chosen to misuse what God made. Jesus has shown what human nature could and should be.

God intended that humans rule over creation, and through the human Jesus Christ, humans will indeed rule over creation (Hebrews 2:8). It is because of Jesus' obedience as a human, as the Second Adam, that we are made righteous and therefore qualified to rule with him.

Two moments in Jesus' life illustrate his humanity most clearly: his birth and his death. Let us look briefly at his birth. Although his human life began with his conception, it was at his birth that he became visible.

7. Was Jesus conceived in a miraculous way, in a virgin? Matthew 1:18-23. What was his significance? Verses 21, 23. How does Luke describe the events? Luke 1:26-35. Was Jesus born in a place of glory, or of humility? Luke 2:4-7. Did the angels sing praises for this event in God's plan of salvation? Verse 14. Did angels sing for any other events?

Since the incarnation was essential for our salvation, we praise God for it. Indeed, at least one passage in Scripture appears to be a song in celebration of Jesus' willingness to humble himself for our salvation (Philippians 2:6-11).

God became human—what a miracle!

It is by far the most amazing miracle of the entire Bible.... The fact that the infinite, omnipotent, eternal Son of God could become [a human] and join himself to a human nature...will remain for eternity

the most profound miracle and the most profound mystery in all the universe. (Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Zondervan, 1994, p. 563)

*Michael Morrison*

## THE INCARNATION: THE GREATEST MIRACLE

Which is the greatest miracle of all? Many Christians would point to the resurrection of Jesus after his death on the cross. The crucifixion-resurrection event is, after all, the basis for our salvation. But why would we consider the death and resurrection of Jesus so great an event? After all, others have died and risen again. Lazarus, Jairus' daughter, Eutychus. Why is the resurrection of Jesus a greater event than the raising of Lazarus from the dead?

Make no mistake, Jesus' resurrection *is* a greater event than the raising of Lazarus. Lazarus eventually died again, but Jesus rose to eternal life and glory. When Lazarus rose, a great deal changed for him, but little changed for the world. But when Jesus rose, everything changed.

What was so different about Jesus' resurrection? The key lies in who died and rose. In the case of Lazarus, a human died and rose again to continue a mortal life. But in the case of Jesus, someone much more than a human died and rose again. Jesus was human, but not just a human. He was both God and human — God in the flesh, God incarnate, both divine and human.

The reason his death and resurrection have such power is not because death and resurrection are the greatest miracle. Rather, it is because his death and resurrection had been preceded by the miracle that truly is the greatest of all: the miracle of the incarnation. Billions will eventually die and be resurrected into eternal life and glory; the incarnation, however, will remain unique.

C.S. Lewis called the incarnation “the Grand Miracle.” He wrote: “The central miracle asserted by Christians is the Incarnation.... Every other miracle prepares for this, or exhibits this, or results from this.... It was the central event in the history of the Earth—the very thing that the whole story has been about” (*Miracles*, chapter 14).

By a miracle that passes human comprehension, the Creator entered his creation, the Eternal entered time, God became human—in order to die and rise again for the salvation of all people. “He comes down; down from the heights of absolute being into time and space, down into humanity; down further still ... (to) the womb ... down to the very roots and sea-bed of the Nature He has created. But He goes down to come up again and bring the whole ruined world up with Him” (*Miracles*, chapter 14).

The greatest miracle of all is that wonderful, incomprehensible act by which God became a human, and was born to a young Jewish girl named Mary, in a stable in Bethlehem, about 2,000 years ago during the reign of

Herod the Great.

The power of the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ does not lie in the events themselves. The power of the events derives from the person of Jesus himself: who and what he was and is. His words have power and authority because they are the words of God incarnate. His life has power because it is the life of God incarnate. His death and resurrection have power because they are the death and resurrection of God incarnate.

Is it any surprise then that three of the four Gospels begin their record of Jesus' work by emphasizing the wonder of his incarnation? Matthew records how Jesus was miraculously conceived in the womb of Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit, and that he was "God with us." Luke made it clear that Jesus was the Son of God. John described how the Eternal Word, who is God, had become flesh as Jesus Christ to dwell among us.

The real surprise is that some Christians take so little notice of this greatest of all miracles. A spirit of commercialism has become attached to the Christmas season. Disturbed by these things, some avoid the festival. But too often, they also forget to dedicate time to think about the message Christmas was intended to remind us of: the message of God's greatest miracle. What a pity that, as a result, some forgot to rejoice in this greatest of all miracles, the birth of Jesus.

Let us not miss the opportunity to celebrate the great miracle: to come in wonder and worship before the One who humbled himself to become a baby, a child, a human; who descended into his own creation so that by ascending again he might lift it up with him from decay and bondage into glory and freedom.

## THE REAL MIRACLE STORY OF JESUS' BIRTH

Every Christmas season, Christians give thanks to our heavenly Father for his love and grace, showered upon us through the birth of Jesus. The traditional carols we sing memorialize the meaning of Jesus' birth — “Joy to the World,” “O Holy Night,” “The First Noel,” “Silent Night,” “Hark the Herald Angels Sing,” “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” “Away in a Manger,” “God Rest Ye Merry Gentleman” — and many others.

“Silent Night” is one of my favorite carols because it speaks so directly to the inspiring scriptural story. Here are some of the words:

Silent night, holy night, all is calm,  
all is bright round yon virgin mother and child...  
Shepherds quake at the sight...  
heavenly hosts sing Alleluia! Christ the Savior is born...  
Son of God, love's pure light...  
with the dawn of redeeming grace,  
Jesus, Lord, at thy birth...  
With the angels let us sing, Alleluia to our King.

How beautiful are the thoughts of this carol, as it points us to the joy of our salvation through his life, death, resurrection and future coming in visible glory.

Yet, when you think about it, Jesus' birth was a rather ordinary event. Like the billions of human beings who have experienced the birthing process, he was pushed out of his mother's protective womb, down the birth canal and into our world. There was nothing special, extraordinary or miraculous about Jesus' development in his mother Mary's womb or his birth. And that is just the point. Jesus' common birth demonstrates that he was not some kind of hybrid ghost or phantom, but a real human being, one of us in every way.

### **Jesus not a phantom**

It may well be that one reason the church began to have an official Christmas celebration, probably first occurring in the congregations at Rome early in the fourth century, was to counter the heresy of Christian Gnostic Docetism.<sup>1</sup> One of the heretical claims of the Docetic movement was that Jesus only appeared to be a real human being, but that he was only a phantom — an illusion. He did not have a real physical existence or a human body, so

he was not really born as a baby, did not actually die on the cross and was not resurrected bodily.

Docetists rejected the possibility that Jesus had a body and nature like ours because they refused to believe that God, who is perfect, eternal, and spirit could have anything to do with our fallen temporal existence and matter, which they thought was evil. “Most denied the birth of Jesus, which would have put him under the power of the material world,” says historical theologian Justo L. Gonzalez.<sup>2</sup>

The church had battled against Docetic heresies from its earliest days. The New Testament letter of 1 John reminds believers that Jesus was a real human being, not a mirage: “Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God.” John called every person denying this truth an “antichrist” (1 John 3:2-3).

When the church finally instituted a special Christmas festival as a memorial of Jesus’ birth, it fixed in believers’ minds the biblical testimony that he was a real person with a real human body — born as we all are, as flesh and blood, fully human babies. In Christmas, the church was teaching the testimony of the Gospels about Jesus’ humanity. That’s one reason why it’s important for Christians to memorialize Jesus’ human birth as we do during each Advent-Christmas season.

Of course, the church did not invent having what amounts to a public announcement of Jesus’ birth. It was beaten to the punch, we might say, by God himself, who memorialized the birth of Jesus with great public fanfare.

Two of the Gospels, Luke and Matthew, provide many details about his birth. In these accounts, Jesus’ birth is extolled with great pageantry by the announcements of angels, telling the event to common shepherds as well as to individuals of great learning and international religious importance (the “Wise Men”). Singing, giving gifts, visitations and prophetic pronouncements are all part of this joyous public celebration.

## **Looking beyond Jesus’ birth**

Yet, the fact of Jesus’ human birth is only part of the gospel story of how God has worked out our salvation in him. True enough, Jesus’ birth tells us that the One we worship as Savior lived as a fully human individual in all aspects of his creaturely existence, just as we do.

However, by itself, the birth of Jesus is not the miracle and meaning of who he really is in himself and who he is for us — for all of humanity. As we search for the full meaning and miraculous nature of the “Christmas story,” we are compelled to look deeper into the question of who Jesus really was.



Matthew 1:18 tells us that Mary “was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit.” The angel told Joseph, who was betrothed to her in marriage, that she was pregnant not because she had a sexual affair with someone else, but “because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit” (verse 20).

Luke 1:26-38 records the story of the angel Gabriel appearing to Mary and telling her how she, a virgin, would become pregnant: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God” (verse 35).

While Jesus would be born a real and fully human person, he would also be “Immanuel — which means, ‘God with us’” (Matthew 1:23). Though a real human being, Jesus is also fully God of true God—the Son of God, Jesus Christ, one of three Persons of the God who is Three in One and One in Three. The Creator God is free and able to enter his creation as one of us and yet retain his divine identity.

## **Who Jesus really was**

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That is the story of Christmas — the good news of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

<sup>1</sup> The Greek word *doketai* that gives us the English “Docetism” means “to seem.” A number of Greek New Testament verses use forms of the word, as in James 1:26: “If any man among you seem [*dokeo*] to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man’s religion is vain.”

<sup>2</sup> Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, vol. 1 (HarperCollins, 1984), p. 60.

<sup>3</sup> Here we are given a truth about the Being of God that stretches our imagination to the utmost. It was not contemplated by human beings before God acted to reveal himself in Jesus. As it turns out, the one divine Being who is God has existed from eternity in three eternal and distinct persons who are of the same essence — Father, Son (the Word who was born as Jesus Christ) and the Holy Spirit.

*Paul Kroll*

## WHAT JESUS' INCARNATION SHOWS US ABOUT BEING HUMAN

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:14).

“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us,” is arguably the most profound and exciting statement in the Bible. Jesus came to seek and save the lost, but the good news goes much farther than that. Salvation is not merely the removal of our sins—it is a new creation, a radical transformation of what it means to be human.

You might even say that Christmas is not only about Jesus; it's ultimately about you!

### **True humanity**

When John wrote in John 1:14 that Jesus became flesh and lived among us, he used an image the Jews were familiar with. The word that is translated “dwelled” literally means “to pitch one’s tent.” It referred to God’s dwelling among the Israelites in the tabernacle, a special tent that was the precursor to the temple of Solomon (see Exodus 40:34-38). The difference is that the Word—Jesus—didn’t just dwell *among* humanity, he *became* human.

As the perfect human, Jesus is the definition of everything it means to be human. Whatever Jesus is, that is what he has made humanity to be in him. This tells you at least three things about yourself.

1. It tells you that God is on your side. Jesus is God’s beloved Son in whom he is well pleased (Matthew 17:5). Because your life is in Jesus, and he is your life (Colossians 3:4), you share in his personal relationship with the Father. With him and in him, you are God’s beloved child.
2. It tells you that your sins have been removed. Isaiah 59:2 declares that sin separates people from God. When Jesus came, he took that sin upon himself so that we could be reconciled to God. In other words, Jesus became sin (2 Corinthians 5:21) so that we could be completely reconciled to God.
3. It tells you that nothing stands between you and God. John 1:14 says that Jesus “came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” Jesus restored us to God through grace, without our input or help. We were reconciled even when we were still sinners, Paul wrote in

Romans 5:10. It's a gift.

Jesus restored us to God by taking our broken human condition on himself. He became the representative and the substitute for all of humanity. Paul sums this up in 2 Corinthians 8:9: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich." As a human, Jesus brings humanity into perfect relationship with God and as God, he brings God into perfect relationship with humanity.

Paul wrote in Ephesians 2:4-5, "Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved." This is reconciliation at its finest. Paul went one step further in verse 6, saying, "God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus." We are not waiting for God to accept us. Because of Christ, he already has accepted us, and this never depended on us.

In the Parable of the Prodigal Son, Jesus illustrates God's unconditional love for wayward humanity. In this parable the betrayed father represents God and the prodigal son represents all of us. The Father never rejected us—we rejected the Father. He eagerly awaits our repentance (turning our hearts back to him) and is watching for the first sign of our return. As soon as he sees us, he runs down the road to embrace us, honor us, and declare us his beloved child.

## **To be fully human is to know God**

Jesus is the perfect revelation of the Father. As Ray Anderson put it in his book, *The Shape of Practical Theology*, "To know Jesus is to be confronted with the reality of God himself." There is no difference between the heart of Jesus and the heart of the Father. Jesus said he was one with the Father (John 10:30). To know Jesus is to know God.

In coming to be with us, Jesus showed us the Father's love and compassion toward us. He "pitched his tent" among us because he *wants* to be with us and to identify with us. God didn't turn his back on sinners—he came to live among them, to love them and to heal them.

God created us to be in relationship with him. This was the plan from the foundation of the earth. Paul wrote in Ephesians 1:4-10, "In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ... And he made known to us the mystery of his will...to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ."

Jesus was never "plan B." It was always God's plan and purpose to be in

loving communion with those he created in his image.

When “the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us,” he didn’t come to live in a tent or a temple. He came to live in *us*. He bound himself to us, taking up our cause, bearing and vanquishing our sinfulness. He called us his friends and made us his brothers and sisters, bringing us with him into the Father’s embrace.

As Anderson said: Jesus confronts us with the reality of God. The Spirit leads us to Jesus, and when we know Jesus, we know the Father. When we are in communion with Jesus, we are in communion with the Father and with the Spirit.

To be fully human is to know God — to know he loves us, wants us, and will never let us go. Jesus heals and restores our full humanity, becoming for us the image of God into which we were created.

Jesus shows us what life is all about. It’s about walking in communion with God—being in relationship with the One who created us, loves us, dwells among and in us, and adopts us as his own precious children.

Jesus shows us what it means to be truly human. He became a human for us, for our benefit. The story of his birth is about you.

## **A fresh look at nothing**

“[Jesus], being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness” (Philippians 2:6-7).

When Paul says that the Son of God made himself “nothing,” he is not implying that humans are nothing. Paul is using a figure of speech to express that Jesus humbled himself in love in order to serve us. We should follow his example by humbling ourselves in order to love and serve one another.

Theologian Gordon Fee summarizes it this way:

In Christ Jesus God has shown his true nature; this is what it means for Christ to be “equal with God” — to pour himself out for the sake of others and to do so by taking the role of a slave. Hereby he not only reveals the character of God but also reveals what it means for us to be created in God’s image. To bear his likeness and have his “mindset.” It means taking the role of the slave for the sake of others. (Gordon Fee, *Philippians*, InterVarsity Press, 1999)

*Rick Shallenberger*

## HE GAVE HIMSELF

God came into time and space in the Incarnation.  
He united himself with us, giving us the greatest gift.

“When I draw the Lord He’ll be a real big man. He has to be to explain the way things are” (*A Study of Courage and Fear*). A young black girl in Mississippi was describing a picture of God she had drawn at the request of psychiatrist and Harvard professor Robert Coles. Dr. Coles won the Pulitzer Prize for his *Children of Crisis* series.

The girl was already struggling with the world at large, and with what it meant to be a black woman in the American South. Her expectations of God are shared by Christians everywhere. We all like to visualize God as a “real big man” capable of giving the help we need.

### God gave himself

But ironically, when God came in the flesh, he didn’t begin his human existence as a “real big man.” In Jesus, God started the way we start. He was born. He acted in history to explain and resolve “the way things are.” He gave humanity the ultimate gift: he gave us himself. God came in the flesh, becoming one of us, for our salvation.

The teaching of Christianity that describes the historical reality of God becoming flesh is called the Incarnation. Jesus came in the flesh so that those who believe in him might be redeemed, reconciled and saved. The act of God becoming a human is the greatest gift ever given, the ultimate expression of love.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). God’s greatest gift included his human birth, his life among sinful human beings and his atoning work on the cross.

Jesus’ birth, his life and his sacrificial death help us understand the depth of God’s love. Jesus Christ is a “real big man.” John tells us, “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:14). God came in the flesh as one of us because of sin. He came because of hatred, greed, tyranny and racism. He came because of brutality, violence and war.

### Love means giving

Jesus came to show us how and what to love. He showed us that love means giving of ourselves for others. He showed us that the object of love

ought to be human beings, not things.

That's just one of the problems that we have as we seek to follow Jesus Christ. We often have our priorities backward. Instead of loving people, we are tempted and encouraged to love things.

The act of God becoming flesh demonstrated that material things aren't wrong, of and by themselves. Jesus showed us that we should use things. But Christ also showed us that material things should never become the object of our affection or adoration. When we reverse this ethical foundation, spiritual disaster occurs. We begin to use people, and love things.

That is an accurate picture of life apart from Jesus Christ. He came in the flesh because he loved people, not things.

Sometimes we can focus on the wrong things about Jesus' birth and his life. We minimize or forget about worshiping our Savior who loved us by coming in the flesh and dying for our sins. We can fail to focus on the meaning of his coming.

The meaning of his birth and life transcends any specific date on the calendar. He loves us, not because we are things, but because we are people. He came to atone for our sins, to save us and to help us come to know God. He didn't come so that our worship of him would become a worship of things.

*Greg Albrecht*



## GOD IN THE FLESH

The birth of Jesus Christ marked the beginning of the most important sequence of events of all history. His birth, life, death and resurrection are all part of the greatest gift. Jesus was God in the flesh. He was of the royal line of David, the rightful heir to David's throne. The King of kings had come. The promises to the line of David had been fulfilled in Christ.

God was miraculously and mysteriously born of a woman, coming as a baby into an oppressed land occupied by a foreign power. He was not born into wealth. His arrival on earth was not universally acclaimed. He was born in a village. He worked in a carpenter's shop with his father. He wasn't rich. His ship never came in. He never went to college. He never wrote a book. He never married or fathered children.

Those who promised him their loyalty deserted him at his time of greatest need. He was betrayed. He was denied justice. He was tortured and beaten without cause or provocation. He was nailed to a cross, where he died, flanked on both sides by criminals.

Jesus didn't come as a mystical teacher with secret knowledge that would make his followers superior. He didn't come to find fault with us or to dazzle us with clever arguments, obscure and technical chronologies and genealogies, or to thunder at us in hellfire-and-brimstone sermons.

“God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him” (John 3:17). God in the flesh was God's greatest gift. The Incarnation and the Virgin Birth remind us that God loves us enough to have sent us his one and only begotten Son.

### **Only God can forgive**

If our greatest need is for knowledge, God could have sent us an acclaimed teacher, scholar, or philosopher. If our greatest need is for money, God could have sent us a banker or an economist. If our greatest need is for physical health, God could have sent us a doctor or



a dietitian. But our greatest need is for forgiveness, redemption and reconciliation. Only God could accomplish this.

A great scholar couldn't atone for our sins. Someone who strived to lead a perfect life and build a lot of character couldn't redeem us and reconcile us to God. The most righteous and perfect human being who ever lived could not do what God in the flesh could do.

Only God can forgive, redeem and reconcile. That's why Jesus was God-man. Jesus was able to atone for our sins because he was God in the flesh. Jesus wasn't merely a perfect person who was a spiritual superman. He didn't come to earth to master sin through superhuman effort.

Jesus didn't overcome sin because he built strong spiritual muscles. Because if that's all Jesus was, his perfect life would have only been enough to pay for one other imperfect person's sins. But the Bible tells us that Jesus' death was enough to pay for all humanity's sins. Once and for all. Because Christ was fully man and fully God.

So God sent us the greatest gift. He gave himself. It is the life of Jesus Christ dwelling in us that makes us holy. We are not righteous because of our own superior insight or knowledge. The great central truth is that "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst" (1 Timothy 1:15).

So God is a "real big man" who can "explain the way things are." If you doubt it, think about how God, because of his love for us, was born into this world. His birth, life, death and resurrection for us demonstrate that he loved us, not things.

The Incarnation was the act of God sharing his glory and our poverty with us. Jesus retained his deity, but voluntarily gave up his divine rights in order to become our Savior. Truly this is the greatest gift. And you can receive the greatest gift, if you believe.

## **The miracle:**

The central miracle asserted by Christians is the Incarnation. They say that God became man.... In the Christian story, God descends to re-ascend. He comes down; down from the heights of absolute being into time and space, down into humanity.... Christians are not claiming that simply 'God' was incarnate in Jesus. They are claiming that the one true God is He whom the Jews worshipped as Jahweh, and that it is He who has descended. (C.S. Lewis, *Miracles*, pages 108, 111, 114)

## JESUS THE SAVIOR

## WHO IS JESUS?

For Christians, there are two very important questions: “Who is Jesus?” and “Who is the God revealed in Jesus?” To help us get at those two questions, I’d like for us to consider some answers given by Jesus in the Gospel of John.

Let’s first take a look at John’s account of Jesus at the Jewish Feast of Dedication in John 10:22-30. “Then came the Feast of Dedication at Jerusalem. It was winter.” Let’s stop for a moment right there and ask this question: What is the Hebrew word for dedication? I bet you know, even if you don’t think you know it. It’s Hanukkah. The celebration of the Feast of Dedication or Hanukah was established by the Jewish leader Judas Maccabeus in 165 BC to commemorate the Jewish victory over the army of the Syrian ruler, Antiochus IV. It celebrated the rescue of the Jewish temple from Gentile occupation and desecration. Judas Maccabeus was viewed by many of his countrymen as a Messiah because he had delivered his people and their holy city.

Now let’s look at John 10:23. “And Jesus was in the temple area walking in Solomon’s Colonnade.” This was a common place for rabbis to meet with their disciples, so if anyone were looking for Jesus, he would be easy to find on this occasion. Now let’s look at John 10:24. “The Jews gathered around and circled him saying, ‘How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ [that is, the Messiah] tell us plainly.’” The question these Jewish religious leaders are asking is, Who are you, Jesus?

They want him boldly to proclaim that he is the Messiah. Then they can turn him over to the Romans for treason and rebellion, proclaiming that he is the King of the Jews. But Jesus, I think wise to what they’re doing, does not answer in the way they wish or expect. Indeed, he gives three answers as to who he is. Let’s notice those answers.

First, let’s go to John 10:25 and 26. “Jesus answered, ‘I did tell you, but you do not believe. The miracles I do in my Father’s name speak for me, but you do not believe because you are not my sheep.’” So answer number one is you know I am the Messiah, but you choose not to accept it.

Now, let’s look at John 10:27-29. “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand.” Here we have answer number two. I’m the Messiah, but I’m not here as a

messianic warrior of the line of David, but rather as the messianic good shepherd like King David, the shepherd boy.

Then he shocks them with his third answer as to who he is. Let's look at this in John 10:30. "I and the Father are one." Okay, so here is answer number three. Totally unexpected by the crowd. Jesus says, "I am God, equal to the Father." Think about what he has just said. We have a compound subject, I and the Father. Each are distinct. We have a plural verb and "one," which in the Greek is in the neuter, meaning a thing or a being. That is, it's not separate. It's not in the masculine, meaning one person. It's "I and the Father are one." Wow.

What did he mean? How did he mean *one*? People have debated, did he mean one philosophy, of one attitude, of one goal? It's evident from the story that the Jewish leaders seem to know exactly what he meant. They were clear as to what they understood him to be saying, because they picked up stones to kill him for blasphemy. They indeed believed that Jesus had just made himself equal to God. What do the words of Jesus quoted by John 10:30 mean? "I and the Father are one." This became a key verse in the discussion of the doctrine of the Trinity and who is God in the early church.

Let's look further at John 14:8-11:

Philip said, "Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us." Jesus answered: "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Don't you believe that I am in the Father and that the Father is in me? The words that I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe me on the evidence of the miracles themselves."

Here again, Jesus makes this bold claim that "the Father and I are one." I am in the Father and the Father is in me and we are one. How can two be one? This was a very difficult question for early Christians to begin to try to analyze and work out and explain. But then you may say, "What about the Holy Spirit? What does Jesus say about the Spirit?"

Let's look at John 14:16-20. Jesus said:

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever, the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, for he lives with you and will be [some early manuscripts have,

“and is”] in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you.

Now, Jesus has added the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is “another Comforter.” The Greek means by “another” “one just like myself.” Now, Jesus is added to the mix. Not only are he and the Father one, but there is going to be another Comforter, the Holy Spirit, who is like him, similar to him, who is God, and is in the Father and in the Son as well.

We’ve got God the Father who is in Jesus and in the Holy Spirit, we’ve got Jesus who is in God the Father and in the Holy Spirit, and we’ve got the Holy Spirit who is in God the Father and in Jesus. We might comically say, “Wow, it must be getting crowded in there. What is going on? I thought there was one God?” Indeed, there is. That one God as revealed by Jesus is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and each is in each other.

What we are reading here is that John has Jesus saying that there is the Father who is God, there is Jesus the Son who is God, and there is the Holy Spirit who is one just like Jesus, but is not Jesus, who is also God. We have the Father who is in the Son and in the Spirit. We have Jesus the Son of God who is in the Father and in the Spirit and we have the Spirit who is in the Father and in the Son. These three are one. There is one God, but that one God is Father, Son, and Spirit – each distinct but not separate, in a union, a communion together as one being in three persons.

Further, listen to what Jesus has to say about the disciples, believers who are yet to come. Let’s look at John 17:21. Breaking into the middle of the thought here, Jesus says in chapter 17, verse 21, “That all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, that the world may believe that you have sent me.”

What does all this mean? Who is Jesus, and who is the God revealed in Jesus? Based on the scriptures we’ve just discussed, plus others, and being guided by the Holy Spirit, the early church came to understand that God is a Trinity: three persons and one being: Father, Son, who became the incarnate Jesus, and Spirit. All three who indwell and interpenetrate each other. Each distinct, but not separate.

By the eighth century, Christians were using the Greek word “perichoresis” to explain what Jesus was describing in the verses we have just read. Literally, the word comes from the prefix, “peri,” meaning around and “choreo,” meaning contain, move, rotate, go about, dwell around, and

## JESUS THE SAVIOR

inhabit, we come up with the word in English “indwelling” or “interpenetration.” When Jesus in the Gospel of John talks about “that they may be one as we are one,” he is inviting us, all of humanity, into active participation and the perichoretic relationship the Father, the Son, and the Spirit have.

The early church fathers spoke of this relationship as being like a great dance, and this is a relationship with the Father and Jesus and through the Spirit. It is shared life; rich, full, abundant life; the shared life of God. God, through the incarnation of Jesus Christ, reaches out to humanity and invites all into, as the great fathers called it, the great dance. I invite all of us to take Jesus’ hand and actively participate in the life of God now and for all eternity. Take Jesus’ hand and come enjoy the dance.

*Dan Rogers*

## WHO IS THIS MAN?

Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” The question confronts us, too: Who is this man? What authority does he have? Why should we trust him? The Christian faith centers on Jesus Christ. We need to understand what kind of person he is.

### Fully human—and then some

Jesus was born in the normal way, grew in the normal way, got hungry and thirsty and tired, ate and drank and slept. He looked normal, talked in ordinary language, and walked in the normal way. He had emotions such as compassion, surprise, sorrow and apprehension (Matthew 9:36; Luke 7:9; John 11:38; Matthew 26:37). He prayed to God, as humans need to. He called himself a man and other people called him a man. He was a human being.

But Jesus was such an extraordinary human that after he ascended to heaven, some people claimed he was not human after all (2 John 7). They thought that Jesus was so holy that surely he would have nothing to do with flesh, with its dirt, sweat, digestive functions and imperfections. Perhaps he merely *appeared* to be human, in the way that angels sometimes appeared as humans, without actually becoming human.

So the New Testament makes it clear that Jesus was really a human. John tells us, “The Word became flesh” (John 1:14). He didn’t just appear as flesh, or clothe himself in flesh. He *became* flesh. “Jesus Christ has come in the flesh” (1 John 4:2). We know, says John, because we saw him and touched him (1 John 1:1-2).

Paul said that Jesus was “made in human likeness” (Philippians 2:7), “born under the law” (Galatians 4:4), “in the likeness of sinful man” (Romans 8:3). Since he came to save humans, the author of Hebrews reasons, it was necessary that he “shared in their humanity” (Hebrews 2:14-17).

Our salvation depends on the reality of Jesus’ humanity. His role as our intercessor, our high priest, depends on his experience as a human (Hebrews 4:15). Even after his resurrection, Jesus had flesh and bones (John 20:27; Luke 24:39). Even in heavenly glory, he continues to be a human (1 Timothy 2:5).

### Acting like God

“Who is this fellow?” asked the Pharisees when they heard Jesus forgive sins. “Who can forgive sins but God alone?” (Luke 5:21). Sin is an offense against God, so how could a human speak for God and say the offense is



removed from the record? It was blasphemy, they said.

Jesus knew what they thought about it, but he forgave sins anyway. He even implied that he had no sins of his own (John 8:46). He made some astonishing claims:

- He said he would sit at God’s right hand in heaven—another claim the Jewish leaders thought blasphemous (Matthew 26:63-65).
- He claimed to be the Son of God—another blasphemy, they said, since in that culture it implied equality with God (John 5:18; 19:7).
- Jesus claimed to be in such perfect communication with God that he did only what God wanted (John 5:19).
- He claimed to be one with the Father (John 10:30), which the Jewish leaders again said was blasphemous (verse 33).
- He claimed to be so much like God that people should look at him to see the Father (John 14:9; 1:18).
- He claimed to be able to send God’s Spirit (John 16:7).
- He claimed that he had angels he could send (Matthew 13:41).
- He knew that God was the judge of the world, but he also claimed to be the judge (John 5:22).
- He said he could raise the dead, even himself (John 5:21; 6:40; 10:18).
- He said that everyone’s eternal life depends on their relationship with him (Matthew 7:23).
- He said that the words of Moses were not enough (Matthew 5:21-48).
- He claimed to be the Lord of the Sabbath—the Lord of a God-given law! (Matthew 12:8).

If he were merely a human, his teaching was arrogant and sinful. But Jesus backed up his words with some amazing actions. “Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles” (John 14:11). Miracles can’t force anyone to believe, but they can provide powerful supporting evidence.

To show that he had the authority to forgive sins, Jesus healed a paralyzed man (Luke 5:23-25). His miracles give evidence that what he said about himself is true. He has more-than-human power, because he is more than a human. The claims that would have been blasphemous in anyone else were true for Jesus. He could speak like God and act like God because he was God in the flesh.

## Who did he think he was?

Jesus had a clear sense of self-identity. Even at age 12, he had a special relationship with his Father in heaven (Luke 2:49). At his baptism, he heard a voice from heaven say that he was God's Son (Luke 3:22). He knew he had a mission to perform (Luke 4:43; 9:22; 13:33; 22:37).

When Peter said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God," Jesus answered, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven" (Matthew 16:16-17). Jesus was the Son of God. He was the Christ, the Messiah—the person uniquely anointed by God for a special mission.

When Jesus called 12 disciples, one for each tribe of Israel, he did not count himself among the 12. He was above them, for he was above all Israel. He was the maker and builder of the new Israel. At the last Supper, he proclaimed himself to be the basis of the new covenant, a new relationship with God. He saw himself as the focal point of what God was doing in the world.

Jesus spoke boldly against traditions, against laws, against the temple, against religious leaders. He demanded that his followers abandon everything to follow him, to put him first in their lives, to give him complete allegiance. He spoke with the authority of God—but he spoke on his own authority. He had authority equal to God.

Jesus believed that he was the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. He was the suffering servant who would die to ransom the people from their sins (Isaiah 53:4-5, 12; Matthew 26:24; Mark 9:12; Luke 22:37; 24:46). He was the king of peace who would ride into Jerusalem on a donkey (Zechariah 9:9-10; Matthew 21:1-9). He was the son of man who would be given all power and authority (Daniel 7:13-14; Matthew 26:64).

## Previous life

Jesus claimed to be alive before Abraham was born: "I tell you the truth," he said, "before Abraham was born, I am!" (John 8:58). The Jewish leaders thought that Jesus was claiming something divine, and they wanted to kill him (verse 59). The phrase "I AM" is an echo of Exodus 3:14, where God revealed his name to Moses: "This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.'" Jesus used this name for himself.

Jesus said he shared glory with God before the world began (John 17:5). John tells us that he existed even in the beginning of time, as the Word (John 1:1). John tells us that the universe was made through the Word (John 1:3).

The Father was the Designer, and the Word was the Creator who carried out the design. “All things were created by him and for him” (Colossians 1:16; 1 Corinthians 8:6). Hebrews 1:2 says that God made the universe through the Son.

Both Hebrews and Colossians tell us that the Son sustains the universe (Hebrews 1:3; Colossians 1:17). Both tell us that he is “the image of the invisible God” (Colossians 1:15), “the exact representation of his being” (Hebrews 1:3).

Who is Jesus? He is a divine being who became flesh. He was in the beginning with God; he was the Creator of all, the Author of life (Acts 3:15). He is exactly like God, has glory like God, and has powers that only God has. Little wonder that the disciples concluded that he *was* God, even in the flesh.

### **Worthy of worship**

Jesus was conceived in a supernatural way (Matthew 1:20; Luke 1:35). He lived without ever sinning (Hebrews 4:15). He was blameless, without impurity (Hebrews 7:26; 9:14). He committed no sin (1 Peter 2:22); in him there was no sin (1 John 3:5); he knew no sin (2 Corinthians 5:21). No matter how tempting the sin was, Jesus always had a greater desire to obey God. His mission was to do God’s will (Hebrews 10:7).

On several occasions, people worshiped Jesus (Matthew 14:33; 28:9, 17; John 9:38). Angels refuse worship (Revelation 19:10), but Jesus did not. Indeed, the angels worship Jesus, the Son of God (Hebrews 1:6). Some prayers are addressed to Jesus (Acts 7:59-60; 2 Corinthians 12:8; Revelation 22:20). He is worthy of worship.

The New Testament gives elaborate praises to Jesus Christ, with doxologies that are normally reserved for God: “To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen” (2 Timothy 4:18; 2 Pet 3:18; Revelation 1:6). He has the highest title that can ever be given (Ephesians 1:20-21). Even if we call him God, that title is not too high.

In Revelation, equal praise is given to God and to the Lamb, implying equality: “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!” (Revelation 5:13). The Son must be given equal honor with the Father (John 5:23). Both God and Jesus are called the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and end of everything (Revelation 1:8, 17; 21:6; 22:13).

The New Testament often uses Old Testament passages about God and applies them to Jesus Christ. One of the most striking is this passage about worship: “God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that

is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:9-11, quoting Isaiah 45:23). Jesus will get the honor and respect that Isaiah said would be given to God.

Isaiah says there is only one Savior—God (Isaiah 43:11; 45:21). Paul just as clearly says that God is Savior and Jesus is Savior (Titus 1:3-4; 2:10, 13). So, is there one Savior, or two? Early Christians concluded that the Father is God and Jesus is God, even though there is only one God, only one Savior. The Father and Son are the same in essence (God), but different in person.

Several other New Testament verses also call Jesus God. John 1:1 says, “the Word was God.” Verse 18 says, “No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father’s side, has made him known.” Jesus is the God who made the Father known. After the resurrection, Thomas recognized Jesus as God: “Thomas said to him, ‘My Lord and my God!’” (John 20:28).

Paul says that the patriarchs are great because “from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen” (Romans 9:5). In Hebrews, God himself is said to call Jesus God: “About the Son he says, ‘Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever’” (Hebrews 1:8).

“In Christ,” Paul said, “all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form” (Colossians 2:9). Jesus Christ is fully divine, and even now has bodily form. He is the exact representation of God—God made flesh. If Jesus were only a human, it would be wrong to put our trust in him. But because he is divine, we are *commanded* to trust in him. He is utterly trustworthy, because he is God.

The divinity of Jesus is crucial for us, for he could reveal God to us accurately only if he is divine (John 1:18; 14:9). Only a divine person could forgive our sins, redeem us, and reconcile us to God. Only a divine person could be the object of our faith, the Lord to whom we give complete allegiance, the Savior we worship in song and prayer.

## **Truly human, truly God**

As you can see from the scripture references above, the biblical information about Jesus is scattered throughout the New Testament. The picture is consistent, but it is not all drawn together in one place. The early church had to put the facts together. They drew these conclusions from the biblical revelation:

- Jesus, the Son of God, is divine.
- The Son of God became genuinely human, but the Father did not.

- The Son of God and the Father are distinct, not the same.
- There is only one God.
- The Son and the Father are persons in that one God.

The Council of Nicea (A.D. 325) declared that Jesus, the Son of God, was divine, of the same essence as the Father. The council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451) explained that he was also human:

Our Lord Jesus Christ is one and the same Son; the same perfect in Godhead and the same perfect in manhood, truly God and truly man... begotten of the Father before all ages as regards his Godhead and... begotten of the Virgin Mary the Theotokos [the “God-Bearer”] as regards his manhood; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only-begotten, made known in two natures... the difference of the natures being by no means removed because of the union but the property of each nature being preserved and coalescing in one person.

The last part was included because some people said that the divine nature so overpowered Jesus’ human nature that he wasn’t really human. Others said that the two natures combined to form a third nature, so that Jesus was neither human nor divine. No, the biblical data says that he was truly human, and truly divine, and this is what the church must say, too.

### **How can this be?**

Our salvation depends on Jesus being both human and divine. But how can this be? How can someone infinite become finite? How can the holy Son of God become a human, in the likeness of sinful flesh?

Our question comes mainly because the only humanity that we can see now is woefully corrupt. But this is not the way God made it. Jesus shows us what true humanity is. For one thing, he shows us a person who is completely dependent on the Father. This is the way humanity ought to be.

Jesus also shows us what God is capable of doing. He is able to become part of his creation. He can bridge the gap between the uncreated and the created, between the holy and the sinful. What we might think is impossible, is possible with God. Jesus also shows us what humanity will be in the new creation. When he returns and we are resurrected, we will look like him (1 John 3:2). We will have bodies like his glorious body (1 Corinthians 15:42-49).

Jesus is our trailblazer, showing us that the way to God is through Jesus. Because he is human, he sympathizes with our weaknesses, and because he is divine, he effectively intercedes for us at God’s right hand (Hebrews 4:15).

With Jesus as our Savior, we can be confident that our salvation is secure.

### **Summary: Five facts about Jesus**

1. Jesus was a physical, mortal human.
2. Jesus has the authority of God.
3. Jesus had shared in God's glory.
4. It is appropriate for people to worship Jesus.
5. Jesus is truly human and truly divine, showing us what God is like and what humanity should be.

### **For further reading**

(easiest listed first)

Michael Green, *Who Is This Jesus?* Nelson, 1992.

Murray Harris, *Three Crucial Questions About Jesus*. Baker, 1994.

Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ*. Zondervan, 1998.

Alister McGrath, *Understanding Jesus*. Zondervan, 1987.

Millard Erickson, *Introducing Christian Doctrine*. Baker, 1992. Ch. 23-25.

I. Howard Marshall, *The Origins of New Testament Christology*. InterVarsity, 1990.

Donald Bloesch. *Jesus Christ: Lord and Savior*. InterVarsity, 1997.

### **Things to think about**

1. Is it easier to think of Jesus as a human, or as a God? Are you troubled by his divine characteristics, or by his humanity?
2. Which of Jesus' words or actions best shows that he was divine?
3. Do we slight the Father when we worship Jesus? Do we slight Jesus when we worship only the Father?
4. What does Jesus reveal to us about God? About humanity?

*Michael Morrison*

Editor's note: Several interviews in the *You're Included* series discuss the incarnation. For these, we refer you to the books *Trinitarian Conversations*, volumes 1 and 2. We also give the URL for the video, audio, and text:

- Robert T. Walker, "Why the Incarnation Is Good News," <https://www.gci.org/YI085>
- Paul Molnar, "God Choose to Enter Into Our Humanity," <https://www.gci.org/YI093>
- Cherith Fee Nordling, "What Jesus' Humanity Means for Us," <https://www.gci.org/yi060>

## JESUS THE SAVIOR

- Christian Kettler, “The Importance of Jesus’ Humanity,”  
<https://www.gci.org/yi/kettler45>
- C. Baxter Kruger, “Jesus Has United Himself to Us,”  
<https://www.gci.org/yi/kruger5>
- Gerrit Scott Dawson, “Jesus Is Still a Human,”  
<https://www.gci.org/yi/dawson36>

## HE PITCHED HIS TENT

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.—John 1:14

He pitched his tent among us—that is the literal meaning of “made his dwelling among us.” Our human minds can’t understand how Jesus was born by the direct action of God. But the fact that God pitched his tent with us, coming to live among us, is all-important. It is our salvation.

Ironically, Jesus’ birth passed with little fanfare. Most people did not understand that God had entered time and space. I’m reminded of how cartoonist H.T. Webster celebrated the 100th anniversary of the birth of Abraham Lincoln. Webster re-created events surrounding Lincoln’s birth by depicting two Kentucky woodsmen meeting on a snow-covered wilderness path:

The two woodsmen exchanged news of the swearing in of the new American president, James Madison. They wondered how much of Europe Napoleon Bonaparte would be able to conquer. Finally, they discussed their local communities. One of the men mentioned that a baby had been born at Tom Lincoln’s house. Then they agreed that nothing much of any consequence ever happened in their corner of the world.

It might have been something like that in Bethlehem. Life seemed to be the same as always. Nothing new; just another birth. Joseph and Mary were the proud parents, and they had just arrived in town. After the birth, strangers from a distant land arrived, and they brought gifts for the baby.

Matthew tells us that the Magi, who came from the east, had first gone to Jerusalem. They knew that the king of the Jews was to be born, and they came to bring gifts. The chief priests and teachers of the law directed them to Bethlehem. King Herod was understandably threatened that someone else should be called “king of the Jews.” He gave orders to kill all the baby boys in Bethlehem. Just to make sure, Herod ordered his men to slaughter all baby boys who were two years and under, in the vicinity of Bethlehem. An angel told Joseph to take Mary and Jesus, and become refugees. So the young family became aliens in the land of Egypt, the country that had once enslaved their people. They stayed there until Herod died.

Aliens and strangers. Struggling through the wilderness. Longing for the



Promised Land. Refugees. It sounds much like our world today. Christians are called to be citizens of another kingdom, aliens and strangers in Babylon. Our beacon of hope, our source of Light, is the One who pitched his tent.

John tells us Jesus was “full of grace and truth.” *Grace* is a powerful and complex word that is often misunderstood. It speaks of unconditional love for the undeserving. Love for the refugee and alien. Love that comes to the rescue—salvation love. Grace speaks of giving and of generosity. Paul speaks of the riches of God’s grace. *Grace* is a one-word description of the way God deals with us, loving us so much that, in Jesus, he pitched his tent with us and died for us.

The Magi came with gifts. But the greatest gift had already arrived. That gift was given, in its fullness, on the cross and in the resurrection from the tomb. Salvation is the greatest gift. If you have needs, hurts, worries and problems, do not despair—grace is available. Turn to the Lord, the King of kings and Lord of lords. He is the answer.

Take another look at John 1:14, this time from *The Message*, the New Testament in contemporary English. Eugene H. Peterson has put the New Testament in the language and idiom of the playground and marketplace, comparable to the everyday Greek idiom used throughout the New Testament. Peterson has tried to give us an equivalent. His translation of John 1:14 may help you realize that God, in the person of Jesus, came to be with us and rescue us from sin: “The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son, generous inside and out, true from start to finish.”

*Greg Albrecht*

## HE GAVE HIMSELF

God came into time and space in the Incarnation.  
He united himself with us, giving us the greatest gift.

“When I draw the Lord He’ll be a real big man. He has to be to explain the way things are” (*A Study of Courage and Fear*). A young black girl in Mississippi was describing a picture of God she had drawn at the request of psychiatrist and Harvard professor Robert Coles. Dr. Coles won the Pulitzer Prize for his *Children of Crisis* series.

The girl was already struggling with the world at large, and with what it meant to be a black woman in the American South. Her expectations of God are shared by Christians everywhere. We all like to visualize God as a “real big man” capable of giving the help we need.

### God gave himself

But ironically, when God came in the flesh, he didn’t begin his human existence as a “real big man.” In Jesus, God started the way we start. He was born. He acted in history to explain and resolve “the way things are.” He gave humanity the ultimate gift: he gave us himself. God came in the flesh, becoming one of us, for our salvation.

The teaching of Christianity that describes the historical reality of God becoming flesh is called the Incarnation. Jesus came in the flesh so that those who believe in him might be redeemed, reconciled and saved. The act of God becoming a human is the greatest gift ever given, the ultimate expression of love.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). God’s greatest gift included his human birth, his life among sinful human beings and his atoning work on the cross.

Jesus’ birth, his life and his sacrificial death help us understand the depth of God’s love. Jesus Christ is a “real big man.” John tells us, “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:14). God came in the flesh as one of us because of sin. He came because of hatred, greed, tyranny and racism. He came because of brutality, violence and war.

### Love means giving

Jesus came to show us how and what to love. He showed us that love means giving of ourselves for others. He showed us that the object of love

ought to be human beings, not things.

That's just one of the problems that we have as we seek to follow Jesus Christ. We often have our priorities backward. Instead of loving people, we are tempted and encouraged to love things.

The act of God becoming flesh demonstrated that material things aren't wrong, of and by themselves. Jesus showed us that we should use things. But Christ also showed us that material things should never become the object of our affection or adoration. When we reverse this ethical foundation, spiritual disaster occurs. We begin to use people, and love things.

That is an accurate picture of life apart from Jesus Christ. He came in the flesh because he loved people, not things.

Sometimes we can focus on the wrong things about Jesus' birth and his life. We minimize or forget about worshiping our Savior who loved us by coming in the flesh and dying for our sins. We can fail to focus on the meaning of his coming.

The meaning of his birth and life transcends any specific date on the calendar. He loves us, not because we are things, but because we are people. He came to atone for our sins, to save us and to help us come to know God. He didn't come so that our worship of him would become a worship of things.

*Greg Albrecht*

## THE BIRTH OF JESUS: A STORY OF SHAME

Jesus' birth involves more *humiliation* than glory. The Son of God *was* in glory, but he saw us living in the slimepit of sin, and he loved us so much that he came into this slimepit to save us. He gave up his glory and he lived in humble circumstances. When Jesus was born, there was no pageantry. There was no glory in putting a baby in an animal's feed trough.

Jesus didn't deserve any shame, but he was willing to live in it, until he killed him. That is the example God has given us. It shows us what love is. It shows us what God is like. Jesus told Philip, If you have seen me, you have seen the Father (John 14:9). He wasn't talking about appearance, but about love and humility.

When Christ became flesh, it was not some strange deviation in his character. Rather, it shows what God is like all the time. God is always so loving that he is willing to come to our slimepit to rescue us. He is always willing to put his own comfort and glory aside so he can rescue us.

This is true greatness. Glory is not about power and bright lights. True greatness is not in strength or money. True greatness is humility and service, and that is just as true of God as it is for us. God's greatness is seen in his love, in his willingness to serve. The birth of Jesus shows that.

To put it in human terms, it would be like Pharaoh decided to give up the throne, give away his wealth and join the Hebrew slaves in the claypits, trying to make bricks without straw. If any Pharaoh actually did this, we would think he was insane, but God did this on an even greater scale. He gave up more, and he descended even more—and this is what God is like all the time. His glory and greatness is seen in how much he is willing to give up, not in how much he has now.

### **A birth in shame**

Think about the circumstances of Jesus' birth. He did not come when the Jewish people were a strong nation. Rather, he came when they were despised and ruled by a pagan empire. He did not come to the most important city—he grew up in a backwoods region called “Galilee of the Gentiles.”

Jesus was born in embarrassing circumstances, less than nine months after Mary and Joseph married. God could have easily caused the conception after Mary and Joseph were married. It would have been just as easy for the Holy Spirit to create a baby in a married woman as in an unmarried woman. It would have been easy to avoid the appearance of evil, but God did not. Even

before Jesus was born, Jesus was in a compromised situation.

Luke tells us that Joseph went to Bethlehem because everyone was supposed to go to their family's city to be counted for the census (Luke 2:3-4). I don't know, of course, but it seems that Joseph would have had at least a few brothers or cousins in the family of David who would have gone to Bethlehem, too. But we hear nothing of them, about they might have helped Joseph and Mary. They were on their own.

God loved the world so much that he gave them his only Son—and the world didn't want him. They knew God only as a God of power and wealth; they had forgotten about the God who walked in the garden of Eden calling for his wayward children. They had forgotten about the God who had a still, soft voice.

The world didn't want God, but God still loved the world. Even when we were sinners, even when we were ungodly, God loved us and sent his Son to die for us (Romans 5:6, 8, 10). That is what God is always like. The birth of Jesus should remind us of that. Christmas should remind us of his great humility.

### **A touch of glory**

The angels were a touch of glory in the nativity story. Here were the bright shining lights, the heavenly choir singing praises to God. But where did they appear? Outside of town, with shepherds, the lowest level of society. Shepherds were so despised that they couldn't even testify in court. No one trusted them because they moved from one town to another. But God sent his angels to shepherds, not to priests and kings.

The wise men of Jerusalem knew that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem (Matthew 2:4-6), but they didn't bother to make the five-mile trip. God was drawing the far-off, but the ones who were close, couldn't even see the star. The glory of Christmas was so hidden that only a few people from the east could take the hint.

Not long after this, an angel warned the family: "Flee for your life. The king is out to kill you." The Christ child was taken to Egypt, becoming a refugee in the land the Jews had left—the land of slavery, the land of outcasts. This is the glory of being poor, persecuted, rejected by the people you have come to save. This is not the way we usually think of glory, but it is God's kind of glory—the glory of love and self-sacrifice. Whoever wants to be great, Jesus said, let him become a servant. This is true greatness because this is the way God is.

## **Just like Jesus**

God is like a king who steps into the mud to help us make bricks without straw. He is like a king who sends his Son to his people even though he knows they will kill him. God is like someone who sacrifices himself to keep his enemies (that's us) from being punished. God is like Jesus—all the time. He is like a person who loves children, touches lepers and socializes with tax collectors and prostitutes. God is like someone who was hated without a cause, beaten without mercy and crucified without committing a crime.

God lets people hate him and beat up on him—not because he is a fool, but because he knows the best way for us to come to our senses is to see what selfishness really leads to. He knows that the best way to overcome evil is not by force, but by persistent love.

Thankfully, God has the power to pull it off. He is not hurt by our flailings. He does not get depressed when we reject him. He does not get vindictive when we insult him. He is bigger than that, so much bigger that he can be patient with us. He can be a helpless baby, he can be a crucified criminal, he can stoop that low because he loves us.

In this way, Christmas shows us what God is like. It shows us how much he loves us. It shows us the extreme that he went to in order to save us. God is so glorious that he left his glory and came down into the slimepit to save us. He was willing to be a baby conceived before marriage. He was willing to be born in a stable, to be rejected, to flee to Egypt. He was willing to give it all up, even his life, for us.

## **A lesson for us**

God wants us to be like he is, to be like Jesus was. Not in appearance, not in power, but in love and humility. He set the example for us, and Christmas, or the birth of Jesus, has a message for us in how we behave toward one another.

Jesus said that a servant is not greater than the master. If he, our lord and teacher, has served us, we should also serve one another (Matthew 20:26-28). Whoever wants to be great should become a servant. Jesus wants us to go out of our way to help others. We are to use our time and our resources to help others. Jesus also said, If you want to follow me, take up your cross. Be willing to lose, even your life, and you will be great.

This is the way we are to follow Jesus' example. We don't follow his example in keeping Hanukkah, in cleansing the temple, or in going to synagogues on the Sabbath. But he specifically says that we are to follow his

## JESUS THE SAVIOR

example in serving others. That's the message of Christmas and the path of true glory.

We need to identify with that baby in the manger, to be like he is. We need to identify with the woman who had to give birth in a stable, and with the family who were refugees in another nation. Our role model is someone who loved his enemies, who was rejected time and again, and yet loved them. He was taken advantage of, ridiculed, despised and convicted of a crime, all because he wanted to help us. That is truly praiseworthy, truly worth celebrating!

*Joseph Teach*

## WHY JESUS GIVES US HOPE

The Old Testament is a story of frustrated hope. It begins by telling us that humans were created in the image of God. But it was not long before we humans sinned, and we were kicked out of paradise. But along with the word of judgment also came a word of promise—God said that one of Eve’s descendants would crush the enemy (Genesis 3:15). A deliverer would come to rescue the people.

Eve probably hoped that her first child would be the solution. But it was Cain, and he was part of the problem. Sin continued, and it got worse. There was a partial salvation in the time of Noah, but sin continued. There was the sin of Noah’s grandson, and then of Babel. Humanity continued having problems, having the hope of something better but never able to achieve it.

Some important promises were given to Abraham. But he died before he received all the promises. He had a child, but no land, and he was not yet a blessing to all the nations. But the promise continued. It was given again to Isaac, and then Jacob. Jacob and his family went into Egypt and became a great nation, but they were enslaved. Even so, God remained true to his promise. With spectacular miracles, God brought them out of Egypt.

But the nation of Israel fell far short of the promise. Miracles didn’t help. The law didn’t help. They kept on sinning, kept on failing, kept on doubting, kept on wandering for 40 years. But God was true to his promise, and he brought them into the land of Canaan, and with many miracles, he gave them the land.

But that did not fix their problems. They were still the same sinful people, and the book of Judges records some of the grossest of sins. How could this messed-up nation ever become a blessing to the other nations? They kept on sinning—falling into idolatry again and again. God finally let the northern tribes of Israel be taken into captivity by Assyria. You’d think that would have





made the Jews repent, but it didn't. The people failed time and again, and God let the Jews be taken into captivity, too.

Where was the promise now? The people were right back where Abraham had started from, in Mesopotamia. Where was the promise?

The promise was in God, who cannot lie. He would fulfill his promise no matter how badly the people failed.

God let the Jews stay in Babylon for 70 years, and after that, a small percentage of them returned to Jerusalem, and the Jewish nation became a shadow of its former self. They got a taste of freedom, then a taste of being ruled by Rome. They weren't any better off in the Promised Land than they had been in Egypt or Babylon. And they groaned: Where is the promise that God gave Abraham? How are we going to be a light to the nations? How are the promises to David going to be fulfilled if we can't even rule ourselves?

Under Roman rule, the people's hopes were frustrated. Some gave up hope. Some joined an underground resistance movement. Others tried to be more religious, more worthy of God's blessing. Everyone longed for God to do something.

## **A glimmer of hope**

God started in the smallest possible way—as an embryo in a virgin. Behold, I will give you a sign, he had said through Isaiah. A virgin will conceive and bring forth a child, and you will name him Immanuel, which means “God with us.” But he was first called Jesus — the Hebrew name *Yeshua*, which means, God will save us.

God began fulfilling his promise with a child conceived out of wedlock. There was some social stigma attached to that—even 30 years later the Jewish leaders made snide comments about Jesus' parentage (John 8:41). Who would believe Mary's story about angels and supernatural conception?

God began fulfilling the hopes of his people in a way that they did not recognize. No one would have guessed that the “illegitimate” baby was the answer to the nation's hopes. A baby can't do anything, can't teach anyone, can't help anyone, and can't save anyone. But a baby has *potential*.

Angels told shepherds that a Savior had been born in Bethlehem (Luke 2:11). He was a Savior, but he wasn't saving anyone right then. He even needed to be saved himself. The family had to flee to save the baby from Herod, the king of the Jews.

But God called that helpless baby a Savior. He knew what that baby would do. In that baby were all the hopes of Israel. Here was the light to the Gentiles; here was the blessing for all nations; here was the son of David who

would rule the world; here was the child of Eve who would crush the enemy of all humanity. But he was just a baby, born in a stable, his life in danger. But in his birth, everything changed.

When Jesus was born, there was no sudden burst of Gentiles coming to Jerusalem to be taught. There was no sign of political or economic strength—no sign except that a virgin had conceived and had given birth—a sign that no one in Judah would believe.

But God had come to us, because he is faithful to his promises, and he is the basis of all our hopes. The history of Israel shows again and again that human methods do not work. We cannot achieve God's purposes by our own efforts. God does not do things the way we think, but in the way he knows will work. Our way always gets messed up. We think in terms of laws and land and kings and kingdoms of this world. God thinks in terms of tiny beginnings, of spiritual rather than physical strength, of victory in weakness rather than power.

When God gave us Jesus, he fulfilled his promises and brought about everything he had said. But we didn't see the fulfillment right away—all we saw was a baby. Most people didn't believe it, and even those who believed could only hope.

## **Fulfillment**

We know now that Jesus grew up to give his life as a ransom for our sins, to bring us forgiveness, to be a light to the Gentiles, to defeat the devil, and to defeat death itself in his death and resurrection. We can see how Jesus is the fulfillment of God's promises.

We can see much more than the Jews could 2,000 years ago, but we still do not see everything there is. We do not yet see every promise fulfilled. We do not yet see Satan chained where he can deceive the nations no more. We do not yet see all nations knowing God. We do not yet see the end of crying and tears and death and dying. We still long for the final answer—but in Jesus, we have hope and assurance.

We have a promise, a promise guaranteed by God, ratified by his Son, sealed by the Holy Spirit. We believe that everything else will come true, that Christ will complete the work he has begun. Our hope is beginning to bear fruit, and we can be confident that all the promises will be fulfilled—not necessarily in the way we might expect, but in the way that God has planned.

He will do it, as promised, through his Son, Jesus Christ. We may not see it now, but God has already acted, and God is working even now behind the scenes to bring about his will. Just as in the baby Jesus we had hope and a

promise of salvation, so in the risen Jesus we now have hope and promise of completion. That is true of the growth of the kingdom of God, it is true in the work of the church, and it is true in each of our lives.

## Hope for ourselves

As people come to faith in Christ, his work begins to grow in them. Jesus said that we must each be born again, and when we come to believe in him, the Holy Spirit overshadows us and begets in us a new life. Just as Jesus promises, he comes to live within us. Someone once said, “Jesus could be born 1,000 times, and it would do me no good, unless he is born in me.” The hope that Jesus gives to the world does us no good unless we accept him as *our* hope. We need to let Jesus live in us.

However, we do not yet have the fulfillment of all the promises that God has made. We do not yet have all the life and goodness that he offers. What we have is hope, and a down payment, and a promise of better things to come. What we have now is just a baby in comparison to the glory that God will give us later.

We might look at ourselves and think, I don’t see much here. I’m not much better than I was 20 years ago. I still struggle with sin, doubt and guilt. I am still selfish and stubborn. I am not much better at being a godly person than ancient Israel was. I wonder if God is really doing anything in my life. It doesn’t seem like I’ve made any progress.

The answer is to remember Jesus. Our spiritual beginning may not seem good for much right now, but it is, because God says it is. What we have in us is only a down payment. It is a beginning, and it is a guarantee from God himself. The Holy Spirit in us is a down payment of glory yet to come.

Luke tells us that the angels sang when Jesus was born. It was a moment of triumph, even though humans couldn’t see it that way. The angels knew that victory was certain, because God had told them so.

Jesus tells us that the angels rejoice whenever a sinner repents. They are singing for every person who comes to faith in Christ, because a baby has been born. That baby might not perform very well. It might have many struggles, but it is a child of God, and God will see to it that his work is done. He will take care of us. Though our spiritual lives are not perfect, God will keep working in us until his work is done.

Just as there is tremendous hope in the baby Jesus, there is tremendous hope in the baby Christian. No matter how long you have been a Christian, there is tremendous hope for you, because God has invested in you, and he will not abandon the work he has begun. Jesus is evidence that God always

keeps his promises.

### **Five facts about hope**

- God made great promises to Abraham, but they were not fulfilled in Old Testament times.
- Because of persistent sin, God let the Jews be taken into captivity.
- God's answer to humanity's problem began in the least expected and least visible way.
- We still do not see the complete answer to all of earth's problems, but we have hope in God's promise.
- Believers do not experience all the promises in this life, but have hope and confidence in Jesus.

### **Things to think about**

- Why did Israel fail to be a light to the other nations?
- Why didn't the Jewish people recognize Jesus as the Messiah?
- What hopes do people have for the world today?
- The lesson of ancient Israel is that human methods do not work. Why do we get so discouraged when our efforts do not work?
- Why do we find it hard to believe that God will finish the work he began in *us*?

*Joseph Tkach*

## THE MIRACLE OF JESUS' BIRTH

“Can you read that?” The tourist asked me, pointing to a large silver star bearing a Latin inscription: “*Hic de virgine Maria Jesus Christus natus est.*”

“I’ll try,” I answered, and bringing to bear the full force of my meager Latin, attempted a translation: “Here Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary.”

“Well, what do you think?” the man then asked. “Do you believe it?”

It was my first visit to the Holy Land, and I was standing in the Grotto of the Nativity in Bethlehem. The fortress-like Church of the Nativity is built over this grotto or cave where, according to tradition, Jesus Christ was born. A silver star inlaid in the marble floor is said to mark the exact spot where Jesus’ birth took place. I responded that, yes, I believe that Jesus Christ was miraculously conceived, but I doubted whether the silver star marked the spot of the birth.

The man, an agnostic, offered the opinion that Jesus was probably illegitimate, and that the Gospel accounts of the Virgin Birth were attempts to cover up that embarrassing fact. The Gospel writers, he speculated, simply borrowed the theme of supernatural birth from ancient pagan mythology.

Later, walking on the paved expanse of Manger Square outside the ancient church, we discussed the subject some more.

### Infancy narratives

I explained that the term *Virgin Birth* refers to the virginal conception of Jesus; that is, the belief that Jesus was conceived in Mary by a miraculous work of the Holy Spirit, without the agency of a human father. The doctrine that Mary was the sole natural parent of Jesus is clearly taught in two New Testament passages, referred to as the infancy narratives: Matthew 1:18-25 and Luke 1:26-38. They record Jesus’ supernatural conception as a historical fact. Matthew tells us:

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit.... All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”— which means, “God with us.” (Matthew 1:18, 22-23)

Luke records Mary’s reaction to the angel Gabriel’s announcement of the Virgin Birth:

“How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?” The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.” (Luke 1:34-35)

Each of the writers approaches the story in a different way. Matthew’s Gospel was compiled for Jewish-Christian readers concerned with the fulfillment of Old Testament messianic prophecies. Luke, a Gentile Christian, wrote with the Greek and Roman world in mind. He had a more cosmopolitan audience—Christians of pagan background living outside of the Holy Land.

Notice Matthew’s account again: “This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 1:18). Matthew is telling the story from Joseph’s point of view. Joseph considered quietly terminating the betrothal. But an angel appeared to Joseph and reassured him: “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit” (verse 20). Joseph accepted the divine plan.

As evidence for his Jewish readers that Jesus was their Messiah, Matthew adds that all this took place “to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ‘The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel’—which means, ‘God with us’” (verses 22-23). This refers to Isaiah 7:14.

### **“The virgin shall conceive”**

Through Isaiah, God promised to give his people a sign: “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel” (Isaiah 7:14). The Hebrew word translated as “virgin” is *almab*. It can mean either “virgin” or “young woman.”

The translators of the Septuagint (the earliest Greek translation of the Old Testament) chose the Greek word *parthenos*, meaning virgin, as their rendering of *almab*. In reporting the birth of Jesus, Matthew quotes Isaiah 7:14 from the Septuagint, using the Greek word *parthenos*. To Matthew, the virgin is clearly Mary; the child, Jesus Christ.

Many Christians accordingly understand Isaiah 7:14 as a prophecy of a future event—the miraculous Incarnation of our Lord—though it may not have been recognized as a messianic passage in Isaiah’s day. Jesus was the fulfillment of this prophecy, for he was Immanuel—“God with us”—in the fullest sense. Only the Incarnation can explain how a child could be God

with us.

The context of Isaiah further identifies this child with the Wonderful Child of Isaiah 9:6. That passage speaks of a child to be born, a son to be given—and then goes on to declare him Mighty God! This refers to the Messiah—the God-Man, Jesus Christ.

Jesus' miraculous birth was a sign that God had come in the flesh to dwell with humanity. The child Jesus was the salvation of God—not from a physical enemy, but from sin.

### **Mary's story**

With extra attention to the role of women, Luke tells the story through Mary's eyes. In Luke's account, we learn that God sent the angel Gabriel to Mary in Nazareth. Gabriel said to her: "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus" (Luke 1:30-31).

How could this be, Mary asked, as she was a virgin? Gabriel explained that this would not be a normal conception. "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God" (verse 35).

Even though her pregnancy would surely be misunderstood and put her reputation at risk, Mary courageously accepted the extraordinary situation. "I am the Lord's servant," she declared. "May it be to me as you have said" (verse 38). By a miracle, one person of the Godhead entered into time and space and became a human embryo.

### **The Word became flesh**

Those who believe in the Virgin Birth usually believe that God became flesh for our salvation. Those who do not accept the Virgin Birth are inclined to understand Jesus of Nazareth as only a human being.

The doctrine of the Virgin Birth is directly related to, but not identical with, that of the Incarnation. The Incarnation (literally, "embodiment") is the doctrine affirming that the eternal Son of God added human flesh to his divinity, and became a human. This belief finds its clearest expression in the prologue to John's Gospel: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:14).

The doctrine of the Virgin Birth states that the conception of Jesus was miraculous, in that he had no human father. The Incarnation says that God became flesh; the Virgin Birth tells us a little more about *how* this was done. The Incarnation was a supernatural event and involved a special kind of birth.

If the child to be born was merely human, there would have been no need for a supernatural conception.

The first man, Adam, for example, also came miraculously from the hand of God. He had *neither* father nor mother; there was no conception. But Adam was not God. God chose to enter into humanity—“enflesh” himself—by means of a miraculous Virgin Birth.

### **Late origin?**

The wording of the passages in Matthew and Luke is clear: Mary was a virgin when Jesus was conceived in her womb by the Holy Spirit. It was a miracle of God.

But with the rise of liberal theology—with its suspicion of everything miraculous—these biblical statements have come to be challenged on a variety of grounds. Among them is an alleged late origin of the birth accounts. This theory argues that as early Christian beliefs about Jesus developed, Christians began to add fictional elements to the basic story of Jesus’ life. The Virgin Birth, we are told, was simply their imaginative way of saying that Jesus Christ was God’s gift to humanity.

The Jesus Seminar, a group of liberal biblical scholars who voted on the words of Jesus and the Gospel writers, took this view. These scholars reject the biblical account of Jesus’ miraculous conception and birth, calling them “later creations.” Mary, they conclude, must have had sexual intercourse with Joseph or some other man.

Did New Testament writers engage in mythmaking, deliberately making Jesus Christ larger than life? Was he simply a “human prophet,” an “ordinary man of his time” who was later invested with a supernatural aura by well-meaning followers to “buttress their Christological dogma”?

Such theories are impossible to sustain. The two infancy accounts in Matthew and Luke—with their differing content and perspectives—are independent of each other. The miracle of Jesus’ conception is almost the only point in common between them. This indicates that the Virgin Birth is based on an earlier, common tradition, not a later theological interpolation or doctrinal development.

### **Miracles outmoded?**

Despite its widespread acceptance by the early church, the Virgin Birth is a difficult concept for many in our modern culture—even some Christians—to embrace. The idea of a miraculous conception, many feel, smacks of superstition. They suggest that the Virgin Birth is an unimportant doctrine



on the margin of the New Testament, of little importance to the message of the gospel.

This rejection of the miraculous is consistent with a rationalist and humanistic worldview. But for a Christian to eliminate the supernatural from the birth of Jesus Christ is to compromise its divine origin as well as its fundamental importance. If we believe in the divinity of Jesus Christ and in his resurrection from the dead, why reject the Virgin Birth? If we can admit a supernatural exit, why not a supernatural entrance? Compromising or denying the Virgin Birth robs other doctrines of their value and significance. We are left with no foundation or authority for what we believe as Christians.

## **Born of God**

God involves himself in the world, actively intervenes in human affairs, overrides natural laws when necessary to accomplish his purposes—and he became flesh by means of a Virgin Birth. When God came in human flesh in the person of Jesus, he did not abandon his deity, but rather added humanity to his divinity. He was both fully God and fully human (Philippians 2:6-8; Colossians 1:15-20; Hebrews 1:8-9).

Jesus' miraculous origin sets him apart from the rest of humanity. His conception was a divinely ordained exception to the ordinary rules of nature. The Virgin Birth illustrates the extent to which the Son of God was willing to go to become our Redeemer. It was a demonstration of God's grace and love (John 3:16) in fulfilling his promise of salvation.

The Son of God became one of us for our salvation, sharing in the nature of humanity so he could die on our behalf. He came in the flesh so those who believe in him might be redeemed, reconciled and saved (1 Timothy 1:15). Only the Creator of humanity could pay the price for all of humanity's sins.

As Paul explains, "God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons" (Galatians 4:4-5). To those who receive Jesus Christ and believe in his name, God offers the precious gift of salvation. He offers us a personal relationship with him. We can become sons and daughters of God— "children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God" (John 1:13).

*Keith Stump*

## **Parthenogenesis**

Some believe that the Virgin Birth could have happened naturally, without

a miracle, by a process called *parthenogenesis*. Parthenogenesis is biological reproduction that involves development of an ovum without fertilization. Parthenogenesis occurs commonly among lower plants and invertebrate animals such as rotifers, aphids, ants and bees.

Parthenogenesis in mammals is not impossible, but does not occur naturally. It has been induced, for example, in rabbits, though all the offspring were female. It is not known in primates or humans. If a rationalization of the Gospel accounts is wanted, any number of such theories could be argued, but they can never be more than speculative.

Editor's note: For studies of the birth stories in Matthew 1 and Luke 1–2, see *Exploring the Word of God: The Four Gospels*. Or you also see <https://www.gci.org/bible/gospels>.

For thoughts about Mary's response to the angelic message, see our interview with Roger Newell at <https://www.gci.org/yi/newell29>.

## THE GREATEST BIRTH STORY

I was born in a Navy hospital in Pensacola, Florida. No one knew I was breach until the wrong end of me presented itself to the doctor. Fortunately I didn't take too long coming out and there were no complications. I did earn the affectionate nickname of "Froglegs" for the first few days of my life.

Everyone has a birth story. Children delight in hearing about their births, and mothers love telling the details of how their babies came into the world. A birth is a miracle and often brings tears to the eyes of those who witness it.

Most births quickly fade from memory, but there is one that will never be forgotten, even into eternity. It was ordinary from outside appearances, but its significance was felt around the world and continues to affect the lives of people everywhere.

When Jesus was born, he became Emmanuel, God with us. Until Jesus came, God was "with us" only in specific ways and with certain people. He showed his presence in the pillar of the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. He was with Moses in the burning bush and with Joshua when the walls of Jericho fell down.

But his birth as a human made him touchable, gave him eyes, ears and a mouth. He ate with us, talked to us, listened to us, laughed with us and touched us. He cried and felt pain. Through his suffering and sorrow, he understood our suffering and sorrow. He was with us and he was one of us.

By becoming one of us, Jesus answered the lament that so many people say today: "No one understands me." Hebrews 4:15 says he is a high priest who can sympathize with us because he went through the same kinds of temptations we all face. As *The Message* puts it, "We don't have a priest who is out of touch with our reality." He has walked the proverbial mile in our shoes.

A common misperception is that God lives in a heavenly ivory tower, far away and far above us. But the Son of God came to us as one of us. And *God with us* is still with us. When he died, we died, and when he rose, we rose. Because he lives, we live. And because he started out as a baby just like we do, he knows us and understands us—and loves us anyway.

The birth of Jesus was more than the account of one more human born into this world. It was God's way of showing how much he loves us.

*Tammy Teach*



## EMMANUEL, OUR REDEEMER

As we celebrate the birth of our Redeemer, the opening words from a beautiful hymn keep running through my mind: “There is a redeemer, Jesus God’s own Son.” Redemption isn’t a word we use often in everyday life, unless we’re talking about turning in a coupon to save money, or exchanging points for merchandise. Some of us remember saving green stamps in books and redeeming them for just about anything. We sometimes talk about redeeming time, particularly making up for a misspent youth or wasted opportunities.

However, even when we think of *redemption* as a churchy word, we might not be so clear on the meaning. One well-known story of redemption is found in the book of Ruth (a biblical love story, if you will), of a young widow’s tragedy and triumph, and her hero-kinsman-redeemer, Boaz. Perhaps you know the story. Ruth’s experience helps us understand what it means to be redeemed.

Under the laws of ancient Israel, the closest relative of a widow (enter Ruth) could, upon her request, marry her and thus restore the land belonging to the family, as well as continue the family line of the deceased husband. When Ruth lay at Boaz’s feet on the threshing floor, she wasn’t being inappropriate; she was claiming her right to make him her kinsman-redeemer. A closer relative who had the first prerogative declined to marry Ruth and the rest is history; Ruth took her place in the genealogy of Jesus.

By marrying Ruth, who was a Gentile daughter-in-law of the wife of one of his relatives, a “nobody” to him, Boaz restored her honor, dignity, land and inheritance. By extension, Naomi, Ruth’s mother-in-law, also got back her life and was given a future and hope.

Boaz was a type of Christ, pointing to Jesus as the kinsman-redeemer of all humanity who would buy us back from sin and death. Jesus gave himself for us, restoring our hope and future. His sacrifice saves us from bondage to the wrong master and frees us to be in him, with blessings now and hope for eternal life with him.

The most beautiful thing about our redemption is that it wasn’t a transaction. Just as Ruth had nothing to offer Boaz but herself, we have nothing to offer Jesus but ourselves, sins and all, no coupon or green stamps required. It was a plan God formulated before the foundation of the universe, and it was motivated and shaped by one thing: his amazing love.

By becoming human just as we are human, yet remaining God; from

zygote to embryo to fetus, then infant to child to preteen and on to teenage and adulthood, Jesus redeemed us entirely, healing our sin and alienation and taking us into himself. Just as Boaz changed Ruth's life, making her part of his family and no longer an outsider, so Jesus has brought us into the life of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit and, in him, we are outsiders no more. Our Kinsman-Redeemer became one of us to make us one with him.

*Tammy Tkach*

## MAGNIFICENT JOY!

Recently, three couples who are our dear friends shared that they are expecting grandchildren. For two couples, it's their first grandchild, and they gave me a delightful rundown of their plans to be present at the birth. For the third couple, it's their second grandchild and they also plan to be present for the wonderful event.

Tammy and I still remember the glorious emotions we experienced awaiting the arrival of both of our children. I imagine most of you share similar memories and some of you are anticipating the wondrous time of new life in the weeks or months ahead. So it's fairly easy for most of us to identify with the joy felt by two pregnant women in Luke's account known as *The Visitation*.

At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!... As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy" (Luke 1:39-42, 44).

In response, Mary offered a song known as *The Magnificat*.

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden. For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. And his mercy is on those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm, he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, he has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his posterity forever. (Luke 1:46-55, *RSV*)

The phrase "my soul magnifies the Lord" can mean to praise, glorify, celebrate, adore, enlarge, exalt or extol. The words convey an experience of being enlarged, lifted up and out of one's self by power from another realm. This is a quality of joy and hope that transcends human emotion—it comes

only from God.

Mary's song, which weaves together the language of several of the Psalms, is patterned closely on the song of Hannah, who could not bear children until the Lord visited her (1 Samuel 2:1–10). While Mary's song is focused on humility and calmness, Hannah's song focuses on her sense of indignation, followed by personal triumph.

An unusual feature of both songs is that God is portrayed in terms of what he has done as well as what he will yet do. This is a literary technique where the past tense is used to express hope for the future. Both songs remind us that what God has done in the past is what God will do in the future. During Advent, we celebrate this fact—noting God's involvement in our past and relying on his involvement in our future. We rejoice in knowing that all God's acts are the fruit of his consistent character—his faithfulness demonstrated in Jesus Christ.

Another noteworthy feature in Mary's and Hannah's songs is that God's justice and mercy are presented in terms of the reversal of fortunes for the proud and the humble, the mighty and the lowly, the rich and the poor. The God of our past and future will make everything right, straighten everything that is crooked and heal all that is broken. We read of this in Isaiah 40:1-5, a passage often sung during Advent in performances of Handel's oratorio, *Messiah*.

The biblical accounts of Hannah and Mary (with Elizabeth) are full of symbolism and prototypes from the past. Both Hannah and Elizabeth were barren until, in their later years, God intervened miraculously, as he had for Sarah, Abraham's wife. In the Old Testament, barrenness was much worse than an inability to bear children—it was a symbol of the end of human potential, the choking off of life. It pointed to the impotence of the human race in the face of sin and death. It's no wonder that God would use a barren woman, Elizabeth, to point to his Son Jesus, who announced and accomplished the astounding reversal that Isaiah and other prophets proclaimed.

At Mary's greeting, Elizabeth, who was pregnant with John the Baptist, said "the baby in my womb leaped for joy." Both Elizabeth and Mary experienced great joy in receiving and proclaiming God's sure promise concerning the future. They knew that God's promises always come with the power to see them fulfilled. The overlapping pregnancies of these women were beautiful signs that what was promised was about to happen. In God's economy, it already had! Mary's song—*The Magnificat*—celebrates the divine events as though they already had occurred. She knew that God is as good as



his Word!

Mary and Elizabeth symbolically represent the poor and oppressed, those of “low estate,” who can be filled with joy knowing their hope is in God who is faithful to fulfill what he has promised. The two miraculous pregnancies are living examples of what Jesus later proclaimed: “With humans this is impossible, but with God all things are possible” (Matthew 19:26). In his almighty love, God entered this world in human flesh. All who positively, willingly respond to that love by embracing their new lives in Christ will experience magnificent joy for all eternity.

*Joseph Tkach*

## GENEALOGIES OF JESUS

Genealogies fulfilled several purposes in the ancient world. Rulers used such lists to justify their power and authority. They were also used when planning marriages to determine the compatibility of the intended couple. A family tree established the social pedigree of the family.

Two of the Gospel writers, Matthew and Luke, give genealogical lists for Jesus. When Matthew's and Luke's lists are compared we see several differences. Matthew's genealogical list for Jesus is an ascending list that goes from Abraham to Jesus. Luke has a descending list that goes from Jesus back to Adam. The lists are almost identical from Abraham to David, yet they are very different from David to Jesus. Luke's list is complete in that it is from Jesus to Adam. In comparison, Matthew's list is incomplete. Why is this?

Those who would like to discredit the Bible are quick to see this as further evidence that it is unreliable and filled with mythology. But this is a rush to judgment — false judgment, in my opinion. There are other answers that are more accurate, although they too have an element of speculation about them.

For example, Martin Luther explained Matthew's list to be giving us Joseph's line, while Luke's list is giving us Mary's line. Many years before, Tertullian offered a similar explanation, only he reversed it as Matthew giving us Mary's line and Luke giving us Joseph's line. I find a serious problem with these two explanations. Matthew 1:16 tells us that he is giving us Joseph's line and Luke 3:23 also says he is giving us Joseph's line.

Another explanation was offered by Julius Africanus. He suggested that Matthew is giving us Jesus' natural descent while Luke is giving us his legal descent. Even though neither of the Gospels makes this assertion, it is a possibility.

Grant Osborne, a New Testament professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, gives what I believe is a better and fuller explanation. He agrees with the ancients that a careful examination of the two genealogical lists reveals the authors' differing purposes.

The list given by Matthew is presented in a style rulers used to justify their status and authority. The genealogy is arranged in three groups, with 14 names in each group. There is a Hebrew linguistic device known as *gematria*. Each letter of the Hebrew alphabet was assigned a numerical value: *aleph* was 1, *beth* was 2, *gimel* was 3, *daleth* was 4, *he* was 5, *vav* was 6, and so forth. The three consonants for David (*daleth* — *vav* — *daleth*) add up to 14. Matthew is highlighting the kingly ancestry of Jesus by working in groups of 14. Matthew omits a few names in order to achieve this structure.

The major difference between the two lists is the names between David

and Jesus. Matthew traces the line through Solomon; Luke through his brother Nathan. Matthew may be giving the “official” line of royal inheritance (which could include adoptions); whereas Luke may be presenting a biological line. We do not have enough information to be sure.

Luke does not work with groupings and numbers like Matthew. Luke has a different purpose. In his Gospel, Luke places his genealogy between Jesus’ baptism and the temptation of the devil. At his baptism God declares Jesus is his Son. Then Luke goes on and gives us a simple list of the succession of his human ancestors, using their common names. It begins by indicating that Jesus is “the son of Joseph” and concludes by tracing his ancestry all the way back to Adam, who is finally “of God.” This Jesus, who is the Son of God, is also joined to the very root of all humanity. After linking Jesus to Adam, Luke then proceeds to the story of Jesus triumphing over Satan’s temptation. Jesus rises above temptation where Adam failed. The message is clear that all humanity, from its very root, finds its sins and the power of evil overcome in Jesus.

While there may remain questions about why certain names are in the lists or whether names of uncles and brothers are used instead of literal fathers, the message of the two genealogies is similar. Jesus is both son of man and Son of God. As son of man, of Adam and Joseph, he represented all humanity. As God’s Messiah in the line of kings and as Son of God (which was also used as a royal title) Jesus is uniquely from God and set over all humanity as its divine ruler and deliverer. Matthew and Luke together proclaim that on the basis of the human and divine ancestry of Jesus, we are saved from sin and its power in, by and through him.

*Joseph Tkach*

## THE PRINCE OF PEACE

When Jesus Christ was born, a company of angels proclaimed, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests” (Luke 2:14). As recipients of God’s peace, Christians are unique in this violent and selfish world. The Spirit of God leads Christians to a life of peacemaking, of caring, of giving, of love.

In contrast, the world around us is constantly embroiled in strife and intolerance, whether political, ethnic, religious or social. Even now, whole regions are threatened by modern eruptions of ancient grudges and hatreds. Jesus Christ illustrated the stark difference that would mark his own disciples when he told them, “I am sending you out like sheep among wolves” (Matthew 10:16).

Peoples of the world, divided in so many ways, cannot find the way to peace. The way of this world is the way of self-interest. It is the greedy way, the envious way, the hate-filled way. But Jesus told his disciples, “Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you” (John 14:27, NKJV).

Christians are called to be diligent before God to “pursue the things which make for peace” and to “pursue peace with all men, and holiness” (Romans 14:19; Hebrews 12:14, NKJV). They are partakers of “all joy and peace...by the power of the Holy Spirit” (Romans 15:13).

This kind of peace, “the peace of God, which transcends all understanding” (Philippians 4:7), overcomes divisions, dissensions and feelings of separatism and party spirit in which humans find themselves embroiled. It leads instead toward harmony and a sense of common purpose and destiny—“the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3, NKJV).

It means that we will forgive those who wrong us. It means we will show mercy to those in need. It means that kindness, honesty, generosity, humility and patience, all underscored by love, will mark our relationships with others. It means that greed, sexual sin, substance abuse, hatred, envy, bitterness, strife and mistreatment of others will not maintain a root in our lives.

Christ will be living in us. James wrote of Christians, “Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness” (James 3:18). This kind of peace also gives us assurance and security in the face of disaster, calm and strength in the midst of tragedy. Christians are not immune from the problems of life.

Christians have to struggle through periods of grief and hurt like everyone

else. But we have divine help and assurance to hold us up. Though our physical circumstances may be gloomy and dark, the peace of God that lies within us keeps us settled, sure and steadfast, confident in the hope of Jesus Christ's return, when his peace will at last encompass all the earth.

As we await that glorious day, let's remember the words of the apostle Paul in Colossians 3:15: "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful." Do you need peace in your life? The Prince of Peace—Jesus Christ—is where you'll find it!

*Joseph Teach*

## IS CHRISTMAS A SIN?

Some Christians believe that Christians should not observe Christmas. Some object to the commercialism of the holiday; others object to its origins. In order to understand this subject, it is helpful to trace some of the history of Christmas avoidance, particularly its roots in Puritanism.

The Puritans believed that the first-century church modeled a Christianity that modern Christians should copy. They attempted to base their faith and practice solely on the New Testament, and their position on Christmas reflected their commitment to practice a pure, scriptural form of Christianity. Puritans argued that God reserved to himself the determination of all proper forms of worship, and that he disapproved of any human innovations – even innovations that celebrated the great events of salvation.

The name Christmas also alienated many Puritans. Christmas meant “the mass of Christ.” The mass was despised as a Roman Catholic institution that undermined the Protestant concept of Christ, who offered himself once for all. The Puritans’ passionate avoidance of any practice that was associated with papal Rome caused them to overlook the fact that in many countries the name for the day had nothing to do with the Catholic mass, but focused instead on Jesus’ birth. The mass did not evolve into the form abhorred by Protestants until long after Christmas was widely observed. The two customs had separate, though interconnected, histories.

As ardent Protestants, Puritans identified the embracing of Christianity by the Roman Emperor Constantine in the early 300s as the starting point of the degeneration and corruption of the church. They believed the corruption of the church was brought on by the interweaving of the church with the pagan Roman state. To Puritans, Christmas was impure because it entered the Roman Church sometime in this period. No one knows the exact year or under what circumstances Roman Christians began to celebrate the birth of their Lord, but by the mid-300s, the practice was well established.

No evidence exists that the Christian leaders who began this practice consciously wanted to compromise with paganism. They may simply have wanted to celebrate the birth of Jesus. However, modern scholars generally agree that the date they chose for Christmas was influenced by a pagan celebration on or about that same date honoring the “Invincible Sun.” Consequently, some customs unrelated to the birth of Jesus that commonly characterize modern Christmas celebrations were also present in pre-Christian pagan celebrations. This religiously blended character of most forms of Christmas celebration was enough for Puritans to avoid the holiday

as a compromise with the pure exercise of Christian faith.

The New England culture was permeated with Puritan values. As late as 1847, no college in New England had a Christmas holiday. The fact that anti-Christmas sentiment exists among some groups originating in New England should not be surprising. However, there are today no churches that call themselves Puritans. Yet their theological descendants – Presbyterians, Congregationalists and many Baptists – remain. Gone, except among their most conservative offspring, is any concern about Christmas.

The central issue regarding Christmas observance is this: How much freedom do Christians have in the new covenant, either individually or as a church, to express their faith, worship and thanks toward Christ in forms not found in the Bible? Are Christians ever free to innovate in worship? May church leaders establish special days to celebrate the great acts of salvation?

Devout Christians sometimes confuse ancient forms with modern substance. “Once pagan, always pagan” is the way some people reason. They may admit the transforming power of Christ for people, but deny it for customs and traditions. Yet many of the practices God approved for ancient Israel had previously existed in paganism. Temples, priests, harvest festivals, music in worship, circumcision and tithing all had ancient pagan counterparts. God transformed these customs into a form of worship devoted to him. Even the sun, universally worshipped as a god by pagan cultures, God used to symbolize an aspect of the Christ (Malachi 4:2).

Jesus taught, “Stop judging by mere appearances, and make a right judgment” (John 7:24). Too often, Puritan criticism of Christmas was based on outward appearances and a strong anti-Catholic perspective.

When Israel added Hanukkah and Purim to its religious calendar – events that celebrated God’s saving acts in Jewish history – these were acceptable to God. So, too, was the addition of the synagogue itself and its traditions, although they were not in Scripture. Examples such as these have led many Christians to conclude that the church also has the freedom to add to its calendar festivals that celebrate God’s intervention in human affairs, such as the birth of Jesus and the resurrection of Jesus.

Unless we are to conclude that celebrating Christ’s arrival as God in the flesh is a bad thing, its celebration on what was once a pagan holiday is irrelevant. Christians who keep Christmas are not pagans. They do not worship nor regard pagan gods. They honor Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

It is true that certain customs attached to December 25 are practiced in a pagan spirit by many people. But a truly Christian observance of Christmas does not include drunkenness, fornication, carousing or any other conduct

unworthy of saints.

It is not a sin to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. After all, his entrance into the world was a cause of great rejoicing and celebration, because it made possible human reconciliation to God. At his birth people who loved God rejoiced in praise, and even the angels sang for joy (Luke 1:46–2:38).

Love motivates many Christians to celebrate Christmas. They love their Savior and they love their families. Christmas provides an opportunity for them to express love for both. To harshly judge those who choose to practice their faith in this spirit of devotion conflicts with many New Testament principles.

No one knows the exact date of Jesus' birth. But this lack of knowledge does not diminish the value of celebrating his birth, any more than not knowing when Christ will return diminishes the value of celebrating his return. The fact that non-Christians or even some Christians celebrate Christmas as a secular holiday or in a profane way is not a reason to avoid Christmas — any holiday can be misused. The problem is not the date, but the behavior.

We encourage people to observe Christmas as a celebration of a very important event in our salvation: the birth of Jesus Christ. We encourage them to celebrate it as a religious holiday, not a commercialized one. Christ should be the center of the celebration. Some may choose not to celebrate, and we hope that Christians who celebrate Christmas and those who do not are both seeking to honor Jesus Christ (Romans 14:5-6).

*Ralph Orr*



## DOES GOD HATE CHRISTMAS?

Spend five minutes surfing the Internet for information about Christmas and you'll find websites calling for an end to its celebration. Some are posted by atheists. But others, surprisingly, are posted by Christians — Christians who believe that Christmas observance is sinful.

At first glance, some of the arguments put forward by anti-Christmas Christians might sound plausible, especially if you've never thought about them before. But we believe that Christians ought to be free to experience the joy and inspiration of Christmas celebration without needless guilt or apprehension that they might be doing something God does not approve of. So let's look at four common arguments against Christmas and explain why each one does not stand up.

### **Argument 1: “We don’t know the date of Christ’s birth.”**

No one knows for certain on what day or even month of the year Jesus was born. However, we do not need to know the precise date of Jesus' birth to celebrate the fact of his birth. People can celebrate a birthday on a date other than a person's actual birthday. For example, Queen Elizabeth celebrates her birthday on June 17, but her actual birthday is April 21.

It is not crucial or necessary for us to know when Jesus was born in order to celebrate his birth.

### **Argument 2: “Christmas is commercialized and materialistic.”**

The Christmas holiday season has become a commercial race for many people. However, the fact that some people engage in ungodly activity associated with Christmas does not mean that right and meaningful celebration of Jesus' birth is wrong. If negative behavior on the part of some people meant that all Christmas celebration should be discarded, it would also follow that marriage, for example, would have to be discarded, because there are bad marriages in which physical and mental abuse takes place.

We are not obligated to discard a celebration, practice or institution just because some people misuse or distort them.

### **Argument 3: “Most Christmas traditions originate in paganism.”**

Some of the traditional practices and elements that are part of our Christmas celebration are similar to those found in ancient pagan religious

ceremonies. It does not follow, however, that Christians are practicing paganism when they use similar practices or elements in worshipping Jesus.

There are basic elements of celebration common to all peoples of all religious faiths and ethnic backgrounds, whether they are parts of a wedding, an anniversary, a homecoming, a graduation or a memorial. Characteristics of most celebrations might include a special meal, giving of gifts, music and singing, decorations and sending greeting cards or notes. These are not inherently pagan activities; they are simply human activities and common patterns for celebration, even in the worship patterns God gave the ancient Israelites.

Worship in ancient Israel, for example, included the lighting of candles and the burning of incense (Exodus 30:1-9), sumptuous feasting (Deuteronomy 14:25), and offerings of thanksgiving for abundant harvests. In setting up Israel's worship system, God gave them several institutions, elements and practices that were already in use by pagan religions. These included, among other things, the priesthood, the harvest festivals, sacred music in worship, animal sacrifices, circumcision, tithing, and purification rites. God transformed these customs and elements used in pagan religions into a form of worship devoted to him.

Even trees had their place in the celebrations that God gave to Israel. In the tabernacle, lamp stands were made of gold engraved with branches and foliage (Exodus 25:31-36). The Israelites used leafy branches in their religious processions and made temporary shelters of them during the festival of tabernacles (Leviticus 23:40-42). Several times in Scripture, God compares his goodness to the qualities of a tree. In Hosea 14, God compares himself to a cedar tree in verse 5, to an olive tree in verse 6, and to a pine tree in verse 8.

Christians who keep Christmas are not pagans. They do not worship trees or anything in nature as the pagans did, nor do they regard false gods. They honor God alone, who sent his Son to save the world.

#### **Argument 4: "Jeremiah 10:2-4 condemns the use of Christmas trees."**

The King James Version of this passage reads: "Learn not the way of the heathen. . . . For the customs of the people are vain: for one cutteth a tree out of the forest, the work of the hands of the workman, with the axe. They deck it with silver and with gold; they fasten it with nails and with hammers, that it move not."

On the surface it might seem that Jeremiah is describing Christmas trees.

But that is to ignore the context. Verses 2 through 4 of Jeremiah 10 are part of a larger context, which includes verses 1 through 16. Jeremiah is not talking about Christmas trees. He is condemning idolatry. The trees in Jeremiah 10 are cut down so that they can be carved into idols and decorated with gold and silver to worship heathen gods.

Where the King James reads “one cutteth a tree out of the forest, the work of the hands of the workman, with the axe” (verse 3), the New International Version says “they cut a tree out of the forest, and a craftsman shapes it with his chisel.” The chisel is not a woodsman’s tool, but that of a wood carver. Most modern English translations agree with the NIV. Jeremiah 10 condemns idols, not Christmas trees. No Christian worships a Christmas tree.

### **Faulty logic**

- Dichotomous reasoning. This is also known as polarized, all-or-nothing or two-dimensional thinking. In other words, something must be black or white, and there are no shades of gray. Example: God hates the worship of idols. Since pagans used trees to carve idols, God must hate the use of trees in worship celebration to him. Therefore, use of Christmas trees is sinful. Problem: Pagans used bread and wine, too.
- Overgeneralization. Generalization, the ability to generalize from a set of facts, is necessary in drawing right conclusions from the information at hand. Overgeneralization occurs when a wrong general conclusion is drawn from a single incident or a small sampling — or even when a misguided conclusion is derived from a large body of facts. Example: Some people get drunk at Christmas dinners and parties; therefore Christmas celebration is sinful. Problem: Some people get drunk at dinners and parties at other times of the year, too.
- Selective abstraction. This error results from focusing attention on one detail without regard to the rest of the facts and principles that should inform a conclusion. Example: Pagans decorated trees in their worship of false gods; therefore, decorating a Christmas tree is sinful. Problem: Pagans gave money in their worship, too.
- Discounting the positive illustration. This is also known as minimization or neglecting proof that contradicts our assumption. People do not accept clear evidence because it does not fit their

interpretation of the facts. Example: The Gospel writer Luke records that angels praised God at the birth of Christ, which would indicate that God is pleased with praise and celebration related to Christ's birth, such as singing Christmas carols. However, a people with an anti-Christmas bias might neglect such information because it contradicts their position. Such information is sometimes called "invisible information." It is invisible because preconceived conclusions tend to prevent a person from seeing facts and evidence that is contrary to what they already believe.

- Arbitrary inference or "jumping to conclusions": This occurs when someone interprets the meaning of an event based on misinterpreting of evidence or facts at hand. Example: Since God condemns pagans for worshipping idols, Christians should not use in their worship of Christ any element that pagans used in their worship of idols.

## **Conclusion**

Christians must decide for themselves about whether and how to celebrate Christmas. We have freedom in Christ to celebrate and worship him in joy during Christmas if we choose to do so. Whether or not we choose to celebrate Jesus at Christmastime, every believer knows that there is nothing more worthy of celebration than the coming of our Savior into the world!

*Joseph Tkach*

## WHEN WAS JESUS BORN?

The Gospel of Matthew indicates that Jesus was born before the death of Herod the Great (Matthew 2:1, 15, 19). New Testament scholar Donald A. Hagner, in *Matthew 1-13* of the Word Biblical Commentary, notes: “Herod, whose long reign began in 37 B.C., died in 4 B.C.” Most modern scholars agree.

What is the evidence? The first-century Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, in his *Antiquities of the Jews* (17.6.4), tells of a lunar eclipse in the final year of Herod’s life. *Solar and Lunar Eclipses of the Ancient Near East* by Kudiek and Mickler states that this eclipse occurred March 13, 4 B.C. Josephus also reports that Herod’s death occurred before the next Passover (*Antiquities* 17.9.3). This Passover—in April of 3 B.C.—was 13 months after the lunar eclipse and, according to Jewish tradition, a few months after Herod’s death. Taken together, this information confirms a birth date for Jesus in the latter half of 4 B.C.

How could Jesus have been born in a year B.C. —“Before Christ”? The 4 B.C. -A.D. system of reckoning time was devised in the sixth century A.D., hundreds of years after Jesus’ birth. At that time, a misunderstanding of the chronology of Herod’s reign caused a miscalculation of Christ’s birth year, an error that was detected too late to be corrected.

As for the month and day of Jesus’ birth, the Gospels make no specific statement; Jesus’ birth was not commemorated in the early days of the church. Christmas was not included on the church calendar until the fourth century.

Some people have claimed that Jesus was born near the fall festivals. That is possible, but it is not proven. Luke 2:1-3 says that “everyone went to his own town to register.” Why would “everyone” go to such trouble? Apparently it was required. However, it is not likely that Rome would risk a rebellion by requiring each person to go to his own city at the same time as the local religion required everyone to go to Jerusalem. Most likely, an empire-wide census would take several years, and would be administered locally, by local customs, taking into account local religious festivals.

Some people have objected to the idea that Jesus was born in December, since there were shepherds staying in the fields (Luke 2:8), and shepherds supposedly didn’t do that in winter. (I have never seen this documented.) The weather in Bethlehem is sometimes cold, but sometimes mild in December, and there would have been a practical need to keep sheep somewhere near

Jerusalem for sacrificial purposes. This doesn't prove that Jesus was born in December, but it shows that this objection to a December birth isn't conclusive.

In the early third century (long before Constantine), Julius Africanus and Hippolytus came up with December 25 as the date of Jesus' birth. They don't tell us how they came up with this date, but John Chrysostom does. His calculation may have been innocent, or it may have been contrived. We do not know what his motive was. Therefore, we cannot say that the December 25 date was contrived simply because a pagan festival already existed on that date.

When the church first began celebrating Christmas, it had nothing to do with trees and holly and reindeer. All those were added centuries later in northern Europe. The fact that non-Christian customs were later associated with the festival does not prove that the date itself originated in paganism. It may have been based on calculation instead.

However, for the moment let us suppose that Christmas originated as a deliberate substitution for Saturnalia, a pagan holiday. Many of the people who attended church were recently-converted pagans. Some were not-yet converted pagans. They were attracted to the Saturnalia festivities, and sitting at home alone was not a desirable option when merrymaking could be heard in the streets all around. So, the theory goes, the church provided a clean alternative: going to church.

Would it be wrong to have a church service in deliberate opposition to Saturnalia? Of course not. There is no question of the church trying to worship God by the customs of the heathen — the church is fighting *against* the customs of the heathen. Only the date is the same, and there is good reason to have church services on that date, on which members can invite their unconverted friends and family into church and away from paganism. At some point, Christians could have made the comparison: on this date, pagans celebrate the birth of the sun god, but we are worshipping the sun of righteousness (Malachi 4:2). We can celebrate his birth, too.

That may have been the way Christmas started. Apparently in the early centuries it was primarily a church service. The strategy seems to have been successful: no one celebrates Saturnalia any more. Christians don't observe Christmas in honor of the sun god, just as they don't worship the little statues that they may have in their homes or gardens. Although December 25, like many other dates, was once used for idol worship, that is not its meaning now.

## JESUS THE SAVIOR

## THE DATE OF JESUS' BIRTH

Many Christians acknowledge that no one knows the exact day Jesus was born. The precise date of Jesus' birth is not critical, and speculation and controversy about this topic can cause Christians to lose focus.

It is important that we rejoice and celebrate the central events in the life of Jesus Christ, because he is the core and foundation of our faith. When we think about his birth, there are many issues that are mysterious and profound. God came to us, taking human flesh, dwelling with us, so that we might be saved. He never stopped being God, but he also became human. He was born of a virgin, and began his human life as a helpless and dependent baby, just as we all do.

How he did all of that for us is beyond our comprehension, but it is a subject that repeatedly causes us to marvel and to worship. Every December Christians (and many others who are not Christians but hear the gospel message nonetheless) center their lives in the miracle and mystery of the birth of our Lord.

No one knows the actual day that Jesus was born. Attempts to calculate an exact date often fall into two schools of thought. Both methods depend on counting from the "course of Abijah." A course was a time when priests served in the temple.

The first method begins with Luke 1:5, 8, where we read that Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, was serving in the course of Abijah in the temple. 1 Chronicles 24:7-19 indicates that there were 24 courses. The assumption is that the eighth course was the course of Abijah and that this period of service started in early June. Based on this, some believe that we can count forward to discover the dates of birth for John the Baptist, and then by deduction, Jesus (born about six months after John, see Luke 1:24-36).

Therefore, assuming that Elizabeth became pregnant right away, and that the pregnancies of both Mary and Elizabeth were of normal length, John the Baptist would have been born in March, nine months after his conception in June. According to this calculation, Jesus might have been born in the month of September. For some, the fact that the autumn festivals of the Old Testament begin at this time adds credibility to these calculations.

If all these assumptions are correct, the *conception* of Jesus, when the miracle of incarnation really began, when Mary was overshadowed by the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:35), would have happened in December.



The second method of trying to fix a date for Jesus' birth counts backward rather than forward. When the temple was destroyed in A.D. 70, the priestly course of Jehoiarib was serving. If the priestly service was unbroken from the time of Zechariah to the destruction of the temple, this calculation has the course of Abijah in the first week of October. Some early Christian writers (John Chrysostom, 347-407) taught that Zechariah received the message about John's birth on the Day of Atonement, which falls in September or October. This would place John the Baptist's birth in June or July, and the birth of Jesus six months later, in late December or early January. Some advocates of this second method view believe that December 25 is the correct day of Jesus' birth, while others believe that January 6 is the correct day.

Luke 2:1-7 mentions a tax census ordered by Augustus Caesar. The census records were eventually taken to Rome. Cyril of Jerusalem (348-386) requested that the true date of Jesus' birth be taken from the census documents. He reported that the date he was given from these documents was December 25. Unfortunately, these records are no longer available.

### **Meaning for us**

What does all this mean to you and me? It means that no one knows for sure when Jesus was born. The exact date of the first coming of our Lord is much like the date of his return. No one knows the exact day or hour of the Second Coming (Matthew 24: 36, 42, 44, 50; 25:13). Despite this, many Christians have become enthralled with predicting the date of his return, often losing sight of Jesus Christ and the gospel in the process.

Even though we do not know the exact date when Jesus will return, we may celebrate and look forward to the Second Coming. We may celebrate his return on any date we choose, and it is possible to do so without becoming sidetracked with predictions and speculations about an exact date!

The Bible does not command us to celebrate either the first coming or the return of Jesus Christ. However, believers and followers of the Lord are permitted to rejoice because of the significance and meaning of these two events. There can be no Second Coming without the first. We may celebrate his birth on any date we choose, and it is possible to do so without becoming sidetracked with irrelevant debate about whether the date is "correct."

Jesus is the reason for the season. We do not celebrate a day, but rather we celebrate the fact that God, in the person of Jesus ("Immanuel—which means 'God with us'"—Matthew 1:23) came to save us from our sins. It was in Jesus that God gave us the greatest gift. He came to save us, to give us

salvation, and eternal life. He gives us that gift freely, by the riches of his grace. We celebrate the extravagant and lavish love of God that is demonstrated by the birth of Jesus Christ.

Regardless of when Jesus was actually born, we overflow with thanksgiving and joy that God chose to send his Son into the world for our redemption and salvation. The gospel does not *require* the celebration of Christmas, nor for that matter, any other festival. On the other hand, there is no time that is “off limits” for us to meet together to celebrate the good things God has done for us through his Son. In other words, the gospel does not forbid the observance of Christmas, either.

It is fitting that we come together as Christian brothers and sisters to celebrate God’s love whenever we meet. Whether it is on Christian festivals such as Christmas and Easter, or some other annual occasions, we are free to joyfully give praise and honor to God as his beloved children. Every celebration is an expression of our love and devotion to God. Let each of us learn how to worship our Lord without condemning those who do so in a different way.

*Joseph Tkach*

## DOES IT MATTER WHEN JESUS WAS BORN?

During the season of Advent, most Christian churches are in a “countdown” to the celebration of Jesus’ birth at Christmas. During this time of year we sometimes hear discussions concerning whether December 25 is the right day to celebrate Jesus’ birth, or even if it is appropriate to do so at all.

Trying to figure out the exact year, month and day of Jesus’ birth is not new. Theologians have been at it for almost 2,000 years. Here are brief samplings of some of their ideas:

- Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-220) mentioned several possible dates, including November 18, January 6 and the day of Passover, which, depending on the year, would have been March 21, April 24 or 25.
- Sextus Julius Africanus (c. 160–240) mentioned March 25.
- Hippolytus of Rome (170–235), a disciple of Irenaeus, mentioned two possible dates in his *Commentary on Daniel*: “For the first appearance of our Lord in the flesh took place in Bethlehem eight days before the Kalends of January [December 25], on the fourth day [Wednesday], under Emperor Augustus, in the year 5500.” In another document and in an inscription on a statue of Hippolytus, the date given is April 2.
- Based on statements from the Jewish historian Josephus, some place Jesus’ birth in the period of March 12-April 11, 4 B.C., since Christ was born before the death of Herod the Great.
- John Chrysostom (c. 347–407) mentioned December 25.
- In *Computation of the Passion*, an early anonymous work, probably of North African origin, the date mentioned is March 28.
- Augustine (354-430), in *De Trinitate*, writes that, “He is believed to have been conceived on the 25th of March, upon which day also He suffered...and He was born according to tradition on December 25.”
- Messianic Jews mention a couple of options—the predominant one based on the schedule of the priests’ service in the temple, specifically the “course of Abijah” (Luke 1:5). This approach leads them to place Jesus’ birth on the first day of the Feast of Tabernacles and his circumcision on the eighth day of that festival.

It’s interesting to speculate that Jesus could have been born (or conceived)

during Passover or the Feast of Tabernacles. I like the concept of Jesus reversing the work of the death angel if it happened during Passover. And there would be a satisfying symmetry in his coming to “tabernacle” with us if he was conceived or born during Tabernacles. However, there is not enough evidence to be sure, though perhaps we can make intelligent guesses based on the small amount of evidence available to us.

In Luke 2:1-5, we read that Caesar Augustus decreed that the Roman Empire should be taxed and that everyone had to return to their own city to pay the tax. So Joseph and Mary returned to Bethlehem and there Jesus was born. It is reasonable to assume that such a census would not have been ordered at a time that would interfere with the harvests. It is also reasonable to assume that the census would not have been ordered in the winter when the weather is usually cold and travel is difficult. Since spring was the time for preparing to plant, perhaps autumn, after the harvest, is the most likely time of the year for the census, and thus for Jesus’ birth. However, it is not clear from Scripture how long Joseph and Mary stayed in Bethlehem. Perhaps Jesus’ birth occurred several weeks after the census was taken.

The fact is, we can’t know the date of Jesus’ birth for sure. Scoffers seize on this vagueness, claiming that the whole idea is a myth, and Jesus never existed. However, even though the date of Jesus’ birth is uncertain, the fact of his birth is founded on verifiable historical evidence. Biblical scholar F.F. Bruce has a nice comment about those who doubt it: “Some writers may toy with the fancy of a ‘Christ-myth,’ but they do not do so on the ground of historical evidence. The historicity of Christ is as axiomatic for an unbiased historian as the historicity of Julius Caesar. It is not historians who propagate the ‘Christ-myth’ theories” (*The New Testament Documents*, p. 123).

The people of Jesus’ time knew from the prophecies *about* when to expect the Messiah. But those prophecies, or the Gospels, don’t pinpoint the date with the degree of precision that modern historians might desire. But that is not the purpose of the Bible, which is to make us “wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 3:15).

The main focus of the New Testament writers was not on the date of Jesus’ birth, but that God the Father had sent his Son at just the right time in all of history to accomplish his saving purposes and thus fulfill his promise. The apostle Paul proclaimed, “When the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship” (Galatians 4:4-5). And we read in the Gospel of Mark: “Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good

news of God. “The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!” (1:14-15).

To know the date of Jesus’ birth might be interesting from a historical perspective, but it is theologically irrelevant. We need to know *that* it happened, and what is more important, *why* it happened. On that, the Bible is abundantly clear. Let’s keep that big picture in mind and not get bogged down in the details.

*Joseph Tkach*

## A CALL FOR TOLERANCE

In Luke 2:10-11, an angel of God describes the birth of Jesus as “good tidings of great joy for all the people.” Since it was appropriate for angels to rejoice at the birth of Jesus (verses 13-14), we believe it is certainly in keeping with the message of Scripture for Christians to do so.

Following the apostle Paul’s instruction in Romans 14, it is important that Christians respect one another’s views on this subject and not judge one another. Neither those believers who celebrate the birth of Jesus, nor those who don’t, are more righteous or more evil than the other. Christians are free in Christ to celebrate Christmas — or they may avoid it.

Some Christians avoid Christmas celebrations for conscience sake. There is no sin in their abstinence. Others devote themselves to worship, and celebrate with thanksgiving the miracle that God sent his Son into the world for our salvation. We can all learn to say with Paul: “Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord.... Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God” (Romans 14:6, 10).

Love, not command, is what motivates many Christians to celebrate during the Christmas season. They love their Savior and they love their families, and the Advent season provides an opportunity for them to express love to both. Similarly, love motivates some Christians who choose *not* to celebrate Christmas. They also love their Savior and their families. Their discomfort with the Christmas celebration is based on their desire to avoid taking part in something that defiles their conscience.

Can we respect one another’s views, and follow Jesus’ command that we love one another? I believe we can. The fact that non-Christians or even some Christians celebrate Christmas as a secular holiday or in a profane way is not a reason for all Christians to avoid Christmas. No matter what the holiday or holy day, some will observe it for the wrong reasons, or get involved in ungodly conduct. These are not reasons for everyone else to avoid those same holidays.

The fact that many Christians celebrate the birth of Jesus in December or January does not mean that all Christians must do so. After all, there have been faithful Christians throughout the centuries who never celebrated Christmas.

Every pastor should provide meaningful worship opportunities during the Advent season for members who want to celebrate the birth of the Son

## JESUS THE SAVIOR

of God. Many people will be thinking about the birth of Jesus, and pastors can build on those thoughts and direct members to the spiritual significance of his birth. Whether his birth actually happened in December is not important—what is important is that we can build on the thoughts that are seasonally common in December, just as we usually use Thanksgiving Day as an opportunity to discuss thanksgiving.

Not every member has to participate, nor to observe Christmas at home. That is a personal matter. Some Christians celebrate Christmas with traditional customs, while some celebrate it without traditional customs. Some avoid it altogether. Those who celebrate Christmas and those who do not should seek to honor Christ (Romans 14:5-6).

All our annual occasions should serve to draw us into a closer walk with Christ. They are opportunities to preach Christ, celebrate Christ and drink deeply of the living waters. May God grant us peace and unity as we live together in his grace and obedience.

*Joseph Teach*

## THE FIRST CHURCH CHRISTMAS

“Joy to the world!” Christians look forward to a joyous Christmas season each year. Yet, surprisingly, for the first 300 years of the church’s life there was no Christmas celebration of Jesus’ birth. Possible reasons include:

- The apostolic church had expected that Christ’s coming in glory was just around the corner and its worship pointed to the future instead of the past.
- The church’s primary focus was on Christ’s death and resurrection and his presence through the Spirit, which were celebrated during Easter and Pentecost.
- Epiphany, or “manifestation,” another early church festival, afforded a remembrance of Jesus’ Incarnation and birth.
- There was no corresponding Old Testament festival from which Christmas could emerge, as there had been for Pasha or Easter (Jewish Passover) and the Christian Pentecost (Feast of Weeks).
- The date of Jesus’ birthday was, perhaps, not known.

### First Christmas at Rome

In A.D. 336 the church at Rome proclaimed December 25 as the *dies natalis Christi*, “the birthday of Christ.” An entry in the Chronograph of A.D. 354 (also called Philocalian Calendar) records, “Our Lord Jesus Christ was born on the eighth before the calends of January,” or December 25. It doesn’t state that Christmas was being observed on that date, but it is likely that the observance began at Rome around this time.

A generation after the Chronograph was published, church father John Chrysostom (c. 347-407) wrote that Rome was celebrating a December 25th Christmas: “On this day also the birthday of Christ was lately fixed at Rome in order that while the heathen were busy with their profane ceremonies, the Christians might perform their sacred rites undisturbed.”

The “profane ceremonies” referred to by Chrysostom centered around the birthday of the “Invincible Sun,” or Sol, which was also celebrated on December 25, the day of the winter solstice in the old Roman calendar. The cult of the Sun was of grave concern to the church at Rome. It was introduced in A.D. 218 when Elagabalus (c. 203-222) became emperor of the Roman Empire. Elagabalus venerated the Sun god and introduced his cult into Rome under the title *deus Sol invictus*, that is, the invincible, undefeated or unconquered sun god.



Emperor Aurelian, Roman emperor from A.D. 270 to 275, decreed the Unconquered Sun as supreme god of the Roman Empire. Mithra, a god of Persian origin, was part of the Sun cult worship. Mithra's birthday was also on December 25. The Roman Emperors Diocletian and Galerius, who ruled prior to Constantine the Great (306-337), venerated the Sol Mithras Deus invictus cult. Constantine, the first Christian emperor, was a devotee of the Sun cult before his conversion.

### **Struggle against sun worship**

A December 25th birthday celebration for Christ served to compete with and counteract the festival of the pagan devotees of Sol-Mithra. The church was able to challenge the worshippers of Sol Invictus with Jesus Christ, whom they proclaimed as the true Son of God and the Sun of Righteousness (Malachi 4:2; Revelation 1:13, 16).

Christmas celebration was an effective evangelizing event for turning the hearts and minds of people to Christ and away from worship of Sol. It also provided church members with a safe, Christ-centered worship alternative to other heathen festivals, such as the late December Saturnalia. Simultaneously, the Roman church could promote prayerful and moral behavior, in sharp contrast to the licentiousness that accompanied the pagan festivals.

Celebration of Christmas (or Advent, a term referring to Christ's coming) also was effective in combating heresies about Jesus, pointing to his incarnation as a real human being.

It's not surprising that the December 25th Christmas celebration quickly spread from the congregations in Rome to churches throughout the empire. From the fourth century on, every Western calendar assigns Christmas to December 25. By the middle of the fifth century, most of the Eastern churches had adopted the Christmas festival, although on January 6, and by the time of Jerome (347-420) and Augustine (354-430), Christmas is everywhere established in Christendom.

Over the next thousand years, Christmas observance followed the expanding community of Christianity around the world. Today Advent/Christmas is one of the church's most important worship seasons. Have a joyful Christmas celebration and a blessed new year.

*Paul Kroll*

## **CHRISTMAS PAST AND PRESENT IN THE CHURCH**

Have you ever wondered how Christmas came to be part of the annual Christian calendar? Here's the fascinating story, which we begin with a surprising observation. Neither Jesus nor the apostles commanded or even suggested that the church should have a Christmas festival — and no evidence of such a celebration is in the New Testament.

In the church of the second century, we see evidence of an annual celebration of Jesus' resurrection in the spring, but no celebration of his birth. (It's possible that the roots of the resurrection celebration go back to the apostolic church.) The church also added Pentecost and Epiphany to its yearly worship calendar in the second century. Epiphany, on Jan. 6, celebrated not the birth of Christ, but the manifestation of his divine sonship, his kingship and his divine power as displayed in his baptism, the visit of the Magi, and his miracle at the wedding feast in Cana. Pentecost commemorated the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Epiphany was the church's earliest annual celebration in connection with the Incarnation of Jesus. However, it was not until the fourth century that we have clear evidence of the birth of Jesus being celebrated on Dec. 25.

### **Why December 25?**

One theory for the origin of Christmas is that it was intended to compete with or supplant the pagan celebration of the sun-god on that date. According to this hypothesis, accepted by most scholars today, the birth of Jesus was given near the date of the winter solstice. On this day, as the sun began its return to the northern skies, the pagan devotees of Mithra celebrated the birthday of the invincible sun. The cult was particularly strong at Rome when Christmas celebration arose.

The idea is that the church tried to counteract this pagan worship with its own celebration of Jesus' birth. That makes good sense, since the church was, in effect, providing its members with a Christian worship and fellowship opportunity while the pagans were cavorting and doing homage to their gods. It was also an opportunity for the church to preach the true gospel. If this reasoning is correct, what Christians did, then, was to redeem in Christ an understanding that he (not a pagan sun god) was the true Son and Sun of Righteousness (Malachi 4:2) — the true light that lights our path with his grace (John 8:12).

Another idea as to why Christmas celebration began and expanded throughout the church has to do with its need to combat a heresy about Christ's Person. The council of Nicea in 325 had condemned Arianism, which claimed that Jesus Christ was only an exalted creature and not true God of true God.

It was not long afterward that the Christmas festival first appeared in Rome, and then spread to the churches in other parts of the Roman Empire. In this view, the controversies of the fourth century about the incarnation and person of Christ impelled the church to create a festival that would celebrate the mystery of God becoming human, as a kind of teaching tool for the church.

### **Birthday of Jesus?**

Why wasn't Jesus' birthday celebrated earlier than the fourth century? One reason might be that neither the day nor month of Jesus' birth is given in the Gospels or any other early Christian writings—and cannot be determined with any certainty. Despite this, it seems to have been the opinion of some church leaders in the first four centuries that Christ was actually born on Dec. 25.

Theologian John Chrysostom (347-407) appealed, in support of this view, to the date of the registration under Quirinus (Cyrenius). He apparently believed that the census and tax records of Jesus' family were preserved in the Roman archives. Justin Martyr (100-165) stated that Jesus was born at Bethlehem, saying such can be ascertained “from the registers of the taxing” (*Apology I*, 34).

Tertulian (160-250), spoke of “the census of Augustus — that most faithful witness of the Lord's nativity, kept in the archives of Rome” (*Against Marcion*, Book 4, 7). The early church father, Hippolytus (180-236), came up with a Dec. 25 date, which he attempted to calculate from information in the Gospel of Luke regarding the ministry of the priest Zechariah, John the Baptist's father (Luke 1:5, 8-10).

Whatever the facts might be about the date of Jesus' birth, it is clear that the church sensed the need to have a festival that commemorated the birth of our Savior. In the words of the church historian Philip Schaff, it was inevitable that the church would have “sooner or later called into existence a festival which forms the groundwork of all other annual festivals in honor of Christ” (*History of the Christian Church*, volume 3, “Nicene and Post-Nicene Christianity,” page 395). Schaff points to Chrysostom's observation that “without the birth of Christ there would be no salvation history in Christ —

no baptism, passion, resurrection, ascension or outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Hence, there would be no celebration of Epiphany, of Easter or of Pentecost.”

However meaningful Christian worship was during the Christmas season, we must also acknowledge that Christmas was often celebrated with the same sensual excesses as some pagan feasts had been among the general populace. Truly, at several times in the history of the church, it was needful to put Christ back into Christmas.

## **Puritans in Britain and America**

“Puritans” was the name given in the 16th century to a group of Protestants that arose from within the Church of England. As part of their broad-based reform agenda, they demanded that the church should be purified of any liturgy, ceremony or practices that were not found in the Bible.

Since the Christmas celebration was not mentioned in Scripture, the Puritans concluded that it must be stopped. When the group came to political power in England under Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658), they outlawed Christmas. Cromwell and the Puritans even banned special church services, not just on Christmas but also on Easter and Pentecost. Christmas Day was a regular work day and shops remained open. Parliament was to sit as it usually did. Criers were sometimes sent through the streets, shouting, “No Christmas today, no Christmas today.”

The year 1642 saw the first ordinance forbidding church services and civic festivities on Christmas day. These were issued regularly in the ensuing years. On June 8, 1645, the Puritan-dominated Parliament abolished the observance of Christmas, Easter, Whitsuntide and the Saints’ days. But in 1660, things changed. The monarchy was re-established, and the Puritan clergy were expelled from the Church of England.

But the Puritans were already established in America. Many Puritans had migrated to New England beginning in the second decade of the 17th century. In Puritan New England, Christmas was a regular workday, and any violation of this was punishable by fine or dismissal. In 1659, the Massachusetts Puritans declared the observation of Christmas to be a criminal offense. Offenders had to pay five shillings as a fine. In Massachusetts, Dec. 25 did not become a legal holiday until 1856. It is hard to realize now that worship on Christmas was outlawed in New England until the second half of the 19th century.

## Twelve Days of Christmas and Advent

“The Twelve Days of Christmas” is more than a secular, traditional Christmas song. At one time it was common for Christmas worship and celebration to last 12 days, from Dec. 25 until Jan. 5, the beginning of Epiphany. This tradition has almost disappeared.

Today, the season of Advent begins the yearly worship or liturgical calendar. Advent is celebrated on the four Sundays preceding Christmas. It is devoted to the commemoration of the coming of our Lord in the flesh as well as to his return at the final judgment. That’s why they are called Advent Sundays, since “advent” means the coming or arrival, especially of something extremely important. (What event could be more important than the coming of the Son of God in human flesh — and then his coming again as King of kings and Lord of lords!)

Lawrence Stookey, in his book *Calendar: Christ’s Time for the Church*, explains it this way:

The primary focus of Advent is on what is popularly called “the second coming.” Thus advent concerns the future of the Risen One, who will judge wickedness and prevail over every evil. Advent is the celebration of the promise that Christ will bring an end to all that is contrary to the ways of God; the resurrection of Jesus is the first sign of this destruction of the powers of death.... The beginning of the liturgical year takes our thinking to the very end of things. (pages 121-122)

## Meaning of Christmas

For the church, the entire Christian year centers on the person and work of Jesus Christ. Christians do not “celebrate” or “keep” days as though holy in themselves, but rather worship Christ and recall the great events of our salvation, using those special times as opportunities for worship. The purpose of the annual worship year is to keep our minds focused on the story of salvation and to worship Jesus Christ in a way that ministers to his glory. Specifically, Christmas, Advent and Epiphany were meant as vehicles to celebrate Jesus Christ.

The yearly Christian festivals remind us of the leading events of the gospel history, and beckon us to participate in worship of Christ. In the words of Philip Schaff: “The church year is, so to speak, a chronological confession of faith; a moving panorama of the great events of salvation; a dramatic exhibition of the gospel for the Christian people” (*History of the Christian*

*Church*, volume III, page 387).

*Paul Kroll*

## **PAGANISM — WHERE SHOULD CHRISTIANS DRAW THE LINE?**

Paganism is a controversial subject. Can we use pagan customs in the church of God? We already do. Simply because something has a pagan origin does not mean that it is sinful to use it, even for a religious use.

Wedding rings were and are a pagan custom, and there is no biblical command for them, but we use them in church-sanctioned ceremonies. Wedding ceremonies themselves were also a pagan custom, and are not commanded in Scripture.

Funerals include pagan customs, too, based on erroneous ideas about the afterlife. Scripture says nothing about putting flowers on graves, etc. Egyptian mythology said that the dead should be embalmed, and Joseph participated in this custom (Gen. 50:2-3) despite its pagan origin.

Pagans created statues — of animals and people, both life-size and miniatures. They had statues in their flower gardens and statues in their homes. But statues have lost their “pagan” connotations because people do not believe in such gods and goddesses anymore.

Money has pagan designs on it. Some U.S. coins used to have the goddess “Liberty” on them. Pagans assigned days of the week to different gods, and we still use these names.

So the question arises, How careful must we be in weeding paganism out of our lives? Where do we draw the line? The answer is, different Christians draw the line in different places. We need to allow some diversity on these issues.

Some conservative churches used to forbid wedding rings. Some forbid Christmas and Easter. They are careful to do what God says, and if God tells them to avoid paganism, then they carefully do it. Some are so careful that they err on the side of forbidding too much — but they err. They make commands about things that God doesn’t command. In their desire to avoid one sin, they commit another.

### **Example of the Corinthians**

In the first-century Church, Gentile Christians were told to avoid meat that had been sacrificed to pagan idols (Acts 15:29). However, Paul told the Corinthians that they could eat meat sold in the public market even though that meat may have been sacrificed to an idol (1 Cor. 10:25). He told them not to eat in the pagan temple. In other words, he told them to avoid blatant

paganism, but they did not have to superstitiously avoid everything that paganism might have touched at some time in the past.

In Corinth, some Christians were more careful than others, and some more liberal than others. Paul told them they could eat the meat, but he also told them to be cautious about causing offense (verses 32-33). However, love does not mean that we all have to abide by the strictest person's conscience. No matter how many people think we ought to be circumcised and to keep the law of Moses, we don't have to (Acts 15). Even if some Christians think we should be vegetarians (and some do), we don't have to abide by their conscience (Rom. 14:1-8). Paul says that we have freedom, but we are to use our freedom in a sensitive way.

Now let us imagine a first-century potluck in the Corinthian church. Everyone has brought their food and everyone has eaten a little bit of everything. Suddenly some overly zealous convert, anxious to avoid the paganism he recently came out of, starts asking questions about the meat. The Smith family, he finds out, bought their beef from Marcus Agorus, and Marcus always has his cows killed at the temple of Zeus. The casserole has been filled with pagan-tainted meat, and everybody has eaten some of it!

What should the zealous convert do with this information? Should he announce it throughout the congregation, leading to an ever-more-diligent search for pagan-tainted foods? Of course not. The sensible (and the Christian) thing to do would be to keep quiet — but overly zealous converts sometimes aren't sensible. Their zeal overcomes good sense, and although they think they are acting in love, they are actually causing an unnecessary and unhelpful disturbance with their "knowledge." That's what happens today when people preach that wedding rings are pagan.

It is possible to be too zealous in avoiding things that have connections with paganism. Shouting about idol-tainted meat doesn't do anything to strengthen anyone's faith in Christ. All it would do is cause doubts and irritations. That is basically what some people do in their vociferous condemnations of Christmas. People today generally learn about Christmas as a Christian custom, not as a pagan custom. It's like they saw the meat in the market and there was a sign saying "Good for Christians." So they bought it, and then someone comes along and tells them it was tainted.

Some people don't think that the example of meat can apply to holidays; some people do. They draw their lines in different places. People generally consider themselves as strong and others as weak, but how are the weak and the strong to get along with each other? Not by enforcing conformity, but by



allowing some diversity.

Consider the case of Christians in Korea, for example. December 25 was not a pagan holiday there. But Christians there now observe December 25. Why? Because missionaries introduced the holiday. For them, it has a Christian origin, not a pagan one. Should the scrupulous Christians go tell them that December 25 was once sacrificed to an idol and should therefore be avoided? That approach creates doubts, not dedication. It does not edify or encourage.

## Scriptures

Two scriptures have often been used to argue against Christmas customs. Jeremiah 10 has nothing to do with Christmas trees. That custom originated in northern Europe and had nothing to do with Jeremiah centuries earlier. Deut. 12:30 has also been appealed to, but the verse doesn't forbid everything the pagans did. God does not object to *all* worship practices of the pagans (such as prayer, sacrifices and temples), but only the abominations that they did in worship.

Basically, if it's wrong, it's wrong on any day of the year. That's the kind of customs we need to beware. But if a custom is harmless in July (decorating the house with colored lights, for example), then we needn't condemn it in December. We can't let centuries-dead pagans dictate what we can or can't do. They have no authority over our calendar.

Eastern Orthodox Christians observe January 6 as a festival for the birth of Christ. They were not influenced by Rome or Saturnalia. Does anyone feel a compulsion to dig into history looking for something bad about this day so it can be disqualified? Does anyone feel a compulsion to ask whether the date was once sacrificed to an idol? I hope not.

Let's summarize:

- It is not wrong to rejoice at the birth of Jesus.
- It is not wrong to do this every year.
- It is not wrong to add a religious festival.
- The date of Dec. 25 isn't necessarily pagan.

Even if the date is pagan, it isn't automatically wrong to use things that used to be pagan, such as wedding rings, funeral customs, statues, and the names of days. If the date is permissible and church services are permissible, but certain customs are not, then people ought to specify *which* customs are ungodly rather than just condemning everything associated with the date. If a fat man in a red suit is permissible, but fables about him are not, then we

need to identify the sin without condemning the harmless. Different Christians will draw the lines in different places, and we need to get along with each other.

## **Conclusion**

Paganism is an emotion-laden subject. Conservative Christians have a history of being dogmatic, legalistic, and of misusing the Scriptures when we argue our point. With that history, it is impossible to discuss this subject without somebody disagreeing. Each person thinks himself to be properly balanced — but each person's balance point is different. Equally sincere people draw lines in different places. What then are we to do?

Should the church legislate about which practices are OK and which are not? That is not our commission. We are not in the Talmud business. Each Christian should draw his or her own lines, and be tolerant of those who draw different lines. Do not judge your brother or sister, Paul says (Romans 14:5-13). That is one of the most difficult commandments in the Bible!

No one has to participate in Christmas or Easter, but we should not condemn those who do. Some will do it one way and some will do it another. Whether you participate or whether you abstain, do it all to the Lord, and let him be the judge. This is the Christian approach to the cultural situation today.

*Michael Morrison*

## WHAT DOES DEUTERONOMY 12:30-31 FORBID?

“You must not worship God in their way.”

Some people claim that Deuteronomy 12:30-31 commands us not to borrow any custom of any kind from pagan religious practices. Nothing once used in idol worship is to be used in worshipping the true God. Absolutely nothing. Some Christians have therefore argued that all attempts to transform pagan customs into Christian customs are wrong. Those who think this way allow for no exceptions. “Once pagan, always pagan,” they reason.

We appreciate the sincerity of those who earnestly seek to obey God. We don’t ask them to do anything that violates their conscience. Yet we must ask, Are they correct? If something is once pagan, is it always pagan?

Various customs and traditions in Israel’s religion had earlier parallels in pagan religions — customs that God either commanded Israel to use or that he accepted, endorsed, promoted and blessed. Temples, priesthoods, sacrifices, sacred music, tithing, festivals, circumcision, all existed in pagan contexts and generally came earlier than those found in Israel. Such examples prove that although a custom may be pagan in one context, it may be commanded or permitted by God in another.

Take, as an example, the temple. Pagans built temples more than a thousand years before Moses. At Sinai God instructed Israel to build a tabernacle, not a temple. Four hundred years later David decided to build a temple, though God had not instructed him to do so. David reasoned that since he was going to live in a palace of cedar, then the ark of God should be in a temple.

In response, God reminded David that he never had asked Israel for a house (2 Samuel 7:6-7). Furthermore, David’s plan would set aside much of the letter of the law (those portions concerning the tabernacle, its construction, maintenance and transportation). In principle, what David proposed was noble. God was to be given greater honor than the king.

However, a temple was so alien to Israel’s thinking that Solomon had to rely on craftsmen from the pagan kingdom of Tyre. They had experience in temple construction. Nonetheless, God blessed this and other worship innovations.

How then should we understand Deuteronomy 12?

The context of Deuteronomy 12 is God’s command to utterly destroy the many pagan sacrificial sites that existed within the Promised Land (verses 1-

3). The Canaanites, like many other pagans, had many sacrificial sites because they thought that various gods had power in various places. They believed that if the worshippers of these gods offered acceptable sacrifices, the gods would be forced to do what the worshippers wanted. Human sacrifice and temple prostitution were parts of their religion.

To discourage Israel from adopting the polytheism and immorality of paganism, God commanded Israel to have only one place of sacrifice, the tabernacle. It was only to the tabernacle that Israel was to bring their sacrifices, offerings and tithes (verses 4-18). God expanded on this thought in verses 19 through 28. He told Israel where and under what circumstances certain meats were to be eaten. He emphasized that Israel was not to eat blood, and that they were to pour the blood of their sacrifices beside the tabernacle's altar, not just anywhere that they pleased (verse 27).

Then in verses 29 through 31 God repeated his intent to destroy the pagan nations occupying Canaan. He commanded Israel not to worship God in the pagans' way of worship (verse 31). The reason? Because their way of worship included vile and hateful things, such as child sacrifice. This was not a blanket condemnation. The passage does not condemn the adoption of things that by nature are not evil. We have already seen how the change from tabernacle to temple fit that pattern. God did not forbid prayer, even though that was a part of pagan worship. He did not forbid sacrifices or harvest festivals, although the pagans had them.

The final verse of Deut. 12 commands Israel not to add or take away from what God has commanded. David's innovations did not violate the spirit of this command. Other human innovations that God subsequently approved included religious holidays not originally a part of the old covenant's festival calendar — including Purim and Hanukkah. These two days celebrated great events in Israel's history.

God abolished the Levitical system and the old covenant through Jesus' sacrifice. His birth, death and resurrection are of supreme importance to our salvation history. Deuteronomy's focus on the Exodus, the tabernacle and its rituals no longer applies. We are dead to and released from the law (Romans 7:4-6). We do not have to worship God in old covenant places and in old covenant ways. We may add celebrations of our salvation in Jesus Christ. Yet the principle of avoiding vile and hateful practices in worship, such as child sacrifice, remains.

## JESUS THE SAVIOR

## ONCE PAGAN, ALWAYS PAGAN?

Does Deuteronomy 12:30-31 mean that it is sinful to have Christian celebrations on days that used to be celebrated in honor of false gods? Through Moses, God says:

Be careful not to be ensnared by inquiring about their gods, saying, “How do these nations serve their gods? We will do the same.” You must not worship the Lord your God in their way, because in worshipping their gods, they do all kinds of detestable things the Lord hates. They even burn their sons and daughters in the fire as sacrifices to their gods.

Do these verses mean that we cannot do anything pagans did in worship? No, for pagans prayed, sang hymns, played musical instruments, and some baptized by immersion. They also had priesthoods, special garments, temples, altars and sacrifices. They had annual festivals in conjunction with the agricultural seasons. None of these practices are wrong. Some are even part of Christianity.

Since Deuteronomy 12 does not forbid *all* pagan worship practices, then what does it forbid? The context clarifies the concern when it gives the reason for the prohibition: “because in worshipping their gods, they do all kinds of detestable things the Lord hates.” The problem isn’t worship—the problem is detestable worship practices. The example cited in verse 31 is child sacrifice; temple prostitution would be another.

If we go back to the beginning of the chapter, we will see the context. The primary concern throughout the chapter is the location of worship. God told the Israelites to destroy all Canaanite high places and altars and idols. Instead, the Israelites were to make all their sacrifices at one central site. This would make it difficult for anyone to worship other gods. This emphasized the fact that there was only one God, not dozens of deities each having power over small areas.

In Canaanite religion, and in many other pagan religions, the people thought that various gods had power in various places. The god that was most influential in one area might not have as much influence in another. So people made sacrifices in their own areas to appease the local gods. If the people offered acceptable sacrifices, they expected the gods to respond by giving them whatever they wanted. In effect, their worship was an attempt to tell their gods what to do. That’s why they sacrificed sons and daughters in

the fire—a costly sacrifice like that would supposedly guarantee that they would get what they desired.

Canaanite religion also included cultic prostitution. If the people wanted fertility, they performed sex acts in their worship. They thought that if they did their part, then Baal would do his. Anthropologists call it a system of sympathetic magic. It was an attempt to control and manipulate the gods.

The Canaanite concept of gods was defective, and their concept of worship was also defective. Their theology led to detestable practices, and that is why God wanted the Israelites to destroy the pagan altars and not to copy their worship methods.

Deuteronomy 12 does not apply to every worship practice. The context connects it with places of sacrifice and with child sacrifice. It is concerned with things that are detestable or abominable—things that God hates. There is no hint in the text that the day of the year was of any concern. Since Old Testament worship days were connected to agricultural seasons, and Canaanite worship was also based on agricultural seasons, it is likely that there were some similarities in the days being observed. God’s condemnation of pagan worship practices was based not on dates, but on whether the customs were detestable.

Canaanite religion was superstitious about worship locations and the effectiveness of sacrifices and rituals. But on the other side of the coin, it would be superstitious for us to avoid everything that pagans did simply because they did it—because that would include prayer, hymns and marriage ceremonies. We cannot let centuries-dead pagans dictate what we do or what we avoid.

It is not wrong to rejoice that Jesus was born; it is superstitious to think that we should avoid this subject on one particular day of the year. It would also be wrong to think that we *must* celebrate a particular day the Bible does not require. It would also be a mistake to restrict our joy concerning Christ’s birth to one season of the year.

It is not wrong for families and friends to exchange gifts whenever they wish; it is superstitious to think that it is OK to do this on 363 days a year, but wrong on one or two. If a practice is detestable, it is detestable in any time or place. If wrong things are done on December 25, for example, then we should criticize whatever is wrong, not the date on which it is done.

## **Is it wrong to do things that were once part of pagan worship customs?**

Pagan worship practices included prayer, music and offerings. Those practices are not sinful in themselves, and we see biblical examples of them being used in worship of the true God. Pagans conducted marriage ceremonies and used wedding rings, but we may also have them, even though the Bible does not command them.

Pagans also had many funeral customs, such as embalming, ceremonies and giving of flowers. Even though these customs were shaped by non-Christian ideas about the afterlife, and these customs continue to be used by non-Christians, we may, and do, use them in Christian ceremonies without indicating any agreement with the originating beliefs.

Pagans dedicated certain days of the week to their gods, and we use these names today without implying idolatry on our part. Pagans created statues of people and animals, but that does not mean that we cannot. These customs have lost their pagan connotations and have become religiously neutral. It is not sinful, for example, for an architect to copy the pillars found in Greek and Roman temples. Things that were once “pagan” do not necessarily remain pagan.

In the United States, no one would think it odd for a Christian to have a small ornamental figurine of a bird or animal. In Moses’ day, however, such statues would have been inappropriate. Whether something has pagan connotations is often cultural. What is acceptable in one nation or century may be frowned upon in another. But we do not have to be restricted by erroneous concepts of the past.

We can make decisions about embalming, burial, caskets, crypts, cremation and flowers without having to investigate which of these customs originated in paganism. It is even possible to use these things in religious ceremonies without fear of contamination or compromise.

Some people are uncomfortable with customs such as wedding rings and cremation. Others are not. Different people draw their “lines” in different places, but they need to respect each other’s beliefs. The advice of Romans 14:6-13 applies to such matters: “He who participates does so to the Lord. He who abstains does so to the Lord. So then, why do you judge your brother? Each of us has to give our own account to God. Therefore, do not pass judgment on one another, and do not put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother’s way.”

The principles given in 1 Corinthians 8:4, 7 are also adaptable: “So then,



about participating in customs that were once associated with the worship of idols: We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one. But not everyone knows this. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they participate they think of an idol, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled.” Paul explained that Christians had freedom in this matter, but he cautioned them to be careful with their freedom (verse 9).

Basically, we can live and worship without worrying about what pagans did or did not do. If the behavior is wrong, it is wrong for us to do it whether or not pagans did it. If it is not wrong, we may do it whether or not the pagans did it first.

## JEREMIAH 10 AND CHRISTMAS TREES

Christians opposed to Christmas have often argued that Jeremiah condemns Christmas trees. They believe that Jeremiah 10:2-4 is quite plain — Christmas trees are sinful. But are these Christmas critics correct? Does Jeremiah 10:2-4 actually condemn the setting up of Christmas trees?

The King James Version reads: “Thus saith the Lord, Learn not the way of the heathen.... For the customs of the people are vain: for one cutteth a tree out of the forest, the work of the hands of the workman, with the axe. They deck it with silver and with gold; they fasten it with nails and with hammers, that it move not.” On the surface it does seem that Jeremiah is describing Christmas trees. But let’s look deeper.

An important key to understanding any passage is to pay careful attention to its context. Verses 2 through 4 of Jeremiah 10 are part of a larger context. That larger context is verses 1 through 16. In these verses Jeremiah proclaims the Lord as the only God. “No one is like you, O Lord; you are great, and your name is mighty in power. Who should not revere you, O King of the nations? This is your due.... The Lord is the true God; he is the living God, the eternal King.... God made the earth by his power; he founded the world by his wisdom and stretched out the heavens by his understanding” (verses 6-7, 10, 12, NIV).

The gods that pagans worship are nothing compared to the Lord. “These gods, who did not make the heavens and the earth, will perish from the earth and from under the heavens” (verse 11). They are mere images made by mortals. “Every goldsmith is shamed by his idols. His images are a fraud; they have no breath in them. They are worthless, the objects of mockery” (verses 14-15).

Gold is not the only substance used to make idols. Verses 8 and 9 speak of “worthless wooden idols” on which workmen place hammered silver and gold, and rich apparel. When we consider that these verses condemn idolatry, we can understand what Jeremiah meant when he said “the customs of the peoples are worthless” (verse 3). No wonder he tells us not to “learn the way of the nations” (verse 2).

Turning to translations other than the King James also helps our understanding. Where the King James reads “one cutteth a tree out of the forest, the work of the hands of the workman, with the axe” (verse 3), the New International Version says “they cut a tree out of the forest, and a craftsman shapes it with his chisel.” The tool referred to in the passage is not

a woodsman's tool, but that of a wood carver. Most modern English translations agree with the NIV.

Jeremiah is not condemning Christmas trees. He is condemning idolatry. The trees in Jeremiah 10 are cut down to carve them into worthless idols that will later be decorated with gold and silver. Jeremiah says nothing about Christmas trees. That custom originated in northern Europe, not in ancient Canaan.

## **PAGANISM, PAGANS AND PAGAN CUSTOMS**

Rather than address the subject of Christmas directly, this article will consider the broader topics of paganism, pagans and pagan practices in light of the gospel. Once we properly understand these subjects, we can then formulate and apply principles to many customs, not just those associated with Christmas. Our ethics will have a sounder basis.

We need to begin by defining our terms. We do this because confusion arises when people try to communicate without understanding how the other person uses words. Some Christians talk of paganism without reflecting about what they and others mean by that term.

Paganism, as classically understood, refers to any polytheistic religion that is generally sensual and materialistic in its orientation. The key words here are polytheistic, sensual and materialistic. The ancient Canaanite religion is a classic example of paganism.

Pagan customs include all usages, practices and social conventions that are common to and regulate the life of pagans. Pagan customs may include such things as religious festivals, temple architecture, dress, greetings in the marketplace or anything else that is common to pagan life. Pagan customs may or may not be religious. They are simply the customs of pagans. Pagan religious customs are those customs specifically associated with pagan religious life. Christians have long debated whether the church can adapt pagan customs without jeopardizing the faith. How does one distinguish between the harmless and the deadly?

Since we have defined the terms, we are prepared to ask a critical question regarding any allegedly pagan issue: Are we talking about paganism, pagans or pagan customs?

Many Christians believe that at least some pagan customs can be Christianized, and that in doing so we strengthen the Christian faith. From this perspective, when pagan customs are transformed in Christ, then Christianity conquers paganism. Customs that were once dark now proclaim Jesus Christ. In so doing, they can become a good evangelistic tool.

The Roman Catholic Church and many Protestants have long held such views. However, some anti-Catholic writers (such as Alexander Hislop) have exaggerated the degree and nature of such syncretism in attempts to label Rome as Babylon and themselves as the children of God. Ironically, these writers have found allies among anti-Christian and agnostic writers who view Christianity as nothing more than another step in human religious thought.

Yet similarity in form does not prove common origin or similarity in substance. Both pagans and Christians had baptismal rites. Is baptism therefore pagan? No, it is only similar in form to some aspects of pagan practices. In many other respects, Christian baptism is different. Even if baptism were originally a pagan custom, would that make the Christian custom wrong? No.

From the earliest years of the Reformation, many Protestants challenged the Catholic view on mixing cultural practices. They attempted to eliminate what they thought were destructive Roman Catholic compromises with paganism. This purge took place in both doctrine and custom. In many minds, the Catholic Church was the Babylonian mystery religion spoken of in Revelation.

Because they could not agree on what were pagan doctrines and practices, Protestants could not agree on what they were to reject. Some believed that if the New Testament did not permit it, then it should not be done. Others believed that if the New Testament did not prohibit it, it could be done. Overall, Calvinists believed that Lutherans had not done enough to purge the church of Roman influences. Anabaptists thought the Calvinists were too compromising. In England people were labeled as Puritan if they sought to purify the state church. All Romanism must go, they thought. In their zeal, Puritans rejected many long-cherished customs, including Christmas.

In the 16th and 17th centuries religion was deadly business. Catholics and Protestants fought over control of the state. Martyrs died on both sides. In England, patriotism mixed with religion as Protestants urged the English to resist the power of a foreign pope. Had not Spain tried to invade England to reimpose the Catholic faith? Yet, with the help of God, they defeated the Armada.

Today, for most of the Western world, these religious controversies are in the past. Except among the most conservative descendants of the Puritan movement and their ideological offspring, anti-Christmas sentiment has largely evaporated. Harmless customs once forbidden are now practiced.

## **Paganism and the gospel**

We will examine paganism and pagan customs in light of the gospel. Before doing so we should also reflect on what the gospel is. The gospel is the good news about Jesus yesterday, Jesus today and Jesus tomorrow. It is the story that Jesus, who is the Son of God, became flesh and lived among us. It is the story of his life and teaching, his suffering and crucifixion, all for our salvation. The gospel proclaims his resurrection, his ascension to heaven

and his glorification at the right hand of the Father (1 Cor. 15).

Even now the Son dwells in his church. Jesus is returning. God dwells in his people, for they are his temple. The gospel is the good news that the kingdom of heaven has broken in among the kingdoms of this world. Jesus — the king of kings and Lord of lords — reigns. Believers in him are reconciled to God, given eternal life and receive the Holy Spirit. They have entered a covenant relationship with him. God writes his eternal law on their hearts and they are converted.

Paganism is at odds with the gospel. One cannot believe in paganism and believe the Christian gospel. The theology and ethics of the two are in complete opposition with each another. Where paganism is polytheistic, Christianity is monotheistic. Where paganism is sensual, Christianity is temperate. Where paganism is materialistic, Christianity rejects materialism. Reading Justin Martyr, one realizes how seriously the early church fathers understood this conflict and how antipagan they were. Paganism cannot be converted. One cannot have Christian paganism any more than one can breed a dog-cat. Polytheism is not Christianity. The gospel cannot transform paganism. It rejects paganism.

The gospel does affirm, however, that God is converting pagans. The Old Testament prophets proclaimed that pagans would reject their false religions and come to worship the God of Israel. When the Magi followed the star from the east to bow before the Messiah, this process began.

Although paganism cannot be converted, pagans can. What, then, of their customs? Specifically, what of their religious customs? Pagan religious customs have not only varied in form but also in kind. They have ranged from the most debauched behavior to rather innocuous traditions, such as the position one's body might take in prayer.

When we think about pagan customs, must we place human sacrifice in the same category as seasonal festivals? Must we classify temple prostitution along with wedding traditions? Do we never distinguish between the substance of paganism (the polytheism) from the forms that paganism used? Are there not customs that, had they never appeared in a pagan religious context, people would never have considered wrong? For example, the use of certain plants and animals as fertility symbols. Do not most married Christian couples wish to be fertile? Are fertility and the symbolic portrayal of fertility wrong, or is it paganized views of fertility that are wrong?

Good things once corrupted are not forever lost. That is the message of the gospel. Through Jesus, reconciliation is possible. We must distinguish

between form and substance. Past and present must be considered. What pagans corrupt we might put to good use. For example, in Malachi 4:2 God uses the sun, long a pagan symbol, to figuratively image Jesus.

The point is this: Some pagan customs reflect the heart and core of paganism. They exist only in a pagan context. One cannot have Christian human sacrifice or Christian temple prostitution. On the other hand, there are pagan customs that do not reflect paganism itself. They just happen to be forms used by pagans in some of their religious traditions. Placed in another context, these forms take on new meanings. For example, meat sacrificed to idols may be eaten. Greenery used in pagan religious festivals may also be used to decorate Christian homes. In Christian contexts these forms may take on Christian meanings.

### **What is the “way” of paganism?**

So then, how do we understand Deuteronomy 12:30-31? “Be careful not to be ensnared by inquiring about their gods, saying ‘How do these nations serve their gods? We will do the same.’ You must not worship the Lord your God in their way, because in worshipping their gods, they do all kinds of detestable things the Lord hates. They even burn their sons and daughters in the fire as sacrifices to their gods.” The intent of this law — to shun paganism — remains.

The critical phrase in this passage is “You must not worship...in their way.” What is worshipping in the pagan way? Do pagans sing hymns? Do pagans sacrifice animals? Do pagans go to temples? Do pagans have harvest festivals? Do they decorate using God’s creation? Yes, they do, but these forms are not what God condemns. They are not “the way” of paganism. The way or substance of paganism is much more significant.

In Deuteronomy 12, the pagan way is to serve their gods by doing detestable things. God is not taking issue with outward forms that in other contexts are perfectly acceptable. He is concerned with immoral practices that support the perversions of an evil decadent polytheistic system. God illustrates what he means by detestable works by mentioning the pagan practice of human sacrifice. Such practices get to the heart and core of paganism. It is that rotten core that we are to avoid.

Not everything pagans do in worship is inherently evil. They sing. They go to a temple. They pray. These are customs of pagans, and they may do them even as they are sacrificing humans. What is critical to God is *how* they sing, how they behave in their temples, how they pray and to whom they pray. People can corrupt and misuse anything. Paganism’s polytheism and

immorality are what disturbs God. Polytheism and immorality are the pagan way. Israel was not to adapt that way in its worship of God.

Jesus urged, “Stop judging by mere appearances, and make a right judgment” (John 7:24). In trying to make a right judgment, sometimes Christians label others as pagan without understanding what a pagan is. By anachronistically imposing ancient settings on modern settings, we falsely condemn Christian customs. This occurs when we fail to appreciate their Christian substance. To confuse the past with the present is to misunderstand both. Further, when we concentrate on outward forms, we forget Jesus’ advice: “Stop judging by mere appearances.” A modern Puritan’s desire to serve God is commendable. Yet his or her understanding needs to mature.

Christian ethics should make distinctions between paganism, pagans and pagan customs. Paganism can never be converted. Pagans can be converted. Pagan customs may be converted if they are mere forms and not inherent expressions of paganism. In making such distinctions, we do not confuse the form with the substance. We do not confuse decency with sinfulness. We do not confuse what is Christian with what is pagan. That makes for sound Christian ethics.

*Ralph Orr*



## STANDING IN THE LIGHT

In December 1996, the headquarters congregation of our denomination first sang hymns about the birth of Christ. It was an emotional moment. We were Christians, but in years past, we had understood it to be sinful to celebrate the birth of Jesus in December. Even to sing about his birth evoked pangs of conscience. As a church, we had been taught, and had believed, that any celebration of Jesus' birth was a pagan invention dating from the early centuries of Christian history, and as such, it would be wrong to participate in any way, at any time.

I remember having trouble reading the words on the screen (no hymn about Jesus' birth appeared in our hymnal) because of the tears that had welled up in my eyes. My experience was not unique; others told me the moment affected them in the same way.

I pray that we never become cynical or jaded as passing time erodes the memory of that newness and freshness of the newfound freedom to celebrate Advent. I pray that we never lose the inner joy that by God's grace the Christmas season can bring to us. Everywhere we look during the Christmas season, it seems, there is decorative lighting—white lights and colored lights and lit candles. Once we taught our children that these beautiful displays of light were one of Satan's ways of making sin look enticing. Now, in the physical light and color we can enjoy a dim reflection of the indescribable beauty of the true Light, which enlightens everyone, who has come into the world.

In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.... The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.... The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:4-5, 9, 14)

It is fitting and inspiring that brilliant displays of light and color are so much a part of the Advent season. For unbelievers, such displays are little more than another advertising gimmick of modern retailers. But for us who believe the gospel, who know God and Jesus Christ whom he has sent, they can be another reminder of the glory of the One and Only Son of God, who brings the peace and rest for which the whole world aches and pines.

## Desire of nations

In the days when Jesus was born in Bethlehem more than 2,000 years ago, there was a devout old man called Simeon living in Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit had revealed to Simeon that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. One day the Spirit led Simeon into the temple courts—the very day that Jesus' parents brought in the infant Jesus to fulfill the requirements of Torah. When Simeon saw the baby, he took Jesus 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 and for glory to your people Israel. (Luke 2:29-32)

Simeon praised God for what the scribes, the Pharisees, the chief priests and the teachers of the law could not comprehend: Israel's Messiah was not for the salvation of Israel only, but also for the salvation of all peoples of the world. Isaiah had prophesied it long before:

It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth. (Isaiah 49:6; cf. 42:6-7)

## Division

Joseph and Mary, Luke tells us, marveled at what Simeon was saying about Jesus (Luke 2:33). To add to their amazement, Simeon's tone changed to that of an oracle of judgment as he began the second part of his proclamation. First, he blessed Joseph and Mary. Then, he began speaking directly to Mary:

This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too. (verses 34-35)

Because of Jesus, people in Israel would fall, and people in Israel would rise. What the rulers of the Jews had assumed to be true about Messiah, about the Son of Man and about the kingdom of God was going to be turned on its ear. This child would be reviled, despised, ridiculed and condemned, and the hearts of those who stood against him would be displayed for all the arrogance, pride and self-interest they really contained. People would be

divided because of him, and this sword of division, this cost of discipleship, would apply even to Jesus' own mother—she too, as one of the daughters of Israel, would need to decide whether to believe in him, or to stumble over him.

Years later, Jesus would declare during his ministry:

Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law. (Luke 12:51-53)

### **False expectations**

The messianic sword of division cuts as deeply and certainly today as it did in the first century. Many who claim to believe in Jesus are unable to discard their personal sense of what a real Messiah should be and do. Killing one's own world view—personal and group identity, plans, beliefs about success, focus of affections, sense of control, security and personal goodness—is not part of the game plan for people who only profess to be Christians.

The faith to pick up one's cross and follow Jesus is all too easily confused with carnal commitment to a divine hero who will destroy our enemies and bring in the fulfillment of our own selfish dreams and agenda. Faith in Jesus Christ entails the death of our "old self" and resurrection into a new life in which we have a new identity—the identity of Christ. We are "dead to sin" and "alive to God in Jesus Christ" (Romans 6:3-11).

Because of this supernatural sharing in the death and resurrection of Christ, Christians no longer live for themselves, for their personal or corporate success, power and security in the world, but for God (2 Corinthians 5:15). Their hope does not rest in the pleasant things the world can provide, but in God who provides a far better country—a heavenly one (Hebrews 11:13-16).

### **Stumbling stone**

Isaiah had written centuries earlier about the division that Messiah would bring:

He will be a sanctuary; but for both houses of Israel he will be a

stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall. And for the people of Jerusalem he will be a trap and a snare.... This is what the Sovereign Lord says: 'See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation; the one who trusts will never be dismayed.'" (Isaiah 8:14; 28:16)

For some, those who put their confidence in him, he is a cornerstone that will be a foundation for an unshakable house. But for those who trust in themselves, he is a stone over which they will stumble and fall.

These are the prophecies that Jesus used to challenge the rulers of Israel:

Jesus looked directly at them and asked, "Then what is the meaning of that which is written: 'The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone?'" Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed. (Luke 20:17-18)

Jesus confronted these rulers with these prophecies in the context of the parable he had just told them, about taking the vineyard from its present tenants and giving it to others (from Israelites to Gentiles). There were Jews in the beginning who accepted Jesus, but the majority refused to listen, and the synagogues became the persecutors of those who put their faith in him.

Paul and Peter used the same prophecies in explaining why Israelites rejected their own Messiah, while Gentiles were accepting him:

What then shall we say? That the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith; but Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not attained it. Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works. They stumbled over the "stumbling stone." (Romans 9:30-32)

For in Scripture it says: "See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame." Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, "The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone," and, "A stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall." They stumble because they disobey the message. (1 Peter 2:6-8)

### **'Faithful remnant'**

People have continued to stumble over this rock to this day. Even some Christians find the gospel of God's grace through Jesus Christ offensive. The idea that for the sake of Jesus, God justifies the ungodly by faith alone

without their having to measure up to standards of obedience (Romans 4:5) is offensive and distressing even to some Christians.

We humans like to feel good about ourselves. We like to feel that we are basically good and decent people. Conversely, we don't like the idea that people who are not good and decent, people who are different from us, can be justified by God just by believing the gospel without going through at least some of the righteousness hoops that we feel we have gone through.

Certain Christian groups like to feel that they are the faithful remnant, the true and faithful holy ones of God, the decent ones who alone are pleasing to God and who alone are chosen by God. They like the idea of being special, and they set various standards and rules that keep the riffraff, the pretenders, the false believers out of their holy circle. They look forward to the day when Christ will return to vindicate their group as the faithful few and crush the evil majority.

They identify themselves as the "new Israel," the ones who now have the distinction of being God's chosen ones, and they intend not to make the mistakes Israel did in failing to measure up to their call. Some groups even adopt some of the identifying signs God gave to Israel as the marks of their group's "special standing" before God.

It is true that God called Israel to be his special people, and that God gave Israel special commands that would mark them out as his chosen ones. But what many Christians have missed is the fact that God chose Israel not merely for themselves, but for the salvation of all the nations. Through Israel, God was dealing with the sins of the whole world. Yet, Israel, being sinful, could not muster the faithfulness to God necessary to do the job. In the midst of Israel's failure, however, God brought forth his chosen one, his Messiah, as the perfect representative of Israel to do what Israel could not do. Now that he has done so, there is only one "identifying sign" of the people of God, and that sign is Jesus Christ.

## **The new Israel**

The Israelites were the people of God. God had called them out from among the nations and set them apart through a covenant as his own special people. He did it not merely for them, but for the eventual salvation of all nations (Isaiah 49:6). But Israel failed. They were to be a light to the Gentiles, but their light had gone out. They failed to keep the covenant. But God is faithful to his covenant regardless of the faithlessness of his covenant people (Romans 3:3-4).

In the fullness of times, God sent forth his own Son, the perfect Israelite, who perfectly kept the covenant as the new Israel (Romans 5:18-21). Despite

the failure of Israel, God accomplished through Jesus all that the covenant was intended to accomplish. Jesus was the prophesied Messiah, the perfect representative of the covenant people, and as such, he was also the true light to the Gentiles, the One through whom both Israel and all nations are delivered from sin and brought into the family of God.

## **Works of the law**

The Jews believed they were the people of God by virtue of their keeping the “works of Torah.” But this does not mean that the Jews thought they were God’s people on the basis of their own moral integrity or observance of all the 613 laws included in Torah (the law of Moses). By “works of the law,” Paul is referring to those particular aspects of Torah that represented Torah’s very essence and purpose—those aspects that kept Israel separate from the nations around them and marked them out as God’s own special people.

These “works of the law” were 1) circumcision, 2) the Sabbath and 3) the purity laws (the laws of clean and unclean). These were the works of the law, the marks of the covenant, that set Israel out as being the people of God, as being distinct from the Gentiles, as being God’s own special people.

## **Law of faith**

Now Paul is telling the Jews that they are not the people of God on the basis of the works of Torah, but on the basis of the principle of faith. Through faith in Jesus, the promised Christ (or Messiah) of God, Israelite and Gentile alike are made the true covenant people of God on the basis of being identified with Christ—the true Israel, and as the true Israel, the true representative before God of humanity itself (Romans 3:19-26).

In Christ, God fulfilled everything that Torah was intended to fulfill. By putting our faith in Christ, by giving our allegiance to him, by becoming identified with him, we become members of the faithful covenant community, the people of God—not by the works of Torah, but by a new torah, or law, the torah of faith (Romans 3:27-30).

Do we overthrow the Torah by this faith? By no means. On the contrary, we uphold the Torah (v. 31). How do we uphold the Torah? Because it is precisely through faith in Christ, and only through faith in Christ, that the law is kept in the way God intended from the beginning.

The purpose of the law was to create of Israel the people of God, to mark them out as his own. They failed to keep it. They became *lo ammi*, or “not my people,” God said (Hosea 1:9). But now Paul tells us that through faith in

Christ, and not through keeping the law, we become the true keepers of the law, the true people of God. That's because through faith we become identified with the true Israelite, the true humanity, Jesus Christ the perfect one. It is through faith in Christ that we join with Israel in redemption to become *ammi*, or "my people" (Hosea 14:4).

### **Not two classes**

Paul is telling Jew and Gentile alike that the "works of the law" are no longer the way God marks out his people. Now the fulfillment of Torah has arrived on the scene. Now the essence and purpose of Torah is fulfilled through faith in Jesus—everyone who believes is now a full member of the people of God. There are not two classes—Jews as the charter members of the kingdom and Gentiles as the associate members. No, Paul says. On the basis of faith in Christ, Jew and Gentile alike are full members of the kingdom; there is no difference (Romans 3:29-30).

God's people belong to him on the basis of faith in Christ. Circumcision, the Sabbath and the purity laws are no longer important (Galatians 5:1-6; Colossians 2:16-17)—not because they did not have their fitting place for a time, but because they have now been fulfilled in Christ. To continue to insist on these "works of the law" as needful in order to be counted among the people of God is to deny that Jesus has fulfilled the law, to deny that he is the climax of the covenant, that he is the true Israelite and the true human in whom the people of God must now be identified.

### **Identity only in Christ**

Some have asked: "But isn't it good to keep the Sabbath anyway, since it was commanded by God, even though we know it is not required? Wouldn't God be pleased with that?" The answer to this important question is *no*. When we adopt from ancient Israel a law that has been fulfilled in Christ, we miss the point of what God has done in Christ and relegate him to something less than having completely fulfilled the law.

Christ did not destroy the law—he fulfilled it (Matthew 5:17). Now we fulfill the law by putting our trust in him (Romans 3:21-22). We are lawkeepers in Christ according to the original intent and purpose of the law, not by keeping the works of the law but by putting our faith in Jesus through whom God has indeed fulfilled the law (Romans 4:4-8).

The original purpose and intent of the law was to define and identify the true people of God. Israel failed to keep it. But God does not fail! In Christ, God kept the law for Israel, as the perfect representative of Israel, the perfect

Israelite.

As the perfect Israelite, Jesus not only redeemed Israel, but became the light to the Gentiles that Israel had failed to be. This was no afterthought. This was God's plan and purpose from the beginning. We are defined and identified as the true people of God by faith in Christ.

Israel failed to keep the law, and in breaking the covenant, they became "not my people," God said (Hosea 1:9). But in Christ, not only is Israel redeemed, but all people are redeemed by a new and better way, the way of faith, the way that makes us God's own people in Christ, the true and perfect Israelite, the true and perfect human.

If we go back to the works of the law, including Sabbath, it is as though we have no concept of the fact that Jesus fulfilled the law and calls us to put our faith wholly and completely in him. We cannot muster righteousness on our own. Only as we are identified with Christ the Savior are we counted as righteous.

To go back to the works of the law means we have not fully comprehended what God has done in Jesus. It means we are still bound up with the idea that God is after some form of righteousness from us and that God identifies his people by at least one of the works of the law, in this case, Sabbath observance. Our identity as God's people centers on faith in Jesus Christ, not in the performance of identifying signs given to ancient Israel. (We must distinguish between keeping the Sabbath and teaching it as though it were commanded for Christians on one hand, and the practice of simply meeting for worship on Saturday on the other. To meet on Saturday is not the same thing as teaching that Sabbath keeping is required for salvation.)

### **Well-intentioned endorsement**

Occasionally, a leader in another denomination or church would tell one of our members or pastors: "You have a good thing there with the holy days and the Sabbath, and you should hold on to that."

Some people saw that as a kind of endorsement of what our former practice was and as a reason for us never to let go of it. These other Christians meant well, but they had not experienced as we had the disastrous fruit of going back to what Christ has fulfilled—the judgmental spirit it breeds, the exclusivity it fosters, and the subversion of the gospel it creates by causing its adherents to feel they should spread the word about this "good thing" they have discovered. They have not had to face the biblical and spiritual issues we had to face about the Mosaic law, but they can't help but admire the joy they see in our worship.



We are sinners, no more righteous in ourselves than Israel was. Only when we see our sinfulness and put our faith in the One through whom God justifies the wicked can we be counted as righteous for his sake (Romans 4:16, 22-25). The church needs the grace of God as much as Israel did. All who put their faith in Christ, Gentile and Jew alike, are saved only because God is faithful and good, not because we have been faithful, or because we have found some secret formula, some “right” doctrine or the “right” church.

## **Trust in Jesus**

What makes it so hard to trust in Jesus? It is hard to trust in Jesus because trusting in him means putting our life in his hands, and that means giving up control over our own life. That is not easy to do. We like to be in control of our own lives. We like to call the shots, make our own decisions and do things our own way. We want to be secure and safe and free and respected, and we put our hearts into getting secure and safe and free and respected and into maintaining that security and safety and freedom and respect. We like being independent from outside influence.

In the early chapters of Isaiah, we find an appalling tragedy unfolding. The sign God gave to the king of Judah for deliverance, for salvation, for peace, was rejected. It was rejected because the king had his own plans about how to best save the nation. Turning over the safety of his kingdom to God was not his idea of leadership (see Isaiah 7:1-17).

God has a long-range plan for our deliverance and security, and he has a short-range plan. But, like the Jewish king, we cannot receive the fruit of his plans if we do not stand firm in our faith. There are many ways to stand firm. Some people stand firm (or so they think) in military might. Others stand firm in financial security, in their personal integrity or their personal reputation, their skill or their strength, their ingenuity, deal-making or intelligence.

None of these things is bad or sinful in themselves. But as humans we are inclined to put our confidence in such things, and therefore to put our energy and devotion into defending and upholding and amassing these things in order to have security and safety and peace.

## **Walking humbly**

The way that will get us through the trials of our lives and bring to us the joy and peace of God, the deep peace of heart that provides real comfort and remains with us, is to stand firm with our confidence in God. It is not to stand firm with our confidence in the things we can get, or the things we can

do—including, as we saw earlier, the works of the law.

Humanly, it is all too natural for us to think of God as a nice sentiment for celebration times, but not really effective when the down and dirty issues of life get deadly serious. Nothing could be further from the truth. When we commit to God our problems along with the positive action we take in dealing with them, and trust in his care, provision and deliverance instead of “putting him on the shelf,” he promises to be with us.

James wrote, “Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God” (James 4:10). “Fall on your knees,” the hymn says (O Holy Night). God calls us to put aside this lifelong crusade to defend ourselves, promote ourselves, secure ourselves, preserve our possessions, protect our reputations and prolong our lives as though we were not God’s own creation and possession, as though God were not our provider, our defender, our hope and our destiny.

This facade, this illusion that we have or can get our lives under control, must fall, and then we can rise in Christ, becoming who we really are—God’s own precious children whom he saves and helps, whose battles he fights, whose fears he calms, whose pain he shares, whose future he secures and whose reputation he preserves. In giving up all, we gain everything. In kneeling, we rise. In setting aside our false illusion of personal control, we are clothed with all the glory and splendor and riches of the heavenly eternal realm.

“Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you,” Peter wrote (1 Peter 5:7). What oppresses you? Your sins? An enemy? A financial disaster? A crushing disease? An inconceivable loss? An impossible situation that you are utterly helpless to do anything about? A disastrous and painful relationship? A blackening of your name? False accusations? Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you. He has sent his Son, and through his Son, he takes our hands and lifts us up and shines the light of his glory into the dark and painful crisis we are enduring. Though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we are not afraid, because he is with us.

God has given us the sign that his rescue is certain: “Today in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you. He is Christ, the Lord” (Luke 2:11). Let us put our confidence in him.

That is why Christians celebrate the birth of Jesus. But it is also why we should not condemn people who, out of fear or out of discomfort, or out of personal conviction, do not celebrate his birth.

The same God who loves us so much that he sent his Son to save us, loves all of us, even when we stand in ignorance or in remnants of

## JESUS THE SAVIOR

superstition, as do we all. Together we all stand in the grace of God under the blood of Christ. With Paul, we can say, “Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift.”

*J. Michael Feazell*

## MERRY CHRISTMAS

Sometimes it's nice to state the obvious—that's what most Christmas cards do. In celebrating Christmas, it's not the date of Jesus' birth that's important, but the stunning fact of his incarnation. In his infinite creativity and freedom, God reached down to us by becoming one of us. In doing so, he delivered the joyous good news of who he is for us and who he has made us to be in him.

Irenaeus, a second-century Christian teacher, put it this way:

For, in what way could we be partakers of the adoption of sons, unless we had received from Him through the Son that fellowship which refers to Himself, unless His Word, having been made flesh, had entered into communion with us? Wherefore also He passed through every stage of life, restoring to all communion with God. (*Against Heresies*, Book 3, 18.6-7)

As the apostle Paul explained, the eternal, all-powerful Son of God willingly put himself through this profound change, taking upon himself our fallen human nature and mortal body:

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich. (2 Corinthians 8:9)

The angels celebrated with great joy when Jesus was born. Let us join in the celebration!

*Joseph Tkach*

## JESUS: MERELY A MYTH?

The Advent-Christmas season is a time of joy, hope and promise as we reflect on Jesus and the Incarnation. People all over the world are telling the story of his birth. The airwaves are filled with songs of the season. Churches celebrate with pageants, cantatas and choirs. It's the time of the year when you'd think the whole world has a chance to learn the truth about Jesus, the Messiah.

Sadly, many don't get the full meaning of the season and simply celebrate Christmas because of the holiday spirit. They miss out on so much because either they don't know Jesus or have fallen for the lie that Jesus is merely a myth—a contention that has been around since Christianity began.

Sometimes articles declare that "Jesus is a myth," often claiming that the Bible is unreliable as a source of history. But these claims overlook the fact that the Bible has been around far longer than many "credible" sources. Historians often cite as reliable the writings of historian Herodotus. Yet there are only eight known copies of his writings, with the earliest dated 900 A.D.—some 1,300 years after Herodotus' time.

Contrast that with the "discounted" New Testament, which was written shortly following Jesus' death and resurrection. The earliest New Testament manuscript (a fragment from the Gospel of John) is dated A.D. 125-130. There are more than 5,800 complete or fragmented copies of the New Testament in Greek, about 10,000 in Latin and 9,300 in other languages. Let me share with you three notable quotes that point to the authenticity of the New Testament accounts of Jesus' life.

The first quote is from first century Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus:

Now there arose at this time a source of further trouble in one Jesus, a wise man who performed surprising works, a teacher of men who gladly welcomed strange things. He led away many Jews, and also many of the Gentiles.... When Pilate, acting on information supplied by the chief men around us, condemned him to the cross, those who had attached themselves to him at first did not cease to cause trouble, and the tribe of Christians, which has taken this name from him is not extinct even today. (*Antiquities*, 18.3.3)

F.F. Bruce noted that, "The historicity of Christ is as axiomatic for an unbiased historian as the historicity of Julius Caesar."

The second quote is from Roman historian Caius Cornelius Tacitus, who also wrote in the first century. Referring to accusations that Nero burned

Rome and then blamed Christians, he wrote:

Nero procured others to be accused, and inflicted exquisite punishment upon those people, who were in abhorrence for their crimes, and were commonly known by the name of Christians. They had their denomination from Christ, who in the reign of Tiberius was put to death as a criminal by the procurator Pontius Pilate... At first they were only apprehended who confessed themselves of that sect; afterwards a vast multitude discovered by them, all of which were condemned, not so much for the crime of burning the city, as for their enmity to mankind. (*Annals*, 15, 44)

The third quote is from Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus, official historian of Rome during the reigns of Trajan and Hadrian. In a book written in A.D. 125 concerning the lives of the first twelve Caesars, Suetonius wrote this about Claudius (who reigned from A.D. 41 to 54):

He banished the Jews from Rome, who were continually making disturbances, Chrestus being their leader. (*Life of Claudius* 25.4, and note his spelling of Christ as “Chrestus”)

Suetonius’s statement points to the growth of Christianity in Rome prior to A.D. 54, only two decades after Jesus’ death. Reflecting on this and other evidence, British New Testament scholar I. Howard Marshall concluded: “It is not possible to explain the rise of the Christian church or the writing of the Gospels and the stream of tradition that lies behind them without accepting the fact that the Founder of Christianity actually existed.”

Though other scholars doubt the authenticity of the first two quotes and a few even claim them to be forgeries by Christians, the criterion for validating these references is solid. I enjoy a comment made by historian Michael Grant in his book, *Jesus: An Historian’s Review of the Gospels*: “If we apply to the New Testament, as we should, the same sort of criteria as we should apply to other ancient writings containing historical material, we can no more reject Jesus’ existence than we can reject the existence of a mass of pagan personages whose reality as historical figures is never questioned.”

Though skeptics are quick to dismiss what they don’t want to believe, there are exceptions. Noted skeptic and liberal theologian John Shelby Spong wrote in *Jesus for the Non-Religious*, that “Jesus was, first of all, a human being who actually lived at a particular time in a particular place. The man Jesus was not a myth, but a figure of history from whom enormous energy flowed—energy that still in our day cries out to be adequately explained.”

In his days as an atheist, C.S. Lewis believed that the New Testament

accounts about Jesus were mere legends. But when he read them for himself and compared them with what he knew of actual ancient legends and myths, he saw clearly that these writings were nothing of the sort. They had the form and quality of recollections concerning the daily life of a real person. With that recognition, a barrier to faith fell away. From that point forward, Lewis had no problem believing in the historical reality of Jesus.

Many skeptics assert that Albert Einstein did not believe in Jesus. Though Einstein did not believe in a “personal God,” he refused to combat those who did, because “Such a belief seems to me preferable to the lack of any transcendental outlook” (*Einstein and Religion: Physics and Theology*, by Max Jammer). Einstein, who grew up a Jew, admitted to being “enthralled by the luminous figure of the Nazarene.” When asked by an interviewer if he accepted the historical existence of Jesus, Einstein gave this reply:

Unquestionably. No one can read the Gospels without feeling the actual presence of Jesus. His personality pulsates in every word. No myth is filled with such life. How different, for instance, is the impression which we receive from an account of legendary heroes of antiquity like Theseus. Theseus and other heroes of his type lack the authentic vitality of Jesus. (“What Life Means to Einstein: An Interview,” by George Sylvester Viereck, *The Saturday Evening Post*, October 26, 1929).

I could go on, but as Roman Catholic scholar Raymond Brown has rightly noted, concentrating on the question of Jesus being a myth causes many to miss the real point of the Gospels. In *The Birth of the Messiah*, Brown mentions that he is often approached around Christmas by those wanting to write an article about the historicity of Jesus’ birth. “With little success I try to convince them that they could promote understanding of the birth stories by concentrating on the message of those stories instead of an issue that was very far from primary [for] the evangelists.”

When we keep our focus on sharing the story of Christmas, instead of on trying to convince people that Jesus was not a myth, we are giving living proof of Jesus’ reality. That living proof is the life he now lives in us and among us. The Bible’s focus and purpose is not to prove the historical validity of Jesus’ incarnation, but to share why he came and what his coming means to us. The Holy Spirit uses Scripture to put us in actual contact with the incarnate and risen Lord, who draws us to himself that we might believe in him and worship the Father through him. Jesus came into the world as a demonstration of God’s love for each and every one of us (1 John 4:10). Here are a few other reasons why he came:

- To seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10).
- To save sinners and call them to repentance (1 Timothy 1:15, Mark 2:17).
- To make himself a ransom for humanity (Matthew 20:28).
- To bear witness to the truth (John 18:37).
- To do the will of the Father, which is to bring many children to glory (John 5:30, Hebrews 2:10).
- To be the light of the world, the way, the truth and the life (John 8:12; 14:6).
- To preach the good news about the kingdom of God (Luke 4:43).
- To fulfill the law (Matthew 5:17)
- Because the Father sent him: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God” (John 3:16-18).

We celebrate the truth of God entering our world in Jesus. It is good for us to remember that not everyone knows this truth, and we have been invited (commissioned) to share it with others. Jesus is more than a historical figure—he is the Son of God who came to reconcile all to the Father in the Holy Spirit. That is what makes the Christmas season one of joy, hope and promise.

*Joseph Tkach*



## THE MEANING OF CHRISTMAS

In the Christmas season we celebrate the joy of Jesus' birth. It is the story of the Son of God coming to be with us in the midst of our sin and sorrow, in order to bring us his salvation—the ultimate healing. As we thank God for sending his Son, born in a manger about 2,000 years ago, let us pray for those who are suffering and let us also pray for our Lord's return in glory when all tears of sorrow will be wiped away and all this world's wrongs will be made right.

### The word *Christmas*

Our appreciation of the Christian meaning of Christmas is enhanced by understanding the origin of the word *Christmas*. It is the contraction of the words *Christ's mass*, which is derived from the Middle English *Christemasse* and the Old English *Cristes masse*. The suffix *-mas* is from *maesse*, which means “festival,” “feast day” or “mass.” *Maesse* is derived from the common Latin word *missa*, which means “dismissal” and is taken from the formal Latin word *missa*, the feminine past participle of *mittere*, meaning “to let go” or “to send.”

Over time, *missa* came to signify the Eucharistic service—a practice that continues in Catholic churches, probably because the concluding words of the service are “ite, missa est” meaning, “go, the mass is over,” or “the prayer has been sent.” You will find this sort of information in an etymological dictionary, like the one online at [www.etymonline.com/](http://www.etymonline.com/).

### Celebrating and proclaiming the Messiah's coming

The Christian celebration of this day has its roots in the idea that Jesus has been sent to us. The church gathers on Christmas to worship and take communion in recognition of his coming through his birth to Mary in Bethlehem. From this gathering, the church is sent out (dismissed) to proclaim this good news in all the world.

When Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, regained his voice, he proclaimed a rich prophecy concerning the coming *Messiah* (from the Hebrew word *Māšīach*, meaning “anointed one,” which in Greek is *Christós* and in English is *Christ*). In Luke 1:78, Zechariah refers to the long-promised Messiah as “the dayspring” (KJV) or “the rising sun” (NIV), sent “to us from heaven.” The Greek word translated “dayspring” or “rising sun” is *anatole*—a word used by Greek speakers in two ways. It is used to refer to the light of the sun and the stars rising—also meaning, “from the east,” since the sun rises in the east and sunrise is another way of saying daybreak or dawn.

Second, *anatole* is used to refer to a “shoot” or “branch.” It was used this way in the Septuagint (the Old Testament in Greek) to convey the meaning “branch” found in Jeremiah 23:5 and Zechariah 3:8 and 6:12.

Thus, in Luke 1:78, *anatole* could be translated “the branch from on high,” a reference similar to Isaiah 4:2, “the Branch of the Lord.” However, the translators chose “dayspring” (KJV) and “rising sun” (NIV) because verse 79 contains the imagery of light coming into darkness, just as the dawn chases away the darkness of night. The translators were likely correct in this choice, though the idea of “the branch” is lurking in there too. It appears that Luke uses *anatole* as a play on both meanings of the word—celebrating the Messiah as both humankind’s new branch and new day.

Christmas proclaims that God is the light of his people from all eternity. And when, in the fullness of time, Jesus came, it was to fulfill all the ordinances and messianic prophecies concerning him. These were shadows, cast by the real light, for Jesus alone is “the dayspring” (Malachi 4:2; Luke 1:78) and “the morning star” (2 Peter 1:19; Revelation 2:28 and 22:16) of the promised everlasting day in which the sun never sets. With Jesus’ first coming, the eternal morning dawned. In this we find great hope, for it carries with it the promise that all wrongs will ultimately be righted and all tears wiped away. Thus Jesus’ first coming carries with it the promise of his second coming in glory, when the fullness of this hope will be realized in the new heavens and new earth, proclaimed in the book of Revelation.

Our celebration of Jesus’ first Advent (coming) is a joyous celebration of his love, his faithfulness and the promise of the fullness of his kingdom at his second Advent. Because of his birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension, the love of God dwells not just among us but also, by his Spirit, in us so that we will love one another with his love in the same Spirit.

Christmas is about the light and the love of God being sent to us in a most personal way—in the incarnate person of the Son of God, Jesus Christ. I pray that as you and yours celebrate Christmas with this fullness of meaning, you will find the joy, hope and comfort that come through our Lord’s presence.

*Joseph Tkach*

## JESUS: THE DOUBLE AGENT

As the traditional day for celebrating the birth of Jesus, Christmas provides the church its focal point for gratefully acknowledging the Incarnation of the Son of God. In response to this historic event, the angels joyfully praised God (Luke 2:13) as they watched God's master plan unfold. I believe this is significant to notice. The angels rejoiced because they knew it was God's desire to be reconciled to his children, and that in Jesus, the children would be reconciled to their Father.

The Incarnation is not only for humanity and our reconciliation to God; it is also for the Father, whose purpose has always been to be reconciled to his children. As fully God, Jesus acts in the role of the reconciler — and as fully human, he acts in the role of the one reconciled. Because he worked for both God and humanity, I fondly refer to Jesus as a “double agent.” But unlike other double agents, Jesus was loyal to both parties. One of my favorite secret agents, James Bond, temporarily saved the UK and the world from terror and ruin as he awaited his next assignment. But Jesus, through his one assignment, redeems and saves the whole world for eternity.

Whether or not the birth of Jesus occurred on December 25 is not important; what is important is that it did occur and is a real event to be celebrated. In Christmas celebrations, Christians honor the reality of the one plan of redemption throughout history—a plan brought about by Jesus Christ, who fulfills the promise to Abraham:

As many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise. (Galatians 3:27-29, ESV)

As the one true son of Israel, Jesus is the answer to and fulfillment of all of God's promises. “For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory” (2 Corinthians 1:20, ESV).

God made a covenant with Israel: “If you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:5-6).

Unfortunately, Israel as a nation was not faithful to the covenant, as the prophets repeatedly warned: “They have turned back to the iniquities of their

forefathers, who refused to hear my words. They have gone after other gods to serve them. The house of Israel and the house of Judah have broken my covenant that I made with their fathers” (Jeremiah 11:10, ESV).

It is only in Jesus’ total obedience as a human son of Israel that the covenant is fulfilled. He is the true Israel of God. He inherits the Abrahamic promises on behalf of all Israel. That is good news for all people because the eternal Son of God, through his Incarnation, became the second Adam—the representative for all humanity. Therefore we rest on his perfect obedience.

As our great High Priest, Jesus acts in our place and on our behalf. In this way, all who “belong to him” are included in God’s “Yes.” “Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘In you shall all the nations be blessed’” (Galatians 3:7-8, ESV).

In his book *Incarnation*, T. F. Torrance makes the point that Jesus is the fulfillment of the prophecies:

If it is the historical factuality of Jesus that is of controlling importance, then that Jesus must be presented as really *embedded in history*, embedded therefore in the hard stubborn history of Israel. That is precisely the case with Jesus (p. 16).

Jesus is God in the flesh. He is Israel in his humanity so that in him God and humanity are brought together in flesh and blood, in time and space, in person. Jesus is a true double agent—always for us, always on our side, the only one who has redeemed and saved all.

Also like a double agent, not everything is transparent. Jesus’ mortal humanity concealed his divine identity. In commenting on Paul’s thoughts to the Philippians, Karl Barth says the following:

[Jesus] puts himself in a position where only he himself knows himself in the way that the Father knows him. In the unknowability into which he enters, it is now certainly the Father’s part to reveal him. But the step that brings him into that unrecognizable condition, into the incognito, is grounded entirely in himself alone... He exists in such a way that to any direct, immediate way of regarding him—e.g. to the historical and psychological approach—he does not present the picture of his proper, original, divine Being, but solely the picture of a human being (*The Epistle to the Philippians*, p. 63).

What becomes revealed in Jesus is that the Triune God cannot be known

in a true and saving way by mere mortals. So God the Father in the person of Jesus reveals the divinity of his Son by the Spirit. That revelation can only come about by grace which, at the same time, reconciles and redeems us. Knowing God in Jesus the incarnate Son transforms us in every way. That is why Jesus said, “All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (Matthew 11:27). The early church put it this way: “Only God knows God and only God reveals God.”

Here’s a related quote I much enjoy from N. K. Gupta:

Christ by becoming a mortal, accepted slavery to those cosmological forces that lord over humanity. But, like a true “double agent” of popular espionage, he never forsook his true allegiance to God or his status as Son of God.... Christ is ingeniously able to nullify their own power through the ultimate act of eschatological reversal: his own death and resurrection that is capable of being shared by others” (*Horizons in Biblical Theology*, 32.1, pp. 1-16).

At Christmas we rejoice along with the angels in this great reversal. We celebrate Jesus’ perfect obedience, which fulfilled the covenant on our behalf. We celebrate that Jesus is the one true son of Israel, and because we are in him, by faith we share with him in the covenant promises. We celebrate that Jesus never forsook his allegiance to God nor his allegiance to humanity. We celebrate the redemption we have in Christ our Savior. We celebrate the Incarnation.

*Joseph Tkach*

## THE LIGHT OF LIGHTS

My teenage son is a Hoosier fan and one of his Christmas gifts was that I would take him to a game. The drive to Bloomington from Ohio was over country roads, making it a pleasant afternoon drive. After the game, however, the nighttime drive home had quite a different feel. The dark country roads with no streetlights made me feel as if I were entering a mystery novel, “It was a dark and stormy night...”

It was the sheer blackness that made the first home we saw decorated with Christmas lights really stand out. The rich, bright colors replaced the ominous darkness with something beautiful, something inviting. It occurred to me that if I were lost and needed directions, I’d look for a home with Christmas lights to ask for help.

Christmas lights, especially on black, starless nights, always make me think of Jesus, who called himself the Light of the world (John 8:12). I like to ponder what he meant. What is he illuminating? What is he revealing?

Did he come to reveal the depravity of mankind? Did he come to show us how far removed we are from the Father, how our sins have deceived us, destroyed us and separated us from God? We already know all that, so that can’t be why he came.

Did he come to reveal a new and better set of laws, new rules we must adhere to if we are to have any hope of obtaining God’s love? No, that doesn’t make sense either. No one has ever lived without sin, not even believing Christians. If there is anything we have to do to qualify for God’s love, none of us will ever qualify for it.

Or did he come to reveal not something for us to qualify for or measure up to, but something *about God*—about the Father’s unconditional love, mercy, forgiveness and grace toward humanity manifest in Jesus himself?

As I continued driving home, I started thinking about my relationship with my children. If I want to have a relationship with them that endures into their adulthood and for the rest of our lives together, my priority will not be to continually point out their flaws and weaknesses. My priority will be to continually remind them how precious they are to me. I teach them and do what I can to equip them to cope with life and to thrive in this world. But the most important thing I can teach them is that I love them unconditionally.

Jesus is the Light who came to reveal the Father for who the Father really is. He came to show us that God loves us, and that he is not some angry god of judgment and condemnation. He came to show that God is a Papa/Father

## JESUS THE SAVIOR

who loves us as his precious children. It's amazingly simple, yet incredibly beautiful. And he's asked us to share that good news!

*Rick Shallenberger*

## CHRISTMAS LIGHT

“In him was life, and that life was the light of men” (John 1:4).

Brilliant displays of light and color are part of the Advent season. For some people, such displays may be little more than another advertising gimmick of modern retailers. But for believers, they can be another reminder of the glory of the One and Only Son of God, the light of the world, who brings the peace and rest for which the whole world aches and pines.

In the days when Jesus was born in Bethlehem more than 2,000 years ago, there was a devout old man called Simeon living in Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit had revealed to Simeon that he would not die before he had seen the Lord’s Christ. One day the Spirit led Simeon into the temple courts — the very day that Jesus’ parents brought in the infant Jesus to fulfill the requirements of Torah.

When Simeon saw the baby, he took Jesus 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 and for glory to your people Israel” (Luke 2:29-32).

### **Light to the Gentiles**

Simeon praised God for what the scribes, the Pharisees, the chief priests and the teachers of the law could not comprehend: Israel’s Messiah was not for the salvation of Israel only, but also for the salvation of all peoples of the world. Isaiah had prophesied it long before: “It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth” (Isaiah 49:6; cf. 42:6-7).

### **Jesus: the new Israel**

The Israelites were the people of God. God had called them out from among the nations and set them apart through a covenant as his own special people. He did it not merely for them, but for the eventual salvation of all nations (Isaiah 49:6). Israel was to be a light to the Gentiles, but their light had gone out. They had failed to keep the covenant. But God is faithful to his covenant regardless of the faithlessness of his covenant people (Romans 3:3-4).

So, in the fullness of times, God sent his own Son to be the light of the



world. He was the perfect Israelite, who perfectly kept the covenant as the new Israel (Romans 5:18-26). As the prophesied Messiah, the perfect representative of the covenant people and the true light to the Gentiles, Jesus delivered both Israel and the nations from sin and reconciled them to God.

Through faith in Christ, giving our allegiance to him and becoming identified with him, we become members of the faithful covenant community, the people of God (Romans 3:27-30).

### **Righteous in Christ**

We cannot muster righteousness on our own. Only as we are identified with Christ the Savior are we counted as righteous. We are sinners, no more righteous in ourselves than Israel was. Only when we see our sinfulness and put our faith in the One through whom God justifies the wicked can we be counted as righteous for his sake (Romans 4:16, 22-25).

The church needs the grace of God as much as Israel does. All who put their faith in Christ, Gentile and Jew alike, are saved only because God is faithful and good, not because we have been faithful, or because we have found some secret formula, some “right” doctrine or the “right” church. “He has rescued us,” Paul wrote in Colossians 1:13, “from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”

### **Trust in Jesus**

As easy as it might sound, it is hard to trust in Jesus. Trusting in Jesus means putting your life in his hands, and that means giving up control over your life. That is not easy to do. We like to be in control of our own lives. We like to call the shots, make our own decisions and do things our own way.

King Ahaz of Judah was no exception. Ahaz rejected the sign God gave him for deliverance, for salvation, for peace. He had his own plans about how to best save the nation (Isaiah 7:1-17). God has a long-range plan for our deliverance and security, and he has a short-range plan. But, like Ahaz, we cannot receive the fruit of his plans if we do not stand firm in faith.

Some people, like King Ahaz, stand firm in military might. Others attempt to stand firm in financial security, in their personal integrity or their personal reputation. Some stand firm in their skill or their strength, their ingenuity, deal-making or intelligence. None of these things is bad or sinful in themselves. But as humans we are inclined to put our confidence, energy and devotion into them instead of in the real source of security and safety and peace.

## Walking humbly

When we commit to God our problems, along with the positive action we take in dealing with them, and trust in his care, provision and deliverance, he promises to be with us.

James wrote, “Humble yourselves before the Lord” (James 4:10). God calls us to put aside our lifelong crusade to defend ourselves, promote ourselves, preserve our possessions, protect our reputations and prolong our lives. God is our provider, our defender, our hope and our destiny.

The illusion that we can get our own lives under control must be exposed to the light, to Jesus, “the light of the world” (John 8:12). Then we can rise in him, becoming who we really are — God’s own precious children whom he saves and helps, whose battles he fights, whose fears he calms, whose pain he shares, whose future he secures and whose reputation he preserves.

In giving up all, we gain everything. In kneeling, we rise. In setting aside our illusion of personal control, we are clothed with all the glory and splendor and riches of the heavenly eternal realm.

“Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you,” Peter wrote (1 Peter 5:7). What oppresses you? Your sins? An enemy? A financial disaster? A crushing disease? An inconceivable loss? An impossible situation that you are utterly helpless to do anything about? A disastrous and painful relationship? A blackening of your name? False accusations?

God has sent his Son, and through his Son, he takes our hands and lifts us up and shines the light of his glory into the dark and painful crisis we are enduring. Though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we are not afraid, because he is with us. “If we walk in the light, as he [God] is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin” (1 John 1:7).

God has given us the sign that his rescue is certain: “Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:11).

Everywhere we look during this season, it seems, there is decorative lighting — white lights and colored lights and lit candles. In these physical lights we can enjoy a dim reflection of “the true light that gives light to everyone” (John 1:9).

*J. Michael Feazell*

## I'M DREAMING OF A QUANTUM CHRISTMAS

The wise men who came from the East to worship the infant Jesus were the scientists of their day. Known as Magi, they studied the heavens and the earth, seeking to understand the natural world, and make sense of the supernatural.

When they observed a mysterious sign in the sky, they knew it was significant. Exactly what they saw is not known. Was it a comet? A conjunction of planets? A unique special creation? Whatever it was, it guided these Magi to Jerusalem, and eventually to a house in Bethlehem where the infant Jesus was staying. There they worshipped him and gave him gifts.

The heavens have always been a source of inspiration to those who seek to understand the meaning of existence. A thousand years before the Magi, King David wrote:

When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? (Psalm 8:3-4)

David could have seen with the naked eye between 5,000 and 6,000 stars, and maybe five of the planets. He could not have known that some of those “stars” were galaxies, composed of millions of stars. Today we know that those few thousand visible stars are just a handful of the estimated two to three hundred billion stars in our Milky Way galaxy. And our galaxy is just one of at least 100 billion galaxies. I’m being conservative; new data from the Hubble telescope suggests there could be as many as 500 billion galaxies, each with maybe 300 billion stars of its own.

We will likely never know for certain how many stars there are. Even if we did, old stars burn out and new stars come into existence every day. Astronomers have estimated that in each galaxy, one star dies and one is born at the rate of about one a year. Assuming a conservative 100 billion galaxies in the observable universe, there are about 100 billion stars being born and dying each year. That means an average of about 275 million per day. In the time it is taking you to read this paragraph, maybe a million stars have collapsed and another million have burst into life.

There is far more going on out there than we have even begun to observe or measure. About 70 percent of the universe seems to consist of what scientists call “dark energy.” By “dark” they mean it is beyond the range of

our ability to measure and observe. Of the remaining 30 percent, 26 percent seems to be made of “dark matter.” Only four percent of the universe consists of material that we can measure, or even describe. And the more we learn about that four percent, the more mysterious it becomes.

As the English astronomer Sir Arthur Eddington put it, “Not only is the universe stranger than we imagine, it is stranger than we can imagine.”

## Is God necessary?

Even with the limited understanding of his time, David could write confidently, “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands” (Psalm 19:1).

Well, it doesn’t work for everyone. In a recently published book, *The Grand Design*, physicists Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow argue that a belief in God is not needed to explain the origins of the universe. They claim that the theory of quantum mechanics and the theory of relativity help us understand how universes could have formed out of nothing. They argue that the Big Bang is a consequence of the laws of physics alone. Hawking has said: “One can’t prove that God doesn’t exist, but science makes God unnecessary.”

That is a bold claim, but is it right? Physicist and science writer Paul Davies doesn’t think so. While accepting that cosmology can probably now explain how our universe began, he says,

A much tougher problem now looms, however. What is the source of those ingenious laws that enable a universe to pop into being from nothing? ... There is no compelling need for a supernatural being or prime mover to start the universe off. But when it comes to the laws that explain the big bang, we are in murkier waters.

## Missing something big

Murkier waters indeed. Even if the origins of the universe can be described entirely by laws of physics, as Hawking asserts, the question remains as to how can we explain the origin of those laws? In a remarkably frank book about the state of research today, physicist Lee Smolin admitted that physics has come to an impasse:

The one thing that everyone who cares about fundamental physics seems to agree on is that new ideas are needed. From the most skeptical critics to the most strenuous advocates of string theory, you hear the same thing: We are missing something big. (Lee Smolin, *The*

*Trouble with Physics*, p. 308)

So today, our astounding investigations into the incomprehensibly vast expanse of the known universe and the equally incomprehensibly miniscule world of sub-atomic particles have not made God unnecessary. The unfathomable night sky still reflects the glory of God and the mysterious quarks join it in proclaiming the work of his hands.

In another recently published book, Robert J. Spitzer argues that far from doing away with the need for God, cutting-edge scientific discoveries have shown ever more clearly that faith is a rational response to the state of our knowledge. If the scientific evidence we have today is taken seriously, Spitzer writes, “they cannot help but transform our view of the universe, transcendence, our destiny and the meaning of life” (*New Proofs for the Existence of God*, pages 10–11).

Twenty years ago, astronomer Robert Jastrow anticipated this situation when he wrote,

For the scientist who has lived by his faith in the power of reason, the story ends like a bad dream. He has scaled the mountains of ignorance, he is about to conquer the highest peak; as he pulls himself over the final rock, he is greeted by a band of theologians who have been sitting there for centuries. (Robert Jastrow, *God and the Astronomers*, p. 107)

Reading that, it is tempting for religious people to offer a smug “We told you so.” But let’s be careful. Far from Jastrow’s picture of theologians sitting on the highest peak, theologians have more often preferred to squat complacently on the lowest slopes of scientific discovery, stubbornly clutching old ideas and resisting—sometimes viciously opposing—anything new and ground-breaking. Let’s not forget Copernicus and Galileo, whom the church attempted to silence because of their discoveries that the earth was not the center of the universe.

Theologians, just as much as scientists, need to ask whether we are missing something big, starting with the common perception among religious people that God is a rather remote, stern Judge “out there” somewhere, who is difficult to please and preoccupied with sinful behavior. But is that the God that Jesus came to reveal? Has our understanding of God been too narrow?

The Magi followed the star to worship Jesus because they knew his birth was in some way significant. They could not have known just how significant. They thought he was the new king of the Jews, the long-awaited Messiah.

How could they know that he was far more than that—the loving and faithful Creator of all they had studied, come to earth as a human being to heal and transform humanity into a new creation in himself?

As his life and ministry unfolded, Jesus showed us what God is really like, and he and his apostles told us of the purpose of the universe and human life. The Creator became one of us, not only forgiving all our sins by taking them on himself, but also giving us his own righteousness by becoming one with us. He died for us, rose from the dead for us and lives eternally for us, drawing us relentlessly into his new creation, into the love relationship he shares eternally with the Father and the Spirit.

As the carols remind us, “Long lay the world in sin and error pining ‘til he appeared, and the soul felt its worth,” and “Man will live forevermore because of Christmas Day.”

The brilliant lights of science, which are no more than human discoveries of what God has created, and the ancient glow of the gospel, which is nothing less than God’s revelation of his unfathomable love for all human beings, both lead us to Jesus. Through him alone we come face to face with the Creator who not only loves us more than we have imagined, but more than we can imagine.

*John Halford*

## **TRUCE ON EARTH, GOOD WILL TOWARD MEN**

About 15 years ago, I met an old soldier. A very old soldier. Frank Sumpter was more than 100 years old when we met. He was one of the dwindling ranks of veterans who had fought in the trenches of the First World War that raged from 1914 to 1918. Frank is dead now, as are all those who fought with him and against him.

I wanted to meet Frank because he was one of the few people who had personal memories of a remarkable event that happened at Christmas in the first year of that devastating war nearly a century ago. The old soldier's body may have been fragile, but his mind was still sharp and focused. He told me a fascinating story.

Let me set the scene for you.

The dreadful conflict that history remembers as The Great War had been building in Europe for years. Germany in the late 19th century had become a formidable, united nation, and it felt threatened by its neighbors. The rest of Europe, in turn, was alarmed by Germany's growing power.

Great Britain had been the unchallenged superpower of the day, but Germany was becoming a serious rival. The German leader, Kaiser Wilhelm II, was the grandson of Queen Victoria of England, and the two nations were not natural enemies. But storm clouds were gathering as political and economic tensions steadily increased across the continent.

By August 1914, Europe was ready for war, and a madman's murderous assault on the Archduke of Austria provided the catalyst. Germany invaded Belgium, and Britain and France had pledged to come to the little nation's defense. So hundreds of thousands of young Britons, Germans and Frenchmen cheerfully went off to fight for King, Kaiser or country. Both sides expected a quick victory. "Home by Christmas" was the patriotic slogan.

But it was not to be. A fierce winter set in over the battlefield, and neither side could gain a quick victory. By December 1914, the two huge armies were stalemated, bogged down in a line of trenches that stretched from the Belgian coast to the Alps. Losses to both sides were appalling as they fought to gain or regain a few feet of land.

It soon became obvious that this war would be different from anything the world had seen before. It would not be decided by one or two pitched battles. The front-line soldiers lived for weeks on end, knee deep in mud, in

each other's gun sights. They had once shared the same youthful enthusiasm, the same belief that they were fighting for a worthy cause. But as winter clamped down, friend and foe realized that, far from being home for Christmas, they were trapped in the grim trenches, cannon fodder for the first modern industrialized war.

Then on the evening before Christmas of 1914, a remarkable thing began to happen. Frank Sumpter remembered:

The Germans started it. They were in the trenches about 80 yards away, with rolls of barbed wire separating us. As Christmas Eve fell, the German troops called across "Happy Christmas, Tommy." We called back "Happy Christmas, Happy Noel." Then the Germans signaled to us to come out and we began to move.

The Officers became extremely annoyed and called out "Get back in the trenches." But we ignored them. We had no particular feelings of animosity towards the individuals on the other side. We were soldiers, and soldiers don't hate each other. We put our hands through the rolls of barbed wire and shook hands with the German troops.

One man asked me where I was from, and I told him. "Do you know the Jolly Farmer Pub?" he said, and I said, "Yes." He said, "I used to be the barber next door!" As far as we were concerned there was no hatred between us."<sup>1</sup>

Similar exchanges began to happen all along the front line. German soldiers adorned their lines with candles and makeshift Christmas trees. On Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, men who only a few hours before had been trying to kill each other sang carols and songs across the trenches. Soldiers left their muddy trenches and met each other in No Man's Land. They shared drink, food and cigarettes. Some even played football.

Soldiers on both sides wrote home about this extraordinary event. One German soldier wrote:

Is it possible? Are the French really going to leave us in peace today, Christmas Eve? Then; listen; from across the way came the sound of a festive song. A Frenchman singing a Christmas carol with a marvelous tenor voice.

Everyone lay still, listening in the quiet of the night. Is it our imagination or is it maybe meant to lull us into a false sense of security? Or is it in fact the victory of God's love over human conflict?

And from a letter written by Sergeant A. Lovell of the 3rd Rifle Brigade:



Climbing the parapet, I saw a sight which I shall remember to my dying day. Right along the whole line were hung paper lanterns and illuminations of every description... As I stood in wonder a rousing song came over to us.... Our boys answered with a cheer. Eventually a party of our men got out from the trenches and invited the Germans to meet them halfway and talk. And there in the searchlight they stood, Englishmen and Germans, chatting, and smoking cigarettes together midway between the lines. A rousing cheer went up from friends and foe alike.

The diary of Lieutenant Geoffrey Heinekey of the 2nd Queen's Royal West Surrey regiment recounted an astonishing development, as Christmas dawned over the front line:

The next morning a most extraordinary thing happened—I should think one of the most curious things in the war. Some Germans came out and held up their hands and began taking in some of our wounded, and so we ourselves immediately got out of the trenches and began to bring in our wounded also. The Germans then beckoned to us and a lot of us went over and talked to them and they helped us bury our dead. This lasted the whole morning, and I talked with several of them and I must say they seemed extraordinarily fine men. It seemed too ironical for words. There, the night before we had been having a terrific battle and the morning after, there we were, smoking their cigarettes and they smoking ours.

No one gave the order to fraternize like this. It happened spontaneously, in many different places, all along the front. It was just that the ordinary Tommy, Fritz and Jacques had had enough, and for “one brief shining moment,”<sup>2</sup> sanity prevailed over the madness. The generals didn't like it. They realized that if opposing soldiers became friendly, it would weaken their resolve to continue the struggle. Nevertheless, in some places the unofficial armistice continued into the New Year. (Certain areas of the line actually remained quiet for even longer by an unspoken, mutual consent.) But eventually the fighting started again.

It lasted for nearly four more years, until the 11th minute of the 11th hour of the 11th month of 1918. So terrible had been the carnage that politicians confidently said it had been the war to end all wars. It wasn't. Twenty-one years later, the sons of those who fought in those trenches were at it again in the trenches of World War II. It never ends.

Of course, there is another way—a way humanity longs to go but cannot.

But that path, the path of love, the path of peace, is a path humanity is incapable of walking. Even when we are weary of the fighting, hating and killing; even when we weep the tears of deepest pain and anguish for our sons, and now our daughters, who are sent away to war to return broken and traumatized, if not in body bags; even then, even then, we always do it again. In the words of the musical *Shenandoah*, set in the U.S. Civil War, “They always got a holy cause to send you off to war.”

Jesus changed all that.

Christmas is our way of celebrating the Incarnation, the “becoming human” of the Son of God for the sake of humanity. He became one of us. He took up our cause into his own being. He lived our life for us (Colossians 3:4). He died our death for us (2 Corinthians 5:14). He is our righteousness (1 Corinthians 1:30).

He draws all people, even you and me, to him (John 12:32). He has made us one with him, one with each other, and in him, one with the Father (John 14:20). In Jesus Christ, at what the Bible calls “the day of his appearing,” the day at last will have arrived when “nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore” (Isaiah 2:4).

More than a hundred years ago, at Christmastime, for one shining moment in the midst of a ghastly war, the spirit and hope of peace transformed the hearts of soldiers at the front. The day is coming when such a moment will last forever.

<sup>1</sup> Louis Orgeldinger, *History of Württembergische Reserve Infantry Regiment No. 246*, Stuttgart, 1931.

<sup>2</sup> Lerner and Lowe, *Camelot*.

*John Halford*

## USING CHRISTMAS TO TEACH CHILDREN ABOUT JESUS

Parents or guardians are usually the most important influences in children's spiritual development. This presents both a responsibility and an opportunity. Concerning the responsibility, parents have the God-given assignment to teach their children about God and his love (Deuteronomy 4:10; 6:7). Concerning the opportunity, young children tend to see their parents as "god-like" in authority and credibility.

Parents can capitalize on this window of opportunity—it may remain open for only a few years. Wise parents are therefore opportunistic—capitalizing on teachable moments in the lives of their children. One such moment comes each December as Christmas dominates community, school and family life for most people in North America.

Though we may object to the commercialism of much of these Christmas celebrations, we can take advantage of this annual opportunity to help children learn about the miracle of Jesus' birth.

For most of my adult life I avoided Christmas, believing it to be pagan both in origin and in contemporary practice. I have come to learn that my claims of pagan origin were, at best, overstated and that my former working assumption of, once pagan, always pagan, was simply false (see the article, "Paganism, Pagans and Pagan Customs"). I now realize that God is Creator and Redeemer of every day on the calendar. Although we do not know with certainty the day of Jesus' birth, the lengthy biblical accounts of his birth invite our celebration and focused worship (see "The Date of Jesus' Birth").

The birth of Jesus is perhaps the greatest of all God's miracles—for through this birth, God took on human flesh in order to become Immanuel—God with us—God come to be one of us; God come to save us. Glory to God in the highest!

This biblical message of Christmas, appropriately presented, captures the imagination and hearts of children everywhere. Think about it—God chose to enter our world in the flesh of a baby—Jesus, fully the Eternal Son of God, and yet fully a human baby!

Why God came in this way is part of the mystery of Christ. In coming as a baby, God fully identified with our lowly state—sharing fully our experience, including all of our suffering. What a powerful way to show children that God loves them—he was once a child, just like they are. The Christ child grew up, became a man and died and was resurrected so that they can be with him and share his joy forever.

Christmas offers parents and children's ministry workers a wonderful opportunity to share Jesus. This can be done by enacting the stories of Jesus' birth—his nativity in a stable, the visit of the shepherds, and the eventual visit of the Magi. Many children delight to participate in these dramatic reenactments. They also make powerful outreach events.

Within the home, Christmas decorations can serve as teachable moments for children. An evergreen Christmas tree can be a captivating illustration that Jesus is eternal life. Lights on the tree illustrate that Jesus is the light of the world. The exchange of presents can be used to tell children about God's greatest gift—his Son who came wrapped in swaddling clothes. A manger scene on the mantle can be used to illustrate the entire nativity story.

My encouragement to parents and congregations is this: use Christmas for the powerful teachable moment that it can be. Teach about Jesus—and in particular, the miracle of Jesus' birth. Don't miss out on this great opportunity.

To help you capitalize on the opportunity of Christmas, here are some ideas adapted from "Help Your Child Discover the Real Christmas," published by Gospel Light in 1992.

### **Help your child know the simple facts of Jesus' birth**

Read the story of the first Christmas to your child from Bible storybooks or from an easy-to-understand version of the Bible. Tell your child that they will hear the story again in church. Attend the Christmas service as a family, no matter how busy your schedule may be! Listen to the gospel and sing the Christmas hymns together.

Visit your Christian bookstore and choose "Baby Jesus" books or videos that will appeal to your child.

### **Help your child feel that Jesus is God's best gift of love**

Remember that much of a child's response is a reflection of the attitudes he or she sees at home. Nurture feelings of joy, love and thankfulness in your child. Avoid (as much as possible) the hectic holiday bustle that makes a young child feel left out. Concentrate instead on preparing for the celebration of Christ's birth in a spiritual way by praying together and celebrating the Advent season.

In the presence of your child, give thanks to God for Jesus.

### **Help your child express joy, excitement and feelings of love**

Include your child in making Christmas decorations, food, gifts and cards for family members and friends. Show gladness to your child as you sing the

songs of Christmas. Learn the songs your child is singing at church so you can sing them together at home, too. Emphasize Christ-centered songs.

Be sensitive to moments when it is natural to talk about God, and encourage your child to talk to God with thanks and praise.

### **Celebrate the Nativity**

Keep the meaning of Christmas clear throughout the holiday season by frequently commenting, “Christmas is a happy time because it celebrates Jesus’ birthday.” Bake and decorate a birthday cake for Jesus. Children will understand that because Christmas celebrates Jesus’ birthday there should be a cake. Sing “Happy Birthday” to Jesus and plan together what your family can give him for a gift of love.

Give Jesus a birthday present as a family, by doing something extra special for others. Make cookies (or even a whole dinner) and deliver them to elderly relatives and shut-ins. Take canned foods or personal care items to a rescue mission. Adopt a needy family through a charity.

### **Keep Santa in the proper perspective**

Explain that Santa legends are based on the real Christian leader Nicholas, who loved God and gave generously to the poor.

Avoid the “What do you want Santa to bring you for Christmas?” and “Be good for Santa!” emphases. When your child wants to talk about Santa Claus, listen attentively. Then turn the discussion to Jesus and his birth.

*Ted Johnston*

## THE SECOND-BEST CHRISTMAS GIFT

Sam wakes slowly as the sun breaks through the window. It is a Saturday morning in January. Sam smiles, remembering that he doesn't have to bundle up against the cold and go to the office today. He smells the beckoning aroma of coffee from the gourmet grind-and-brew system (a Christmas gift to themselves). He slides carefully out of bed to avoid waking Susi, his wife, and heads towards the smell, already tasting the coffee in his mind.

As he tiptoes down the hall and steps over the remote-controlled monster truck in the hallway, Sam notices that the truck is missing a wheel and the windshield is cracked, as if it had been in a pileup on I-70. Shaking his head, he remembers how much this Christmas gift had cost, and feels a twinge of frustration at how quickly it had been rendered ready for the junkyard.

After the anticipated sip of coffee and taking a moment to put on his new sheepskin slippers, Sam ventures outside into the brisk winter air, his breath immediately visible in the cold. As he navigates down the icy driveway past the shiny black SUV, he has to pause to admire the sleek lines. He still enjoys looking at it six months off the showroom floor. Life is good, he thought. Thank God for home equity loans and zero percent financing!

As he approaches the mailbox, Sam notices a red package teetering halfway out of the mailbox, the newspaper carefully balanced on top as a counterweight. He smiles, wondering who might be sending a late Christmas gift.

Looking closer, he realizes that although the package is Christmas related, it is not what he expected. It is a professionally wrapped box of chocolates sent by the credit-card company in appreciation for his being an exceptional customer. Cleverly nestled under the bright wrapping paper is his monthly statement, with the \$300 minimum monthly payment printed boldly at the top.

"Welcome to the new year," Sam mumbles to himself, feeling the fun of Christmas gift-buying drain from his body into the ice under his feet. He opens the newspaper and stares in disbelief at the headline, his mind stumbling to comprehend it. Finally, it registers. His employer will be eliminating 2,000 employees starting next week. His body seems to go numb. He glances back at the credit-card bill and suddenly wonders what the new minimum payment on his other credit cards will be. A knot of anxiety begins to form somewhere in his chest and radiate down into his stomach.

## **The real joy of Christmas**

Sam is fictional. But his story is all too familiar. He learned the hard way that Christmas isn't about credit-card debt.

Here's something to remember: The second-best gift that your family can enjoy this holiday season is a debt-free January.

The best gift, of course, is the awe-inspiring reality of God's love for us in sending Jesus (John 3:16).

The best thing about Christmas — Jesus — doesn't add a lingering burden of debt to our lives; he paid the debt for all our sin once and for all. We can celebrate and share this love-filled, debt-free life in him without racking up credit-card bills that will dog us month after frustrating month, long after the lights and tree come down.

Why not give your family a debt-free Christmas this year?

## **Practical ways to avoid Christmas debt:**

Focus on celebrating the real meaning of Christmas, not expensive gift-giving.

Budget for any gifts that you buy, and spend only what you budget. Start putting away a little money from each check starting in January, and then spend only what you have set aside.

Shop early, so you don't overspend in desperation just before Christmas. Consider shopping on the Internet, where competition tends to drive prices down and where you don't have to spend money and time driving to a busy mall.

Be creative. Remember that a gift does not have to be expensive to be meaningful. How about giving a loved one a coupon to spend meaningful time with him or her? A day at the beach, a bike ride together, a hike with dad or tea with mom can be meaningful and inexpensive.

A special photo album containing pictures of memory-filled events or a handmade gift certificate for a service to be provided to a family member (breakfast in bed, a free car wash, doing the dishes or vacuuming without being asked, free babysitting, etc.) can also be inexpensive alternatives.

*Mat Morgan*

## WHAT DOES JESUS WANT FOR CHRISTMAS?

Shortly after Jesus was born, wise men brought him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. These were quite valuable—presents that were traditionally offered to a king. Perhaps they came in handy, because Joseph and Mary, with their infant son, were shortly to flee from Herod and spend several years in Egypt as refugees.

Those days are long gone. Jesus, resurrected and glorified, is restored to his position at the Father's right hand. He wants for nothing; he is the Lord of all Creation. But he tells us that he does still have "needs." Jesus died for us, and he lives for us. In a parable in Matthew's Gospel he reminds us that he still suffers with us.

When he finally arrives, blazing in beauty and all his angels with him, the Son of Man will take his place on his glorious throne. Then all the nations will be arranged before him and he will sort the people out, much as a shepherd sorts out sheep and goats, putting sheep to his right and goats to his left.

Then the King will say to those on his right, "Enter, you who are blessed by my Father! Take what's coming to you in this kingdom. It's been ready for you since the world's foundation. And here's why:

I was hungry and you fed me  
 I was thirsty and you gave me a drink,  
 I was homeless and you gave me a room,  
 I was shivering and you gave me clothes,  
 I was sick and you stopped to visit,  
 I was in prison and you came to me.

Then those "sheep" are going to say, "Master, what are you talking about? When did we ever see you hungry and feed you, thirsty and give you a drink? And when did we ever see you sick or in prison and come to you?" Then the King will say, "I'm telling the solemn truth: Whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored, that was me—you did it to me." (Matthew 25:31-40, *The Message Bible*)

Jesus is telling us that his kingdom—which will eventually bring salvation and justice to all—is even now concerned with the poor and the underprivileged. He expects those he has called and commissioned to represent that kingdom on earth to share his concern.



## Getting on Jesus' right side

To celebrate Jesus' birthday has become a firmly entrenched Christian tradition, typically marked by the exchange of gifts with our loved ones, acquaintances and perhaps even people we simply want to impress. But suppose we let Christmas take on an even deeper meaning this year? Suppose we use the Christmas giving season to identify with what is important to Jesus—forgiveness, freedom, peace of mind, restored hope and a new way of life?

There are ways we can do this. In the next few pages, let's take a look at several ideas that might help us share our blessings with those who live in poverty and loneliness, some simple and practical opportunities to help us reach out to our fellow human beings who are frequently overlooked and ignored. Some of these people are in other parts of the world, far out of our view. Others are close to home; almost 36 million people in America live in poverty! In fact, wherever we live, there are people nearby who need help.

This Christmas, what if we were to reach out to these people in a practical way, confident in the knowledge that “whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored, that was me—you did it to me”? After all, isn't that what Jesus would want for Christmas?

## Charity gift catalogs

“I'd like to help, but where do I start?”

Why not send for a gift catalog from one of the organizations that specialize in changing lives in practical ways. Browsing through the pages of the catalogs from World Vision or Church World Service can get the imagination going.

Just \$25 provides an underprivileged American with desperately needed school supplies for a year. Or how about \$40 for a warm winter kit, which buys a warm shirt, a thick sweater, gloves, a hat, a coat and some good shoes for a poor child facing one of Eastern Europe's bitter winters?

A slightly larger investment can transform the lives of the members of a poor family. Just \$100 can provide a loan for an impoverished mother in Africa or Asia to start a small business and \$150 buys a treadle pump, saving a peasant farmer hundreds of hours of backbreaking labor.

Even something as simple as a hoe is beyond the means of some families. You might not appreciate a hoe as a Christmas present. But there are many people for whom it would make a real difference in their ability to garden and farm.

These charity gift catalogs are colorful and inspiring. They will show you what has been done and what needs to be done.

Contact info:

Church World Service  
1-800-297-1518  
[www.churchworldservice.org](http://www.churchworldservice.org)

World Vision  
1-888-511-6511  
[www.worldvisiongifts.org](http://www.worldvisiongifts.org)

## **Be an “angel” to a soldier**

By Paul Kroll

Would you like to support an American soldier overseas, some of whom have been wounded, sometimes severely? Now you can, through “Soldiers’ Angels,” whose motto is “May no soldier go unloved.”

In summer 2003, Sgt. Brandon Varn wrote home from Iraq about the plight of some of his fellow soldiers who were getting little, if any, moral support from home. His mom, Patti Patton-Bader, great-niece of Gen. George S. Patton, was greatly saddened to hear his story. She had been sending him letters each week and large packages filled with toiletries, snacks and other goodies, which he was sharing with other soldiers who received nothing.

When Brandon told his mom about the soldiers’ plight, she asked her friends and extended family if they would care to write to a soldier or two. That was just the beginning. Within a few months Patti was coordinating an Internet support community, and “Soldiers’ Angels” was born.

Through the efforts of Patti’s small army of volunteers, thousands of people began donating money and sending cards, letters and care packages to deployed and wounded military personnel in military hospitals. Merchants began donating services, money and items for mailing.

Soldier’s Angels is now a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization incorporated in Nevada, accepting tax-deductible contributions. Staffed by volunteers, Angels supports thousands of American military personnel.

Soldiers’ Angels has been featured in local and national newspapers, such as the *Wall Street Journal*, and mentioned on radio and television programs. Its operations are many and varied, including its Holidays for Heroes program, Hero Packs, First Response Backpacks, Guardian Angels for Soldier’s Pets,

Cool and Sand Scarves, Sewing for Heroes, Blankets of Hope, Saving Soles and many others.

The Saving Soles project provides extra boots to soldiers because the military issues only two pairs. Boots are easily ruined by sand, heat and rough terrain. Project Valour-IT provides voice-controlled software and voice-activated laptop computers to severely wounded soldiers at military hospitals, especially those recovering from hand or arm injuries and amputations.

Through its “Holiday for Heroes” program, Soldier’s Angels distributes tens of thousands of Christmas stockings or bags filled with various treats, such as phone cards so that troops can call home, and provides blankets for wounded soldiers with a note that says, “Dear Wounded Hero, this was made for you.” Volunteers help by packing Christmas bags, sending money to buy stocking items and sending out flyers or donating items.

You can adopt an individual soldier, sailor, airman or marine as that soldier’s “angel.” In this program, you send a specific soldier letters on a weekly basis and packages each month—including such items as snacks, games, books, CDs and DVDs, and selected toiletries. Soldiers’ Angels provides full instruction and guidance on how to adopt a serviceman or woman.

You can also donate frequent flier miles so that troops can be quickly reunited with loved ones—and Soldiers’ Angels takes care of all the coordinating details. You can even donate a car you are no longer using.

For information about the many possible ways you can help, contact Soldiers’ Angels: [www.soldiersangels.org](http://www.soldiersangels.org)

Before you make any donations, you need to visit their website for necessary information and instructions.

## **Get their goat**

By Roger Lippross

Let me introduce you to Dina, a poor widow with two small children who lives in one of the thousands of villages on the flood plains in Bangladesh. Since her husband died, she works long days in the rice fields. She could never make ends meet, and did not expect to ever get out of debt. Then something happened to change her life, the life of her children and their children to come. She was given a goat.

Just an ordinary goat. But it was the way out of poverty. The goat gives as much as four quarts of milk every day, an unimaginable luxury for Dina’s family. And as goats often do, it produced twins, increasing the little family’s wealth even more. Looking after the baby goats is teaching them about

livestock care, creating a future job opportunity for Dina's children. And Dina was able to give a goat to her poor neighbor, thus passing on the love she received.

What a difference a goat made. It opened a door called hope, and carried a powerful message of God's love for her, all because someone in a land far away cared about her plight.

You can start a chain reaction that will stretch across the world and keep on giving for many years to come. When you give a goat to a family, you don't lie awake at night thinking, "OK, I fed them today, but what will happen to them tomorrow?"

Just \$40 will purchase a goat from a breeder in Bangladesh, which will then be given to a well-deserving family.

You can send the gift that keeps on giving to The Bengali Evangelical Association, P.O. Box 776, Bryn Mawr, Ca., 92318. (They will do the rest.)

[www.bengalimission.org](http://www.bengalimission.org)

## **I was in prison and you visited me**

By Rannie Childress

Do you, or does someone you know, have a friend or loved one in prison?

According to the U.S. Department of Justice, one in every 136 U.S. residents is in prison or jail. This stunning statistic should concern us as Christians. The Bible teaches us to have compassion for prisoners (Matt. 25:36-46). That does not mean we approve of their crimes. But Jesus is in the life-changing business, and most men and women in prison need to make some serious life changes. They also need something many people in prison have never experienced—unconditional love. They need to know they have a Savior who loves them unconditionally, and who died, for them.

A display of Christian love toward a prisoner may bear fruit in a way you would never dream of! I know what I am talking about here. You see, I spent just short of 15 years in prison. If it had not been for some Christian people who befriended me, I would still be there. My sentence was 50 years!

I became a Christian while in prison, where I experienced the life-changing event of Jesus Christ entering my life. I have never been the same! I had visits from pastors and their wives, as well as from lay members, and at times I was overwhelmed with the concern and love displayed toward me. I received letters and packages (when allowed by the warden), which provided a little touch of home that I missed so much. The Christian friends that I made during those years are still my friends today.

Prison is a lonely place. The dreariness of day-to-day existence can be

tormenting. Go into your walk-in closet, dim the light and sit down. Now, stay there until meal time, then go eat something you really do not care for, go back to your closet and sit down, take a shower (with several other people present), go back to your closet and sit down. Do this for several days, weeks, months, maybe years, and you will begin to get some idea of what it is like to be incarcerated!

Prison is also frightening and at times dangerous. But then, it is not designed to be a “nice” place. However, with the help of Jesus Christ and some of his people, time spent behind bars can become a positive training ground for future life, rather than negative, wasted years.

I am now the executive director of a residential substance abuse program, and I am involved in a prison ministry. I have a Master’s Degree in Counseling and am a National Certified Addiction Counselor, Level II. Not bad for a high school drop-out who was sentenced to 50 years in prison. I share this not to boast, but to give honor and glory to the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and all that he has done in my life. I owe this new life to him. He came to me in that awful place where I thought I would end my days, and he did it through the lives of Christians and through their acts of Christian mercy and love. Our acts of Christian love toward inmates and their families can and do bear fruit!

Obviously, not everyone has the inclination or the temperament to become directly involved with a prison ministry. But what better way to show Christian love than by helping family members of inmates, especially their children and spouses?

The Christmas season can be especially lonely and stressful for inmates and their family members. First, the pain of separation is intense. Added to that is the knowledge that you cannot provide the gifts and greetings that make Christmas so memorable for children. But there are organizations that exist for the express purpose of filling that gap. Through them you can play a part in bringing some seasonal joy and warmth to a lonely prisoner and his or her family. Believe me, as one who knows, it makes a much bigger difference than you might think.

So, I challenge you to not forget the prisoners and their families this Christmas season. Remember “The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me’” (Matt. 25:40, NIV).

Rannie Childress, MS, NCAC II, is Executive Director of CED Fellowship House, in Gadsden, Alabama. If you have questions on how to

help prison inmates, he would be glad to help. e-mail: cedfsh@bellsouth.net.

This organization lists numerous groups that are dedicated to helping inmates and their families, such as Chuck Colson's Prison Fellowship and their Angel Tree program, which is dedicated to supplying Christmas presents to inmates' children.

## **Fair's fair**

By Brenda Plonis

When I was a child, a “fair trade” meant that I swapped a pony sticker for a jelly bracelet. I heard stories about “sweat shops” in other parts of the world, where children my age were forced to sit at sewing machines all day to produce the jeans I loved so much. I enjoyed sewing, so I didn't really understand why that was so bad—until I discovered how little money those children made. I was shocked to learn that I made more money with my allowance for helping out in the garden than those kids made working all day and half the night.

I have spent the last ten years living in and traveling through places like Ukraine and West Africa. I have seen the poverty, and I am acutely aware of how the products filling our shelves and closets are made.

Most of us take the plentiful supply of affordable consumer goods for granted. We are concerned about getting a “good deal,” but do we ever ask if a fair percentage of that money reaches the hands that made them? That is the goal of the Fair Trade Organization (FTO).

The FTO has made a commitment to social justice in which employees and farmers are treated and paid fairly, sustainable environmental practices are followed and long-term trade relationships are fostered. The FTO website explains that its goal is to benefit the artisans they work with, not maximize profits. By reducing the number of middlemen and minimizing overhead costs, they can return up to 40 percent of the retail price of an item to the people who make it. Working conditions—and workers—can then become safer and more dignified. Many producers who work with the FTO have committed time and money to build health clinics and support other community projects in their villages.

The FTO markets its products under the distinctive “Fair Trade” logo. These products are not always easy to find in large superstores, although I have noticed the occasional product stocked on their shelves. I have also seen Fair Trade coffee in Dunkin' Donuts and Starbucks. But just imagine the impact if we all, as we celebrate Jesus' birthday in our richly blessed nations, began to ask, “Do you have anything that is ‘Fair Trade?’”

## JESUS THE SAVIOR

Here are some businesses that distribute Fair Trade products in the USA.

Fair Indigo: Women's and men's clothing, gifts, accessories and coffee.

[www.fairindigo.com](http://www.fairindigo.com)

Starbucks: North America's largest purchaser of Fair Trade Certified coffee.

[www.starbucks.com](http://www.starbucks.com)

The Body Shop: In August 2006, The Body Shop announced a new range of preservative-free aloe skin and body products—the first in the world to feature fair trade aloe, by paying a fair price to aloe farmers in the El Progreso region of Guatemala. Other products include: toiletries, makeup and body items for men, women and children. Buy a prepackaged gift basket or create your own, or purchase a gift card.

[www.thebodyshop.com](http://www.thebodyshop.com)

Ten Thousand Villages: The largest fair trade organization in the United States. They carry unique housewares and gifts from around the world.

[www.tenthousandvillages.com](http://www.tenthousandvillages.com)

## DISCOVERING HANDEL'S MESSIAH

One of the greatest musical masterpieces of all time was written by a man on the edge of despair. In September 1741, George Frederick Handel (1685-1759) sat down to begin work on a new composition. Just 24 days later, he had finished what some consider the greatest musical work of all time.

Handel was German by birth, but had spent many years in Italy, where he had learned to write operas. By 1738 he already had about 40 to his name. He settled in London, and soon became England's most popular and successful composer. In 18th-century London, opera, and especially Italian opera, was all the rage. Fame and fortune awaited those who could satisfy the popular demand. Handel knew how to do that.

But show business, then as now, is a fickle and capricious trade. By 1740, the public's appetite for opera had begun to wane. Handel had exhausted his popularity and much of his finances by writing and staging two fiascos that played for only four nights before being laughed off the stage. With his reputation in tatters, and facing bankruptcy, his career seemed over.

At this low point in his life, a former colleague, Charles Jennens, sent him an idea for a new composition. Jennens was what today would be considered a scriptwriter, composing the libretto (i.e., the words) of operas and other long vocal works.

What Jennens was proposing was an oratorio. The laws of the time did not allow the performance of religious drama on stage. An oratorio got around this. It is, like opera, an extended musical work, usually with a religious theme. Although based on biblical texts, it is staged without scenery or costumes, and the performers do not play specific roles. In modern terms you could say it was more of a documentary than a play.

Jennens' libretto skillfully blended Old and New Testament scriptures to tell the story of Jesus Christ from the earliest prophecies of his birth to his triumphant resurrection and return. He called it *The Messiah*.

The idea appealed to Handel. Thus began the incredible three weeks of creative energy. The popular legend has it that he shut himself up in his room, forgetting about food or sleep. His servants would find him in a trance, with tears streaming down his face, totally wrapped in inspiration. When he finished the "Hallelujah Chorus," the story goes, Handel was reported to have said "I did think I did see all Heaven before me, and the Great God Himself."

Some students of Handel's life wonder if this story is somewhat romanticized. We may never know for sure. It may be that *The Messiah* was



produced more mundanely, although with an unusual display of disciplined and applied concentration.

The Messiah premiered on April 13, 1742, and was an immediate success. Handel's fame and fortune was restored. He went on to compose many more oratorios before his death in April 1759. But nothing surpassed the genius and inspiration of *The Messiah*.

When you think of The Messiah, it is probably the famous arias and choruses that come to mind. Why not treat yourself to the whole thing? It lasts about two and a half hours. That may seem rather intimidating if you are not used to listening to classical music, but it is an investment you won't regret. You can borrow the tapes or a CD from your library, or look for a performance in your local area, or on radio. They are quite popular in December.

People who have known only the highlights are often deeply moved when they first experience the entire Messiah in context. Why not discover for yourself how Handel's masterpiece can lift your spirits and fill you with hope? We have prepared a Listeners' Guide (see below) that will help you follow the performance and know where you are as the story unfolds.

Unlike a play, an oratorio is performed without scenery or costumes. The composer tells his story with a combination of songs (called arias) and choruses. There are also short recitatives between the arias and choruses to advance the story line and provide continuity.

Here are the arias, choruses and recitatives of the Messiah, in order, with the scriptural references on which they are based.

*John Halford*

## **Part one**

Theme: The prophecies of the Messiah, and the birth and ministry of Jesus.

Overture

Recitative: Comfort ye, comfort ye my people. (Isaiah 40:1-3)

Aria: Every valley shall be exalted. (verse 4)

Chorus: And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed. (verse 5)

Recitative: (Haggai 2:6-7; Malachi 3:1)

Aria: But who may abide the day of his coming? (verse 2)

Chorus: And he shall purify the sons of Levi. (verse 3)

Recitative: Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a Son. (Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:23)

Aria and Chorus: O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion. (Isaiah 40:9;

Isaiah 60:1)

Recitative: (verses 2?3)

Aria: The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light. (Isaiah 9:2)

Chorus: For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given. (verse 6)

Recitative: There were shepherds abiding in the field. (Luke 2:8)

Recitative: (verse 9)

Recitative: (verses 10-11)

Recitative: (verse 13)

Chorus: Glory to God in the highest. (verse 14)

Aria: Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion. (Zechariah 9:9-10)

Recitative: (Isaiah 35:5-6)

Aria: He shall feed his flock like a shepherd. (Isaiah 40:11; Matthew 11:28-29)

Chorus: His yoke is easy, and his burden is light. (verse 30)

## Part two

Theme: The sacrifice of the Messiah for sin, humanity's rejection of the Savior, and the ultimate defeat of all who oppose the power of God.

Chorus: Behold the Lamb of God. (John 1:29)

Aria: He was despised and rejected of men. (Isaiah 53:3; Isaiah 50:6)

Chorus: Surely he hath borne our griefs. (Isaiah 53:4-5)

Chorus: And with his stripes we are healed. (verse 5)

Chorus: All we, like sheep, have gone astray. (verse 6)

Recitative: (Psalm 22:7)

Chorus: (verse 8)

Recitative: (Psalm 69:20)

Aria: Behold, and see if there be any sorrow like unto his sorrow. (Lamentations 1:12)

Recitative: (Isaiah 53:8)

Aria: But thou didst not leave his soul in hell. (Psalm 16:10)

Chorus: Lift up your heads, O ye gates. (Psalm 24:7-10)

Recitative: (Hebrews 1:5)

Chorus: Let all the angels of God worship him. (verse 6)

Aria: Thou art gone up on high. (Psalm 68:18)

Chorus: The Lord gave the word; great was the company of the preachers. (verse 11)

Aria: How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace. (Romans 10:15)

## JESUS THE SAVIOR

Chorus: Their sound is gone out into all the lands. (Romans 10:18; Psalm 19:4)

Aria: Why do the nations so furiously rage together? (Psalm 2:1-2)

Chorus: Let us break their bonds asunder. (verse 3)

Recitative: (verse 4)

Aria: Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron. (verse 9)

Chorus: Hallelujah! (Revelation 19:6; 11:15; 19:16)

### **Part three**

Theme: Resurrection and the final defeat of death and evil.

Aria: I know that my Redeemer liveth. (Job 19:25-26; 1 Corinthians 15:20)

Chorus: (verses 21-22)

Recitative: (verses 51-52)

Aria: The trumpet shall sound. (verses 52-53)

Recitative: (verse 54)

Duet: O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? (verses 55-56)

Chorus: Thanks be to God. (verse 57)

Aria: If God be for us, who can be against us? (Romans 8:31, 33-34)

Chorus: Worthy is the Lamb. (Revelation 5:12-13)

## HARK! THE HERALD ANGELS SING

In 1739, Charles Wesley wrote the lyrics to a song he called, “Hark How All the Welkin Ring Glory to the King of Kings.” A century later, Felix Mendelssohn wrote the second chorus of a cantata commemorating John Gutenberg’s invention of printing.

Wesley intended his lyrics for slow, solemn music. Mendelssohn intended his music for non-religious, secular use. But neither genius nor genre could prevent the work of these two richly talented men from coming together to herald the good news!

In 1855, another musician, William Cummings, brought the work of Wesley and Mendelssohn together in spite of what they had wanted. He took Wesley’s words and Mendelssohn’s tune and combined them as “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing.”

Isn’t that the Christmas story in a nutshell? God in Christ is always doing something that we could never imagine! Sometimes, even our “No way!” can become “Yes, his way” in Christ.

We appreciate you, Mr. Wesley, Herr Mendelsohn and Billy Cummings, for the beauty of the gospel set to music! But we thank the Father most of all for revealing to us his Son! Let the power and message of the music ring. *“Pleased as man with men to dwell, Jesus, our Emmanuel!”*

*Steve Schantz*

## OH COME, ALL YE WASTEFUL

No kidding—I really did see “Oh Come, All Ye Wasteful” on a store window! The message is no longer subtle or unstated—’tis the season to be greedy. Retailers begin their advertising barrage earlier every year, inundating us with catalogs, commercials and email offers. More and more people buy gifts for themselves while shopping for others. All that matters, it seems, is that we buy as much as possible, whether we need it or not. I want to shut it all out, but it’s everywhere. I can’t escape.

No one likes the commercialism of Christmas, but what can we do? Is the craziness unavoidable—the frenzied shopping, decorating, parties, cooking, company and all the stress?

One of my favorite Christmas hymns is “It Came Upon a Midnight Clear.” I love the line “the world in solemn stillness lay, to hear the angels sing.” The phrase “solemn stillness” makes me think of a universe-wide pause in all activity, everyone and everything holding their breath, as Jesus is born and the angels announce his birth with their amazing song.

Although I shop, cook and have company during the Christmas month, a big part of my celebration is stillness. I love to sit and look at my nativity set while listening to the great Christmas hymns. I enjoy the silent glow of lights from my tree and fireplace mantle. As I take time for solemn stillness and holy silence, I feel a sense of expectation, of waiting with the whole creation for the coming of the Messiah.

The world waited for thousands of years for the One who would change the course of human history and usher in new covenant grace. It doesn’t seem much of a stretch to think a hush came over the angelic world as that moment drew near. It was a birth like no other, and nothing has been the same since.

The world is full of noise and clamor. It seems to me our Christmas celebrations would be much more meaningful if we celebrated with less noise and activity, rather than trying to cram in more. Get the shopping done early, decorate only a little, scale down the activities and spend the rest of your time in solemn stillness. Then, when it’s over, instead of being exhausted, you’ll start the new year with a sense of wonder at what happened two thousand years ago.

The Christmas message isn’t one of stress, exhaustion and frenzied activity. It’s a message of expectation and change, of an event so momentous the whole universe might indeed have held its breath as the Christ child made his appearance.

The last verse of the original lyrics of the hymn also looks forward to a future time: “When peace shall over all the earth Its ancient splendors fling,  
And the whole world give back the song Which now the angels sing.”

As we drink in the marvel of the Incarnation, let’s take time for some solemn stillness and then give back the angels’ song in joyous celebration.

*Tammy Tkach*

## HOLIDAYGREETINGS.COM

I don't do much for the holidays. I string up a few lights, more for a coziness factor in the cold than anything else. And I have a single star I put in my window every year.

I also bake a few batches of gingerbread cookies and give some to the neighbors and to my high-school girlfriends at our annual holiday breakfast. My husband, who is a sailor, is gone every other Christmas. Last year, I spent the day talking with him on Skype, along with friends in Germany and Egypt, and eating the rest of those gingerbread cookies. I probably took a nap in between. All in all, I'm pretty low key as far as any holiday goes. Except for one thing.

Most of my friends tell me that mailing Christmas cards is a chore, and expensive, and something they put off until the last minute. But I love it.

I remember, as a child, getting pen pal letters from far away. Some pen pals I had met, through church or summer camp, but others I wrote to for school projects or in response to their ads in magazines asking for pen pals. I had my own little desk where I wrote about my life as a 10-year-old. Once I mailed the letters, I eagerly awaited replies.

How thrilling to know that somewhere on the planet, someone else eagerly waited to hear news from me. Me!

Checking the mail was (and admittedly, it still is) one of my favorite parts of the day. Sometimes there was a photo of a pen pal in one of the letters, or even some kind of trinket. In the days before the Internet made it so easy to share our every obscure thought and fuzzy photo, we kids measured our "friend lists" by the stack of wallet-sized pics we had traded with one another.

From our house to the mailbox was a good walk, and some days it proved fruitless except for the exercise. Sometimes my mom would get the mail and come back and joke that nobody loved us because there were only bills in the mail.

Even now, my husband says the same thing with a laugh when there is nothing good in the mail. With a mailbox full of bills, rejection letters from various publishers, and flyers with special offers that aren't so special after they've sent the fifth one, good news is hard to come by.

There is something so refreshing about opening an envelope with a foreign postmark and my name handwritten on it, and reading holiday cheer—or indeed anytime-of-year-cheer—from friends far away.

Proverbs 25:25 says, "Like cold water to a weary soul is good news from

a distant land.” *The Message* says it like this: “Like a cool drink of water when you’re worn out and weary is a letter from a long-lost friend.”

I don’t know about you, but I know a lot of worn out and thirsty people out there. Sure, the cost of stamps has gone up. And most greeting card companies charge a small fortune to say something that you can just as easily email or post to 400 plus friends at the same time on Facebook. But really, how special does it make you feel when you get a mass message from someone that essentially says, “you’re a dear friend ... but you are not worth the price of a postage stamp?”

I have been guilty, more than once, of crossing someone’s name off of my Christmas card list because they haven’t reciprocated for a few years. I might have to rethink that policy, though. Maybe they’re the very people who need to hear some good news—even if it’s simply news that someone somewhere is actually thinking of them.

Perhaps it’s time to add a few people to the list instead of crossing some off. Won’t you join me? And while we’re at it, let’s not stop at just at the holidays. We can send a note to our friend’s child at summer camp. We can mail a letter to a school friend we haven’t seen in 20 years. We can put a family photo in a real card for the widow at church who always gives us a hug and says we remind her of her granddaughter on the other side of the country. It might be exactly what they’ve been waiting for in their own mailbox.

May we all receive a little good news from both far and near this holiday season!

*Brenda Steffen*



## THE TREE

The evergreen tree symbolizes the faithfulness of God,  
remaining forever the same,  
even during the darkness and cold of winter.

The lights or candles on the tree symbolize our Savior Jesus Christ,  
whose life was the Light of all people,  
the Light that shines in the darkness  
and which enlightens everyone.

Some people put red bows on the tree,  
symbolizing the shed blood of our Savior,  
by which our sins are forgiven.

Ornaments symbolize fruit,  
which in turn symbolizes the gracious gifts and provision  
of God for his people.

Just as the Cross of Christ  
was a tree stripped of its greenery and dignity  
and made into a dead post,  
so our sin has stripped us of beauty and dignity  
and resulted in death.

Through the death of the Son of God on the dead tree,  
and by his resurrection and life,  
salvation and true life have come to the whole creation,  
especially to us,  
whose dignity and value and beauty has been restored  
through faith in him.

The splendor of the Christmas tree,  
decorated with light and color and beauty,  
symbolizes our restored and reconciled state by the grace of God.

Our Father in heaven and our Lord Jesus Christ love us,  
and have made us beautiful

by the good things they have done for us.

The gifts under the tree  
symbolize the dignity and value God has given to human beings  
through Jesus' saving work.

We give gifts to one another on this day for one reason only:  
God sent his Son into the world to save us  
and make us his children,  
and has placed his love into us  
that we might love one another, even as he loves us.

That's what Christmas is about — the love of God.  
And that's the story the Christmas tree tells us during this Christmas  
season.

*J. Michael Feazell*

## THE MESSAGE OF JESUS: A BIBLE STUDY

This study will be more meaningful if you look up the Scriptures and take time to think about it, rather than reading through in a hurry.

1. When Jesus began his ministry, what did he preach? Mark 1:14-15. When he sent his disciples out, what did he tell them to preach? Matthew 10:7; Luke 10:9.

Comment: Some ancient Greek manuscripts of Mark 1:14-15 say that Jesus preached the kingdom of God; others say that he preached the gospel of God. It is not necessary here to discuss which manuscripts are better, but we will discuss the version that is familiar to most of us—Jesus preached, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand” (NIV 1984)

Jesus was announcing the kingdom—not just the king—as being near. He was talking about nearness in terms of *time*, not geography. “The time is fulfilled....” The time had come for God’s kingdom to be established.

Likewise, when the disciples preached that the kingdom was near, they were not talking about the king, and they were not talking about a nearby territory. They were announcing that God’s kingdom would soon be there. This was good news!

2. Was Jesus a king? John 18:37. Was he like the kings of this world? Were his disciples supposed to act the way rulers of this world act? Matthew 20:25-28. May we assume that God’s kingdom is like the kingdoms of this world?

Comment: When we are studying something as important as the central message of Jesus Christ, it is not safe to make assumptions. God’s thoughts are not like our thoughts, and his ways are not like ours. We need to look to Scripture to see what Jesus revealed about the kingdom.

The Jews had various assumptions about what the Messiah would do, but Jesus did not act the way they wanted him to. Their assumptions about the king were wrong, and their assumptions about the kingdom were wrong, too. Just as their ancestors had wanted a king like the nations around them (1 Samuel 8:5), the first-century Jews also wanted a kingdom much like the kingdoms of this world—with a military leader who enforced laws in a particular territory. The Jews wanted the Messiah to bring a kingdom like that, but Jesus brought something different. Let’s study a few more verses to learn about the kingdom Jesus preached.

3. Did Jesus say that the kingdom had already come upon the first-century Jews? Matthew 12:28. Were people already entering the kingdom of God? Luke 16:16; Matthew 21:31. How were they entering? Matthew 21:31-32. Is it possible to enter something that does not exist?

Comment: When Jesus preached the kingdom of God, he told people to believe the message and repent (Mark 1:15). He criticized those who did not believe and repent, but praised the people who did believe and repent, and said that they were entering the kingdom.

Jesus was talking about a spiritual move, not a geographic move. People enter God's kingdom by accepting his rule, not by moving to a new territory. They enter God's kingdom by repentance and faith—they accept his rule in their lives. They accept Jesus as their King, and he reigns over them. They become his subjects, doing his will. Paul said that Christians have already entered the kingdom (Colossians 1:13).

Jesus, the King, has already been crowned with power and authority over all things (Matthew 28:18). He is already King. However, he does not force others to do his will, the way the kings of this world do. Rather, he reigns over those who willingly accept him as their King.

4. Did Jesus also speak of the kingdom of God as a future reality? Matthew 8:11; 13:43; Luke 13:28. Can something that exists right now expand and also exist in the future?

Comment: Jesus spoke of the kingdom as both a present-tense reality and a future glory. It exists now as a spiritual realm—in the world, but not part of the world—and it will later expand with power and glory when Jesus returns. The kingdom will then come in great power. God's power is already here, but it is veiled—present but usually not visible.

The kingdom is both present and future, already in existence but not yet visible in its fullness. The “already/not yet” nature of God's kingdom is similar to other spiritual realities:

- We are already saved, but the fullness of our salvation is yet future (Ephesians 2:5; 1 Peter 1:5).
- We have already been given eternal life, but its fullness will be given after we die (John 3:35; Mark 10:30).
- We will be like Christ, yet Christ is already being formed in us (Philippians 3:21; 2 Corinthians 3:18).
- We will live with God forever, but he already lives within us (1

Thessalonians 4:17; 1 John 4:13).

The Bible speaks of these spiritual truths not only as future gifts, but also as blessings we already enjoy in part.

In a similar way, Jesus spoke of the kingdom both as something that exists right now and something that will exist in a greater way when he returns. When he and his disciples announced that the kingdom was near, they meant the spiritual, invisible phase of the kingdom. For those who thought the kingdom would soon appear with power and glory, he told a parable to explain that there would be a delay (Luke 19:11-27)—but the parable also explains that some of the work of the kingdom must be done even before the kingdom appears in its fullness. Now is the time we are to believe, repent, be saved and enter the kingdom.

5. What did Jesus say would be preached throughout the world? Matthew 24:14. What did he commission his disciples to preach? Matthew 28:19-20; Mark 16:15-16; Luke 24:47. Should we conclude that preaching the kingdom is practically synonymous with preaching faith, repentance, forgiveness and making disciples?

Comment: According to Jesus, our goal when preaching is to make disciples, and we do that by preaching repentance and faith, baptizing those who believe and teaching them to obey what Jesus taught. For those who *reject* Jesus as King, the kingdom is a message of judgment. But for those who accept him, it is wonderfully good news—the good news is that we can enter the kingdom now!

Since the good news of the kingdom is experienced only through faith, repentance and forgiveness, these aspects of salvation must be a prominent part of the gospel message. If people have faith in Jesus Christ and accept him as Lord, they enter his kingdom—even if they have never heard the word “kingdom.” It is their *relationship* to Jesus Christ that is crucial; the precise terminology is not nearly as important.

## **Preaching about what?**

What are Jesus’ disciples supposed to preach about? The answer can be seen by looking at scriptures that use the Greek words for “preach”:

- Matthew 3:1; 4:17, 23; 9:35; 10:7; 24:14; 26:1
- Mark 1:4, 7, 14; 5:20; 6:12; 13:10; 14:9; 16:15
- Luke 3:3; 4:18-19, 43; 8:1, 39; 9:2; 16:16; 24:47
- Acts 5:42; 8:5, 12, 35; 9:20; 10:36, 42; 11:20; 17:18; 19:13; 20:25; 28:31

- Romans 10:8, 14
- 1 Corinthians 1:23; 2:2; 15:11-12
- 2 Corinthians 1:19; 4:5; 11:4
- Galatians 1:16, 23; 2:2
- Ephesians 2:17; 3:8
- Philippians 1:15
- Colossians 1:22-23
- 1 Thessalonians 2:9
- 1 Timothy 3:16
- 2 Timothy 4:2

The gospel can be described in many ways — a message about the kingdom, about Jesus Christ, forgiveness, reconciliation, salvation or peace. The most common biblical description is “the gospel of Jesus Christ.”

### **“The Gospel of ... “**

Scripture describes the gospel in numerous ways. Here’s how the word is most often used:

- good news of Jesus Christ — 15 times
- good news of God - 9 times
- good news of the kingdom - 7 times
- my gospel, our gospel - 6 times
- the gospel of peace - 2 times
- good news of God’s grace - 1 time
- good news of the glory of Christ - 1 time
- gospel of your salvation - 1 time

### **Preaching in the book of Acts**

What did the disciples preach about? Here are the verses in Acts that use the words for “preach”:

- 4:2 — proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead
- 5:42 — proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah
- 8:4 — proclaiming the word
- 8:5 — proclaimed the Messiah
- 8:12 — proclaiming the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ
- 8:25, 40 — proclaiming the good news
- 8:35 — proclaimed the good news about Jesus
- 10:36 — preaching peace by Jesus Christ
- 11:20 — proclaiming the Lord Jesus

## JESUS THE SAVIOR

- 13:5 — proclaimed the word of God
- 13:32-33 — bringing the good news that God fulfilled the promise by raising Jesus
- 13:38 — proclaiming forgiveness of sins through Jesus
- 14:7, 21; 16:10 — proclaiming the good news
- 14:15 — bringing good news, that you should turn to God
- 15:7 — the message of the good news
- 15:35 — proclaimed the word of the Lord
- 17:3 — proclaiming the Messiah, Jesus
- 17:18 — telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection
- 17:23 — proclaim what you worship as unknown
- 20:24 — testify to the good news of God's grace
- 20:27 — declaring the whole purpose of God
- 26:23 — proclaiming light to Jews and Gentiles

*Michael Morrison*

## PLAYING JESUS— A DISCUSSION WITH BRUCE MARCHIANO

In his Epistle to the Romans, Paul reminds us to “clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 13:1). The Greek word is *enduo*, meaning “to put on as a garment,” or as an actor will put on a costume. Few people have had the opportunity to do this as literally as Bruce Marchiano, who played the lead role in a dramatization of the Gospel of Matthew.

Question: Playing the role of Jesus in Matthew had a major impact on you. Why?

Bruce Marchiano: I wrote a whole book to answer that question. I think it boils down to that scripture, “When you seek me with all your heart I will be found” (Jeremiah 29:13-14). That’s what that acting experience was for me. It put me in a position where I had to seek him with all my heart. My mind exploded with the Wow of him! And within that glimpse of understanding, all my priorities were rewritten, all my motivational foundations were rewritten, everything I thought was important was rewritten. Ah, but even beyond that, my sensitivities were rewritten.

What an actor does is to try to step into another person’s heart. To catch a tiny, tiny, billionth of a billionth of a glimpse of Jesus’ heart was to rewrite my own heart, if I can put it that way. The depth of his compassion, the depth of his heartbreak over human pain, over the lostness of lost people, over people coming short of his plan and purpose for their lives.

There are times to this day when sitting at a red light I’ll just break down in tears watching the people walking the sidewalk, as I think about their lostness, having caught a glimpse of Jesus’ reaction to these things that we just call normal life. To have those little seeds planted in my own life was to rewrite my entire life.

Q: Were you a Christian before you starred in this film?

BM: I grew up very “churched.” I went to Catholic schools until I graduated from high school. I had a deep understanding in terms of the awareness that there is a God, but I had no understanding of a relationship with God. People around me would get born again and they would start to share Jesus with me. I thought they were nuts. My whole life was about my acting career. Then, to make a long story short, the rug was pulled out from under it.

And I found that everything I had built my life on was “weak and shifting



sand.” All I can say is, I just turned to Jesus. I guess that all those seeds from those people who had shared Jesus with me over the years took root somewhere deep inside, because I knew in that moment I needed Jesus. I remember getting down on my knees and looking up saying, “Jesus, you’ve got to save me. You’ve got to save me.” And he began to reveal himself in my life, and there was no looking back.

Q: How did you come to take on the role of playing Jesus in Matthew?

BM: I found out about the opportunity through the leader of a missionary team. I had gone on this mission trip. I didn’t really want to, but I felt the Lord really wanted me to go. And so I went, kind of unwillingly. Little did I know that it would change the rest of my life.

The guy who led that missions team told me about the opportunity, and I made contact with the director. The director is a man who really seeks God, and he felt very strongly that the Lord wanted a born-again Christian to play Jesus. He also wanted someone who was not the traditional iconic figure—tall, Anglo-Saxon—but someone more authentic.

He sent me an audition piece for the scene where Jesus speaks very harshly to the Pharisees. As I was preparing for the audition, I thought, you know, it wasn’t that he didn’t like these guys. He loved them. He wasn’t so much being harsh as desperately and passionately reaching out to help them.

I explained that to the director, knowing full well that it was a great risk, because I had never seen it done that way before. Little did I know that six months earlier, when the director began working with the script, he felt the exact same thing, that this scene needs to be done in love.

Q: It is quite obvious in Matthew that you portray Jesus as the Lord of love and joy—quite different from the way he is usually portrayed.

BM: Well, the joy was a surprise to me. In my church background, joy was not part of the program. You could use the word in a song, but you’d better not actually show it. The director pointed me to Hebrews 1:9 where it says of Jesus, “Therefore God, your God has anointed you with the oil of joy above your brethren.”

I went down to a local Christian bookstore to try to find books about the person of Jesus. I couldn’t find any—not about Jesus the man. To make a long story short, I eventually found this little Christian bookstore, and there, sitting in the commentary section was a small book titled, *Jesus, Man of Joy*. It was misplaced, and I knew that God was trying to say something to me. So that’s where the joy came from, and that built and built. It just opened up—joy. Joy, that’s what the kingdom of God is. It’s joy.

At the end of the day all I really did was what Jesus said. He says, “I have

loved you with an everlasting love.” So as an actor I did that. Jesus didn’t talk about loving people, he actually did it. He cried tears over their pain. Instead of just talking about compassion, he actually showed it.

There is never a moment when he doesn’t love you. So everything I did, even the harshest rebuke, had to be founded on love, in the same way that you would tell your kid not to touch the stove. You would say it harshly, but it’s founded in love. If you didn’t love your kid, you wouldn’t care if he touched the stove. And that’s all I was trying to do. I was trying to keep them from touching the stove.

That became the challenge. Even in a line like “you hypocrites” or “you of little faith,” the audience had to see that love. It became quite a transforming factor for me. I would walk away from those scenes and realize, wow, he loves me!

I remember we did one scene where Jesus tells the parable of the sheep and the goats. On the first take I talked about how he will say to the goats, “Away from me, I never knew you.” Spontaneously I just started to weep and weep and weep. Unfortunately that’s not the tape that got on screen. Believe it or not, in the middle of the shot an airplane went overhead and ruined the tape. But the outtake of that, to see “Jesus” weeping in the same sentence that he is talking about people who are going to be condemned, that’s a revelation.

When we finished that shot, there were 300 people standing around. You could hear a pin drop. Nobody ever imagined it like that. It was just a revelatory moment. You’ve got to understand that what we were doing was the Word of God, and that it’s living and active, and sharper than any two-edged sword.

Time after time, I walked away learning something about Jesus’ heart. Every day was just a lifetime of adventures. There wasn’t one moment out there where it was just a job or drudgery.

Q: It seems that making Matthew has changed the direction of your life.

BM: Yes, the whole experience re-wrote my priorities, re-wrote what I thought was important in life, and re-wrote my professional direction. It’s been tough to give up lifelong dreams, but at the end of the day those lifelong dreams can’t begin to satisfy.

I just began to pray, “Lord, what is my life all about? What’s the purpose for which I was born?” It’s probably a guy thing, but I was thinking vocationally. I was thinking God was going to say, “You’re a filmmaker,” and that meant I wouldn’t write books or speak anymore. Or, “You’re a speaker.” But that’s not what the Lord said to me.

In the way he deals with me it's as if he said to me, "You were born for the purpose of revealing my Son to my people. So I want you to take every opportunity, whether it is a book, or an interview like this, speaking in front of people, no matter what setting I put you in, reveal my Son, reveal my Son."

Suddenly my life became clear. And I think the Lord would say to every one of us who claims to be a child of God, "You're born for the purpose of revealing my Son to my people."

Q: Do you have any exhortation and encouragement about how to share this with others?

BM: If I have to point to five highlights of my ministry life, one of them is my relationship with this denomination. I remember, ten or so years ago, as things were changing. I don't know the whole history—it doesn't matter—all I know is that I saw people in love with Jesus and bouncing off the walls with a fresh awareness of grace.

Back in those days I'll never forget thinking, "Wow—these people, all they know is grace and the love of Jesus." That's all there is to know, in a sense. And the celebration of freedom, because he's all about freedom and liberating people from sin, complication and self-reliance.

It was so exciting. I have said many, many, times that the transformation of your fellowship could be the greatest work of the Holy Spirit in the last 25 years.

Don't move from that place. Don't ever become a sophisticated denomination full of things. Just be a bunch of little kids in love with Jesus and stay there. Stay there. That's where the rest of us need to catch up to.

## JESUS AND WOMEN

In the first-century world, the way Jesus treated women was considered revolutionary.

When she became a teenager, her father made the arrangements. This was the custom of the times. Mary would be married to a carpenter, Joseph, the son of Heli. From birth, Mary's role in life was set, for she was born female to a Jewish family. Yet her role in history was to be extraordinary. God chose her to be the mother of Jesus.

### **Woman of courage**

When the angel Gabriel came to Mary, she was initially troubled by what the angel's appearance might mean. The angel reassured her, explaining that she was the one chosen to be the mother of Jesus.

“How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?”

The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God.”

“I am the Lord's servant,” Mary answered. “May it be to me as you have said.” Then the angel left her. (Luke 1:34-38)

Though she knew she was facing shame and humiliation, Mary, in faith, willingly submitted herself to God's will. She understood that it was possible that Joseph would not marry her. She would be considered damaged goods. Mary acted in great courage and faith.

Though God protected her by showing Joseph in a dream that he should accept her in marriage in spite of her being pregnant, the story of her pregnancy was out. Nevertheless, Joseph faithfully married an already pregnant Mary. A legacy of raised-eyebrow, finger-pointing gossip would follow them and Jesus throughout their lives.

Jesus Christ honored his mother throughout his life and at his crucifixion. Mary was at the foot of the cross. When Jesus saw her there, no doubt in shock at what she was witnessing, he compassionately let her and John know how she would be cared for after his death and after his resurrection:

When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother. “Dear woman, here is your

son,” and to the disciple, “Here is your mother.” From that time on, this disciple took her into his home. (John 19:26-27)

Jesus’ honor and respect was not reserved simply for his mother. It was extended to all women—an attitude largely unexpected and unknown in his culture and time. Jesus, unlike the men of his generation and culture, taught that women were equal to men in the sight of God. Women could receive God’s forgiveness and grace. Women, as well as men, could be among Christ’s personal followers. Women could be full participants in the kingdom of God. Jesus offered full discipleship to women.

These were revolutionary ideas. Many of his contemporaries, including his disciples, were shocked. Women were overjoyed and grateful, and many dedicated their lives to his service. Let’s take a look, from the historical narratives in Scripture, at a few of these women of faith and how Jesus dealt with them.

### **Mary of Magdala**

In the early days of Jesus’ ministry, one of the most unusual examples is the devoted following of Mary Magdalene. Among the group of women who traveled with Jesus and his 12 disciples was Mary of Magdala (Luke 8:2). Mary is almost always mentioned first in a list of the female disciples of Jesus Christ. She may have been one of the leaders of that group of women who followed Jesus from the outset of his ministry in Galilee to his death and afterward.

The risen Jesus appeared to her first. It’s ironic that in a time when women could not be legal witnesses, Jesus chose women as the first witnesses of his resurrection. As British writer Dorothy L. Sayers said:

Perhaps it is no wonder that the women were first at the Cradle and last at the Cross. They had never known a man like this Man—there never has been such another. A prophet and teacher who never nagged at them, never flattered or coaxed or patronised: who never made arch jokes about them...who rebuked without querulousness and praised without condescension: who took their questions and arguments seriously. (*Are Women Human?*, page 47)

### **Mary and Martha**

Jesus taught that women were just as responsible for growing in grace and knowledge as men when it came to being one of his followers. This is clearly expressed in Luke’s account of Christ’s visit to the home of Martha and Mary, who lived in Bethany, a village about two miles from Jerusalem. Martha had

invited Jesus and his disciples to her home for a meal. But while Martha was busily preparing to serve her guests, her sister, Mary, was listening to Jesus along with the rest of his disciples.

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!" (Luke 10:38-40)

Martha seems to have been the older sister and head of her own house. Jesus didn't chastise Martha for being busy serving, but he told her that her sister, Mary, had her priorities straight. "Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her" (verses 41-42).

Jesus expected women as well as men to learn from him. Jesus did not feel that women's work—or men's work, for that matter—wasn't important. He was not saying it is wrong to be diligent and careful about our responsibilities. Christ was saying we should get our priorities straight. Women were called to be disciples of Jesus, just as men were, and women were expected to fulfill their spiritual responsibilities, just as men were.

## **A daughter of Abraham**

Another fascinating account is Luke's story of the healing of a disabled woman—on the Sabbath day, in the synagogue, right in front of the synagogue ruler. The healing not only shows Christ personally contrasting his new way of life with the old legalistic, pharisaical restrictions, but it also shows his deep regard for women.

On a Sabbath Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues, and a woman was there who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all. When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said to her, "Woman, you are set free from your infirmity." Then he put his hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and praised God. (Luke 13:10-13)

The ruler of the synagogue protested. He indignantly told the people there were six other days they could be healed. This was his means of chastising Christ for what the religious ruler considered as breaking the Sabbath. Was

Christ intimidated by these words? Not in the least.

You hypocrites! Doesn't each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water? Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her? (verses 15-16)

Jesus Christ not only faced the wrath of the Jewish leaders by healing this woman on the Sabbath, he showed his regard for her by calling her a "daughter of Abraham." "The idea of being a *son* of Abraham was common enough. Jesus used that term in reference to Zacchaeus a few chapters later in Luke. But Jesus with this one modification of the phrase—from 'son' to 'daughter'—raises this formerly pitiful woman to a new status," say Ruth A. Tucker and Walter Liefeld (*Daughters of the Church*, page 31).

Before his most hostile critics, Jesus publicly showed his concern and high regard for this woman, someone whom others had probably seen for years as she struggled in her affliction to come to the synagogue to worship God. Someone whom they may well have shunned because she was a woman and because she was disabled.

### **Female followers**

The Bible doesn't specify how many women traveled with Jesus and his male disciples, but Luke records the names of a prominent few, and mentions there were "many others."

After this, Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; Joanna the wife of Cuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means. (Luke 8:1-3)

Think about these remarkable words. Here were women not only associating with Jesus Christ and his male disciples, but traveling along with them. At least some of these women—possibly widows—had control of their own finances. It was out of their generosity that Jesus and his disciples were at least partially supported.

Although Christ worked with the cultural traditions of the first century, he ignored the limitations that had been placed on women by their culture.

Women were free to follow him and to take part in his ministry to the world.

## **All are one in Christ**

In Christ we are all children of God. As the apostle Paul wrote: “You are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:26-28).

Paul’s significant words, especially where they concern women, are bold even now, and were astonishing in the time he wrote them. This was another of Paul’s transitional statements showing that a new covenant relationship through Christ had begun.

Now we have a new life in Christ. All Christians have a new relationship with God. Through Christ, we—both male and female—have become God’s own children and one in Jesus Christ. Christ is calling all—men and women—to repentance and a new way of life. Jesus showed through personal example that it’s time to put aside the old biases, the feelings of superiority over others, the feelings of resentment and anger, and to walk in newness of life with him and through him.

Many of you are striving to be women of faith. Many of you, like the bent-over woman healed by Christ in the synagogue, have to overlook some discrimination as you faithfully worship God and serve him. Don’t get discouraged and give up. Jesus Christ calls you equal in every way in his sight, and heirs to his promises. As you humbly follow him, Christ will use you in his service.

For those of you who haven’t taken that step, just as he freed that poor woman from Satan’s debilitating physical affliction on her, Christ promises to free you, and all his “daughters of Abraham” who repent and follow him. Jesus Christ wants you in his kingdom.

*Sheila Graham*

## **“A Heritage of Reaching Out”**

At the time of this interview, historian Ruth A. Tucker was a visiting professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. She has also taught at Calvin College and Fuller Theological Seminary. She holds a doctorate in history from Northern Illinois University and is a popular speaker at seminars and Christian conferences. Her books include *Daughters of the Church* (with Walter Liefeld) and *Guardians of the Great Commission*.



Question: You have said in several of your books that the Bible shows that Jesus Christ had an unusual sensitivity toward women.

Ruth Tucker: Jesus had a remarkable perspective and attitude toward women. He was the Messiah, and he had come to bring the kingdom of God. He had come to live and to die and send a message to the whole world. He needed to mobilize all of those who would believe, all of his followers, including women as well as men.

We read about the 12 men who followed Jesus, but there were women in his company as well. Mary Magdalene and the other Marys followed him and carried the message of who Jesus was. What these women did goes along well with Jesus Christ's great commission that he gave before he died.

The men and women who followed Jesus had that great commission. It was not a commission that should cause people to rival each other in leadership or prestige or position and power, but rather a commission that calls for servitude.

The great commission is radical. It demands sacrifices and self-denial and calls for servanthood. Unfortunately in the church today, often following the management model in the world, we look for prestige and power, even as followers of Jesus. We may not intend that, but often that happens.

Q. Can any woman today— whether she is a young mother with several children, or perhaps a mother whose children have grown up and left home—serve Christ?

A. Absolutely. Any woman, and any man, should reach out to follow Jesus. We have such an incredible heritage of women reaching out in their communities. Often, when they have little children, they will involve the children in their ministry. They will get their adolescents, teenagers, all involved in the ministry as well. This can be done in the family setting. It can be done in groups.

We have women reaching out, often in social service ministries, helping others, meeting the needs of others in the community, bringing the message of the risen Savior at the same time.

Q. As you know, Paul refers to the older women teaching the younger women. How do you feel older women can serve the younger women in the church?

A. Older, more mature women in the faith can teach younger women and less spiritually mature women in the church. This ministry should also include women who may not be closely associated with the church, but in the community, who may have an interest in knowing more of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Women working together to serve in the community have been a major factor in church growth through the generations. When women reach out to other women, to other families, they help and encourage them and also bring the gospel message at the same time.

Women, young and old, ought to see themselves as they read the pages of the New Testament, that they are there, and that they have been there through the generations, following the command of the great commission.

Often, women are the ones who carry on the faith. That may be partly because men have been secularized more than women. Men are out in the marketplace, out in the workplace and in the world. They are often challenged in their faith more than women. Women have traditionally been in the home. They are the ones rearing the children. They are the ones passing along the faith.

Women have to see themselves from New Testament times on through history in this role. God has especially used women, given them a gift of faith from the very women at the cross, for proclaiming the resurrection down through the centuries. We must continue that in our neighborhoods, not just in our homes, but in our communities.

Today, women are going out in the workplace; more and more. I am concerned that passing on the faith in the family and in the neighborhood may be getting left behind. As women are getting more secularized and involved in their own jobs and positions, they find their time more and more limited.

As women, we need to hang on to our heritage, and encourage men also to be involved in bringing the gospel into the home and into the community, carrying on that great commission, to preach, teach, disciple and baptize.

Q. Women are busy, but economic realities here and around the world have forced many women out of the home into the labor force. How can these women find time to serve?

A. I think they need to serve the Lord wherever they are. I would challenge working women that the workplace is a wonderful place to carry out the great commission. When Jesus said to go out to all the world, the workplace is one of those places to reach out and share the faith, even as Mary Magdalene did, telling others about the risen Savior whom she had encountered.

## JESUS: THE UNEXPECTED MESSIAH

Why didn't Jesus go down in history as a failure?

In fact, why did he go down in history at all?

He lived on earth at a time when his people were expecting a Messiah to deliver them from the Roman occupation. It seems there were many zealots and fanatics eager to appoint themselves to that position. Some even gained a following, but their efforts came to nothing. Most died unknown, and even those we know about are just footnotes in history. However, Jesus is not a footnote in history. He remains considered one of the most influential, if not the most influential, human being who has ever lived.

When he was crucified 2,000 years ago, his followers were left in confusion. Most were expecting the Messiah to be a royal military leader who would overthrow the enemies of Israel and be honored by the Jewish religious leaders as king. This would be the proof of his Messiahship and this is what they expected Jesus would do.

Just a few days earlier, he had entered Jerusalem to the acclaim of the crowds. At last, it seemed, he was going to make his move and lead them in a war of liberation against the Romans. Then he would establish his kingdom, restoring the fortunes of his people. Those who had followed him would be given key positions. But before the week was over he was dead — executed like a common criminal, rejected by the religious leaders and his followers went into hiding.

No one (except for Jesus) expected this to happen. Although there were different ideas among the Jews about what the Messiah would do, there were some common themes. Being crucified was not one of them. In fact, coming to such an end would have been high on the list of events proving someone was *not* the Messiah. So why did his followers continue to believe in a Messiah who, instead of leading them to victory, only seemed to have brought ignominy and suffering on himself?

Let's look at it from the disciples' point of view. Clearly, Jesus did not fulfill any of those common expectations for the Jews of his day. Instead of routing the Romans, he came as the Prince of Peace, not even carrying a weapon. He was born in a borrowed stable and buried in a borrowed tomb. He was executed in mid-life by a method reserved for slaves and common criminals. So, why would his followers maintain that he was the Messiah? Why would they not just cut their losses after his death and move on? Why would they even be willing to be killed themselves for this Messiah?

New Testament scholar N.T. Wright explains it well:

There were, to be sure, ways of coping with the death of a teacher, or even a leader. The picture of Socrates was available, in the wider world, as a model of unjust death nobly borne. The category of “martyr” was available, within Judaism, for someone who stood up to pagans... The category of failed but still revered Messiah, however, did not exist. A Messiah who died at the hands of the pagans, instead of winning [God’s] battle against them, was a deceiver... Why then did people go on talking about Jesus of Nazareth, except as a remarkable but tragic memory? The obvious answer is that... Jesus was raised from the dead. (N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1996, p. 658)

Suffering would not have been necessary for the kind of Messiah the people of his time were expecting. He could have lived to a ripe old age, and then have been enshrined in legend and history like David, Joshua, or Gideon. Even if he had lost his life in a struggle against the Romans, he could have had a place of honor. But to live in relative obscurity and then die in disgrace — what kind of a Messiah is that?

But Jesus was so much more than a military hero. He had come, not just to deliver Israel from the Romans, but to rescue all humanity from captivity to evil and death, and reconcile humanity to God. And to do that, he had to suffer and die. On the very day that Jesus rose from the dead, he spoke of himself, saying, “Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and enter into his glory?” (Luke 24:26 NASB).

The full glory of the Messiah is seen on the cross. This was an important point that Jesus’ disciples had missed until after his resurrection. Many still miss this point today. The glory of Jesus as our Savior was not shown only through his power and resurrection, though it could have been. His glory certainly was not shown through any status or position he had on earth. Rather, his glory was also shown in the incredible suffering he willingly endured as an expression of his immeasurable love for those he came to save.

As Paul wrote to the church at Philippi:

[Jesus] being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death — even death on a cross!

(Philippians 2:6-8).

After his resurrection, the full realization of who Jesus was, and what he had come to do began to sink in. As his followers absorbed the wonder, grace and glory of both his crucifixion and his resurrection, they were transformed. Led by the Holy Spirit, only then did they began to fulfill his “Great Commission,” taking his message of forgiveness of sin, victory over evil and death, and of salvation to the whole world. Convinced of the truth and reality of who Jesus was and what he had accomplished, not even the suffering of hardships, persecution and, for some, execution could stop their proclamation reaching “to the uttermost parts of the earth.” And we today are the beneficiaries of their mission and ministry that was handed on to others who were also faithful channels of God’s own reconciling and renewing work down through the generations.

As Paul put it in 2 Corinthians 5:14-15:

For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.

Let’s take time to renew our own sense of wonder and commitment, as we each do our part in carrying on the Great Commission. It is a message this world needs. It has been well said, “He may not have been the Messiah all had hoped for, but he is indeed the Messiah of great hope for all.”

*Joseph Teach*

## THE MESSIANIC SECRET

Have you ever wondered why Jesus never preached Jesus? He went about doing good, the Bible tells us. He healed the sick and cast out demons and taught large crowds around the countryside and smaller groups in the synagogues.

But he carefully avoided declaring that he was the Messiah. In fact, he went out of his way to keep his identity as Messiah a secret. We read for example, in Mark 1:40-45,

A man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, If you are willing, you can make me clean.

Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. I am willing, he said. Be clean!

Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured. Jesus sent him away at once with a strong warning: See that you don't tell this to anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them.

Instead he went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news. As a result, Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places. Yet the people still came to him from everywhere.

We are not going to talk about begging Jesus on our knees for healing. I suppose many people have taken this passage as an example of what to do when we sincerely desire to be healed of an affliction.

But just about as many people have been disappointed to find that Jesus did not respond to them in the same way as he responded to this leper. So there is no sense in our pretending that if we go to Jesus on our knees and beg for healing that we will assuredly receive it.

We believe that Jesus has given us the greatest healing of all—healing from our sins—but he does not always heal our physical ailments. We trust him to do what is right and good for us and to stand with us in our suffering, but experience has taught us that we do not always receive exactly what we ask for.

We are also not going to talk about offering the sacrifices that Moses commanded for cleansing. Much has been said and written about the differences between the old and the new biblical covenants, so there is no need to cover that again now.

What we are going to talk about in this message is the question of why

Jesus did not want the healed leper to tell anyone about his healing. Jesus gave the healed leper the strong warning, See that you don't tell this to anyone. But the former leper did not obey Jesus. He went straight out and freely spread the news.

As a result of this man's disobedience, Mark tells us Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places. And even in the lonely places, people came to him from all over.

So, what do you think?

Should we applaud the former leper, or should we lament his disobedience to Jesus' strong warning? I am reluctant to try to answer that question, except to say that I have found that it is smarter to obey Jesus than not to obey Jesus.

But in today's world, we have the view that telling people about Jesus by whatever means we can muster is the most important activity in which we can be involved. So when we read that the healed leper went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news, we tend to get excited and wish we could have that same overwhelming joy and evangelistic fervor. Maybe that's why some Christians like to magnify healings and other blessings into advertisements and publicity opportunities for the gospel.

But Jesus didn't want that man to go out and spread the news. Jesus wanted his identity to remain secret. In verse 34, we read that Jesus would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was.

Similarly, in Mark 8:27, Jesus asks the disciples, Who do people say I am? Peter replied in verse 30, You are the Messiah. Good answer. But Jesus responded not by saying, Good job, Peter, but by warning the disciples not to tell anyone about him. Let's read the passage in Mark 8, beginning in verse 27:

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 Messiah.

Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.

That is the very opposite of what we might have expected. We want everyone to know about Jesus. But Jesus did not want everyone to know about him. What's going on? We get a clue in the next few verses of Mark 8:

He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer

many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. Get behind me, Satan! he said. You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.

Do you see what's going on? Let's think about it. Why would Jesus not want his disciples to tell anyone about him? Here was the visible, flesh and blood, miracle-working Jesus walking and preaching all over the country. What better time for his followers to lead people to him and tell them who he was?

Unlike today, when we have to tell people to trust in Jesus in faith, they had Jesus in the flesh. But Jesus was clear, strong, and even stern in saying, Don't tell anyone who I am. Let's go back to Mark 8 and read it again.

He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. Get behind me, Satan! he said. You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.

Do you see the difference between what Peter thought the Messiah would be and what Jesus knew the Messiah was? Peter was so certain about his perception of the Messiah that he stopped Jesus and rebuked him for all that crazy talk about rejection and being killed and rising on the third day. Peter must have thought Jesus had been in the sun too long. Everybody knew what the Messiah would do, and here's Jesus ranting about getting killed.

So Jesus took the moment to call things as they were. He rebuked Peter. Get behind me, Satan! he told Peter. The word translated Satan means enemy or adversary, and it must have stung Peter. You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns, Jesus went on.

If even the disciples, and even Peter among the disciples, didn't know what to expect of the Messiah, how much less would the general public in Judea know what to expect of him? Let's move to Mark 11, and get a close up of what the public perception of Messiahship was.



As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples, saying to them, Go to the village ahead of you, and just as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, Why are you doing this?' say, The Lord needs it and will send it back here shortly.'

They went and found a colt outside in the street, tied at a doorway. As they untied it, some people standing there asked, What are you doing, untying that colt?

They answered as Jesus had told them to, and the people let them go. When they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks over it, he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, while others spread branches they had cut in the fields. Those who went ahead and those who followed shouted,

Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!

Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!

This was what people expected of the Messiah: A triumphal entry into Jerusalem. This was fulfillment of prophecy, and it fit with their perceptions of what the Messiah would do just before he took over the leadership of the nation and led his armies to victory over the occupying Roman armies.

But they were wrong.

When people finally heard that Jesus was the Messiah, they were overjoyed to receive the news.

The problem lay in definitions and expectations. What the people expected the Messiah to be and to do was quite different from what Jesus the Messiah actually came to be and to do. The people expected a king who would rally the people, and with the blessing of God, lead them to victory over their Roman conquerors and restore the kingdom of David in all its glory.

They did not understand what the Messiah was all about. Their idea was different from God's idea. When they heard the term Messiah, they misunderstood it, because they had been conditioned to expect something else.

With this in mind, we begin to see why Jesus did not want his disciples or those he healed to spread the news about him. It was not the right time for the people to hear. The right time for the news to spread was after Jesus had been executed and raised from the dead. Only then could the real purpose of

God in sending Messiah be understood for what it was.

In our world today, there are many concepts about God. If you talk to 10 people on the street, you will likely find 10 different opinions about who God is, what God is like, how God deals with humans and what God expects of us. Surveys by George Barna and others have shown that even among Christians, ideas about who Jesus is, what grace is and how it works, sin, forgiveness, faith, repentance, obedience, and so on, vary widely.

If there is so much variety among believers, how much more do ideas about Jesus vary among non-Christians? Suppose, for example, I approach a stranger sitting on a park bench and ask him if he knows Jesus. Suppose the stranger's idea of Jesus is that of a long-haired, wispy-looking weakling. Suppose his mother used to tell him that Jesus didn't like it when he played cards, or ran and played on Sunday. Suppose his most frequent exposure to the word Jesus was on a dirty cardboard "Do you know Jesus" placard glued in the parking garage of his apartment building? What would likely be the first impression this man would have of me and my question? Would that promote the gospel?

Suppose, on the other hand, I met the man, and over a period of time developed a relationship with him. Suppose we became friends. Suppose the way I treated this friend usually reflected the love of God. Suppose he eventually found out, as friends usually do, that I am a Christian. Would that tend to change his flawed perspective on Jesus and Christianity to a more accurate one?

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 points out that there is a time for everything, a season for every activity under heaven. Among these are a time to plant and a time to harvest and a time to be quiet and a time to speak up. The time to spread the news about Jesus came after his resurrection, not during his ministry.

Until his resurrection, there could not begin to be sufficient understanding of who he really was. Even the disciples were consistently ignorant about Jesus' full identity and mission until after the resurrection. The same principle applies today—people are often not ready to hear and comprehend who Jesus is until they experience his resurrection life in his people, the church.

The call to discipleship is not an individual call to a personal faith apart from the life of the body of Christ. It is only in the context of the body of Christ, the church, that we experience the life of union and communion, of oneness, that we have in Jesus by the Holy Spirit.

Let's read 1 Peter 2:12: "Be careful how you live among your unbelieving neighbors. Even if they accuse you of doing wrong, they will see your

honorable behavior, and they will believe and give honor to God when he comes to judge the world.” You probably noticed that Peter did not say, Press your unbelieving neighbors for a decision. Peter’s focus is on the honorable behavior of believers.

Why? Because it is through our honorable behavior, that is, our love, that our unbelieving neighbors see Jesus in action. Peter says this will result in their belief at a time when God chooses. The words, when he comes to judge the world, is a reference to God’s timing as opposed to our timing.

The foundation, the root, the core, of telling people about Jesus is not a set of facts. It is love. Not just a feeling, but real love that displays itself in how we live with one another. Most important of all, Peter says in 1 Peter 4:8, is that we continue to show deep love for each other.

In a similar vein, Paul wrote in Galatians 6:10, “Whenever we have the opportunity, we should do good to everyone, especially to our Christian brothers and sisters.” In other words, Peter’s and Paul’s instruction on spreading the good news centers on the witness of love, not on a well-rehearsed speech. It is our lives in him and his in us that show people who Jesus really is.

Instead, Peter wrote in 1 Peter 3:15, you must worship Christ as Lord of your life. And if you are asked about your Christian hope, always be ready to explain it. When a person asks about our Christian hope because they have experienced Jesus in us, then that person has a more accurate perspective of Jesus. They ask because the Spirit prompts them, and the catalyst the Spirit uses is the love at work in the body of Christ.

And our conversation, Paul said in Colossians 4:6, “should be gracious and attractive so that you will have the right response for everyone.”

People listen to friends. People listen to those who have proven they care. People listen when the relationship is real, not artificial. People are not our personal gospel projects. People are people, valued by God at the highest level. Relationships must never be thought of as a means to an end, even if the end is to present the gospel. Relationships are the end and love is the means. The gospel is the truth of God’s faithful, loving relationship with humanity in which Jesus, as God, brings God to us and as human, brings humanity to God. In Jesus, there is perfect union and communion between God and humanity.

Peter wrote in 1 Peter 4:10: “God has given each of you a gift from his great variety of spiritual gifts. Use them well to serve one another, so that God’s generosity can flow through you.” God has richly blessed us with active parts in his work of building up the body of Christ, the church, and

reaching out with the gospel to nonbelievers. At the heart of that work is love. Where love is, there is Christ. There is no love apart from Christ. God is love, John wrote.

That's what the disciples and the crowds didn't understand about the Messiah. They thought the Messiah would be a warrior champion to throw off the Roman yoke and restore Israel's glory. But the Messiah was the Father's gift of undying, indestructible, self-sacrificial love.

The gospel is the truth, and the truth is a Person, Jesus Christ, who is God in the flesh, love in the flesh. To share the gospel is to share him, which is to love. He can only be understood in relationship, not in a list of facts. The Messiah did not merely bring good news; he is the good news.

*J. Michael Feazell*

## GOOD FRIDAY AND EASTER SUNDAY

Each spring, we celebrate the death and resurrection of Jesus. These are pivotal celebrations because all that we believe and hope for hinges on the events commemorated by Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

Some sincere people put great emphasis on getting the details surrounding these events correct. Much has been written about the exact year, or precise date, or precise chronology of Jesus' arrest, trial, death and resurrection. Though most accept that Jesus was crucified on a Friday, others insist that it was a Wednesday or a Thursday. Some argue over whether Jesus was in the tomb for three days and three nights or just parts of those days. Some believe we should not celebrate the orthodox Christian days at all, insisting that the Old Testament observances are the only correct way to remember Jesus' sacrifice.

I once thought these details were important and spent far too much time trying to resolve them. I now see that it was time wasted. I don't mean to suggest that the details are insignificant. The events of Jesus' last week were carefully orchestrated by God so that prophecies of the Messiah could be fulfilled. However, if we try to establish an exact chronology, some of these questions cannot be resolved definitively, because there is some ambiguity in the scriptural record. However, even if the precise details had been recorded with the attention to chronological detail that we expect today, the details really do not matter. What is important is *what* happened, not *when*.

If, about 2000 years ago, Jesus the Son of God incarnate was executed and then later resurrected, the destiny of every human being has been changed forever. If he was not, then, as Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, "Our preaching is useless and so is your faith" (1 Corinthians 15:14). In that letter, Paul reminded his readers that if indeed Jesus had been resurrected from the dead, "Then the saying that is written will come true: 'Death has been swallowed up in victory'" (v. 54). Here Paul was quoting from Isaiah 25:8:

He will swallow up death forever.

The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces;  
he will remove his people's disgrace from all the earth.

The Lord has spoken.

That was probably a popular scripture. It is poetic and concise. Had Hallmark been in operation then, they probably would have put the saying

on bereavement cards. Paul was showing the Corinthians that it was no mere pious platitude. Because of Jesus, what Isaiah prophesied became reality. Death had in fact been swallowed up in victory and thus Paul could write confidently: “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” (1 Corinthians 15:55).

Death—any death—does have a sting. If a particular death does not affect us personally, it might only be a small sting and the pain doesn’t last long. Tragedies like a senseless shooting at a school leave us all hurting for some time. The pain of the death of a loved one goes even deeper.

Our Christian worldview gives us comfort in knowing that there is more to life than what we experience in our mortal bodies. Jesus taught that there is an afterlife, and he promised that he would go and prepare a place for us. Knowing that death is not the end for our loved ones moderates the terrible pain of loss, so that we need not “sorrow as those who have no hope” (1 Thessalonians 4:13, NIV). However, it does not take away the entire ache. We still suffer the loss of not having their companionship and presence with us while we are still alive and they are dead.

This is why death is the enemy, and even though Jesus has conquered this enemy, we still feel some of its sting when a loved one dies or when we see innocent children murdered. Though we shed tears over death, we are reassured in Psalm 56:8 that God is aware of them all: “You have kept count of my tossings; put my tears in your bottle” (ESV); “...list my tears on your scroll—are they not in your record?” (NIV). Whatever the translation, the point is clear: God knows our pain and suffering down to the details and has promised to eventually remove them forever.

I have been pondering the phrase that John wrote in Revelation 21:4: “He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” Like Paul, John was reminding us of the reality of the promise in Isaiah 25:8. Consider how important that promise is. If God did not wipe away all tears from our eyes, there would be ongoing cause for weeping.

Most certainly, we’d weep over our past sins, the wasted opportunities while we were upon the earth, as well as our acts of unkindness toward others. We would weep much about the old order of things. But God says there will be no more death and the old order has passed away. In the fullness of God’s kingdom, every cause of grief will be removed. In our glorified life, there will be no more death to part loving hearts. There will be no more sorrow of any kind. There will be no more crying for any reason. There will be no more

pain of any sort. Instead, there will be fullness of life—a sharing in God’s own kind of eternal light and love.

This is why Jesus allowed himself to be tortured and executed, only to be resurrected shortly thereafter. What he did for us he did freely and with confidence in his heavenly Father. And so we read of him: “Who for the joy set before him, endured the cross” (Hebrews 12:2).

The precise chronology of Holy Week is not the important issue (if it had been important, surely God would have made it clearer). What is important is what Jesus did to fulfill the specific prophecies of the Messiah, like those given by Isaiah. Jesus changed the very nature of death and opened a pathway to our future hope when all things are made new (Revelation 21:5).

That is what Jesus did and that is what we should focus on as we commemorate the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

*Joseph Tkach*

## JESUS— THE COMPLETE SALVATION PACKAGE

Near the end of his Gospel, the apostle John made these intriguing comments: “Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book.... If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written” (John 20:30; 21:25). Given these comments, and noting differences among the four Gospels, we conclude that these accounts were not written to be exhaustive records of Jesus’ life. John says his purpose in writing was that “you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31). The focus of the Gospels is to tell the good news about Jesus and the salvation that is ours in him.

Though in verse 31 John attributes salvation (*life*) to the *name* of Jesus, it’s common for Christians to speak of being *saved by Jesus’ death*. Though this short-hand statement is correct as far as it goes, relating salvation exclusively to Jesus’ death can stunt our understanding of the fullness of who Jesus is and all he has done to save us. The events of Holy Week remind us that Jesus’ death, though vital, is part of a larger story that includes our Lord’s incarnation, death, resurrection and ascension. All these are intrinsic, inseparable milestones of Jesus’ one redemptive work—the work that gives us life in his name. During Holy Week, and throughout the year, let’s look to Jesus—the *complete salvation package*.

### **Incarnation**

Jesus’ birth was not the ordinary birth of an ordinary man. Unique in every way, it was the beginning of the Incarnation of God himself. In Jesus’ birth, God came among us as a human in the way all humans since Adam have been born. Remaining what he was, the eternal Son of God took on a whole human life, from beginning to end—birth to death. In his one Person, Jesus is both fully divine and fully human. In this stunning statement we find an eternity’s worth of significance that merits an eternity of appreciation.

Through the Incarnation, the eternal Son of God stepped out of eternity and into his creation of space and time to become a man of flesh and blood: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).



Jesus was indeed a genuine full-fledged man, but at the same time he was fully God—one in being with the Father and Spirit. The birth of Jesus fulfills many prophecies and is the promise of our salvation.

The Incarnation did not end with Jesus' birth—it continued throughout his earthly life, and continues today in his glorified human life. The Son of God incarnate (in the flesh), remains one in being with the Father and Spirit—the fullness of the whole God is present and active in Jesus—making the human life of Jesus uniquely significant. As Romans 8:3-4 says, “For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.” Paul further explains that we are “saved through his life” (Romans 5:11).

The life and work of Jesus are inseparable—all part of the Incarnation. The God-man Jesus is the perfect high priest and mediator between God and man because he partook of the nature of man and reclaimed humanity by living a sinless life. His sinless life helps us understand how he can maintain a relationship with both God and man. While we typically celebrate his birth at Christmas, the events in Jesus' whole life are always a part of our total worship, including during Holy Week. His life reveals the relational nature of our salvation. Jesus brought together, in his own person, God and humanity in perfect relationship.

## Death

For some, the short-hand declaration, *we are saved by Jesus' death*, carries with it the unfortunate misconception that Jesus death was a sacrifice that conditioned God into being gracious. I pray that we all see the fallacy of this notion.

T.F. Torrance writes that with a proper understanding of the Old Testament sacrifices, we will see Jesus' death not as a pagan offering for the sake of forgiveness, but as a powerful witness to the will of a merciful God (*Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ*, pages 38-39). Pagan systems of sacrifice were based on *retribution*, but Israel's was based on *reconciliation*. Under Israel's system, rather than sacrifices and offerings being given to earn forgiveness, God provided them to cover for and remove the people's sin so that they would be reconciled to God.

Israel's sacrificial system was designed to make manifest and to witness to God's love and mercy, pointing to the purpose of Jesus' death, which is

reconciliation with the Father. Jesus' death also defeated Satan and the power of death: "Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death" (Hebrews 2:14-15). Paul adds that Jesus "must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death" (1 Corinthians 15:25-26). Jesus' death is the atoning part of our salvation.

## **Resurrection**

On Easter Sunday, we celebrate Jesus' resurrection, which fulfills many Old Testament prophecies. The author of Hebrews tells us that Isaac being saved from death is a picture of resurrection (Hebrews 11:18-19). The book of Jonah tells us that Jonah was in the stomach of the sea monster "three days and three nights" (Jonah 1:17). Jesus related that event to his death, burial and resurrection (Matthew 12:39-40; Matthew 16:4, 21; John 2:18-22).

We celebrate Jesus' resurrection with great joy because it reminds us that death is not permanent. It's a temporary step toward our future—eternal life in communion with God. At Easter we celebrate Jesus' victory over death and the new life we will have in him. We look forward to the time spoken of in Revelation 21:4: "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." The resurrection is the hope of our salvation.

## **Ascension**

Jesus' birth led to his life and his life led to his death. But we cannot divorce his death from his resurrection and we cannot separate his resurrection from his ascension. Jesus didn't just come out of the grave and live as a human being. Now a glorified human, Jesus ascended to the Father, and it was not until that great event occurred that he finished the work he started.

In the introduction to Torrance's book *Atonement*, Robert Walker wrote this: "The ascension is Jesus' taking of our humanity in his person into the presence of God into the union and communion of the love of the Trinity." C.S. Lewis put it this way: "In the Christian story God descends to re-ascend." The glorious good news is that in ascending, Jesus took us up with him: "God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ

## JESUS THE SAVIOR

Jesus” (Ephesians 2:6-7).

Incarnation, death, resurrection and ascension—all vital parts of our salvation and thus our worship during Holy Week. These milestones point to all Jesus has accomplished for us through his whole life and whole work. Throughout the year, let’s take in more and more of who Jesus is and all of what he has done for us. He is the complete salvation package.

*Joseph Teach*

## THE THIEF'S STORY

“Two robbers were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left” (Mark 15:27; Matthew 27:38; Luke 23:32; John 19:18).

Our cell was deep in the prison, but we could hear the noise of a riot in the courtyard. People were shouting Barabbas' name. Barabbas must have heard it too, but he said nothing. He did not seem to be afraid. Barabbas never showed fear, not even now, when he was soon to be crucified.

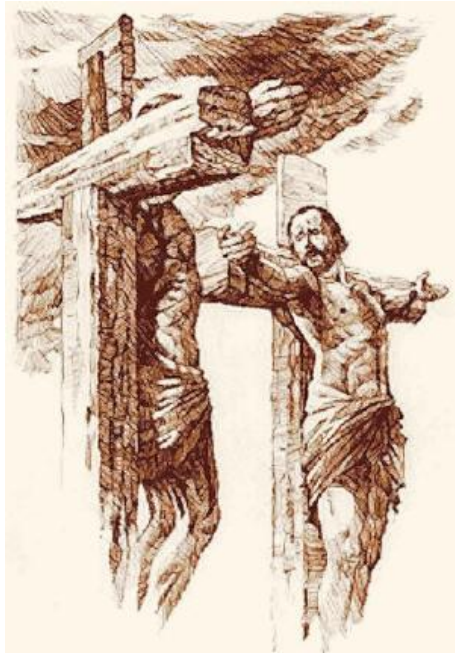
None of us knew his real name. Barabbas meant “son of the father,” and the mystery only added to his popularity. He was a thief and a murderer, but he hated the Romans, and he never missed an opportunity to cause them trouble. So, in spite of his crimes, our people thought of him as a hero. Some even followed him.

I was one of them. Life with Barabbas had been exciting. We didn't think of ourselves as criminals. We were patriots, fighting to free our nation from the Romans. We were known as “zealots.” All our little band could do was tweak the mighty Roman nose occasionally, but Pontius Pilate was afraid of any trouble in Judea, and was determined to crush us.

They caught us just before Passover. It was our fault. Barabbas had led many riots, and we had always gotten away. But perhaps we had become too confident. The Romans brought extra guards to Jerusalem during religious festivals, and we were caught.

They captured two of us along with Barabbas. We did not expect mercy. There was only one punishment for the likes of us—crucifixion. There would be no delay. Things were always tense in Jerusalem during the Passover season, and the Romans wanted Barabbas out of the way before the festival began.

“We'll have a good crowd for you,” the guards had taunted. “They'll all come out to see Barabbas hung up.” Then they left us, chained to the wall in the dark



to await our fate.

The guards came for Barabbas in the middle of the night. I heard footsteps and then a scraping sound as they unbarred the door to our prison. Several soldiers burst in and seized Barabbas.

“You’re a lucky man,” said one, unlocking the chain. “The Governor is letting you go.” They hauled him to his feet, and kicked him into the corridor.

“Does that mean... ?” I asked.

“Not you. You two are still for the cross. We poor soldiers have to do something to earn our keep, don’t we?” said the guard. “Don’t worry. It will still be a good show. We are going to hang you up with the King of the Jews.”

“Herod?”

“No, someone called Jesus of Nazareth, who thinks he is the Messiah.”

The door slammed and the cell was again dark. I heard a curse and a rattle of chains as Demas settled back to sleep. He, like Barabbas, seemed resigned to his fate. I knew I would get no more sleep. The last day of my life had begun.

I had heard of Jesus of Nazareth. He was a wandering preacher who talked about the “kingdom of God.” Nothing much seemed to have come of it. Some said he could do miracles. There was even a rumor that he had raised people from the dead. I saw him once. He was talking to a crowd about love and forgiveness. I didn’t take much notice.

He had a small group of followers who believed he would lead them against the Romans. He seemed more concerned with annoying the Pharisees. Jesus seemed to be just another religious fanatic, and the Romans were usually tolerant of the likes of him. So what had he done to get himself crucified?

But a condemned man does not dwell long on such things. I had my own problems to worry about. In a few hours I was going to be crucified—nailed to a cross and left to die.

## **On the road to Golgotha**

The guards came for us in the morning. I had seen people crucified, and I knew what to expect. They would flog us, then parade us through the streets to Golgotha.

Demas was the first to be beaten. He was dragged to a stone pillar in the prison yard, and his hands tied to an iron ring above his head. Two massive soldiers stood on each side of him, each holding a whip made from strips of leather in which were embedded sharp stones, bits of broken glass and nails. The whips were already soaked in blood—we were not the first to feel them that day.

Demas cursed and screamed as the soldiers began to beat him. Then he

fainted, but they did not stop. I thought they would kill him—victims often did not survive the Roman scourge. But the soldiers knew what they were doing. This was only the start of our punishment.

They took down Demas, and tied me in his place. I am not a stranger to pain. I had been in many fights, and my body had scars to prove it. But nothing I had ever suffered prepared me for those first blows. I heard myself scream and the soldier grunted with satisfaction. The other man waited a few seconds—it seemed like hours—then he hit me too. So it continued until I too fainted. I revived as they were untying me from the pillar.

I collapsed, but the soldiers dragged me to my feet. A centurion pointed at two beams of wood leaning against the wall. They were the crosspieces that the condemned men had to carry to their execution.

Two soldiers picked up one of the beams and dropped it across my bleeding shoulders. They tied my wrists to the beam so that I could not drop it. The rough wood bit into my torn back. Somehow I stayed on my feet as the guards led us out of the prison and into the street.

A crowd was already forming. I saw a man, or what had once been a man, surrounded by soldiers. He was bowed under the weight of a beam like ours. It was Jesus of Nazareth.

What had they done to him?

Every part of his body was covered with bruises and cuts, and his eyes were swollen shut. On his head they had placed a crown made from thorn branches. He seemed already near death as he stood quietly while the crowd jeered and mocked him.

The guards—there were four for each of us—ordered us to move. Jesus was first. I was behind him, and Demas was last. The guards seemed nervous. If Barabbas had been with us, there might have been a rescue attempt. But surely no one would risk their lives for us. Most of Jesus' supporters seemed to be women.

Behind me I could hear Demas, defiant to the end, cursing the crowd, the guards, the Emperor, and even God. Had the man no fear? But it was Jesus who was the center of attention. As he stumbled along the narrow streets, the spectators mocked him. But he said nothing. He even tried to comfort some of the women who were weeping.

I wondered if perhaps he was out of his mind and had no idea what was happening to him. He seemed to be more like an unsuspecting animal being led out to slaughter than a man being driven to a horrible death.

Jesus had obviously been a strong man, but the beatings must have weakened him. Our miserable progress was halted several times as he fell down under the weight of the crosspiece.

The guards kicked him and screamed at him to get up, but he could go

no further. The centurion pointed to a big man in the crowd and ordered him to pick up the crossbeam. The man shrugged, put the heavy wood on his shoulder and joined the procession.

Eventually we arrived at Golgotha, where a little way up the hillside there were several poles in the ground.

## Crucified

Two guards kicked my legs out from under me. A soldier holding a hammer and a bag of rough nails looked down at me, grinning. He placed a nail over my wrist, and smashed it through my flesh into the wood. I screamed. He quickly nailed my other arm the same way, and then moved across to Demas. Finally they gestured to the man who was still holding Jesus' crosspiece to drop it on the ground. Then they nailed Jesus to it. He moaned, but I heard no curses.

One by one the soldiers dragged us over to the upright poles. Jesus in the middle and Demas and I on either side. We pleaded and cursed in fear and pain, but Jesus still said nothing. Using ropes they hauled me up until the crosspieces dropped into a slot in the upright pole, leaving me hanging by my wrists. Then, bending my legs, they smashed another long nail through my ankles and into the wood. Jesus was next, and then Demas. Finally, a guard fixed a board with our names and crimes written on it to the pole above our heads. Mine said simply "robber," but on Jesus' board they had written "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews."

So began our last hours in this world.

After the first shock of hanging from my wrists, I fainted. But I came to with a terrible pain in my chest. Hanging from my arms made it impossible to breathe, and I felt myself suffocating. So I pushed myself up on the nail holding my legs, so that I could at least fill my lungs. But soon that pain became unbearable, and I had to sink back down. There was no relief. This would go on, hour after hour, maybe for several days until exhausted, tormented by the heat, thirst and biting insects that were even now feasting on my blood, I would die.

I cursed my fate, the Romans, the guards and the crowd of people who had come to watch my suffering. But through my pain, I realized their taunts and insults were not aimed at me. All the attention seemed to be on Jesus. As he hung beside me, twisting and writhing as he fought for breath, his tormentors kept up a stream of insults: "He saved others, but he can't save himself." "If you really are the King of the Jews, come down from the cross and we will believe in you."

Then I heard him say, "Father, forgive them. They don't know what they are doing." He was mad! They did know what they were doing—they were

killing us in the worst way they knew, and enjoying it. I wanted to see them thrown into the deepest pit of hell—not forgiven.

Some women and one or two men gathered at the foot of his cross did not join in the insults. A middle-aged lady seemed particularly upset, and yet more under control than the others. She was probably his mother, and the young man looking after her was perhaps his brother. Relatives were allowed to attend an execution, if they did not interfere.

None of my relatives had come to see me die. I had been a disappointment to them for years, and they finally disowned me for their own safety when I joined up with Barabbas.

I thought of my own mother. She was a good, God-fearing woman, and it wasn't her fault that I had chosen a life of crime. She had done her best to teach me our Jewish faith. "Fear God, my son," she told me long ago, "and when you die you will live forever in paradise." But to a young man, paradise seemed a long way off, and I had chosen the excitement of a life with a gang of thieves. We justified our crimes by claiming we were fighting for the liberation of our homeland. Now we were paying for it, hung up to die with this failed "King of the Jews" who had claimed he could save Israel, but couldn't even save himself.

Demas, hanging on the other side of Jesus, was cursing him. I began to do it too—Jesus' calmness was infuriating. He was suffering as much as we were. Why not show it, instead of "forgiving" people for doing this to us? Who did he think he was?

Who did he think he was? He was accused of being the King of the Jews, the Messiah, and the Son of God. The religious leaders who had come to watch him die were particularly happy to see him powerless. Why? What threat was he to them? In his preaching he often exposed their hypocrisy. But they had won—and he was being crucified. He seemed almost at peace, although he was, like us, in agony, struggling for every breath. Yet he showed no bitterness, nor any anger against anyone—the crowd, the soldiers or even the leaders who had accused him. He surely was a good man—why was God allowing this to happen to him?

## **The rescue**

The taunts of the crowd provoked another outburst of anger from Demas: "If you were the Messiah you could get us down from here."

You fool, I thought. Leave him alone. In a few hours we would all be facing the judgment of God. At least Jesus knew God. He had called him "Father" when he asked forgiveness for those who had nailed him to the cross. We might need his help if we were to escape hell. Maybe he could ask God to forgive us, too.



I called across to Demas: “Don’t you fear God? We are getting what we deserve. He has done nothing wrong.” My words only provoked more blasphemy and scorn from Demas. But Jesus suddenly raised his head, and looked directly at me. Although his face was covered with bruises and blood, I saw a look in his eyes. What was it?

Gratitude for a kind word? No, it wasn’t that. Sorrow that he was a failed Messiah who could not help me? No, it wasn’t that either. It was a look of—I can only describe it as compassion, confidence and authority. It was the way my father used to look at me when, as a child I expected punishment, but found forgiveness and acceptance. This was no madman who had lost his mind. Although he seemed to be as helpless as we were, Jesus’ look showed me that he was in control. Even though he was sharing my fate, he seemed to be reaching out to me.

What was he trying to tell me? Jesus was not afraid to die. But then, he could look forward to the approval of God when this torture was over. Then I understood.

He was offering to help me. This man who asked God to forgive his torturers would ask for forgiveness for me too. Somehow, I knew I could trust him.

I heard myself say, “Jesus, will you remember me when you come into your kingdom?”

He tried to smile, and although his voice was hoarse, and he had to struggle to get out each word, he said clearly: “I tell you the truth. Today you will be with me in paradise.”

We tried to smile at each other—and I knew at that moment that I was going to be all right. Although every muscle and joint in my body was still racked with pain, and every breath was torture, I was not afraid anymore.

## **The end**

I don’t remember much of the next few hours. It became harder and harder to breathe. The day became very dark, like when the sandstorms came in from the desert. Most of the crowd went home.

Jesus died first. I heard him cry out, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” Demas was mostly quiet now, but he still found energy to blaspheme and curse the guards, so I knew he was not dead.

The end, when it came, came quickly. The guards decided not to leave us hanging on the crosses during the Passover night. So as dusk approached, they found a board to use as a club to break our legs.

I saw the guard hit Demas just below his knees, and heard the bones break. The guard then looked up at Jesus, and saw he was dead. He stabbed him with his spear to make sure, and blood and water gushed out. Then he

came to me. I felt my bones break, and then I could no longer push myself up on my legs to breathe.

It would not be long now. I looked for the last time at the city that had been my home, with its wall and the temple. I looked at the body of the man on the cross beside me. I tried to remember what he had said just before he died: "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." I tried to say that too. As I felt life slipping away, I knew that whatever came next, I was going to be safe.

Author's note: In trying to tell the story of the crucifixion from the point of view of the repentant thief, I have side-stepped many issues that have preoccupied theologians for centuries. They are genuine questions, and worthy of discussion. But let's not allow them to obscure the lesson of the story of the first human being to look to the crucified Jesus for salvation. You don't have to be good enough. You don't have anything to offer. You don't have to qualify. You just have to trust him to forgive and to save.

*John Halford*

## WOULD YOU HAVE CHOSEN BARABBAS?

Pontius Pilate knew he had no real reason to have Jesus killed. But the mob outside, urged on by their religious leaders, were clamoring for his blood. The Roman governor thought he saw a way out.

It was his custom at that time of year to release a prisoner as a goodwill gesture. He had planned to offer Barabbas, a robber and rabble-rouser. But now he could offer Jesus instead. Just a few days before, Jesus had been escorted into the city by an adoring crowd. Surely some of them were in that mob outside. Surely they would ask for him to be set free.

But they didn't. Urged on by Jesus' enemies, the mob called for Barabbas. "What do I do with Jesus then?" asked the governor.

"Crucify him!" yelled the mob.

"But why? What has he done?" protested Pilate. But the mob was beyond reason.

"Crucify him! CRUCIFY HIM!"

So Jesus was led away to be flogged and crucified.

What would *we* have done if we were in that crowd on the night Jesus was arrested? What would you have done if you had been in that crowd? Would you have joined in the clamor for Jesus to be killed?

"Certainly not!" you say?

Don't be so sure.

The people who chose Barabbas lived in an angry, confused, cruel and frustrated world. They had learned to survive in it, going with the flow without fully endorsing its worst aspects. Most of them would probably not have described themselves as "good people," but surely they were good enough.

Jesus was a likeable fellow. He was kind, fun to be around and generous. He exposed hypocritical public figures. He did fascinating miracles and gave great sermons. No wonder people liked to follow him around. You never knew what was going to happen next, but you knew it would be exciting.

Jesus said he represented a kingdom "not of this world," where love, forgiveness and peace are the way of life. He said the future belonged to the poor, the powerless and the disenfranchised. But the future is a long way off, and right now, the poor were still poor and powerless and disenfranchised.

He spoke often of repentance and forgiveness — which was fine, but divine forgiveness didn't pay the tax man and didn't keep hypocritical public figures from taking your property and killing your children.

Jesus had a disconcerting way of including "good-enough" people among

the sinners. He seemed to expect them to make changes in how they lived, too. “Why do you call me Lord, and don’t do what I tell you?” he’d ask.

Jesus threatened the status quo at every level. He still does, and we don’t like that, especially if we are comfortable. When we are confronted with the reality of Jesus, many of us good-enough people would prefer to do like Pilate, and wash our hands of him. We have nothing against him personally, but we don’t like to be faced with the truth about our own greed, selfishness, double standards and hypocrisy. Save sinners by all means, but not in my backyard!

So Jesus was brutally put to death with the cries of ordinary people ringing in his ears. Three days later, he was resurrected. It was not just the triumph of one man over his own death. It is God’s triumph over all sin and death — once and for all. Christians understand this, and we love, honor, praise and worship the one whose sacrifice has opened the way to our eternal life.

At least, we like to think we do. But let’s be honest with ourselves. What would we have done if we had been in that crowd on the night Jesus was arrested?

We may not have liked Barabbas, but we understood him. He was of our world. We would not have wanted him as a next-door neighbor, but providing he posed no threat to us personally, we could let him live.

But that other fellow? He offered us promises we could not see, and he confronted us where it hurt most, invading our innermost being, challenging us to share, to serve, to be humble, to be honest, to put God first, to love others as much as we love ourselves and to forgive those who wrong us.

That is all very well in theory, and makes for wonderful prayers and praise songs. But in reality, that is not the way we do things down here. Better to play it safe with the devil you do know.

Are you sure you would not have chosen Barabbas?

*John Halford*

## WHERE WAS GOLGOTHA?

Where did the pivotal event of all the ages take place?  
Modern archaeology sheds new light on an old controversy.

The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ was the most significant event in all history! The precise location where he was crucified, buried and resurrected has intrigued Christians for many centuries. The fact of that great event does not depend on locating the authentic site. But it is only natural that Christians would have an interest in knowing where their Savior died—and where he rose again.

What does the Bible tell us about the location? The Gospel writers call the place where Jesus was crucified *Golgotha*—an Aramaic word meaning “the skull.” *Calvary* is the Latin form of the word. Scripture does not reveal the precise location of Golgotha. It simply states that Jesus’ crucifixion took place *outside* the city of Jerusalem, though near it (John 19:20; Hebrews 13:12). Jewish law did not permit executions and burials inside the city.

Further, we know that Jesus was crucified near a well-traveled road, since passersby mocked him (Matthew 27:39; Mark 15:21, 29-30). The Romans selected conspicuous places by major highways for their public executions. The crucifixion probably took place on a hill, because it was visible at a distance (verse 40). As for the tomb or sepulcher, we’re told only that it was in a garden near the place of crucifixion (John 19:41).

### **Rival sites of Jesus’ crucifixion and burial**

Various locations around Jerusalem have been suggested as the site of Jesus’ crucifixion and burial. But in recent times, only two have been deemed worthy of serious consideration. The traditional site lies within the area now occupied by the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (right), in the Christian Quarter of the Old City (see map below). The huge church embraces within its walls a hill called Latin Calvary, and nearby, the traditional tomb of Christ.

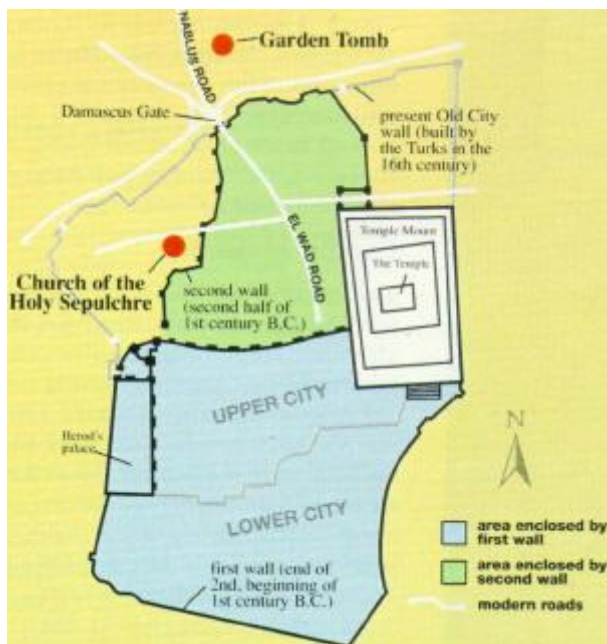
The other contending location is a rocky hill—commonly called Gordon’s Calvary—just north of Jerusalem’s Old City (see map). It was named in honor of a British military leader, General Charles Gordon, who promoted the site in the 19th century. Near Gordon’s Calvary is a quiet garden, with a rock-hewn tomb popularly called the Garden Tomb, held by some to have been the sepulcher of Jesus.



## Golgotha outside city walls

In recent decades, archaeological excavations have revealed more facts about the Jerusalem of Jesus’ day—including the route of the city walls at that time. As we have seen, the Bible requires that Golgotha lie outside those walls.

The Church of the Holy Sepulchre is inside the walls of today’s Jerusalem. Does that disqualify it as the authentic site? No. The walls that now surround the Old City are not the walls of Jesus’ day. They were built in the 16th century. Excavations and literary evidence show that when Jesus was crucified,



the line of the city wall ran south of the site on which the Church of the Holy Sepulchre now stands (see map).

Ancient tradition is another important consideration when evaluating alleged holy sites. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre has a longstanding tradition in its favor that can be traced back to the time of Constantine, the first Roman emperor to profess Christianity. According to tradition, Queen Helena, Constantine's mother, made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem in A.D. 326. The Christians living in Jerusalem at that time pointed out the location of Calvary and Jesus' tomb to Helena and her traveling companion, the historian Eusebius.

It was an unexpected place—they claimed that the holy site lay underneath Jerusalem's Temple of Venus (or Aphrodite), which had been built by the Roman Emperor Hadrian a century after Jesus' crucifixion, when pagan temples were built in the city after the Jewish revolt of A.D. 135.

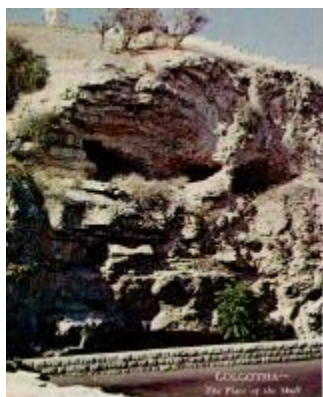
Helena ordered the pagan temple demolished and removed to uncover Jesus' tomb and Calvary. The excavations revealed several ancient tombs. Evidence pointed to one in particular as the tomb of Christ. The workmen also uncovered a rocky outcrop that was identified as the hill of Calvary. A church was built adjacent to the site in A.D. 335—the forerunner of today's Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

Can we trust a tradition as late as the fourth century? Though Hadrian banned all Jews from Jerusalem in A.D. 135, Christians not of Jewish ancestry could and did live in Jerusalem from Hadrian's time on. Eusebius even preserves a list of the Gentile bishops of Jerusalem. A tradition could therefore have easily been passed down through generations of Christians to Constantine's time.

Consider, too, that Jerusalem's Christians were *so certain* the tomb lay under the Venus temple that they persuaded Helena to pay for the demolition of the temple. Had they not been certain that a tomb and rocky hill lay beneath it, they would be less likely to suggest the costly work. Their conviction must have been tied to a long and consistent tradition.

### **The place of the skull**

What of the notion that Golgotha was named because it in some way resembled a skull? The rough shape of a human skull—with eye sockets, nose and mouth—is visible in the cliff face of Gordon's Calvary (see photo below). Scripture, however, requires no such features.



Gordon's Calvary



The Garden Tomb

The notion that Golgotha, “The Place of the Skull” (Matthew 27:33), was named because of the appearance of the hill is a modern idea. From early Christian times, virtually all commentators held that Golgotha was so named simply because it was a place of execution, where the skulls and bones of criminals lay scattered.

Further, Gordon's Calvary was probably part of a ridge—not a separate hill—in Jesus' time. The features of the hill that make it look like a skull were not present in the first century. Archaeologists believe it to be a quarry or mine developed only in the past two or three centuries. In other words, its skull-like appearance is the result of modern quarrying operations.

The fact that Gordon's Calvary was suggested only recently is, in itself, clear testimony that the hill did not resemble a skull until relatively recent times. Otherwise, it would have been suggested as an alternative candidate for Golgotha in earlier centuries. Yet no ancient or medieval tradition connects the crucifixion with the place.

### **Garden Tomb is too old**

Jesus' tomb was a “new tomb” (Matthew 27:60). Any tomb not identifiable as a first-century tomb is out of the running. Archaeological work has shown that the ancient rock-cut tombs within the Church of the Holy Sepulchre are indeed *first-century* tombs, as required by Scripture.

The Garden Tomb, by contrast, was originally hewn out centuries earlier—in the Iron Age, in the eighth or seventh century B.C., during the time of the later kings of Judah. This determination is based on the plan and characteristics of its rooms, the type of chisels used in cutting out the tomb, the artifacts excavated inside, and other factors. Thus, it does not qualify as



a “new tomb” of the first century.

**Is it important to know?**

The verdict of archaeology seems to be clear: Gordon’s Calvary and the Garden Tomb have little evidence in their favor. What of the site now occupied by the Church of the Holy Sepulchre? It seems to have the weightier claim as the actual location of Jesus’ crucifixion and burial. We cannot know with 100 percent certainty, and it is not important that we know. Salvation does not hinge on a particular location, but on the reality of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

*Readers who would like to know more about the archaeological investigations into the Garden Tomb and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre may consult the March/April 1986 and May/June 1986 issues of Biblical Archaeology Review.*

*Keith W. Stump*

## BORN TO DIE

The Christian faith proclaims that at a specific time and place, the Son of God became flesh and lived among us. However, Jesus was such a remarkable person that some people even wondered whether he was human at all. The Bible therefore goes out of its way to say that he was flesh, born of a woman, in very nature a human, made like us in every respect except for sin (John 1:14; Galatians 4:4; Philippians 2:7; Hebrews 2:17). He was really human.

The incarnation of Jesus Christ is often celebrated on Christmas, even though the incarnation would have actually begun when the pregnancy began—by traditional calendars, on March 25, the Feast of the Annunciation (formerly called *Festum Incarnationis*, or Feast of the Incarnation).

### Christ crucified

As important as the conception and birth of Jesus are to our faith, however, that is not the primary focus we carry to the world. When Paul preached in Corinth, he preached a much more provocative message: Christ crucified (1 Corinthians 1:23).

The Greco-Roman world had many stories about deities being born, but they had never heard of one being crucified! It was preposterous—like saying that people could be saved by believing in an executed criminal. How could anybody be saved by a criminal?

That was just the point—the Son of God died shamefully on a cross like a criminal, and then was he resurrected to glory! Peter told the Jewish leaders: “The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead.... God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel” (Acts 5:30-31). Jesus was resurrected and taken to heaven so our sins could be removed.

But Peter did not omit the embarrassing part of the story: “whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree.” The word *tree* would no doubt remind the Jewish leaders of Deuteronomy 21:23: “Anyone who is hung on a tree is under God’s curse.” Ouch! Why would Peter bring that up? Peter did not try to sweep the public-relations problem under the rug. Rather, he made sure that he included it. The message said not only that Jesus died, but that he died in a shameful way. That was part of the message—it was essential to the message.

When Paul preached in Corinth, he characterized his message not merely as proclaiming that Christ died, but that Christ died by crucifixion (1

Corinthians 1:23). In Galatia he may have used some visual aids: “Before your eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified” (Galatians 3:1). Why would Paul go out of his way to describe a hideous death that the Scriptures call a sure sign of God’s curse?

### **Was it necessary?**

Indeed, why had Jesus suffered such a horrible death? Paul had probably thought long and hard about that question. He had seen the risen Christ. He knew that God had approved this man as the Messiah. But why would God allow his Anointed One to suffer a death the Scriptures call cursed? (In a similar way, Muslims do not believe that Jesus was crucified. They believe he was a prophet, and God wouldn’t allow that kind of treatment for a prophet. Muslims believe that someone else was crucified instead of Jesus.)

Jesus prayed in Gethsemane for some other way, but there was no other way. Herod and Pilate did only what God had already “decided beforehand should happen”—that he should die in this accursed way (Acts 4:28).

Why? Because Jesus died for us, for our sins, and we, because of our sins, had come under a curse. Our sins are as ugly to God as a crucifixion. All humanity is accursed because of sin. The good news, the gospel, is that “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us” (Galatians 3:13). Jesus was crucified for every one of us. He took the pain, and the shame, that we deserve.

### **Other analogies**

But this is not the only analogy the Bible gives us, and Paul explains the crucifixion as a curse in only one of his letters. More often, he simply says that Jesus “died for us.” At first glance, this phrase looks like a simple substitution: We deserved to die, Jesus volunteered to die instead of us, and now we don’t have to.

But it is not quite so simple. For one thing, we still die. From another perspective, we die with Christ (Romans 6:3-5). In this analogy, Jesus’ death was both representative (he died in our place) and participatory (we are included in his death by dying with him). The main point is clear: We are saved by the crucifixion of Jesus, and we can be saved in no other way than through the cross of Christ.

Another analogy, one that Jesus used, was that of a ransom: “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). It is like we were held captive by an enemy, and Jesus’ death secured our freedom. Paul uses a similar analogy when he says

we were redeemed. This word would remind some readers of the slave market, others of the Exodus. Slaves could be redeemed from slavery, and God redeemed Israel from Egypt. The Father paid a price by sending his Son.

Colossians 2:15 uses a different analogy: “Having disarmed the powers and authorities, he [Christ] made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.” The picture here is a victory parade: the victorious military leader brings the captives into town, disarmed, in chains, humiliated. The point in Colossians is that Jesus Christ, by means of his crucifixion, has broken the power of all our enemies and given us victory.

The Bible is giving us *images* of salvation, not precise formulas that we must insist on. Substitutionary sacrifice, for example, is only one of the many pictures that the Bible uses to get the point across. Just as sin is described in several ways, the work that Jesus did to remove our sins can also be described in several ways. If we think of sin as violations of law, we can think of the crucifixion as payment of a legal penalty. If we think of sin as a violation of God’s holiness, then we can view Jesus as an atoning sacrifice. If sin makes us dirty, then Jesus’ blood makes us clean. If sin is bondage, then Jesus is the redeemer, the victorious rescuer. If sin creates hostility, Jesus brings reconciliation. If we see sin as ignorance or stupidity, then Jesus is the one who enlightens us and makes us wise. All these images can be helpful.

### **Appeasing God’s wrath?**

God has wrath against ungodliness, and there will be a “day of God’s wrath” when he judges the world (Romans 1:18; 2:5). People who “reject the truth” will be punished (verse 8). God loves them and would prefer that they change, but if they refuse, they will suffer the consequences. If the truth of God’s love and mercy is rejected, the result is punishment.

But God is not like some angry human who needs his “pound of flesh” to calm down. He loves us and provided the means by which our sins could be forgiven. They were not simply wiped away—the sins were given to Jesus, and there were real consequences for them.

“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us” (2 Corinthians 5:21). Jesus became a curse for us, became sin for us. It’s like our sins were given to him, and his righteousness was given to us “so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (same verse). We are given righteousness by God.

### **Righteousness of God displayed**

The gospel reveals the righteousness of God—that he is righteous to

forgive us instead of condemn us (Romans 1:17). He does not ignore our sins—he takes care of them through the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. The cross demonstrates God’s justice (Romans 3:25-26), and it demonstrates his love (5:8). It demonstrates justice because it is appropriate for sin (rebellion against the author of life) to be punished by death; it demonstrates love because the person who forgives is accepting the pain.

Jesus paid the price of our sin—the personal price of pain and shame. He achieved reconciliation (a restoration of personal fellowship) through the cross (Colossians 1:20). Even when we were enemies, he died for us (Romans 5:8).

Righteousness involves more than legal requirements. The Good Samaritan did not have a law telling him to help the wounded man, but he acted righteously when he did so. When it is in our power to rescue a drowning person, we should do so. When it was in God’s power to rescue a sin-enslaved world, he did so by sending Jesus Christ. “He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2). He died for everyone, even while we were all sinners.

## **Through faith**

In showing mercy, God is showing himself to be right. He is right to consider us righteous even though we are sinners. Why? Because he has made Christ to be our righteousness (1 Corinthians 1:30). Because we are united to Christ, we share in his righteousness. The righteousness we have is not our own, but it comes from God and is given to us by faith (Philippians 3:9).

This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. (Romans 3:22-26)

Jesus’ sacrifice was effective for everyone, but only those who have faith in Christ enjoy the benefits of his sacrifice. It is only when we accept the truth that we can experience the mercy. We see his death as ours (as a substitute and as something we participate in), we see his punishment as ours, and we see his victory and resurrection as ours. In this way God is true to his nature:

merciful and righteous. Sin is not ignored, nor are sinners ignored. God's mercy triumphs over legal requirements (James 2:13).

Through the cross, Christ has reconciled the whole world (2 Corinthians 5:19). Through the cross, the entire universe is being reconciled to God (Colossians 1:20). Everything will experience redemption because of what Jesus has done (Romans 8:21). That expands our understanding of the word salvation, doesn't it?

## **Born to die**

The bottom line is that we are saved through the death of Jesus Christ. He became flesh for this very purpose. In bringing us to glory, it was fitting that God have Jesus suffer and die (Hebrews 2:10). Because he wanted to save us, he became like us, so he could save us by dying for us.

“Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death” (2:14-15). It was by God's grace that Jesus experienced death for everyone (2:9). “Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God” (1 Peter 3:18).

The Bible gives us many ways to think about what Jesus did for us on the cross. We do not understand how all of it “works,” but we accept that it does. Because he died, we can enjoy eternal life with God.

I'll close with one more way to think about the cross—as an example:

“This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” (1 John 4:9-11).

## WHY DID JESUS DIE?

In March or April of each year, Christian churches typically set aside a day to commemorate the death of Jesus Christ. And whenever we participate in the Lord's Supper or Communion, we commemorate the death of Jesus. It's an important part of Christian faith and practice. Today, I'd like to explore some of the reasons for this, and I would like to begin by asking a multiple-choice question:

Why did Jesus die?

Actually, there are multiple answers.

For example, there is a medical answer to the question of why Jesus died. Maybe it was dehydration, or heat stroke, or an electrolytic imbalance in his bloodstream that caused the muscles in his heart to stop working.

And there is a social or political answer to the question of why Jesus died: the religious leaders were afraid that he was going to cause a rebellion against Rome, and that would cause Rome to kill thousands of people. So Jesus was put to death to avoid the risk of a war. He died because the religious leaders wanted him dead.

And there is a spiritual answer, too, and again there is more than one right answer. The Bible tells us that

- Jesus died for us (Romans 5:8).
- He died for our sins (Romans 4:25; 1 Corinthians 15:3; Colossians 2:14).
- He died to justify us, to declare us righteous (Romans 5:9; 2 Corinthians 5:21).
- He died to redeem us from the curse of the law (Galatians 3:13).
- Jesus died to destroy the devil, and to free us from the fear of death (Hebrews 2:15).
- He died to reconcile all of us to the Father (Romans 5:10; 1 Peter 3:18).
- He died to win a victory over powers and authorities (Colossians 2:15).
- He died so that we could live for him (2 Corinthians 5:15).

Now, some of these biblical statements are just the tip of the iceberg.

For example, the Bible says that Jesus died "for our sins." But there is a deeper question right after that. Someone might ask, Why does his death have anything to do with our sins? What's the connection between him dying, and us living? How does this work?

Theologians have answered this question with various "theories of

atonement.” Depending on how you count these theories, there are a half dozen or so. All of them have some biblical support, and each of them makes sense to at least a few people.

Atonement is an old English word meaning at-one-ment, the condition of being “at one” with God – what the Bible calls reconciliation. But in modern theological usage, the meaning of *atonement* is usually focused on the connection between Christ’s death and the forgiveness of our sins. There’s more to salvation than just the forgiveness of sins, so the question can be expanded even larger than that, but to keep our discussion a manageable size, let’s just look at what Jesus’ death does for our salvation.

One common theory of the atonement is called the penal substitution theory. The word penal comes from the Latin word *poena*, from which we get the legal word subpoena, and the English words pain, and penalty, and penitentiary and penance and penalize. A list of punishments for crimes is called a penal code. When England sent criminals to Australia, it was called a penal colony. The word refers to a penalty prescribed by a judge.

This theory, when it comes to Jesus, is that Jesus was a substitute for us, paying our penalty for us.

One song puts it this way: I owed a debt I could not pay, and he paid a debt he did not owe. That’s really a financial metaphor, but it’s a similar idea. One person is a substitute for another, paying a penalty on behalf of someone else. We deserved to die, but Jesus died for us, so we don’t have to.

Now, like I said, that is a common theory. In fact, it is so common that some people think that it’s the only explanation for why we can be saved by the death of Jesus. Maybe it was the explanation that made the most sense to you, and maybe it is the way you have explained the gospel to other people.

But as we have just seen, the Bible gives a number of other explanations, and they each add something to our understanding of how we are saved by the death of Jesus.

Actually, if we take a closer look at the penal substitution theory, we will see a few problems with it, and we will see that it’s a good thing the Bible gives some additional explanations as well. If we are going to explain the gospel as a substitute punishment, it will be helpful for us to know where the difficulties are, so that we can avoid some mistakes.

1. The first problem I will mention is not in the theory itself, but the way it is sometimes used. The story sometimes goes like this: God is perfect, and he gives us perfect laws, but we don’t keep them. We sin, and God’s sense of holiness and justice says that we deserve to die. He is angry at us and wants to punish us.



But along comes Jesus, who loves us and volunteers to die for us. Father, he says, if I pay the penalty for them, will you stop being angry at them? So the Father and the Son make a deal, and Jesus dies for us, and God is happy with us if we have faith in Jesus.

The big problem with this is that it makes Jesus quite different from his Father. God the Father looks like an ill-tempered grump who has to be talked into loving us, who has to be paid off, and Jesus is the nice guy who figures out a way to change his Father's mind.

But this is not the way that the Bible describes God the Father and God the Son. The Bible says that Jesus is the Word of God made flesh, God made human, a person in whom the fullness of the deity lives. Jesus told Philip, "If you have seen me, you have seen the Father" (John 14:9). The Father and the Son are in perfect agreement. The Father loves us just as much as Jesus does, and Jesus hates sin just as much as the Father does.

And it's not like Jesus figured out a way to convince God to be merciful – God was already merciful, and the Father is the one who *sent* Jesus to save us. The Father was not angry with us in the sense of wanting to punish us. No, quite the opposite – the Bible says that God wants everyone to escape the punishment. He is angry at sin, but he wants us to escape the results of sin. So the death of Jesus was not designed to change God's attitude toward us. Rather, it expressed what God himself did for us.

2. Now let's consider something else. The Bible says that the wages of sin is death. Everybody deserves to die, and it's like we are all on death row, waiting for our execution. Along comes Jesus and says, Hey, I am willing to die for these people. If we are on death row, that sounds like a pretty good deal.

But an impartial observer says, That's not justice. Justice does not mean punishing an innocent person and letting guilty people go free, even if the innocent person volunteers for it. If somebody is sentenced to 20 years in prison, we do not let anyone else serve the time for them – and if one person deserves to be executed, we don't let anybody else volunteer to take their place, especially if they are innocent. That's not justice.

Maybe you didn't know this, but in the Middle Ages, punishments could be transferred. If the king's son got into trouble, then they beat the son's servant instead. That is the origin of the term "whipping boy." The servant got whipped, and the prince had to watch him get a beating, and in the Middle Ages, they thought that justice had been served. The penalty had been paid, even if it was by someone else.

But today, many people do not think that this is fair. It does not seem to

fit into any category of justice for God to let condemned criminals go free just because Jesus volunteered to die for them. Maybe our sense of justice is wrong, but it will be difficult to argue for that in our culture. Maybe there is a better way to explain what's going on.

3. Third, the penal substitution theory focuses on the final penalty of sin – in a court of law at the last judgment, we will be found guilty and deserve the death penalty. Now, that is pretty serious, but I would like to point out that the penalty of sin at the last judgment is only part of our problem. It's only part of the problem of sin, and only part of what Jesus came to die for.

Sin is a real problem in this life. Paul describes sin as a power that grips our lives and enslaves us (Romans 6:20-21), causing us to make bad choices in life – bad choices that hurt us, and hurt the people around us. That's a real problem, and the good news is that Jesus has done something to solve this problem.

Just paying a future penalty is only part of the salvation that we need. Jesus frees us from the grip of sin – he liberates us from its enslaving power – and by the Holy Spirit, he begins to change us from the inside out. This is doing something about sin from where it begins, not just where it all ends up. This is saving us from our own corrupt selfishness, not just from a judicial verdict. That's good news, and the penal substitution theory doesn't say anything about it, but that is one of the reasons that Jesus died.

4. My last point here is that the penal substitution theory says that our salvation was completed by the death of Jesus. The substitute was offered on the cross, and the penalty was paid in full. But there is something important that is missing from this picture, and that is the resurrection of Jesus. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul said that if Christ had not been raised, then we would still be in our sins. The crucifixion is not enough – for the simple reason that the penalty is not the only problem that has to be taken care of, and the atonement of Jesus involves more than paying a penalty on our behalf. In Romans, Paul tells us that Jesus was raised to life for our justification, and we are saved not just by his death, but also by his life.

Now, if people are really worried about the last judgment and the penalty of their sins, then the penal substitution theory addresses their main concern, and it might be enough for them. But some people have different concerns, and they need a message of salvation that addresses those other concerns. As we mature in the Christian faith, we all need to know that the problem we have, and the salvation that Jesus gives us, involves much more than removing a penalty at the end of this age.

## Colossians 2

So today, let's look together at a passage in Paul's letter to the Colossians that describes several of the ways in which the death of Jesus saves us from our sins.

We can start in Colossians 2, verse 8 – this is the setting for what Paul says about Jesus: “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.” Paul is dealing with some false teachings that were circulating in the city of Colosse. We don't know exactly what they were, but we do see how Paul responded to them – and in doing so, he tells us about the salvation that Jesus brought us.

He starts in verse 9 by telling us who Jesus is: “...in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form.” In other words, Jesus Christ is fully divine, in a human body. Jesus was able to do what he did because he is both God and man. He represents God to us, and he represents humanity to God. Hebrews calls him a high priest, a mediator between God and humanity.

He came to earth and he became human precisely for this purpose, to become our representative. As a representative of all humanity, he died on our behalf – but not only that, as a representative of all humanity, he was raised to life on our behalf. He has joined himself to us, so that we might be joined to him in his journey from earth to heaven, in moving on the path from death to life. More on that in a moment.

Verse 10: “and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority.” So, we have been given everything we need in Christ. We don't need special rituals or extra works, and we don't need to appeal to any other powers or authorities. He has all the power and authority that we need.

For example, verse 11: “In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ.”

Wow – did you know that? You have all been circumcised – even the women have been circumcised – in Christ. Paul is not talking about physical circumcision, of course – he is talking about a figurative meaning – he is talking about putting off the sinful nature. That is exactly what we need. When we are enslaved by sin, when we see that wrong desires live within us, then this is one aspect of sin that we need to be saved from, and Paul is saying that Jesus in some way separates these wrong desires from us, like cutting off a piece of flesh that we don't need. A little corrective surgery, you might say.

How does Paul figure this? He figures it because Christ is our representative, and what he did counts for us. We see more of this in the next verse, verse 12: “having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.”

As Paul says in Romans 6, we died with Christ, and we were buried with him, as symbolized in our baptism, and we were raised with him. We are connected to him, united with him. So when he died, he was not our substitute in the sense that we don’t have to die. No—Paul says that we died with him. He was not a simple substitute, but an inclusive representative.

When he died, we died—and I think that is really good news. That’s because there are parts of me that I wish would die. There are wrong inclinations in me that I don’t want to struggle with for all eternity. So I am happy to know that when I die, those parts of me will stay dead, and only the good me will be resurrected. The death and resurrection of my body will be a cleansing process in which the weeds are thrown away and only the good grain will be gathered into the harvest for eternal life.

Sometimes people wonder, if all my sins have been forgiven in advance, and in the final judgment I am guaranteed a favorable verdict, why should I make any effort in this life? Maybe the reason that they ask this question is because the only way that they have ever looked at Christianity is through the lens of the penal substitution theory. If the only problem with sin is the verdict at the final judgment, and that verdict has already been taken care of, then the logical conclusion is that sin is not a problem anymore.

Now, most people know that that’s not right, but they might have a hard time explaining why, because they are used to thinking that the only reason Jesus came was to forgive us at the final judgment. You’ve probably noticed that there is a problem with sin even in this life. If your brother sins against you, it hurts. If your spouse cheats on you, it hurts. If somebody steals your money, it hurts. And on the other hand, if you lie, cheat and steal, then you find out that nobody likes you, and that hurts, too. Sin hurts all the way around, both the people who do it and the people around them.

That is why God doesn’t like it. When God tells us to avoid something, this is not just an arbitrary rule that God has put in our way to see if we can jump over it, knowing quite well that we are going to stumble at some point or another. No, God is not out to trip us up. Quite the opposite—he is out to save us. The reason that he tells us to avoid certain behaviors is because he knows that those behaviors cause problems in our lives.

When God forgives us, he is saying, Look, folks. You don’t have to worry

about the final exam, because you're going to pass. But you still have a life to live, and I'm telling you, if you make wrong choices, you are going to hurt somebody, most likely including yourself. We know, and God knows, that sometimes we aren't very good about doing even the things we know are right. We break our promises, we let other people down, we betray the trust they give to us, and we feel bad about it. So we need help. Jesus gives us help, and his death is an important part of that.

See, part of us needs to die, and in his death, Jesus gives us a way for those bad parts of us to die, and to stay dead. He is not only our representative — he also includes us in his death. Paul talks about it elsewhere, saying that the old person, or the old self, is dead, and the new self lives, created new in Jesus Christ. We are being recreated, bit by gradual bit, by the work of Christ in us.

There's a process of "out with the old, and in with the new." The Holy Spirit works within us to make this process possible. And when we die, the old selfish self will stay dead, and only the new person, created in Christ to be like Christ, only that good part will live into eternity. The old self will die, and the new self will live. We will be saved, and thankfully, we will not be the way we were. All the bad parts will be gone, and we'll be really glad they are.

My point here is that even though the final judgment has been guaranteed for us, it *does* matter what we do in this life. The problem with sin is not just a judicial verdict at the return of Christ—it's got something to do with who we are on a day-to-day basis. We as humans were made in the image of God, and *that* is who we are supposed to be like. Christ is the perfect human. The more we are like him in this life, the more we are like the way God designed us to be.

All of us start out as a mixture of good and evil, and we look forward to an age in which there is only good. We want to live in a world in which there is no more crying, there are no more tears and there is no more sin. We want to live in a world in which there is only love, and never any betrayal. If we really want that way of life, we want it now. We want to love other people, and never betray them. We want to be 100 percent faithful. We want to tell the truth rather than falsehood, we want to be generous rather than greedy, we want to be kind rather than resentful, etcetera.

The evil inclinations that enslave us, we want to put to death, and in Jesus they have been put to death. What happened to Jesus on the cross is not just something that happened to him—it happened to us as well, and this is the key to the change that we each want to happen within ourselves.

1 Peter 2:24 puts it this way: "He himself bore our sins in his body on the

tree, [why was he crucified?] so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness.” Jesus died not just to take care of the future day of judgment, but also to make a change in the way we live right now.

## Forgave all our sins

Let’s go back to Colossians 2, and pick it up in verse 13: “When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins.” We were dead in our sins – living the way that leads to death. And we were spiritually uncircumcised: our sinful nature was in control.

So without Christ, we had two problems: First, that we were dead; we were on the path that leads to death. And second, that we had this sinful nature in us, enslaving us. Christ takes care of both problems for us – not just the verdict on the day of judgment, but also in the day-to-day way in which we live.

What is involved in this? First, it says, “he forgave us all our sins.” Notice that this is in the past tense. When did he do it? Let’s read verse 14: “having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross.”

Now, this verse has had some translation difficulties, but some archaeological discoveries have made the meaning pretty clear. The NIV has “written code” here; the Greek word is *cheirographon*, which means handwriting. Archaeologists have discovered that this word usually refers to a handwritten note of debt. We had a debt that was against us, a debt that stood opposed to us, and Jesus took it away from us and nailed it to the cross. The debt is gone, which is another way of saying that Jesus forgave us all our sins.

He didn’t just forgive some of them, such as the ones we happen to be aware of, and the ones we happen to repent of. He does not wait for us to itemize everything we’ve ever done wrong and say “sorry” for each one of them. In fact, he doesn’t wait for us at all. This is all past tense – he did it when he died, before we were even born.

As it says in Colossians 1, verses 21-22: “Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight.”

Once we were enemies, but even when we were enemies, God sent Jesus to die for us, because he doesn’t want us to be enemies. He doesn’t want to punish us, or to have us suffer from the consequences of sin. So he sent

Jesus, and through the death of Jesus' physical body, we have been reconciled to God. That was done even before we knew about it. It was done before we were born. It was done because God wanted us to be friends rather than enemies.

We might call this a unilateral cease-fire. We might continue struggling against God, but he does not retaliate against us. He does not want to punish us – he sent Jesus to earth so that we could escape the negative consequences of sin. He wants to save us, to help us escape. So he cancels the debt – he tells us that we will be declared righteous on the day of judgment.

Now, this advance declaration of “no penalty” doesn't do us a lot of good if we insist on living in sin, if we insist on banging our head against the wall and shooting ourselves in the foot. If we act foolishly, then there may not be any penalty in the next life, but there sure is a penalty in this life. God does not take that away. Jesus did not die to somehow make it OK to sin. Sin still produces pain and suffering, and God wants us to stop it, because he loves us and he loves the people around us.

You have probably noticed that it's not very easy to just stop sinning. We've got habits. As Paul says in Ephesians 6, we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but spiritual forces that are our enemies. We need victory over those spiritual forces that lead us into sin. Thankfully, Jesus did that for us, too—and he achieved that victory not by force, but by his death on the cross.

Colossians 2:15: “And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.” This is what is often called the *Christus Victor* theory of the atonement. It means Christ is the Victor, the one who conquered not just death, but all spiritual enemies, by his death on the cross. One of the enemies that he conquered was death itself, and one of the reasons that he died a public death is to demonstrate to everyone that he has indeed won a victory over death itself. He has been there and come out the other side.

We win our spiritual battles only because he has triumphed over all our spiritual enemies, and that even includes our own tendencies to sin. Christ conquered every spiritual enemy that we have. It is his strength that is the key to the Christian life.

Colossians 1:20 says that Christ has reconciled to himself all things. Romans 8:21 says that Christ has redeemed the entire creation. By his death on the cross, he has won a cosmic victory that is much, much larger than the verdict given to humans on the day of judgment. The entire creation needs to be fixed, and simply paying the penalty of human sin is only a small part

of what Christ did on the cross. Yes, he gives us a verdict of “righteous.” But he does a lot more than that – he takes care of every enemy, and everything.

So why did Christ die? He died to forgive our sins, so that we escape the final judgment. He died so that we would die with him, so that our old and corrupt self might be eliminated, so that we can get rid of everything within us that isn’t like what God created us to be. And third, he died to give us victory over every spiritual enemy. He died to liberate us from the power of sin that resides within us. He died to liberate us from the power of death itself.

And last, and perhaps this is overlapping with the meaning of Easter, he died so that we might live, so that we might be raised with him into newness of life, into life the way it ought to be lived, into life the way that it *will* be lived in the eternal age to come. Amen.

*Michael Morrison*



## WHY DID JESUS HAVE TO DIE?

Jesus had an amazingly productive ministry, teaching and healing thousands. He attracted large crowds and had potential for much more. He could have healed thousands more by traveling to the Jews and Gentiles who lived in other areas.

The Old Testament tells us that God appeared on earth on several occasions. If Jesus wanted only to heal and teach, he could have simply appeared. But he did more: he became a human. Why? So he could die. To understand Jesus, we need to understand his death. His death is part of the gospel message and something all Christians should know about.

But Jesus allowed this work to come to a sudden end. He could have avoided arrest, but he chose to die instead of expanding his ministry. Although his teachings were important, he had come not just to teach, but also to die.

Death was an important part of Jesus' ministry. This is the way we remember him, through the cross as a symbol of Christianity or through the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper. Our Savior is a Savior who died.

### **Born to die**

Jesus said, "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:28). He came to give his life, to die, and his death would result in salvation for others. This was the reason he came to earth. His blood was poured out for others (Matthew 26:28).

Jesus warned his disciples that he would suffer and die, but they did not seem to believe it. "Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 'Never, Lord!' he said. 'This shall never happen to you!'" (Matthew 16:21-22).

Jesus knew that he must die, because the Scriptures said so. "Why then is it written that the Son of Man must suffer much and be rejected?" (Mark 9:12; 9:31; 10:33-34). "Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.... 'This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day'" (Luke 24:26-27, 46).

It all happened according to God's plan: Herod and Pilate did only what God "had decided beforehand should happen" (Acts 4:28). In the Garden of

Gethsemane, when Jesus knew that he would soon be crucified, Jesus asked his Father if there might be some other way, but there was none (Luke 22:42). His death was necessary for our salvation.

## **The suffering servant**

It was written in the Old Testament, Jesus had said. Where was it written? Isaiah 53 is one of the prophecies. Jesus quoted Isaiah 53:12 when he said: “It is written: ‘And he was numbered with the transgressors’; and I tell you that this must be fulfilled in me. Yes, what is written about me is reaching its fulfillment” (Luke 22:37). Jesus, although without sin, was to be counted among sinners. Notice what else is written in Isaiah 53:

Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

For the transgression of my people he was stricken.... Though he had done no violence ... it was the Lord’s will to crush him and cause him to suffer ... the Lord makes his life a guilt offering.... He will bear their iniquities.... He bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors. (verses 4-12)

Isaiah describes someone who suffers not for his own sins, but for the sins of others. Although this man would be “cut off from the land of the living” (verse 8), that would not be the end of the story. “He will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many.... He will see his offspring and prolong his days” (verses 11, 10).

What Isaiah wrote, Jesus fulfilled. He laid down his life for his sheep (John 10:15). In his death, he carried our sins and suffered for our transgressions; he was punished so that we might have peace with God. Through his suffering and death, our spiritual illness is healed; we are justified, accepted by God.

These truths are developed in more detail in the New Testament.

## **Dying an accursed death**

“Anyone who is hung on a tree is under God’s curse,” says Deuteronomy 21:23. Because of this verse, Jews considered any crucified person to be

condemned by God. As Isaiah wrote, people would consider him “stricken by God.”

The Jewish leaders probably thought that Jesus’ disciples would give up after their leader was killed. It happened just as they hoped — the crucifixion shattered the disciples’ hopes. They were dejected and said, “We had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel” (Luke 24:21). But their hopes were dramatically restored when Jesus appeared to them after his resurrection, and at Pentecost, the Holy Spirit filled them with new conviction to proclaim salvation in Jesus Christ. They had unshakable faith in the least likely hero: a crucified Messiah.

Peter told the Jewish leaders, “The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead—whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree” (Acts 5:30). By using the word tree, Peter reminded the leaders about the curse involved in crucifixion. But the shame was not on Jesus, he said—it was on the people who crucified him. God had blessed Jesus because he did not deserve the curse he suffered. God had reversed the stigma and shame.

Paul referred to the same curse in Galatians 3:13: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.’” Jesus became a curse on our behalf so we could escape the curse of the law, which is death. He became something he was not, so that we could become something we were not. “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21).

He became sin for us, so that we might be declared righteous through him. Because he suffered what we deserved, he redeemed us from the curse of the law. “The punishment that brought us peace was upon him.” Because he suffered death, we can enjoy peace with God.

## **Message of the cross**

The disciples never forgot the shameful way that Jesus died. Indeed, sometimes that was the focus of the message: “We preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles” (1 Corinthians 1:23). Paul even called the gospel “the message of the cross” (verse 18). Paul reminded the Galatians that “before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified” (Galatians 3:1). That was how he summarized the way that he preached the gospel.

Why is the cross good news? Because the cross is the means by which Jesus rescued us from death. Paul focused on the cross because it is the key to Jesus being good news for us. We will not be raised into glory unless in

Christ we are made “the righteousness of God.” Only then do we join Jesus in his glory. The crucifixion is part of the process by which we are transformed from the old creation to the new.

Paul says that Jesus died “for us” (Romans 5:6-8; 2 Corinthians 5:14; 1 Thessalonians 5:10); he also says that he died “for our sins” (1 Corinthians 15:3; Galatians 1:4). “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree” (1 Peter 2:24; 3:18). Paul also says that we died with Christ (Romans 6:3-8). Though our union with him in faith, we participate in his death.

It is as if we were on the cross, receiving the consequences that our sins deserved. But Jesus did it for us, and because he did it, we can be justified, or proclaimed as righteous. He takes our sin and death; he gives us righteousness and life. The prince became a pauper, so that we paupers might become princes.

Although Jesus used the word *ransom* to describe our rescue, the ransom wasn’t paid to anyone in particular—this is a figure of speech to indicate that it cost Jesus an enormous amount to set us free. In the same way, Paul talks about Jesus redeeming us, buying our freedom, but he didn’t pay anyone.

God loves people—but he hates sin, because sin hurts people. God wants everyone to change (2 Peter 3:9), but those who don’t will suffer the result of their own sins.

In the death of Jesus, our sins are set aside. But this does not mean that a loving Jesus appeased or “paid off” an angry God. The Father is just as merciful as Jesus is, and Jesus is just as angry about sin as the Father is. He is angry at sin because sin hurts the people he loves. Jesus is the Judge who condemns (Matthew 25:31-46), as well as the Judge who loves sinners so much that he dies for them.

When God forgives us, he does not simply wipe away sin and pretend it never existed. Sins have serious consequences—consequences we can see in the cross of Christ. Humanity’s tendency to sin cost Jesus pain and shame and death.

The gospel reveals that God acts righteously in forgiving us (Romans 1:17); his mercy is part of his righteous character. He does not ignore our sins, but takes care of them in Jesus Christ. Metaphorically, God presented Jesus as a sacrifice for our forgiveness. Sin has consequences, and Jesus volunteered to suffer the consequences on our behalf. The cross demonstrates God’s love as well as his justice (Romans 5:8).

As Isaiah says, we have peace with God because of what Christ did. We were once enemies of God, but through Christ we have been brought near

(Ephesians 2:13). In other words, we have been reconciled to God through the cross (verse 16). It is a basic Christian belief that our relationship with God depends on Jesus Christ, including his death.

Christianity is not a list of things to do—it is accepting that Christ has done everything we need to be right with God—and this was done on the cross. “When we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son” (Romans 5:10). God reconciled the universe through Christ, “making peace through his blood, shed on the cross” (Colossians 1:20). He did this before we believed it, before we were even born. Since we are reconciled through him, all our sins are forgiven (verse 22)—reconciliation, forgiveness and justification all mean the same thing: peace with God.

### **Victory!**

Paul uses an interesting image of salvation when he writes that Jesus “disarmed the powers and authorities” by making “a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross” (Colossians 2:15). He uses the word for a military parade: the winning general brings captured enemy soldiers in a victory parade at home. They are disarmed, humiliated, and put on display. Paul’s point here is that on the cross, Jesus did this to our enemies.

What looked like a shameful death for Jesus was actually a glorious triumph for God’s plan, because it is through the cross that Jesus won victory over enemy powers, including Satan, sin and death. Their claim on us has been fully satisfied in the death of the innocent victim. They cannot demand any more than what he has already paid. They have nothing further to threaten us with.

“By his death,” we are told, Jesus was able to “destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil” (Hebrews 2:14). “The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work” (1 John 3:8). Victory was won on the cross.

### **Sacrifice**

Jesus’ death is also described as a sacrifice. The idea of sacrifice draws on the rich imagery of Old Testament sacrifices. Isaiah 53:10 calls our Savior a “guilt offering.” John the Baptist calls him the Lamb “who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). Paul calls him a “sacrifice of atonement,” a “sin offering,” a “Passover lamb,” a “fragrant offering” (Romans 3:25; 8:3; 1 Corinthians 5:7; Ephesians 5:2). Hebrews 10:12 calls him a “sacrifice for sins.” John calls him “the atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 2:2; 4:10).

Several terms are used to describe what Jesus accomplished on the cross. Different New Testament authors use different words or images to convey the idea. The exact terminology or mechanism is not essential. What is important is that we are saved through the death of Jesus. “By his wounds we are healed.” He died to set us free, to remove our sins, to suffer our punishment, to purchase our salvation. How should we respond? “Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” (1 John 4:11).

## Seven Images of Salvation

The New Testament uses a wide range of images to express the richness of the work of Christ. We may describe these images as analogies, models or metaphors. Each gives part of the picture:

**Ransom:** a price paid to achieve someone’s freedom. The emphasis falls on the idea of being freed, not the nature of the price.

**Redemption:** “buying back,” or for a slave, buying freedom.

**Justification:** being put right with God, as if declared by a court to be in the right.

**Salvation:** deliverance or rescue from a dangerous situation. The word can also suggest restoration to wholeness, a healing.

**Reconciliation:** the repair of a broken relationship. God reconciles us to him. He acts to restore a friendship, and we respond to his initiative.

**Adoption:** making us legal children of God. Faith brings about a change in our status, from outsider to family member. The phrase “born again” suggests a different way to enter the family.

**Forgiveness:** This can be seen in two ways. In legal or financial terms, forgiveness is like the cancellation of a debt. In terms of personal relationship, forgiveness means the setting aside of personal hurt or injury.

(Adapted from Alister McGrath, *Understanding Jesus*, pp. 124-135).

*Michael Morrison*

## APPRECIATING CHRIST'S SACRIFICE

While reading a list of the 100 best novels written since 1900, I noted two by Vladimir Nabokov. Not being familiar with this author, I checked him out on Google (ah, the marvels of search engines!) and found that in addition to being a famous novelist, he is known for coining the term *doughnut truth*, which refers to truths with holes in them, making them less than the full truth. It struck me that some of the current explanations of Christ's sacrifice are doughnut truths of a sort. Let me explain.

"Jesus died to appease the wrath of God brought about by your sins" is a message being thundered from many pulpits. The idea is that Jesus had to interpose himself between God and us and suffer in order to absorb all of God's wrath towards sinful humanity. Many Christians accept this *penal-substitution theory* of the atonement (sometimes called the *forensic theory*) as the Bible's primary teaching on the topic. Sadly, an overemphasis on this theory leaves the impression that Christ died not as a substitute for sinners, but as a substitute object for God's punishment. The mistaken idea is that God the Father had to take his anger out on someone—as if inflicting pain and suffering on someone would itself make things right.

There are significant problems with this theory (model) of the atonement. One is that the Bible uses not one but several models to describe the riches of Christ's atoning work on our behalf, including the sacrificial model, the economic model of exchange (redemption), the familial or filial model of family (reconciliation), the marital model (fidelity), and the healing model (peace, shalom). As Gustaf Aulen points out in *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement*, the Bible also presents a Christ the victor (*Christus victor*) model of the atonement, which was the primary one taught by the early church fathers. According to this model, "The work of Christ is first and foremost a victory over the powers which hold mankind in bondage: sin, death and the devil" (*Christus Victor*, p. 20). Rather than going to the cross to appease God's wrath, Christ did so to claim victory over the bondage of sin, the threat of death and the power of the devil, thus making all things subject to himself. Just as God delivered Israel from the bondage of oppression into liberty, so God delivers us from these terrible forms of oppression into true freedom in Christ.

Some theologians, such as Gregory Boyd and Scot McKnight, teach that the Christ the victor model should be seen as the Bible's central model of atonement and the forensic model should be viewed as only one of several.

Some theologians who support the centrality of the forensic model offer cautions about doing so. J.I. Packer warns that it should not be based singularly on human models of justice (which often is retaliatory or reciprocal) and should not be understood as an automatic explanation of how penal substitution really works. John Stott, in *The Cross of Christ*, lists multiple cautions about misrepresenting the nature of the atonement.

It certainly is true that Christ's death paid the price, the cost, the debt and even the penalty of our sin. Jesus did rescue us from the consequences of our sin and experienced those consequences in order to overcome them and transform them on our behalf. But the penal substitution model of the atonement can be taken too far. Here are some common ways:

- Misrepresenting the Father as forcing the Son to do what he didn't want to do—making the will of God divided and opposed between the Father and the Son.
- Misrepresenting the Son as manipulating, appeasing or cajoling the Father into changing his mind about condemning humanity—again, making the will of God divided.
- Characterizing the Father's wrath as being pitted against the love of Christ. This mistake pits God against God as if the character and purpose of God are divided, at odds.
- Modeling the atonement after human models of retribution or vengeance, which are rooted in violence and tend to look more like child abuse than grace—as if human wrath “works the righteousness of God,” when it does not.
- Portraying the sinner as the object of God's wrath instead of the sinner's sin. This mistaken approach loses sight of the biblical truth that God's aim is to separate the sinner from the sin, so that the sin can be done away with and the sinner redeemed.
- Viewing the Old Testament sacrifices as God pouring out his wrath on the animals used for sacrifice—sending them to “hell” on behalf of Israel. The truth is that the sacrificial animals were not being punished, but as unblemished creatures were sacrificially giving their lives so that there might be life in others where there was only death.
- Misrepresenting forgiveness as God making exceptions for sin in the lives of some. The truth is that God is implacably opposed to all sin everywhere, and through Christ made a way to condemn all sin, yet rescue sinners, giving them new, regenerated natures and



making everything new.

- Portraying God as being absolutely separate from sinners. This misrepresentation flies in the face of God dwelling among Israel and the entire story of the Incarnation.
- Attributing to God a role that actually is Satan’s (whose name means “accuser”), thus making God out to be the accuser of humanity (because humanity is unholy and unworthy) and portraying God as desiring sinners’ condemnation rather than their repentance (the mistake made by Jonah!).
- Viewing grace as a secondary, separate and optional work of God after his primary and necessary work of judicial justice has been accomplished.
- Separating God’s justice from God’s love; his righteousness from his mercy and grace.
- Portraying God as more bound by his own rules of retributive justice (punishing the bad and rewarding the good) than by his restorative righteousness and desire for the reconciliation of his covenant love (where God’s righteousness aims to put things right).
- Placing an exclusive emphasis on sinners being saved from the penalty or consequences of sin, rather than on the sinner being saved from sin and being given a share in Christ’s renewed and glorified human nature. The truth is that we are saved *from* sin and *for* a right relationship of holy love with God as his beloved children.
- Overlooking the incarnation, the cross and the resurrection, and thus the truth that the Son of God became the new Adam—the new head of humanity—who came to reconcile the world to God on behalf of the Father and in the Holy Spirit, and not to condemn the world.

Faithful and accurate consideration of the atoning work of Christ will take into account the *whole* of the biblical story and teaching. When one aspect of that truth is singled out and developed in isolation, distortion inevitably results. But when we assemble all the pieces, giving all of them full weight while keeping Jesus at the center, we’re on the right track. That holistic approach keeps clearly in mind Christ’s relationship to the Father and the Spirit, and his relationship to us, and why he came. This is what the apostle Paul did in writing that God poured his love out lavishly upon us in Jesus

Christ in order to condemn sin in his flesh so that we might have his new life and love in us by the Spirit (Ephesians 1:7-8; Romans 8:3-4). The author of Hebrews adds that Jesus Christ paid the price to bring this reconciliation about freely and gladly, united in heart, mind and will with the Father and the Holy Spirit (Hebrews 12:2; 9:14). The Bible teaches that Jesus' atoning work was an act of the eternal, divine love of the Father, Son and Spirit.

We understand God and his lavish love for us through Jesus' life and especially through his self-giving death. As T.F. Torrance notes in *The Mediation of Christ*, "the cross is a window opened into the very heart of God." The cross reveals a God who is passionately in love with the world, not one who is furiously angry with it. Indeed, *God so loved the world that he gave his Son*. Yes, God hates sin, but he hates it because it hurts the world that he loves; it hurts his beloved creation. God does not pour out his wrath on the object of his love—Jesus or any of his other children. Jesus did not go to the cross to appease an angry God, but to show clearly the unconditional love of a Father, Son and Spirit whose greatest desire is to be in relationship with us. And that's not *doughnut truth*—it's *whole, gospel truth!*

*Joseph Tkach*

## WHY THE MESSIAH HAD TO DIE

Many first-century Jews expected a Messiah. Groaning under the oppression of occupation forces, they prayed for God to give them a leader — a leader who would defeat the Roman armies and again make the Jews a wealthy, powerful and independent nation. They wanted a Messiah who would lead them to righteousness, because God had promised to restore their fortunes when the people returned to righteousness.

The Hebrew prophets had foretold a leader like that, the heir to the throne of the great King David. Some prophecies even indicated the first century was the appointed time for him to come.

When people heard Jesus preach, and when they saw his miracles, they hoped he was the one. He had divine authority. He was a teacher of righteousness, a champion of the poor, and he preached about liberation for the oppressed. So the crowds acclaimed him the prophesied son of David, and they threw down palm fronds as he rode into Jerusalem one spring day.

But within a week, the would-be leader was dead — rejected by his own people and executed by the Romans, hung out for public shame and ridicule, just like others who had claimed to be messianic leaders. For the moment, the hopes and dreams of those who had believed in him were shattered. But, on the third day, Jesus was raised from the dead — resurrected to glory, and ascended to heaven. He really was the Anointed One, the Righteous One, the Holy One of Israel, the Messiah of God.

The miracle of the resurrection, attested by hundreds who saw him alive, showed that he was the promised Messiah. But one thing still did not make sense — why did the Messiah have to die?

Surely his death proved he was not righteous. Surely God would not allow his appointed leader to be falsely accused, slandered, ridiculed and killed by the enemy! Of what value is a leader who dies, who goes away and cannot be followed?

The Hebrew prophets had foretold the Messiah's death, but their prophecies had not been understood. It had been God's plan all along for the Messiah to suffer and die for his people. God knew the people's biggest enemy was not the Romans — it was death that results from sin. Sin and death could not be conquered by swords and spears, but only by the unjust death of the Creator. It is only through Jesus' atoning death on the cross that sins can be forgiven; it is only through him that we can be given eternal life.

Jesus brought blessings for the entire world, not just for a small nation in

the eastern Roman Empire. He gave the gift of righteousness and eternal life. That is why the Messiah had to die. “If righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!” (Galatians 2:21). Righteousness cannot be obtained through the law. No amount of ceremony or law keeping can make up for the fact that we have already broken the law and come under its penalty.

Jesus was a teacher of righteousness, but he did not save the nation through his teachings, even though they were perfect. He saved the nation — and people of all other nations — by his death and resurrection. He was condemned by Jewish and Roman law and bore the curse of the biblical law (Galatians 3:13), but he brought the gift of righteousness and eternal life to all who believe in him.

The Roman armies are long gone. Someday, our trials will also be gone. We need to see beyond the present and realize that our ultimate enemy is sin and death. We need the Messiah who conquered that enemy, and who gives us the victory over it. God has given us precisely the leader we need — Jesus, the Messiah who died and was raised for the entire world!

*Joseph W. Tkach*

## TWO TRUTHS WE LEARN FROM JESUS' DEATH

Jesus Christ died for us, forgiving all our debts, rescuing us from the slavery of sin, redeeming us from its deadly consequences. He has also been raised for us and lives in us, empowering us to live in him. I am so thankful for what he has done for us! The holy, perfect Son of God gave himself for us to rescue us from our sins. Salvation is truly the best news possible!

Let me rehearse two fundamental truths we can learn from Jesus' crucifixion.

1. First, God hates sin. The cross shows us how ugly sin is. Sin caused the death of God's own Son, and that is another reason he hates sin so much. Sin is the vilest, ugliest thing in the universe — and you and I have done it. We deserve the death that Jesus accepted.

2. Second, the cross shows us how much God loves us. The fact that Jesus, the Son of God, was willing to suffer and die for you and me shows that he loves us with a passion that exceeds and overcomes his hatred of sin. Jesus was willing to pay the price. He was willing to suffer excruciating torture and death so that he might conquer sin and reverse its grip on us.

God wants to give you and me and all his children the best gift we could possibly imagine: life with God — life eternal with Father, Son and Spirit — and he wants us to enjoy this forever and ever! No greater blessing could ever exist, and God wants to give it to us. He so earnestly desires to give us this eternal life that he sent his Son to die so that we might live with him. Oh, what a joy it is!

My friend, can you begin to grasp the enormity of God's love for you? I hope you join with me in praising the God of our salvation — praising in heartfelt joy, in song, in words, and in deeds.

“Christ's love compels us,” Paul wrote, “because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again” (2 Corinthians 5:14-15). What a powerful message is contained in those two verses!

1. First, we died with Jesus Christ. Christ our Passover lamb has been crucified for us — and our old self was crucified with him (1 Corinthians 5:7; Romans 6:6). Because he died for us, we died with him.

2. How then should we live? What should our response be to this priceless gift? The new self should live — a new creation of Jesus Christ — a new child of God. In him, we put to death the works of the flesh and are clothed

in the righteousness of Jesus Christ. By his power, we no longer serve sin, no longer serve ourselves, but now serve our Lord and Savior.

Christ's love compels us, Paul said. Have you understood and experienced that kind of love in your life, the kind of love that compels you to serve the One who died for you? I certainly hope so, because it is the most rewarding life that anyone could ever have.

That's why I rejoice in the opportunity to symbolize my faith in my Savior by eating the bread that represents his body, by drinking "the fruit of the vine" that represents the new covenant in his blood (Luke 22:19-20). I rejoice in the opportunity to celebrate not only his death for us, but also that he was resurrected and now lives in us, leading and strengthening us in a life of righteousness through the Holy Spirit.

Paul says our lives are hidden in Christ and that we live for him (Colossians 3:3; 2 Corinthians 5:15). Can anything be more meaningful, more valuable? I pray that we might renew our commitment to love our Lord with our whole heart and follow him wherever he leads us. I pray that he will bless you with his love, peace and healing touch.

*Joseph Tkach*

## A DEATH IN JERUSALEM

On a spring day in Jerusalem, a man named Jesus was tortured and executed by the Roman government. But after he died God resurrected him, and the world was forever changed.

Jerusalem seemed to be gripped by a fanatical hysteria during that fateful day on which Jesus died. Some were shouting that he had blasphemed against God and should be condemned to death. Others accused him of treason against the state, and clamored for his execution.

Jesus' closest disciples disowned him and fled. Many others followed Jesus to the cross, mourning and wailing for him. Some people hurled insults at him as he was dying. "Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him," they taunted (Matthew 27:42).

One of the criminals executed with Jesus was profoundly moved, perceiving something special about Jesus—something beyond his humanity. A centurion praised God and said, "Surely this man was the Son of God!" (Mark 15:39).

Strange things occurred that day in Jerusalem. The land was mired in a strange darkness between noon and 3 in the afternoon. For no known reason, the curtain in front of the temple's Most Holy Place ripped in two from top to bottom.

Earlier, the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, had agonized over what to do with Jesus. Pilate had been reluctant to sign the execution order because there was no legal reason for doing so. He knew Jesus wasn't guilty of any crime. But Pilate didn't have the political will to resist those who demanded that Jesus be crucified. Finally, to appease the mob, the governor simply signed away the carpenter's life.

### **Letter from Pilate?**

One wonders how Pilate might have explained his actions regarding Jesus to himself—or his superiors in Rome. Pilate was known for overstepping his authority and for being brutal to his subjects. (A few years after signing Jesus' death warrant, Pilate was ordered to Rome to justify his slaughter of a Samaritan religious group that had gathered on Mt. Gerizim.)

Let us assume Pilate felt compelled to justify his execution of Jesus to the emperor. His letter might have looked something like this:

To Emperor Tiberius regarding the execution of an insurrectionist from Galilee.

Greetings:

Your Majesty, I'm writing this letter so you will be aware of an unusual situation in the province of Judea. On the day before the Jews' Passover this year, I executed a man named Jesus, who was from the town of Nazareth.

I thought I would write a personal report to you about this as it is said by some that this man claimed to be a god. The Jewish leaders of Jerusalem told me he had taught everywhere that death would not hold him and that he would rise from the grave, to live again.

But that is not why I felt compelled to have the man executed. He was accused of insurrection and of being the ringleader of a rebel group prepared to overthrow Caesar's government in Judea. He even claimed to be a king himself—a king of the Jews.

When I discovered these things, as a precautionary measure, I authorized a search for the man and had him quickly arrested. His followers scattered into the hills when my soldiers arrived.

I investigated the charges against this Jesus very thoroughly before proceeding against him. Though I was unable personally to verify the accusations, the man did have a large following throughout the province. This seemed evidence enough that the indictment against him as a ringleader of rebellion was true.

It was the leaders of our loyal Jewish subjects in Judea—including the high priest—who brought the charges to me. They insisted they had evidence of a plot. Their own ruling body, the Sanhedrin, concurred that this man was guilty of crimes against Caesar, and said he should be crucified.

The accused man did not deny the charges—he made no reply to them. In order to preserve Caesar's enlightened rulership in Judea, I thought it prudent to deal decisively with the situation and proceed with the examination of the accused. At its completion, I ordered that he undergo the standard execution by crucifixion outside the city walls of Jerusalem.

After his death, I had the body placed in a tomb. I intended to secure the tomb with our own soldiers, but the Jewish religious leaders objected. They pleaded for their temple police to guard it. To show concern for our subjects and to keep the peace of Caesar intact, I allowed their police to be involved in the security measures. I also ordered a large stone to be rolled across the entrance of the tomb.



Then, I placed a seal on it.

However, a report soon came to my ears that the tomb of this crucified insurrectionist was empty. The Jews said that in spite of their best efforts, the followers of this man somehow had been able to steal the body from the tomb.

I made diligent search but was unable to locate it. Whatever the fate of the body, this man's followers now insist he is alive. They are making this claim publicly throughout Jerusalem, asserting that they speak "in Jesus' name." His followers say he is a god. Because of this many are joining their cause.

That being so, I was uncertain what further course I ought to take regarding the followers of this man they say is still alive. The nature of the situation seemed to justify my writing and consulting you.

Pontius Pilate,  
Governor of Judea

Actually, there was no letter. The world took no notice of what happened that spring day in Jerusalem. Only a few discerned there was something different about this man, though they couldn't quite put their finger on what it was. Pilate himself saw Jesus only as a political problem to be dealt with. He had no idea that he had become a player in a momentous historical drama.

The death, burial and resurrection of Jesus, we now know, was the pivotal event of human history. God had sent Jesus to rescue the world from sin by his death. He was resurrected so we might have eternal life. Pilate had no awareness of this central truth of human history (John 18:33-38). He saw Jesus as just another human standing in his way, not God in the flesh.

## The rescue

Strangely, many in the Christian world are also not sure of Jesus Christ's identity. Was he the wisest of wise teachers, but nothing more? If the answer is yes, Jesus' death could have no special meaning and his claimed resurrection would be a pious fraud.

The central event of all history— Jesus' death and resurrection—has meaning only when we understand his divine identity. Jesus was more than a good man, mystical teacher or the best of humans. To put it in a short sentence that describes a divine mystery: Jesus was God in the flesh.

We learn about Jesus' true identity from the first chapter of the Gospel of John. He begins by describing "the Word" as the eternal life that existed from the beginning. This Word was both *with* God and *was* God. In some

mysterious and miraculous way, the Word became flesh—became a human being—and lived with us as the man Jesus Christ.

In Jesus, God “came down” to reach out to humans—to help us to be reconciled to him—and to restore our relationship with the Creator. The apostle Paul spoke of Jesus’ work in these very terms.

He said God “reconciled us to himself through Christ... God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them” (2 Corinthians 5:18-19). In Jesus, God demonstrated his loving plan, which was his purpose from the beginning. Paul told his co-worker Titus that the Christian’s future rests on the hope of eternal life that God “promised before the beginning of time” (Titus 1:2).

God takes every possible step to reconcile us to him. God is the greatest example of a pursuing lover. He yearns, as the apostle Peter said, for “everyone to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). God showed this love while human beings were yet sinners—still his enemies. This proved God was not about rules, or about anger, or about condemnation. He was about love—about bringing us home to himself.

## **Suffering God**

In Jesus, God entered the world to live with a suffering humanity. Jesus shared in our humanity (Hebrews 2:14). That means God can sympathize with our weaknesses. He has “been there, done that.” God knows what it’s like to experience hatred and injustice. In Jesus, he even endured the final torment: extreme torture and death by agonizing crucifixion.

In Jesus, God shared our suffering; this should help to reconcile us to him. Because God reached out to us through a suffering human life, we have no reason to question God’s motives, even though we may not fully understand the processes he uses.

God’s promise revealed in Jesus is that he will liberate us from the bondage and corruption we now suffer. It will be a glorious and eternal freedom. That, as the saying goes, is something we can take to the bank. It is certain. In Jesus, God entered our suffering world voluntarily to begin the process of transforming it. Jesus’ death closed the gap sin had caused between humanity and God.

## **His life also**

Jesus’ death, however, is only half the story of salvation. The rest of the story is his resurrection. We need a living and a resurrected Savior. We need both the Cross and the Empty Tomb. We need both the death and the life

of Christ. The apostle Paul showed how the two work together. He wrote, “If, when we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!” (Romans 5:10).

Jesus Christ’s death is about our present. It makes peace between us and God. His resurrection and life is about our future. It is a living promise that there is much more to our lives than our temporary and physical here-and-now existence.

The book of Revelation gives us a beautiful picture of our eternal future, in which we are promised eternal life in peace with our Creator. John, the writer, explains this through the image of the new Jerusalem, which symbolizes the eternal kingdom of God. Speaking of that eternal rest, John quotes a loud voice from God’s throne saying:

Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. (Revelation 21:3-4)

The resurrection—the way to this eternal kingdom—is the cornerstone of the Christian life. The resurrection of Jesus is the proof that we, too, shall be lifted up from death to immortal life.

No letter about Jesus from Pilate to Emperor Tiberius exists. However, several early church writers claimed that Pilate did, indeed, send a report of the trial and execution of Jesus to Tiberius. (See Tertullian, *Apology* 16; Justin, *Apology* 1.35; Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.2.) Tertullian claimed that when Emperor Tiberius read the report about Jesus, he asked the Roman senate to declare him a god, but that the proposition was rejected (*Apology* 26).

*Greg Albrecht*

## JESUS IS OUR ATONEMENT

For many years, I fasted on Yom Kippur, the Jewish High Day referred to as the Day of Atonement. I did so wrongly thinking that abstaining from food and drink on that day was reconciling me to God. No matter how it was presented to us at the time, fasting on Yom Kippur for that purpose meant trying to maintain our Atonement (at-one-ment) with God through our own works. We were practicing a religious system of grace plus works—one that overlooked the reality that Jesus is our Atonement.

When we view Yom Kippur with new covenant eyes, we understand that Jesus is our Atonement. As is the case with all of Israel's worship festivals, the Day of Atonement points to the person and work of Jesus for our salvation. He is the embodiment of ancient Israel's worship system.

Though we now understand that the Hebrew calendar pointed forward to Jesus' coming, and thus is now obsolete because Jesus has come and inaugurated the new covenant, we acknowledge that God used that calendar to help us see who Jesus truly is. Today, our focus is on the four major "Christ events"—the birth, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus.

Yom Kippur pointed forward to Jesus' death. When we seek to understand what the New Testament teaches us concerning that death, we bear in mind the Old Testament patterns of understanding and worship provided within God's covenant with Israel (the old covenant). We do this because Jesus said that it all testifies about him (John 5:39-40).

In other words, Jesus is the lens through which we properly interpret the entire Bible. We interpret the Old Testament (which includes the old covenant) through the lens of the New Testament (with its new covenant fulfilled in Jesus Christ). If we do this interpreting in the reverse order, we end up with false ideas like thinking that the New Covenant does not begin until Jesus' return. That was a fundamental error in Herbert Armstrong's reasoning, and the reason that he focused so much on the worship calendar of Israel. He wrongly believed that we were in a time between the old and new covenants, and thus still obligated to observe the Hebrew calendar.

During his earthly ministry, Jesus explained the temporary nature of Israel's worship system. Even though God gave Israel a specific pattern of worship to follow, Jesus taught that it would change through himself. He emphasized this in the conversation he had with a woman at a well in Samaria (John 4:1-25). To paraphrase Jesus, he told her that the worship of the people of God would no longer have a physical, material center in Jerusalem or any other geographical location. In another place he promised that wherever two

or three would gather in his name, he would be in their midst (Matthew 18:20). Jesus told the Samaritan woman that there would no longer be such thing as a single “holy place” at the conclusion of his earthly ministry. Note his words to her:

A time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.... A time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth. (John 4:21-24)

With this statement, Jesus was eliminating the significance of Israel’s worship system—a system described in the Law of Moses (the old covenant). Jesus did so because he embodied, and thus fulfilled, that system since almost every aspect of it was, in one way or another, centered on the temple in Jerusalem. Jesus’ statement to the Samaritan woman indicates that a wide range of worship practices are no longer required in the same literal way. If Jesus’ true worshipers would not be worshipping at Jerusalem, they could not be taking their cues for worship as it was established in the Law of Moses, since that worship system depended on the existence and use of the physical building of the temple.

So, as we pass beyond the Old Testament language to Jesus himself, we move from the shadows into the reality. That means allowing the person of Jesus and his work as the one Mediator between God and humanity to shape our understanding of the Atonement. As the Son of God, Jesus came into the situation long prepared for him in Israel. He acted critically and creatively to fulfill the entire old covenant, including the Day of Atonement. In the book *Incarnation, the Person and Life of Christ*, T.F. Torrance explains how Jesus accomplished our Atonement with God:

Jesus did not repudiate the preaching of John the Baptist, the proclamation of judgment: on the contrary he continued it, and as we have seen he searched the soul of man with the fire of divine judgment, but in Jesus that is subsidiary to—and only arises out of—the gospel of grace and vicarious suffering and atonement. In the incarnate life of Jesus, and above all in his death, God does not execute his judgment on evil simply by smiting it violently away by a stroke of his hand, but by entering into it from within, into the very heart of the blackest evil, and making its sorrow and guilt and suffering his own. And it is because it is God himself who enters in, in order to let the

whole of human evil go over him, that his intervention in meekness has violent and explosive force. It is the very power of God. And so the cross with all its indelible meekness and patience and compassion is no deed of passive and beautiful heroism simply, but the most potent and aggressive deed that heaven and earth have ever known: the attack of God's holy love upon the inhumanity of man and the tyranny of evil, upon all the piled up contradiction of sin. (p. 150)

Viewing the Atonement solely as a legal transaction related to “getting right with God” leads to a flawed understanding that, sadly, many Christians hold. Such a view misses the depth of what Jesus has already accomplished on our behalf. As sinners, we are in need of more than mere freedom from the penalty of sin. We need sin itself to be dealt a deathblow and thus eradicated from our nature.

That is exactly what Jesus did. Rather than just dealing with the symptoms of our sin, he went to the cause of it in a way very much like the title of one of Baxter Kruger's booklets indicates: *The Undoing of Adam*. This title speaks of what Jesus actually accomplished in reconciling us to the Father. Yes, Jesus paid the penalty for our sin. But he did far more—he performed “cosmic surgery.” He gave our fallen, sin-sick humanity a heart transplant! That new heart is a heart of reconciliation. It is the heart of Jesus—the one who as both God and human is the one Mediator and High Priest, our Savior and elder brother. Through the Holy Spirit, just as God promised through the prophets Ezekiel and Joel, Jesus creates new life in our dry bones, giving us new hearts. In him, we are a new creation!

*Joseph Tkach*

## CHRIST OUR ATONEMENT

The governor found himself forced to consider the death penalty for an innocent man. Powerful political forces pressured him to make an unjust decision. But the governor knew he couldn't live with himself if he allowed an innocent man to be executed.

The governor prided himself on his training, his knowledge of the law and his sense of justice. He had to resolve the dilemma. He did not want to order the execution of an innocent man.

He paced the floor. Yes, he was concerned for the innocent man, but the real problem was his own conscience. How could he live knowing he had ordered an innocent man's execution? What about his career? Could such a decision return to haunt him and jeopardize his future?

Maybe there was a way. His plan began to unfold as he continued pacing.

It was his tradition to set a prisoner free at this time of year. He could let the people decide who would go free. Let the people bear the ultimate responsibility. The innocent man he was pressured to execute would be the first candidate to be set free. To make sure the choice was obvious, the other man he would offer to the people would be the most notorious criminal on death row.

Relieved to find a solution, the governor stopped pacing and called for the guards. "Find out the name of the most infamous man on death row," the governor commanded. The guards came back with the name: Barabbas.

### **Matthew's account**

Matthew tells the story in his Gospel account:

Now it was the governor's custom at the Feast to release a prisoner chosen by the crowd. At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Barabbas. So when the crowd had gathered, Pilate asked them, "Which one do you want me to release to you: Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?" For he knew it was out of envy that they had handed Jesus over to him.

While Pilate was sitting on the judge's seat, his wife sent him this message: "Don't have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him."

But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus executed.

"Which of the two do you want me to release to you?" asked the governor.

“Barabbas,” they answered.

“What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called Christ?” Pilate asked.

They all answered, “Crucify him!”

“Why? What crime has he committed?” asked Pilate.

But they shouted all the louder, “Crucify him!”

When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. “I am innocent of this man’s blood,” he said. “It is your responsibility!”



All the people answered, “Let his blood be on us and on our children!”

Then he released Barabbas to them. But he had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified. (Matthew 27:15-26)

## Saved from the cross

Barabbas walked the streets of Jerusalem, a free man. He had been chosen by the people—a jury of his peers—to receive a pardon. He owed them his freedom.

He had escaped death, but he couldn’t escape thinking about the One who now stood in his place. Jesus of Nazareth was on that cross between two thieves. Jesus stood in his place. Jesus had substituted for Barabbas, thereby giving him his physical freedom.

But even more significant, Jesus died for Barabbas’ sins. The Bible doesn’t tell us if Barabbas ever accepted Jesus as his Lord and Savior. We can only speculate. But we do know that we, like Barabbas, are all sinners. Barabbas is every man and every woman. Each of us individually, and all of us collectively.

Jesus took our place so he could deliver us from sin and death. He did something for us that the blood of bulls and goats could never do for the children of Israel (Hebrews 10:1-10). Jesus paid for our sins on the cross. He dealt completely, once and for all, with the problem of sin.

Whatever had to be done, he did it. Whatever penalty had to be paid, he paid it. Whatever the law required, he fulfilled its legal requirements. Justice



was done. The penalty was paid.

## **Making atonement**

The problem of sin in the Old Testament era was dealt with by substitutes. The Old Testament substitutes were animals like sheep, goats and bulls. They were sacrificed, and their blood offered by priests. The entire sacrificial system was a type, symbolizing the One who went to the cross in Barabbas' place.

The Israelites were taught that the sacrifice of an animal removed their sins from the record. They believed in the power of sacrifices and offerings. They believed that the blood of animals helped to make up for their sins, and restore them to God.

The most important offerings for sin were made on the annual Day of Atonement. The high priest, on this day, and only on this day, entered the Most Holy Place in the tabernacle or temple with a blood sacrifice. It was to make atonement for the sins of Israel.

Salvation and atonement were rooted in the old covenant. But numerous Old Testament references show that the sacrifices in and of themselves were unable to atone for sin (Psalm 51:16-17; Hosea 6:6; Micah 6:6-8).

Many passages in the books of Leviticus and Numbers say that offenders, sinners and lawbreakers are held responsible and bear the consequences of their sins (see, for example, Leviticus 5:1, 17; 7:18; 17:16; 19:8; 20:17, 20; 24:15; Numbers 9:13; 14:34). Until the sin or transgression was removed by sacrifice and offering, the sin had to be carried by the lawbreaker. But the Old Testament provides a glimpse that these sacrifices were only pointing to the greater reality of Christ.

Isaiah prophesied of the "servant," the Messiah, the Savior who "bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors" (Isaiah 53:11-12). Peter spoke of the suffering that Christ endured for us: "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree" (1 Peter 2:24). "Bearing our sins" is the language of substitution, of taking the place of another.

## **What atonement does**

"Atonement" is an old Anglo-Saxon word, not commonly used in everyday communication today, except to refer to the work of Christ. His work of atonement enables human beings to be reconciled to God, to be justified, forgiven and made righteous in God's sight.

God does not overlook sin. The penalty of sin must be paid, and Jesus took our sins upon himself and suffered the penalty for us. Not only did Jesus

pay the debt of sin on our behalf, but he also shares with us his righteousness.

A righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. (Romans 3:21-25)

The key point of the work of Jesus Christ involved him taking our place. He accepted the punishment of our sin, bringing us pardon and reconciliation with God and the righteousness of Christ. Paul captures the essence of the atoning work of Christ. “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21).

## **The Lamb of God**

The lamb was the most-often-used animal for sacrifice, and it became a symbol of forgiveness and justification. Jesus’ cousin, John the Baptist, identified Jesus with the sin-bearing lamb. “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29).

This was no ordinary man whom John identified as the Lamb of God. No mere mortal could take away the sin of the world. It’s rare when a legal system will allow one human being to substitute his or her life for a guilty party. But even then the substitution would be only one life for one life. But one man’s life for the sins of the entire world? What kind of human being was he?

Jesus was much more than just a teacher, a good role model. He was not merely a messenger God sent to deliver a divine announcement. He was not just another prophet with a message from God. C.S. Lewis, in *Mere Christianity*, comments:

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: “I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept His claim to be God.” That is the one thing that we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you

can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come up with any patronising nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to. (pages 40-41)

As God in the flesh, as our Creator, Jesus atoned for our sins on the cross. Fully human and fully divine, he became the substitute for all sin and for all sinners. It is that supreme act of love that saves us. We look to the cross and the atoning work of Jesus Christ for our salvation. We believe what he did is sufficient to save not only us but the whole world. Because he was not a mere man, but God in the flesh. “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

As the Lamb of God, Jesus bore our sins. He took them upon himself and carried them, becoming our substitute. Just as surely as he was substituted for Barabbas, he took the place of everyone who accepts him and believes in what he did.

The central question for each of us is—do we believe? Do not misunderstand the nature of this question. The question is not about “easy belief” or “cheap grace.” The question searches our hearts and asks for our response to the action of Christ on our behalf.

Jesus Christ went to the cross for each of us, unconditionally committed to us, firm in his resolve to die for our sins. He did not hold back. If we believe in him, we can only answer his love for us with our unwavering devotion.

You may have heard the expression, “I don’t do windows.” Apparently it was originally used by housekeepers and cleaners to convey a limit on the amount of work they would do for the contracted price. “I don’t do windows” has come to be a qualification used to express restrictions and boundaries of work, effort and service. It is an expression of limitation, a disclaimer of responsibility and obligation.

As Christians, we cannot give some equally lackluster response such as “I don’t do windows” to our Lord and Savior. He went to the cross for us in total commitment. We must respond to him by taking up our individual crosses and following him, without any limitations.

A brief survey of men and women of God in the Bible will reveal that their faithfulness to the calling of God was without reservation.

David didn’t say, “I don’t do giants.”

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego didn’t say, “We don’t do fiery furnaces.”

Noah didn't say, "I don't do arks and animals."

Mary didn't say, "I don't do virgin births."

The reason we can be reconciled to God, pardoned of our sins, and have the righteousness of Jesus Christ given to us is because Jesus didn't say, "I don't do crosses."

*Greg Albrecht*

## A CLOSER LOOK AT THE CRUCIFIXION

Today, some methods of execution, such as electrocution, are called “cruel and unusual punishment.” No execution mode ever fit that definition more than crucifixion. After the criminal was condemned by the Roman authorities to die by crucifixion, he was usually scourged with a whip. The convicted person was then compelled to carry the crossbar (when there was one) to the execution site.

### Was Jesus hung on a tree?

The New Testament uses the word *tree* five times to refer to Christ’s crucifixion on a cross (Acts 5:30, 10:39, 13:29, Galatians 3:13 and 1 Peter 2:24). Most of the time, the noun *stauros* (stake) and the verb *stauroo* (crucify) are used in connection with Jesus’ death. These two words appear 74 times in the New Testament.

One of the five appearances of *tree* occurs in Galatians. “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us,” wrote Paul, “for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree’” (Galatians 3:13). Paul was quoting a phrase found in Deuteronomy 21:23.

Paul was referring to the Torah’s prescribed form of execution by stoning for blasphemy and idolatry. After being stoned to death, the person’s body was hung on a tree to show that the individual was under God’s curse. To the Jews, hanging on a tree had become a metaphor for an apostate, a blasphemer or a person under God’s curse. That’s how the Jews viewed Jesus (John 5:18; 10:33; Matthew 26:63-65).

Their attitude would explain why Peter and Paul sometimes used the Greek word for “tree” (*xylon*) to describe Jesus’ execution, even though he was crucified on a cross. Three times in the book of Acts the word *tree* is used to refer to Jesus’ crucifixion. In these cases, it appears in a Jewish context as well.

For example, Peter told the Jewish authorities they had killed Christ “by hanging him on a tree” (Acts 5:30). Peter was denouncing them for wrongly having subjected Jesus to a humiliating death. But, said Peter, God had glorified Jesus by raising him from the dead (verse 31). Peter did not mean to say the Jews had personally carried out a crucifixion. When Pilate suggested that the Jewish religious leaders judge Jesus, they said, “We have no right to execute anyone” (John 18:31).

Peter’s remark to the religious authorities was meant to point out something else. By clamoring to the Roman authorities for Jesus’ crucifixion,

it's as though they had hung him on a tree as a blasphemer or criminal.

*The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* states, “In Judea at the time of Jesus sentencing to crucifixion and execution was entirely in the hands of the Roman authorities” (vol. 1, page 392). The Romans did not hang criminals from trees, except perhaps in exceptional cases. When they crucified, the Romans used some form of a cross — a platform that had a crossbar attached to the main vertical stake.

## What kind of cross?

The New Testament word *cross* is a translation of the Greek word *stauros*. It referred to any upright wooden stake. A *stauros* could serve a variety of purposes as, for example, a pole in a picket fence.

The word *stauros* could also refer to a pointed stake used for impalement of human beings. This was an ancient form of punishment used to publicly display the bodies of executed criminals. The Assyrians, for example, used impalement to execute deserters, captured enemies and rebels. Sometimes they displayed the corpses or heads impaled on stakes.

The Greek words *stauros* (stake) and *stauroo* (crucifixion) do not convey the exact technical form of execution. That is, to be executed by crucifixion was not the same as being hung on a simple upright stake. This distinction is important because the official mode of execution in the Roman Empire changed. However, the same Greek words were used to describe it because a stake was still used.

The execution stake, once used to impale a victim, became a vertical pole with a horizontal crossbar placed across it at some point, though it is not certain when, in history, the crossbar started to be used. Simple impalement became crucifixion.

By New Testament times, the Romans were using several cross forms for crucifixion. One was the so-called St. Anthony's cross, shaped like a T. Another was called the Latin cross, in which a horizontal crossbar intersected the upright beam somewhere along its upper half. One of these two cross forms most likely was used for the execution of Jesus Christ.

Earliest tradition held that the Latin form was the shape of the cross on which Jesus was crucified. The theologian Irenaeus (A.D. 120-202) assumed Jesus was crucified on a stake with a crossbar that traversed the vertical beam below the top (*Against Heresies*, 2.24.4).

There is another indication that Jesus' cross was taller than the crossbar. His cross had an inscription nailed to it. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* says, “From the mention of an inscription nailed above the head

of Jesus it may safely be inferred that this was the form of the cross on which He died.” All four Gospel writers mentioned this inscription (Matthew 27:37; Mark 15:26; Luke 23:38). John wrote: “Pilate had a notice prepared and fastened to the cross. It read: Jesus of Nazareth, The King of the Jews” (John 19:19).

We have few detailed descriptions of crucifixion. Secular writers avoided giving details of something too ghastly to discuss. That means we cannot come to any final conclusion as to the precise form of the cross on which Jesus was crucified. But as stated, either the Latin or the T-shaped cross is the best candidate.

Archaeology does give us one vital clue as to the kinds of crosses used in Jesus’ time by the Roman authorities. In June 1968, a tomb or depository for the bones of the dead was discovered on Ammunition Hill, north of Jerusalem. It contained the bones of a young man who had been crucified, probably between A.D. 7 and A.D. 66.

The remains included the victim’s two heel bones fastened together by a nail. His arms — not his hands — were nailed to the crossbar. The weight of the young man’s body was borne by a plank nailed to the upright beam. This would have supported his buttocks. The victim’s legs had been bent at the knees. Both of his legs had been broken, as were the legs of the two criminals crucified with Jesus Christ (John 19:32). “If Jesus died in similar fashion,” says the *New Bible Dictionary*, “then his legs were not fully extended as in traditional Christian art.”

Also, the victim’s feet were probably only inches above the ground. If that is so, we need to revise our mental image of Jesus’ crucifixion on this point as well. Based on such archaeological discoveries, the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* states, “It seems that the Gospel accounts of the death of Jesus describe a standard Roman procedure for crucifixion.”

## **How a crucifixion was carried out**

The upright stake for the crucifixion had probably already been securely implanted in the ground. Or it could have been tethered to the crossbar at the place of execution and then lifted into place. The crucifixion usually took place outside the city walls. As the victim carried the wooden crossbar, a herald walked in front, carrying the written accusation. Or the accusation was placed around the convicted person’s neck, then removed and nailed to the cross for all to see.

At the execution spot, the condemned person was stripped naked and laid on the ground with his shoulders on the crossbeam. The victim’s arms were

then outspread, and his arms or hands tied or nailed to the wooden beam. The crossbar with the victim was then lifted and secured to the upright post. The victim's feet were then tied or nailed to the upright post.

Death was slow and agonizing, sometimes taking days. Eventually, it would come through loss of blood and shock. Exposure, exhaustion, disease and hunger would also contribute to death. Death of the crucified individual could be speeded up. This was accomplished by breaking the victim's legs below the knees with a club, making it impossible for the person to breathe. Usually the body was left on the cross to rot, or it might provide food for predatory animals and birds. In some instances, as in the case of Jesus, the body was given to friends or relatives for burial.

For many people, the portrayal of Jesus on the cross is sacred. Some people have made the cross itself an object of adoration. However, it is Christ crucified — and now resurrected — we should worship, not the instrument of his death.

### **The cross as a symbol**

Jesus said, "Anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me" (Matthew 10:38). He also said, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily" (Luke 9:23).

"Carrying the cross" is a meaningful analogy. When the Romans crucified an individual, the condemned person was forced to carry the crossbar, on which the body would be nailed or tied, to the execution site.

The suffering of the crucifixion made the cross a dramatic symbol of pain, distress and burden-bearing. Jesus used the cross as a symbol to portray the spiritual sacrifice required of his followers.

*Paul Kroll*



## IT ISN'T JUST ABOUT HOW HE DIED

I didn't see Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* when it first came out, and I still haven't. I don't want to. Hearing that the movie is grisly, sparing us no detail of the crucifixion, is enough for me. People say it leaves an indelible "special effects" impression of how Jesus died. I wonder if that is really such a good thing.

Crucifixion was brutal, and that anyone would deliberately put himself at risk of the cross for others is, of itself, an impressive demonstration of love. But the fact that Jesus was crucified is, to some extent, just a detail. If he had been born a Roman citizen he would have been beheaded. If he had lived in another time or place he could have been hanged, stoned or shot. Today we would have electrocuted him, or strapped him to a gurney for a lethal injection, probably after spending several years on Death Row.

My point is that the graphic details of crucifixion focus primarily on making us feel sorry for Jesus, and therefore on wanting us to feel that we "owe it to him" to accept him after all he went through. That is the effect many people say the movie had on them.

But it seems that the emotion it stirred up was temporary. The movie was touted as "the greatest evangelistic tool for 2000 years," but it has had a minimal impact on church attendance. So maybe wallowing interminably in the blow-by-blow details of Jesus' scourging and crucifixion is not as persuasive as some had hoped.

Besides, Jesus and his Father want us to follow him because he lives, because as one of us he not only died, but was raised from the dead and dwells in the joy of perfect communion with the Father and wants to share that joy and communion with us. He's not looking for your sympathy; he's looking for you to come home to the love of your heavenly Father and your older Brother. That's why he took away our sins — to give us life, to call us home — not to garner our pity.

Jesus, the Son of God, the One through whom all things were made and who upholds all things by the word of his power (Hebrews 1:2) became human for us and died. Maybe it is simply this fact that demonstrates most dramatically the depth and meaning of his sacrifice. For Jesus to face death in any way and in any form was utterly foreign to all that he is.

"In him was life," John's Gospel tells us. "That life was the light of us all." C.S. Lewis, in a discussion about what it meant for Jesus to come and live as a human being, wrote: "The Eternal being who knows everything and

who created the whole universe, became not only a man, but (before that) a baby, and before that a fetus inside a woman's body. If you want to get the hang of it, think how you would like to become a slug or a crab" (*Mere Christianity*, chapter 5).

For about 30 years the Creator and Architect of human life shared in its limitations. Then he allowed his life to be ended in a brutal display of cruelty. For three days, the one who was life lay in a cold dark tomb.

I have a friend who has been for many years in a maximum security prison. He has become used to it, and manages to live a productive Christian life. I love and respect my friend, and visit when I can. But the thought of spending even one night in his environment is frightening. It helps me understand just a little bit the sacrifice Jesus made.

I wonder if instead of focusing on the depth of Jesus' sacrifice by remembering *how* he died, perhaps it is the fact *that* he died that underscores the depth of his love for us. He made our burden his, so that he could make his joy ours. He shared our experience, including death, in order to destroy the power of death over us.

Jesus did not ask us to remember his death by dwelling on the grisly details. Instead, he gave us a simple ceremony. At the end of what we call "The Last Supper," he took some of the leftovers and established the simple ritual that we call communion. "Do it in remembrance of me," he said.

Communion: the word means "to join with." To join with others — a reminder of our commitment to love as we have been loved. To share, serve, tolerate and regard our neighbor's needs as highly as we do our own.

Communion is not an empty religious ritual. Nor is it an outburst of emotion after exposure to some masterfully wrought special effects. Communion is something Christians do again and again. But it should never become routine. Each time we accept the symbols of Jesus' body and blood we commit ourselves to him and to all that he stands for.

*John Halford*

## DON'T CRY FOR JESUS

### A Holy Week Meditation

“Don’t Cry for Jesus” was one of the most memorable sermons I have ever heard. It was given by Dr. Lewis Smedes at a Fuller Seminary chapel service. I was there as a student during Holy Week in hopes of being better prepared to fully appreciate Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection. My prayers were answered in an obvious way that day. I heard a message that has stuck with me ever since.

What was Professor Smedes getting at that struck me as being so profoundly right? He wanted us to see as clearly and precisely as possible that Jesus was no victim and that he didn’t want us to pity him or feel sorry for him. I thought at the time, “What? How can we not feel sorry for him after all he went through for us?” As Smedes developed the message I saw what he meant and how true it was.

Professor Smedes had us consider two things: first, the actual way the story of Jesus is told to us by the New Testament writers and second, a comparison of Jesus with the Greek tragic heroes like the demigod Achilles.

Let me first briefly recount for you the upshot of that comparison. The Greek gods, as great as they were, suffered often because of their own immoral activities and those involving the other gods. But their greatest sufferings were tragic because they were due to circumstances beyond their own control. These gods were born with their various strengths and weaknesses. No one of them “had it all.” They were always born into situations not of their own making and often involving jealousies, revenge plots and grabs for power between various other gods.

These tragic heroes were always victims of their circumstances as the inevitable wheel of fate at some point turned against them. But it was their vulnerabilities that would inevitably lead to their most tragic suffering and defeat, like Achilles’ lamentable heel. Were it not for the fact that despite all his armor, Achilles’ heel was exposed and that his goddess mother was prevented by his unwitting mortal father from completing the daily rituals that would have made Achilles immortal, Paris’ arrow would never have found its fatal target. In some versions of the myth, the god Apollo, for his own reasons, intervened and guided that arrow to pierce Achilles just at that one and only tiny unprotected point. How can you not feel sorry for Achilles? The unfairness of it all. Through no fault of his own, the greatest of all Greek

warriors was brought down.

Though we certainly don't think of Jesus as a Greek tragic hero, I realized upon further reflection that his cross is often described in tragic terms. Jesus is often portrayed as a victim of circumstances that go all the way back to the fall of humanity. Jesus is sent to be our Savior because humanity has rebelled and needs to be reconciled and regenerated if we are to share in God's eternal and triune fellowship and communion and for God's original intention at creation to be realized.

In the New Testament we find Jesus, the Son of God, living at a time when the Jewish nation is occupied by the pagan Romans. Among his own people, the Pharisees and Sadducees are involved in their own disputes with each other. Yet they manage to form an alliance to plot Jesus' arrest and execution. Closer to him, there is a traitor among his own disciples, Judas, who betrays him—with a kiss, no less. Jesus is betrayed first into the hands of the court of the high priests and then into the hands of Pilate, who is himself caught between the rival forces of the Emperor and the potentially riotous crowds. Finally, Jesus suffers the brutally cruel treatment of the Roman soldiers who strip, mock and whip him, then lead him to Golgotha, where he is put to death on the machinery of Roman execution, a cross.

Given these tragic circumstances surrounding Jesus' sacrifice, why should we not consider Jesus a tragic victim? Not because he didn't pay an unimaginably high price for us and our salvation. Not because he didn't actually suffer and die. But simply because he was no victim of those circumstances and because he had no fatal flaw!

The cost of our salvation was foreseen and anticipated before the foundations of the earth were even laid. God was not taken by surprise at the Fall nor by our subsequent need for costly deliverance. But our God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, counted the cost (as it were) from all eternity and agreed they were ready and willing to gladly pay the price for our deliverance from evil and for our reconciliation. So the plan for creation was carried out knowing full well the price to be paid to put things right, for God's righteousness to be done.

Jesus knew why he had come and what his saving work would cost. His mission was freely chosen. He was freely sent and freely given by the Father out of their joint abounding love for the world. Jesus repeatedly told his disciples what he would have to go through, even though they could not imagine his being so completely rejected by their religious leaders and political authorities that it would lead to his death. Jesus was anything but unaware, naive, about the path he would have to take to make all things new.

Jesus tells us that, like a good shepherd, when danger comes to his sheep, he lays his life down—and also takes it up (John 10:17). Jesus freely, voluntarily, not only gives up his life but also receives it back. When Pilate thinks he has to remind Jesus that he has the power of life and death over him, Jesus has to remind Pilate that he has no power except what has been allowed him by God, his Father (John 19:10-11).

In the garden, when one of his disciples takes it upon himself to defend Jesus with a sword, Jesus reminds them that all of his Father's angelic hosts are available to protect him at any moment if he were to call on them (Matthew 26:53). Jesus is no victim of fate, of circumstances, or of powers greater than himself. He is in charge. He goes forth to Jerusalem only when his hour has come—not sooner, not later.

Jesus' suffering is not the result of any large or small flaw in him. Far from it. There is not even a fleeting shadow of personal weakness evident in his confident exercise of divine omnipotence as he fulfills his redemptive mission. Rather, it is by means of his strength and authority operating in full concert with his Father that he arrives at the right moment to exert saving power over sin, evil and death itself. His act of self-giving is a work of deliberate might based on the strength of his holy love. Jesus is no tragic hero, but the willing, omnipotent, Lord and Savior.

Perhaps most astonishing are Jesus' words spoken on the way to Golgotha, even as he bore the heavy weight of the cross-beam of his own crucifixion. Beholding the women standing by, no doubt exceedingly distraught and anguished, welling up from the depths of his compassion, Jesus found the strength to tell them something they and we need to know: "Daughters of Jerusalem, *don't weep for me*" (Luke 23:28).

Jesus does not want us to pity him as a hapless victim who suffers because it couldn't be avoided, because it was inevitable, destined by forces he could not resist. He is not looking for our pity—he trod that road, the Via Dolorosa as it is called, on purpose, by divine design. He intentionally took that journey and nothing, not even torture at the violent hands of human wickedness, could stop him. We may weep for ourselves, if we must, that is, be sorrowful for our sins. But Jesus didn't come looking to gather our tears. Rather, his costly love calls for giving him our thanks, our praise, our gratitude, our love, our absolute trust and loyalty—indeed our very lives in eternal worship.

Jesus not only freely but also gladly gave his life that we might have resurrected life in him. So the author of Hebrews sums it up: "For the joy set before him, he endured the cross" (Hebrews 12:2).

For joy? Yes, for joy. But how can that be? In short, because Jesus was

no fool. The price he paid was worth it and he knew it. He has no regrets! He did not enjoy the suffering. Not at all. It was excruciating. But he rejoiced in what he with the Father and Spirit would accomplish by means of his extravagant self-sacrifice. Jesus was no victim but the *victor*. The surety of his victory gave him a great joy that saw him through his agonies. Crucifixion would lead by the grace and power of God to resurrection and a new heaven and earth.

Jesus was no reluctant Savior, but the conquering Servant-King of all creation. That's the good news that Professor Smedes preached, and from that moment on, I saw that I could no longer think, preach or teach as if Jesus was a victim that we should feel sorry for.

All those illustrations of the cross that I had heard in both liberal and conservative Christian contexts that made it seem that Jesus was a victim, I had to forswear. These made Jesus out to be anything and everything—from a mother rabbit frozen in a blizzard to save her little bunny child, to an innocent toddler run over by a train or ground up in the gears of a drawbridge—all this occurring while his helpless father looks on in horror from a distance. Somehow caught off-guard and facing a horrible dilemma, this father-victim had to choose between his son and humanity. And so he pulls the lever that seals their respective fates. In these illustrations both the Son and the Father are depicted as victims of circumstances and of their own limitations that call for our pity. As tragic characters they match, if not exceed, the sorry state memorialized in the myth of Achilles.

Perhaps more theological than these misguided analogies are certain interpretations of the cross that pit the Father against the Son. The Father is sometimes said to be taking his wrath out on the Son—punishing him to satisfy his righteousness. In this case, the tragedy occurs between the Father and the Son (some, who have rejected the idea of the cross altogether, have gone so far as to claim that if so, the Father is the victimizer and the Son the victim!). Or the Son is depicted as having to overcome the resistance of the Father to being merciful and forgiving by appealing to his own suffering to gain the Father's pity and so get him to relent of his wrath. From these perspectives, the wills, attitudes and aims of the Father and the Son are at odds and can be resolved only by the Son's suffering. How tragic! "Only that it wasn't so!" we reply out of pity.

Sometimes we imagine a modern adversarial court scene where the Father is represented as the judge who wants to condemn the guilty party, and Jesus is the defense lawyer hoping to help the defendant avoid the penalty required

by the law. Fortunately, Jesus figures out a way to keep us from the punishment we deserve. It's a plan that the Father can't argue with since it doesn't seem to involve any violation of the law. Finding no grounds for objection, the Father-Judge has to concede: Jesus wins the court case for us.

But the biblical revelation shows us the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are of one mind, one purpose, united in being, acting for the one and same end, our salvation. The Father sends the Son in the power of the Spirit. The Son freely comes and serves out of love for the Father and with joy in the Spirit. The Holy Spirit empowers the Son to overcome temptation and undo evil itself in order to set free the captives, open the eyes of the blind, set at liberty those who are oppressed and bring in the Lord's promised Jubilee (Luke 4:18-19).

At the cross, no exception is made. Our sin is judged and condemned in Jesus. The wrath of God aims to burn away evil and the sin in us that has corrupted our very natures. Dying in him, we are separated and rescued from the evil in us for eternal life. We are given a share in Christ's restored and sanctified humanity. God's wrath serves his mercy. His righteousness serves his love. There is no tension between the attributes of God nor between the Father and the Son. There is no tragic relationship at the heart of the gospel. At the cross the Son "through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished [without flaw] to God" (Hebrews 9:14). Our salvation is the united work of the whole Triune God, our Savior—Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

At the foot of the cross, Christ doesn't call us to join him in a great pity-party: the Father feeling sorry for the Son, the Son feeling sorry for the Father, Jesus feeling sorry for us and we feeling oh so sorry for him. For Jesus was no tragic victim. Rather, we gather at the foot of the cross to worship in unspeakable awe, with adoration, thanksgiving, praise and prayer for the costly victory of Christ. By his joyful and freely given life, he righteously restored us to fellowship and eternal communion with God our Triune Redeemer.

*Gary Deddo*

## THE DAY CHRIST DIED

<u>Time</u>	<u>Event</u>
<b>Evening</b>	<p>Jesus washes feet and institutes the symbols of bread and wine. He foretells his betrayal. (Matthew 26:26-30; Luke 22:14-23; John 13:3-17, 21).</p> <p>Christ foretells the disciples' desertion and Peter's threefold denial. He prays for his church. (Mark 14:27-31; John 13:36-38; chapters 14-17)</p>
<b>Night</b>	<p>In Gethsemane, Christ prays. The disciples fall asleep. An angel appears and strengthens Christ. (Matthew 26:36-46; Luke 22:43)</p> <p>Judas arrives with a mob. Christ is seized. The disciples forsake him. (Matthew 26:47-56)</p>
<b>Early morning, before daylight</b>	<p>Christ is taken to Annas, questioned and sent to Caiaphas. Peter denies Christ. (John 18:12-24)</p> <p>The Sanhedrin, through false witnesses, tries to condemn Christ for blasphemy. (Matthew 26:57-66)</p> <p>Peter denies Christ a second and a third time. (Mark 14:70-72; Luke 22:58-62)</p> <p>Christ is mocked and beaten. (Luke 22:63-65)</p>
<b>Daybreak</b>	<p>Sanhedrin condemns Christ and sends him to Pilate. (Luke 22:66-71; 23:1)</p>
<b>Morning</b>	<p>Judas, remorseful, hangs himself. (Matthew 27:3-10)</p> <p>Pilate questions Christ, then sends him to Herod. (Luke 23:1-7)</p> <p>Herod questions Christ, then returns him to Pilate. (Luke 23:8-11)</p> <p>Pilate seeks to release Christ. The people reject him. Christ is scourged and led to Golgotha. (Matthew 27:15-26; Mark 15:21-22; John 19:1-16)</p>
<b>9 a.m.</b>	<p>Christ is crucified between two robbers. (Mark 15:25-28)</p>



## JESUS THE SAVIOR

<p><b>9 a.m.-3 p.m.</b></p>	<p>Christ prays for his murderers' forgiveness. (Luke 23:34)          The soldiers divide his garments. (Matthew 27:35)          Christ is scoffed at and mocked. (Matthew 27:39-44)          Christ asks John to care for Mary. (John 19:25-27)</p>
<p><b>Noon-3 p.m.</b></p>	<p>Darkness over the land. (Matthew 27:45)</p>
<p><b>3 p.m.</b></p>	<p>Christ is given wine vinegar. He speaks his last words and dies. (Luke 23:46; John 19:28-30, 34-37)</p>
<p><b>Late afternoon - early evening</b></p>	<p>Joseph of Arimathea claims Christ's body. He and Nicodemus prepare it for burial. Christ's body is laid in Joseph's new tomb. (Matthew 27:60; Mark 15:42-46; John 19:38-42)</p>

## JESUS CHRIST'S LAST SERMON

Jesus Christ spent his final hours of human life nailed to a cross. Despised and rejected by the world he came to save, history's only perfect person took upon himself the consequences of our sins. The Bible records that on that spring day, from a hill outside Jerusalem, Jesus spoke several times. No one Gospel writer records all his sayings. Matthew and Mark describe one. Luke and John each give us three. Together, these sayings constitute a powerful message from our Savior's heart during the hours of his greatest personal agony. They reveal Jesus' innermost feelings as he poured out his life for us.

### 1) "Father, forgive them"

Only Luke tells us that Jesus, shortly after he was crucified, prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34, NIV, 1984 edition used in this article).

Nearby were Roman soldiers gambling for his clothes, common people whipped to frenzy by the religious leaders and gawkers who came for the hideous spectacle. The Jewish elders mockingly said they would believe in him if he saved himself (Matthew 27:42-43). On his left and right were two criminals condemned to die with him.

Not everyone at the foot of the cross was hostile to Jesus. Women who had followed him during his ministry and some of his disciples now came forward. His mother, Mary, was mourning the Son whom God had miraculously given her.

Innocent of any crime against God or humanity, Jesus had been betrayed, arrested, scourged and condemned. Now, from the cross, Jesus' thoughts reached above his pain and rejection. Instead of being consumed with his own pain and misery, Jesus asked forgiveness for those responsible for the evil done to him—by extension, all who ignorantly go the way of sin and death.

### 2) "You will be with me in paradise"

Jesus next spoke to encourage one of the criminals crucified with him. Both criminals, likely thieves or murderers, early on joined bystanders in reviling Jesus (Mark 15:32). Luke tells us, "One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: 'Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!'" (Luke 23:39). This man wanted only escape from his pain. The gulf between them remained because this faithless criminal had no desire to know his Savior and repent of his sins.

But a miraculous change occurred in the other criminal. He came to believe. This man was just as guilty as the first. He admitted he deserved to die (verses 40-41). He, too, had mocked Jesus earlier, but now he rebuked the other criminal.

We are not told of any other conversation between this second criminal and Jesus. Perhaps only Jesus' example and prayer, which he overheard, moved him so deeply. He said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom" (verse 42). Jesus replied by offering him hope for the future: "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise" (verse 43).

All who surrender to Jesus receive not only strength to face the present, but also lasting hope for the future. There is a future beyond the grave. Eternal life in God's kingdom awaits those who will embrace Jesus as Lord and Savior.

### **3) "Woman, behold your son!"**

Jesus honored and showed concern for his mother. When it seemed impossible for him to help anyone, he provided for Mary's care through his trusted friend John.

"When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, 'Dear woman, here is your son,' and to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' From that time on, this disciple took her into his home" (John 19:26-27).

### **4) "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?"**

For the first time, Jesus' thoughts were on himself. He cried out, "*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?*"—which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'" (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34).

Many have puzzled over Jesus' seeming doubt. Was Jesus afraid? Had his Father deserted him in his greatest need? Jesus was quoting the first portion of Psalm 22:1, a prophecy of the Messiah's suffering and exaltation.

We sometimes forget that Jesus was fully human. Yes, he was God in the flesh, but he was also subject to all the feelings of mind and body that any of us feel. Jesus spoke these words after three hours of darkness had covered the land (Matthew 27:45). Jesus hung on the cross alone, where he took our place, to feel the pain and anguish that sin causes.

There, in the darkness and pain, bearing the burden of our sins, Jesus fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy: "Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our

iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isaiah 53:4-6).

Soon Christ would savor the sweetness of eternal victory over sin and death. His final three statements came in rapid succession.

### **5) “I am thirsty”**

Death drew near. The time of final sacrifice was close. Jesus had endured—and overcome—the heat, pain, rejection and loneliness. He could have suffered and died in silence. Instead, unexpectedly, he asked for help. “Knowing that all was now completed, and so that the Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, ‘I am thirsty’” (John 19:28).

Jesus asked for a drink and received vinegar, fulfilling David’s 1,000-year-old prophecy (Psalm 69:21). “Immediately one of them ran and got a sponge. He filled it with wine vinegar, put it on a stick, and offered it to Jesus to drink” (Matthew 27:48). The man who had hurried to answer Jesus’ request said: “Now leave him alone. Let’s see if Elijah comes to take him down” (Mark 15:36).

### **6) “It is finished”**

Jesus had finished his work on earth. His sixth message was one of triumph: “When he had received the drink, Jesus said, ‘It is finished.’ With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit” (John 19:30).

Jesus’ humility rings in his words. His was not a vain, I-showed-you attitude. He did not even say, “I did it.” He claimed no credit. He asked no pity. To the end, Jesus’ mind was on the work he came to do. He announced, for all to hear, “It is finished.”

### **7) Jesus’ final words**

Matthew tells us, “And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit” (Matthew 27:50; see also Mark 15:37). Only Luke preserves Jesus’ words: “Jesus called out with a loud voice, ‘Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.’ When he had said this, he breathed his last” (Luke 23:46).

God is love, and Jesus’ ministry showed what love is. He gave himself for us. He preached his last sermon most effectively, by both word and example. In his last seven statements, he affirmed God’s greatness and glory.

### **God’s work goes on**

Jesus’ example and words on the cross bore fruit even before his death,

when the repentant robber acknowledged him as Lord and appealed for his mercy.

On that Passover so long ago, Jesus finished his own mission as a human on earth. But his work goes on now in his church. Christ's followers today preach his gospel of salvation. They show his love for fellow humans. And they look for his return as King of kings and Lord of lords.

This is the wonderful message of good news that Jesus Christ preached the day he died for all.

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### **Seven Sayings of Jesus on the Cross**

Jesus shared in our humanity. He set an example for us, suffered for us and was victorious over sin and death in his work on the cross. His victory, both in his death and his resurrection, enables us to be reconciled to God and restored to fellowship with him.

While hanging on the cross, Jesus spoke of:

- Forgiveness (Luke 23:32-34)
- Hope (Luke 23:39-43)
- Care (John 19:25-27)
- Loneliness (Mark 15:33-34; Matthew 27:45-46)
- Suffering (John 19:28-29)
- Triumph (John 19:30)
- Reunion (Luke 23:44-46)

## DID GOD FORSAKE JESUS ON THE CROSS?

### Quotes from Theologians on the Interview Program *You're Included* In Alphabetical Order

The Trinity says that God is both above and he is below, God is *involved*. The one who dies on the cross has to be as fully God as the Father in heaven. Jesus says, “God, my Father, why have you forsaken me?” This has to be, not only the language of Psalm 22, the human lament of forsakenness that Jesus takes on his own lips, but it has to be that God himself has, in a sense, assumed a humanity estranged from God, so that atonement begins in Bethlehem.

T.F. Torrance said, you have to go back to the fact that the one who was born from the womb of Mary was born to assume the human estrangement, to assume the sentence of death, so that, in that sense, Jesus as the incarnate Son of God is a dead man walking. Can God die? No. But for God to overcome human death, God has to become human and God has to assume that human death, so that when God the Son, the Logos (as John 1:1 says), enters in to become flesh, has in a sense, placed God from below....

How do we connect the reality of our doctrine of God with the reality of people’s lives? We do that in narrative form. Every person has a narrative – it’s their life, it’s their suffering, their losses, their pain, the questions they’re raising, “Where is God in my life?” That’s their narrative. “My God, why have you forsaken me?” – that’s the narrative of humanity.

There’s also a narrative, God says, “I hear their cry” – the Old Testament. I heard them in Egypt. I love them, and because of my love, I’m going to come with them, I’m going to redeem them, I’m going to bring them out, and they will be a sign that I love, and am willing to include all the families of the earth. There is that narrative of God’s love and God’s grace. The job of pastoral ministry is to connect those two narratives....

What has God become in becoming human? God has become the sinner, which simply means without personal sin he still has a death nature, he’s going to die of something, because he has assumed death as a consequence of original sin. What God has assumed in becoming human is to assume God-forsakenness, to assume that condition. That is part of the narrative of the Trinity at work, so to speak. God has assumed death for everyone.

*Ray S. Anderson*

God's goodness turns out to be far better than we ever would have dreamed, because God, rather than simply overcoming evil by a show of brute force, enters into the middle of it. God takes our diseased and alienated sinful humanity upon himself, suffers and finally dies the death that all of us will someday experience in order to set us free for fullness of life.

This is not a God who sits aloof from us, outside the universe, playing with our lives like a puppet on a string. This is a God who loves us to the uttermost, comes into the midst of our brokenness in order to redeem us. A God who even cries on the cross, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" – "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" When everything is darkness and we feel forsaken, our brother Jesus, our blessed high priest, has said that [why have you forsaken me?] on our behalf on the cross.

*Elmer Colyer*

In the Incarnation, Jesus was born of Mary, and received in that, since he came from the seed of Adam's race, the race that had fallen. Within the Virgin's womb, he was joined with the Holy Spirit to become both God and man. So he took to himself that which we really are, it was a real humanity. He took it in union with the Holy Spirit, so it was a humanity he wore sinlessly. But often, we tend to think of Jesus as a kind of superman – that he wasn't really touched with mortal frailty like the rest of us are, that he didn't really know what it's like to live in this broken world, to live among people who feel like God has forsaken them, to know the difficulty of temptation. But Scripture teaches that Jesus truly was tempted in all points as we are. He really could have gone into sin. He really knew what it was to wrestle against temptation. He knew how it is to be with us in a lost and forsaken humanity which he wore in perfect holiness and sinlessness....

We are the lost and wandering sheep, we're the prodigal children and feel that we've wandered way outside of the Father's grace and care. But the good news in the Incarnation is that our Father loved us so much that he sent his Son all the way into the world, all the way into our humanity where we are, sent to find us in our lost and forsaken condition and to join himself to us in the midst of our brokenness, our lostness and to heal us from within....

Jesus is both fully God but fully human in the way that we are human. When the Son of God came to us, as the Torrances love to say, he penetrated into our lost and forsaken condition, or as Douglas Sparrow says, he pursued us all the way to the place of our fallenness. Not just abstractly in some philosophical sense – he did it by becoming what we are, taking up real

humanity, he truly embraced us....

The God of Jesus Christ, Jesus himself, is not about karma, making sure everything is handed out according to what we deserve, which would be bad news, but it's about grace. Because one person has taken our sins upon himself, has paid the price not only at the external level, but in the depths of the depths he's taken our lost and forsaken condition, made it his own, and healed it so that he can return to us grace in exchange for our letting go of our sin and our guilt.

*Gerrit Scott Dawson*

We don't take the vicarious humanity of Christ seriously – that Christ has taken upon himself that despair, he's taken upon that doubt, he's taken upon that anxiety. That's what we hear from the cross, when Jesus says in those cryptic words, a prayer to God, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

I think Jesus is praying that on our behalf. He is taking our despair and bringing it to the Father, and in doing so, healing it. We are not alone in that despair. We are not alone in our aloneness. We may still be lonely, but we're not lonely alone. Jesus is lonely with us.

That's extremely important for us to see, how close the humanity of Christ relates to our humanity. That's why this, what seems to be abstract talk about vicarious humanity, is really very personal talk. Christ's humanity is so close to us. We're in union with him. We hear him crying out for us, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" when we've gone through a loss of a loved one, or other travails in life in which we've questioned the presence or even existence of God. Jesus cries that prayer on the cross, praying from Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" But he prays, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." There's despair on the cross, but there's also joy. Some scholars suggest that perhaps Jesus recited the rest of Psalm 22. In effect, with "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit," he's saying that.

*Christian Kettler*

When Jesus died on the cross, God was in Jesus reconciling us. But on the cross Jesus asked, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" How did God answer in the Gospels? He didn't give an answer. So people looking at God through that wrong lens assume God the Father forsook his son Jesus. The answer is, he didn't forsake his Son. That was the cry of Jesus



when he became sin for us. If he had heard the answer right then and there, God would have said, “I haven’t forsaken you.”

You say, “How do you know?” I’ll prove it. Psalm 22 is the Messianic Psalm from which that cry of Jesus came. First verse, Psalm 22 of the Messianic Psalm, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” You can go on down and read that Psalm and bit by bit you see it’s talking about the cross right down to them casting lots for his garments — everything. It’s describing the cross.

If you go down to verse 24 in Psalm 22, you get the answer to the question. It’s not recorded in the Gospels, but it is in Psalms. Psalm 22:1, “Why have you forsaken me?” Verse 24, “He has not despised nor abhorred the affliction of the afflicted nor has he hidden his face from him. But when he cried to him for help, he heard.”

Now here’s the neat thing. All the Jews knew these Psalms. When people standing around the cross heard the first line of that Psalm, they knew the rest of it. When Jesus cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” every self-respecting Jew standing there knew the rest of it, and the answer was he has not forsaken him or turned his face on him. But here we are 20 centuries later saying, he asked the question why did God forsake him — God must have forsaken him. We’ve missed the point. No, he did not forsake him. He was right there in him and with him the whole time.

The Father never forsook the Son. People say, Well, they were fragmented. Are you kidding? Deity being fragmented? The Godhead would have ceased to exist. Father, Son, and Spirit have always been in that *perichoresis*, in that circle of love. It’s never wavered for one moment, even at the cross, which is encouraging to us, because like Jesus, when we cry out, why have you forsaken me, we can know God says, “I haven’t. I’m with you.” He’ll never forsake us.

*Steve McVey*

T.F. Torrance would say that God never surrendered his divinity in becoming incarnate (so he could forgive our sins, because he was God incarnate), but he could also, from the human side, live our reconciliation subjectively in his perfect life of obedience. Unless the Word actually assumed our fully human nature, he wouldn’t have come all the way to us within our human history. Redemption takes place within the personal being of the mediator, both so that when Jesus suffers God-forsakenness in obeying the Father, he lives out a human life in the midst of sin and

temptation, in the midst of stresses and strains that would want to divide the unity that took place in the hypostatic union, but, in the end, did not do so...

When he was baptized, it's not because he sinned, but because he assumed our sin for humanity and so his baptism was the beginning of his living a human life of perfect obedience, which culminated on the cross where he said, "Not my will, but thine be done," and then experienced God-forsakenness.

*Paul Molnar*

Christ on the cross stands in our place and laments in our place. He prays, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Psalm 22. It's not in a sense of abandoning God – it's, "*My* God, *my* God, why have you forsaken me?" So he's lamenting as a way of holding onto God in this situation. Christ does this, Old Testament saints do this....

Oftentimes when in the New Testament someone will quote from the Old Testament, they might just quote a verse or even a phrase, but the hearers will know the Scriptures; they were immersed in the Scriptures, and the hearers will call to mind the whole context, the whole story, the whole Psalm or whatever. So when Jesus says, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" we need to remember that Jesus would have been well aware of how the Psalm ended, and the Psalm ends with deliverance.

The book of Hebrews in chapter 2 quotes from the salvation part of the Psalm and applies that to Jesus. In the early church, the Christ-followers saw it as very appropriate to take the second part of the Psalm as applying to Christ and the resurrection, and Christ as the one who praises God in the congregation.

But we need to be careful not to collapse or to somehow downgrade the despair or the lament of Christ on the cross as if he knew it was going to come out all happy in the end anyway, so he wasn't really lamenting. Christ isn't just putting on a show. He isn't feigning lament. He really is suffering in our humanity, he really is lamenting on our behalf. He is expressing precisely how he feels. It's the positive part. In Mark and Matthew, this "why have you forsaken me?" thing comes right near the end. This is something that's been building up through the whole experience on Calvary. It comes out near the end, "why have you forsaken me?" It's not just a passing thing and then he gets over it.

We need to beware of somehow collapsing the hope and the despair together — so he's despairing, but actually he's happy. No. He's lamenting,

so we need to take that utterly seriously, but also to recognize that Jesus has not given up on God. He says, “My God, why have you forsaken me?” This is lament within a relationship with God where he knows... for the joy set before him, as it says in Hebrews, he endured the shame of the cross.

*Robin Parry*

Where is this God of the cross found? Where is this God who cries out to his Father on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” and hears nothing. Where is this God? If our models of great adolescent faith are just the shiny happy kids, then what about all those kids who know that question deep in their being? But the church never helps them articulate it....

God comes near to us in those moments where we don’t know what to do or when we feel lost. There are certain moments in our life that are utterly God-forsaken and are irredeemable. But often in those moments, someone else will share in our lives with us. I think, in those moments, God becomes concretely present....

The objective of the church is to say, “You’re right — Jesus isn’t here. So together let’s search for God...” and this is the paradox — “let’s search for God in the utter feeling of God-forsakenness, of God not being here,” which is this Christological element that opens up, that Moltmann beautifully does, to the Trinity — that God knows death, that God knows what it’s like. Jesus essentially says “God is not here” on the cross. The Father knows what it’s like to lose the Son to the abyss of separation and death. There’s something very Trinitarian about being willing to say “God is not here,” but not as a nihilistic assertion but as a confession of faith.

“God is not here” as a confession of faith that says “I will now search for God in this place where God cannot be found” because this God who cannot be found, this God who I can’t find now, is a God who is often not found, in certain places like in the barren womb of Sarah or in a people under years and years of oppression in Egypt, in the virgin womb of a 15-year-old girl in a God-forsaken place called Galilee...that in those places where “God is not here” is the place where God becomes found.

*Andrew Root*

The heart of the Incarnation is the doctrine that Christ knows our weaknesses, takes our questions, our doubts to himself (“My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”) and identifies with us in our suffering. By the Spirit we are united with that. We don’t float free of the cares of this world.

We are given to recognize the One who stands with us in the concerns of this world, who knows our weaknesses, our doubting, our blindness, who in every respect is as tempted as we are and knows our struggles. He knows even our sense of god-forsakenness at times, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”

*Alan Torrance*

Perhaps the severest forms of judgment we see in the gospel are out of the lips of Jesus. He was absolutely frank. When we look at the cross, we might belittle our sins. We might think it doesn’t matter. I say to people, “You look at the cross, you look at the fact that sin was so serious it took everything that God himself had got, to remove our sin and deliver us.” I think of that great cry, “My God, my God why have you forsaken me?” There you see the depths and the horror of sin. Sin is very real, but thank God that we’re delivered from it. Our church needs to be cleansed, I pray every day that we will be cleansed. We thank God that there is complete cleansing, complete deliverance.

*David Torrance*

He loves us, and he is love in himself — that’s his very nature. He loves us so much that he has even entered into our hell for us on the cross. He’s taken our god-forsakenness and undone it, and cleared away all the barriers between us and him and united us to himself. He has taken our very flesh, our dust, and made it his. He is now a man in Christ. He’s done all that for us. He’s now with us, one with us.

*Robert T. Walker*

We have this idea that God comes to us and says, “You and I have a problem. Your behavior doesn’t meet up to the standards required, but I have a solution: For you and I to be ok, I’m going to take my innocent Son, whom I love more than anything else in the world, out to the woodshed, and kill him – and then you and I will be ok. Oh, by the way, trust me.”

We’re going, “Is there a disconnect here somewhere? Is that what had to happen for God the Father and me to be ok?” We’re going, “That’s not it at all... that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. It was God the Father that crawls inside of this very thing.”

People say, “What about, ‘My God, my God why have you forsaken me?’” That is Christ on the cross, for the first time as a human being, experiences

a sense of separation. He doesn't believe that it's real – because the next thing he says is “into your hands I commit my spirit.” There is no real separation, but he feels the sense of it, but God is in him in that whole process. There is no abandonment like that. That cry is a cry of those who have experienced abandonment. For some of us that is such a hope for us....

Psalm 22, which starts off with, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” You read that psalm and it says, “trust, trust, trust.” At one point it says, “Because I know you will not turn your face from me.” We've come up with a theology where you can't trust God, he's turned his face, he can't look on sin. He's gone somewhere and he's abandoned his son. Like every father would abandon his son. Come on. I'm a father. There's no way.

*William Paul Young*

For more information about the theologians, and the complete interviews, see the e-books titled *Trinitarian Conversations*, volumes 1 and 2. You may also wish to read Thomas H. McCall, *Forsaken: The Trinity and the Cross, and Why It Matters* (InterVarsity Press, 2012).

## JESUS WAS NOT ALONE

On a small hill just outside of Jerusalem, a troublemaking teacher was killed on a cross. He was not alone. He was not the only troublemaker in Jerusalem that spring day.

“I have been crucified with Christ,” the apostle Paul wrote (Galatians 2:20), but Paul wasn’t the only one. “You died with Christ,” he told other Christians (Colossians 2:20). “We were...buried with him,” he wrote in Romans 6:4. What’s going on here? All those people weren’t really on that hill near Jerusalem. So what is Paul saying? Just this: All Christians, whether they know it or not, have shared in the cross of Christ.

Were you there when they crucified the Lord? Yes, you were there. We were with him, even though we didn’t know it at the time. Perhaps this sounds like nonsense. What does it really mean? In modern language, we might say that we *identify* with Jesus. We accept him as our representative. We accept his death as payment for our sins.

But there is more. We also accept — and share in — his resurrection! Paul also wrote, “God raised us up with Christ” (Ephesians 2:6). We were there on resurrection morning. “God made you alive with Christ” (Colossians 2:13). “You have been raised with Christ” (Colossians 3:1).

Christ’s story is our story, if we accept it, if we agree to be identified with the crucified Lord. Our lives become attached to his life, not only the glory of his resurrection, but also the pain and sorrow of his crucifixion. Can you accept it? Can we be with Christ in his death? If so, then we can be with him in his glory.

Jesus did much more than die and rise. He had a life of righteousness, and we share in that life, too. We are not instantly perfect, of course — not even gradually perfect — but we are called to share in the abundant, new life of Christ. Paul ties it all together when he writes, “We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life” (Romans 6:4). Buried with him, risen with him, living with him.

### **A new identity**

What is this new life supposed to be like? “Count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body.... Offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness” (verses 11-13).

When we identify with Jesus Christ, our lives are his. “We are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again” (2 Corinthians 5:14-15).

Just as Jesus was not alone, neither are we. If we identify with Christ, then we are buried with him, and we rise to new life with him, and he lives with us. In our trials and in our successes, he is with us, because our lives belong to him. He shoulders the burden, and he gets the credit, and we get the joy of sharing life with him.

Paul described it in these terms: “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20).

Take up the cross, Jesus urged his disciples, and follow me. Identify with me. Make your life like mine. Let the old be crucified, and let the new life reign in your body. Let it be by me. Let me live in you, and I will give you life eternal.

*Joseph W. Teach*

## DID YOU KILL JESUS CHRIST?

You may remember preachers who said that humanity in general and each of us personally is responsible for the death of Jesus Christ. Many sincere Christians have believed this. As a result, many labor under a huge burden of guilt. Particularly in the spring of each year, as we near the anniversary of his death, the burden is remembered anew.

But are we responsible for the death of Jesus? If we aren't, then who is?

Only one set of shoulders is broad enough and strong enough to bear that burden of responsibility without breaking. Those shoulders are not human, but divine. We are responsible for our own deaths: by our sins we have brought death upon ourselves. Our own deaths (Ezekiel 18:4, 20) are the wages we have earned by our sins (Romans 6:23). "You shall surely die!" is what God said (Genesis 2:17).

But Jesus has chosen to die in our place, to make us free from the penalty of our own sins. "I lay down my life for the sheep," he said (John 10:15). We did not force him to die. He was under no external compulsion to die for us. "I lay down my life.... No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord" (John 10:17-18). We did not compel him die for us. We did not even ask him to die for us. We were bound up in sin, and we did not know enough to ask for such a thing.

The sacrifice was made at God's initiative. Nothing outside of Jesus compelled him. Only his own nature, his own love, compelled him. The self-sacrifice of Jesus on the cross was the expression within time of the self-giving love that is the nature of God in eternity. Jesus "loved us and gave himself up for us" (Ephesians 5:2)—he gave his life as a sign of his love. His act was designed to create in us a response of love and gratitude and wonder. It was not intended to make us feel guilty every time we think about it.

Consider this: If I were guilty for causing the death of Jesus, what could erase that guilt? To claim the blood of Christ to cover it would incur the same guilt again! I would logically be forced to the conclusion that the only way to be free of the guilt of Christ's sacrifice would be to die for my own sins, rather than bear the burden of responsibility and guilt that comes along with having him die for them.

Here is a paradox: When we receive his sacrifice as a gift, we are free from responsibility for his death. Our merciful God did not intend that we, his children, carry a burden of guilt through our lives today, or through life everlasting, based on our mistaken notion that by accepting his gift we bear



## JESUS THE SAVIOR

the responsibility for Jesus' death. God intended that we be freed from and remain free from such a sense of condemnation and guilt (Romans 8:5).

Praise God, and thank him that he took the responsibility of giving his Son for us! Praise Jesus, and thank him that he willingly laid down his life for us, and rejoice that he invites us to take advantage of his gift of love without guilt, without reluctance and without condemnation.

## THREE ASPECTS, ONE GREAT EVENT

In his Gospel and epistles, the apostle John tells us that God is *light*, *love* and *life*. These three key words are especially appropriate to consider as we approach Holy Week, which begins this Sunday (March 29). The apostle Paul also uses these three words in his epistles, where typically they appear in connection with the Triune God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Echoing Jesus' proclamation in John 10:28-29, Paul declares that nothing "will be able to separate us from the *love* of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39, emphasis added). In his first letter to Timothy, Paul indicates the connection between *life* and *light*:

Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal *life* to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses. In the sight of God, who gives *life* to everything, and of Christ Jesus, who while testifying before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you to keep this command without spot or blame until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, which God will bring about in his own time—God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable *light*, whom no one has seen or can see. To him be honor and might forever. Amen (1 Timothy 6:12-16, emphasis added).

The biblical revelation is that our triune God is one and acts as one. We could summarize the Triune God's unity of action by saying that the Father calls light and life into existence, the Holy Spirit illumines our lives with his light, and Jesus Christ is sent as the light and life of the world. Our Triune God does all this out of the overflow of their eternal holy love: "For God so loved the world."

*Light*, *love* and *life*. Something about these three words evokes pleasure, and that leads to celebration. Have you noticed that weddings, renewal of vows, and even fundraising events are referred to as "celebrations of love"? Christmas and independence days are called "celebrations of light." Late-life birthdays, funerals and memorial services are called "celebrations of life." Such celebrations view *light*, *love* and *life* as gifts. But do people know the gift-giver?

In Scripture, light, love and life are interrelated as gifts that flow from the very being of God: "In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (John

1:4-5). The story of Jesus is about this light coming into the world to give us life because of the love of the Father. Indeed, light, life and love convey the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection. This is seen in the last three days of Holy Week, which focus on Jesus' passion (suffering), death and resurrection. These are three aspects of one, indivisible, unrepeatable, unique event that points us to one, indivisible person—Jesus Christ.

The one great event of Jesus' "passover" from life to death, then back to life is called the *Holy Triduum* (and sometimes the *Easter* or *Paschal Triduum*). The word *triduum* (meaning "three days") was first used by Augustine to express the essential unity of the three-day-long Paschal event beginning at sunset on Maundy Thursday (many GCI churches hold a Last Supper commemoration service that evening), leading into Good Friday (when we remember Jesus' crucifixion and death), followed by Holy Saturday (when we remember Jesus lying in the tomb), and culminating with Easter Sunday, when we celebrate Jesus' resurrection.

Though Holy Saturday often is overlooked in Protestant churches these days, it has been emphasized throughout Christian history. Orthodox Christians refer to it as "the Great and Holy Sabbath." Part of their liturgy is to sing "This is the Day the Lord has Made," taken from Psalm 118, the last Psalm of Passover, which was believed to be the hymn Jesus last sang with his disciples. Coptic Christians refer to it as "The Saturday of Light" and "Joyous Saturday."

We should not miss the imagery of Holy Saturday, which portrays Jesus' lifeless body spending the Sabbath in the darkness of death, buried in the tomb. As explained by the apostle John, this imagery points us to the light and life of God: "This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5). "In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:4-5). John reminds us that darkness and death did not hold Jesus in bondage. God entered the darkness and broke through. The good news for all is that, for the sake of his love, God brings resurrection light to dispel all darkness; to bring life out of death.

Because of Holy Saturday, we need not fear the dark. When young, my sisters were afraid of the dark and wanted a night-light in their bedroom. But then they experienced some panic when seeing strange shadows. I remember what my mother said to comfort them: "God is always with us, even in the dark." My mom's words were a cogent reminder that God loves us in ways we cannot imagine. He loves us in our darkness, ignorance and foolishness.

Hearing we are forgiven and that, in Christ, there is no condemnation for us, not only makes me appreciate the depth of God's love, it makes me want to light up fireworks! I sometimes dream of enjoying supernatural light shows when we experience eternal life in the fullness of God's kingdom.

It is the light of God that reveals reality to us. Physically, we are unable to distinguish color in the dark. Darkness hides dangers, while light exposes them. We need light to see. We need God to see reality. The three days stretching from Maundy Thursday through Good Friday, to Holy Saturday and Resurrection Sunday point to three aspects of one great event—what Jesus has done to reclaim, redeem and reconcile us to God, bringing us into the radiant light of the glory of God. It was the *love* of God that sent the *light* of God to bring us into the *life* of God.

*Joseph Tkach*

## OUR STRANGE DEAD GOD

From the various medals, statues and drawings adorning his car, it was obvious that my taxi driver was Hindu. He was driving me to Kuala Lumpur's airport, through the vast oil palm plantations of Southern Malaysia.

Malaysia is a multicultural nation, and although the principal religion is Islam, it is common to see Hindu and Buddhist temples alongside the mosques in the towns and villages. There is even the occasional Christian church—although Christianity is very much a minority religion in Southeast Asia.

The older I get, the more tolerant I become of other people's religious beliefs. I don't mean that I accept them or even understand them, but I have learned that what to me might seem foolish or confusing can have deep meaning to someone from a different culture. For example, my Hindu taxi driver is an intelligent man, but I have to wonder what he sees in what to me are rather odd symbols of his faith. Like, for instance, the brightly colored statues of monkeys and elephants that adorn the temples. Or the small statue of a multi-armed goddess on the taxi's dashboard.

To those who don't know the story, it must seem odd to choose a tortured, bleeding corpse on a cross as the symbol of your faith.

I was thinking of asking the driver about this, when he neatly turned the tables on me. We passed a Christian church building decorated with a large cross on the wall. The cross had a gaudy plaster statue of the crucified Christ nailed to it, with bright red painted blood flowing from its hands, feet and side. Turning to me, the driver asked, "Excuse me, sir, but are you a Christian?"

"Yes," I said.

"Then could you tell me what you Christians see in that strange dead god?"

I had never thought of the symbol of the cross like that. To me, Jesus is very much alive. When you know the story, the cross becomes a powerful reminder of how Jesus suffered when he became the sacrifice for sin. But to someone who does not know the story, it must seem odd to choose a tortured, bleeding corpse hanging on Roman cross as the symbol of your faith.

### **Not always the cross**

Today the cross is the universally recognized emblem of Christianity. It wasn't always. In the early years of the Church, the cross was not widely used.

Perhaps it was considered too horrific at a time when crucifixion was still a dreaded punishment in the Roman Empire. The first Christians identified themselves with the symbol of the fish, like the one you see on bumper stickers. The first letters of the Greek words that meant “Jesus Christ, God’s Son, Savior” (*Iesous Christos Theou Yios Soter*) happened to form the Greek word for “fish” (*ichthys*).

It was an apt symbol, because Jesus told his followers they would be “fishers of men.” But in those early days, they had to “fish” in secret. It was dangerous to be a Christian, and the followers of Jesus resorted to secret signs and symbols to keep from exposing themselves unnecessarily. For example, a man sometimes drew half the picture of a fish in the sand while talking with someone. If the figure was recognized to signify more than an unconscious movement during the course of a conversation, the other person would complete the drawing, and the two believers would know they were safe with one another.

The Christians had to worship in secret, and visiting Christians could find their way to the worship center in the long underground passageways by simply looking at the fish on the wall pointing in the direction they were to go.

However, when Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire in the days of Constantine and crucifixion was abandoned as a punishment, the cross became more prevalent as a symbol of Christian faith. But during the first millennium, the Christ figure was usually portrayed fully clothed and very much alive, focusing on his triumphant resurrection rather than his ignominious death.

My Hindu taxi driver was not the only one who did not understand “our strange dead God.” In many parts of the world, where the representatives of Christ have not always behaved well, the cross is seen as a symbol of oppression and exploitation. And of course, there are now millions of people in the Western world who wear a cross as jewelry, but have no clear idea of what it symbolizes. Perhaps you have heard the story of the girl who asked a jeweler, “Do you have one of those cross things people are wearing?”

“Do you want a plain one, or one with the little man on it?” the jeweler asked.

## **Core of our faith**

Even if a growing number of people see a cross as nothing more than another kind of trendy jewelry, the cross continues to hold its rightful place as a centerpiece in our places of worship. It adorns our Bibles, prayer books

and hymnals. It represents forgiveness of sin and reminds us of what Jesus suffered to become our Savior.

But here's something to think about. Does a cross actually convey the core meaning of our Christian faith? It might to us, since we know the whole story. Jesus didn't remain on the cross or in the tomb. He rose from the dead and ascended to the Father, having conquered death and reconciled humanity to God as both the representative and substitute for all. But to many, like my taxi driver, the cross conveys the idea that we worship a "strange dead God."

Many a church notice board reminds passersby that "the wages of sin is death." Such constant emphasis on avoiding punishment for sin can give the impression that this is what our faith is all about.

But Christianity is not primarily about avoiding death. It is not even primarily about forgiveness of sin. It is about love and life. John 3:16 reminds us that God so loved the world that he gave his only beloved Son so that humanity could have—not just their sins forgiven—but true life, life with God. Forgiveness is part of the process, but even forgiveness springs eternal only from God's heart of love, and it is God's undying love that transforms people into brothers and sisters of Jesus, more than that, into friends of Jesus, and into the beloved children of the Father.

The world has never been so filled with fear, suffering and death. We need to remind ourselves that Jesus said "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10).

Christianity stands for love and life. The cross will always be a symbol of the death of our Lord. But is there an equally recognizable way to represent the new life created for humanity in his resurrection and ascension to the Father? Artists' attempts to show the risen Lord in all his glory inevitably fall far short of reality. But maybe there is a way.

Jesus said he would live in and through people who accept him as their Savior. They would follow him, their lives transformed, reflecting his love and life like a glowing candle in a dark room. "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another," said Jesus (John 13:35).

A life characterized by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustworthiness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23) will undoubtedly be thought of as a bit strange. It is to be expected; people thought Jesus was strange, too. But Christian faith is best represented not when someone looks at a handmade symbol that might have different meanings to different people, but when those who believe it become living symbols of our "strange living God."

*John Halford*



## COMMEMORATING THE CRUCIFIXION

Almost 2,000 years ago, a Jewish carpenter was condemned as a dangerous religious and political rebel. He was executed in one of the most painful and shameful punishments ever known: flogging and crucifixion. This form of death was a scandal to both Jews and Gentiles.

Nevertheless, Jesus' followers made a point of remembering his death—not just the fact that he died, but also that he died in such a shameful way. In their written stories about Jesus, they devoted lengthy sections to his horrible death. They set aside one day each year as the anniversary of his death.

Why is Jesus' death so important to Christians—and so central to the Christian faith?

### Of greatest importance

Jesus' death is listed as of “first importance” in Paul's summary of the gospel message: “For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared...” (1 Corinthians 15:3-5). Paul even characterized his own preaching as “the message of the cross” (1 Corinthians 1:18). “We preach Christ crucified,” he said (verse 23).

Jesus' death was predicted in Scripture, and was necessary (Luke 24:25-26; Acts 3:18; 17:3). It was necessary not just for the Messiah to *die*, but to *suffer*, and to be crucified for our salvation. It was an essential part of Jesus' ministry, and an essential part of the gospel. Jesus had predicted his own suffering and death, even his death on a cross (Mark 8:31-32; 9:31; 10:33-34; Matthew 20:19; 26:2; John 12:32-33). He was sure it had to happen the way it did (Matthew 26:54)—it was his purpose, his mission (John 12:27). He had to fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah 53 (Luke 22:37).



Jesus said that his death would be a ransom to save other people (Mark 10:45). At his Last Supper, he said that he gave his body on behalf of other people, and he gave his blood to form a new covenant, or a new relationship between God and humanity, based on forgiveness (Luke 22:19-20; Matthew 26:28). He was, as Isaiah had predicted, an innocent person who suffered and died to ransom the guilty. God laid our sins on Jesus, and he was killed for *our* transgressions to buy *our* freedom.

Jesus not only predicted his death, he also explained its significance for us—and this is why it is good news. He gave his body for us—for our benefit. He allowed his blood to be shed so we might be forgiven. Jesus was the mediator between God and humans. His death enables us to have a covenant with God—a relationship of promise and loyalty. Indeed, the death of Christ is the *only* way for our salvation. That is why Jesus, even though he knew what pain awaited him, “resolutely set out for Jerusalem” (Luke 9:51). It was the reason he had come.

### **Publicizing a scandal**

The resurrection of Jesus was wonderful news. It was a hope-filled message. Because of that, it would have been easy for the apostles to emphasize Jesus’ resurrection and skip over his shameful death. Indeed, we read in Acts that they preached the resurrection—but they also boldly reminded people of the shameful punishment Jesus had received (Acts 2:22-24; 3:13-15; 4:10; 5:30-31; 7:51-53; 10:37-40; 13:27-30).

Not only did they admit the cross, they also called it a *tree*—a word that would remind Jews of Deuteronomy 21:22-23, which says that anyone who is hung on a tree is under God’s curse. By using the word *tree*, the apostles drew extra attention to the shameful way Jesus had died. Why did they emphasize the shameful way that Jesus died? Because it was important. The Scriptures had predicted it, Jesus had predicted it, and it was necessary for our salvation.

The cross involves shame as well as pain (Hebrews 12:2). It involves a “curse” (Galatians 3:13-14). Paul did his best not to offend people, but he emphasized the crucifixion even though he knew it was offensive (Galatians 5:11; 3:1; 6:14). The cross was the *center* of his gospel (1 Corinthians 1:23; 2:2; Philippians 3:18).

Paul gives the spiritual significance of the cross: Jesus redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us. He was made sin for us (2 Corinthians 5:21). He was a sacrifice so that we might be justified, or declared right, so that we might not receive the punishment our sins deserve (Romans

3:24-26). He carried our sins on his cross (1 Peter 2:24). “Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God” (1 Peter 3:18).

It is through the cross that we can be given the blessing promised to Abraham (Galatians 3:14). It is through the cross that we are reconciled to God (Ephesians 2:16). It is through the cross that God forgives our sins, taking away the written note of debt that was against us (Colossians 2:13-14). Our salvation depends on the cross of Christ.

Since we fail to keep the law perfectly, we fall under its curse (Galatians 3:10). We all deserve death (Romans 3:23; 6:23). Jesus, being sinless, did not need to die, but he willingly died for us. The righteous died for the unrighteous. He received death so that we might receive life.

John Stott writes that the crucifixion shows three truths:

First, our sin must be extremely horrible. Nothing reveals the gravity of sin like the cross.... If there was no way by which the righteous God could righteously forgive our unrighteousness, except that he should bear it himself in Christ, it must be serious indeed....

Secondly, God’s love must be wonderful beyond comprehension.... He pursued us even to the desolate anguish of the cross, where he bore our sin, guilt, judgment and death. It takes a hard and stony heart to remain unmoved by love like that....

Thirdly, Christ’s salvation must be a free gift. He “purchased” it for us at the high price of his own life-blood. So what is there left for us to pay? Nothing! (*The Cross of Christ*, page 83)

## **A memorial of death**

The cross was the focus of Jesus’ mission as a human. His job was not done until he was crucified. Jesus did not tell his disciples to remember his miracles—they were to remember his *death*. Jesus eliminated many rituals, but he commanded a new one: the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper. He told us to participate in these reminders of his death because his death, and our participation in his death, is the key to our salvation.

We remember Jesus’ death not just as something that happened to Jesus—it is relevant for us today. The Lord’s Supper looks to the past—Jesus willingly giving his life to us—and to the present—his union with us now, and the future—his promise to return.

In baptism, we picture our participation in Jesus’ death (Romans 6:3). Spiritually speaking, are we crucified with Christ (Galatians 2:20), and on a

daily basis, we are to crucify our sinful passions and desires (Galatians 5:24; Romans 8:13). To follow Jesus, we must take up our cross each day (Luke 9:23), willing to deny wrong desires. The Lord's Supper reminds us of what our life is all about.

Jesus' death is our pattern for daily living—it is a picture of complete submission to God, a picture of willingness to reject sin and choose righteousness. Jesus died for us, Paul says, so that we should no longer live for ourselves, but instead live to serve Jesus (2 Corinthians 5:15). Since our old self was crucified with Christ, “we should no longer be slaves to sin” (Romans 6:6). Instead, we offer ourselves to God as living sacrifices, willing to serve him (Romans 6:13; 12:1). Because he died for us, we “die to sins and live for righteousness” (1 Peter 2:24).

Jesus' death is evidence that God loves us—it shows us that God cares about us so much that he did something to solve our problem, to rescue us from the pain and death our sinfulness brought upon us (Romans 5:8-10). Since God did not spare his own Son, we can be confident that he will give us everything we need for salvation (Romans 8:32). His love for us becomes an example for how much we should love one another (Ephesians 5:1-2).

The death of Jesus gives us some important freedoms:

- We are no longer prisoners of the law (Galatians 3:23; Romans 7:6).
- We are no longer slaves of sin and passions (John 8:34-36; Romans 6:6-7, 16; Titus 3:3).
- We are no longer enslaved by death or fear (Romans 8:2; Hebrews 2:14-15).
- We have overcome the world and the evil one (1 John 5:4-5; 1 John 2:13-14; Revelation 12:11).

With this freedom, we are to be slaves of righteousness, slaves of Jesus Christ. He died for us so we may live for him (2 Corinthians 5:14-15). This is how we should respond to the love of God shown to us in the cross of Christ.

The cross is also an example for us when we suffer. Peter reminds us that when we suffer unjustly, we should remember the example of Jesus, who suffered unjustly for us, setting an example for us (1 Peter 2:19-23). In Hebrews we are told to remember Jesus when we grow weary of our troubles, for he endured great opposition for us (Hebrews 12:2-4). Unjust suffering is part of the Christian calling, and part of the example Jesus set for us. “A servant is not greater than his master” (John 15:20). The Lord's Supper reminds us of what Jesus' life was all about, and that we are called to follow him.

When we suffer, we are also encouraged by knowing that a crown of glory awaits us, just as it did for Jesus. When we identify with him in his cross, we will also share in his glory (Romans 8:17-18; 2 Corinthians 4:17).

Many people think that the cross is foolishness, but it shows us the wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:17-25). It was a stroke of genius, a brilliant maneuver. It simultaneously shows us how ugly sin is, and how beautiful God's love is, and the extent of his commitment to ensure our salvation. It punishes sin and offers forgiveness. It shows both justice and grace. It breaks the power of sin and death, and gives us power to overcome. The cross gives us visible evidence that our sins have been dealt with once and for all, that our struggles are not in vain, and that a crown of glory awaits us through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. It is certainly worth remembering.

*Joseph Teach*

## HOW LONG WAS JESUS IN THE TOMB?

The Gospels tell us that the day on which the women discovered that Jesus' tomb was empty was Sunday morning. The Gospels say that the women came to the tomb "at dawn on the first day of the week" (Matthew 28:1), "very early on the first day of the week" (Mark 16:2), "on the first day of the week, very early in the morning" (Luke 24:1), or "early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark" (John 20:1). The women came to the tomb around dawn on the "first day of the week" (or Sunday), and found it empty. It appears from these accounts that Jesus was raised sometime during the early hours of Sunday morning.

The question remains: On what day of the week was Jesus crucified and buried in the tomb? Those who believe Jesus was crucified on Wednesday refer to Matthew 12:40. This verse has Jesus saying: "For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." Proponents of a Wednesday crucifixion say that this statement means Jesus was *exactly* three days and three nights – or 72 hours – in the grave. Thus he was buried near sunset Wednesday evening and resurrected Saturday evening.

However, if we read the 20 other places in the New Testament in which Jesus and the apostles refer to the length of time he would spend in the tomb, we would be forced to conclude that they do *not* teach a literal three-day stay in the tomb. You may check the following verses where the length of time between Jesus' death and burial, and his resurrection, is mentioned: Matthew 16:21; 17:23; 20:19; 26:61; 27:40, 64; Mark 9:31; 10:34; 14:58; 15:29; Luke 9:22; 13:32; 18:33; 24:7, 21, 46; John 2:19, 20; Acts 10:40; 1 Corinthians 15:4. In 20 places *indefinite* expressions such "on the third day he will be raised" are given as the length of time between these events.

Those who believe in a Wednesday crucifixion disregard the inexactness as to time in these passages and interpret them by Matthew 12:40 in a literal manner, as exactly 72 hours. But this line of reasoning creates a contradiction. For example, Matthew, who used the phrase "three days and three nights" to refer to the length of Jesus' burial, also has him saying: "The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and *on* the third day he will be raised to life" (17:23, emphasis ours).

Taking the phrase in 12:40 "three days and three nights" as denoting exactly 72 hours creates an internal problem with 17:23 in the Gospel of Matthew. Here's why. The elapsed time between being *killed* and then rising

“*on* the third day,” as described in 17:23, is longer than the time between rising after being *buried*, as discussed in 12:40. Yet, 17:23 uses an expression (“on the third day”) that implies a *shorter* period of time – if we demand that Matthew 12:40 (“three days and three nights”) must be a literal 72 hours. For something to occur “on” the third day is for it to happen in less time than at the point when three literal days have passed. But Jesus was killed some time *before* he was buried. How, then, could the time between his death and resurrection be “on the third day” (or less than three literal days) but the time between his burial and resurrection be *after* three days or 72 hours?

Therefore, to demand that the phrase “three days and three nights” must be taken literally as a 72-hour period creates a contradiction within the Gospel of Matthew. The 72-hour theory also causes Matthew to be in conflict with what Mark, Luke, John and Paul say about the duration of time between Jesus’ death and burial, and his resurrection.

Yet, proponents of a Wednesday crucifixion still say that we should take Matthew 12:40 literally. Their view is that Jesus said he would be resurrected *after* three days and three nights in the tomb, and that is how we should read him. But, must we or should we take Matthew 12:40 literally?

Perhaps the source of the confusion over Matthew 12:40 occurs precisely *because* we try to read it in a literal fashion, as though it referred to a time period of exactly 72 hours. What we may be doing is reading *our* modern views of time exactness into an ancient figure of speech that didn’t contain it, or imposing our sense of precise time-telling on the ancient Jewish sense. In fact, Matthew 12:40 may be consistent with and reflect the way people thought of time in their day, not in our era.

Are there any biblical examples where “after three days and three nights” may not mean exactly 72 hours? Yes, 1 Samuel 30 is an example. The account in this chapter is about David and the Amalekites, and certain events in the village of Ziklag. Verse one tells us that, “David and his men reached Ziklag *on the third day*” (emphasis ours throughout). Upon arriving at Ziklag, David encountered an Egyptian, the slave of an Amalekite. He told David, “My master abandoned me when I became ill *three days ago*” (verse 13). The account also says that the Egyptian had not eaten or drunk for “three days and three nights” (verse 12).

“On the third day” is not necessarily three full days. In fact, it would be less than 72 hours. “Three days ago” is equally vague, as it could be less than three full days. Yet, this time is equated with “three days and three nights.” It’s certainly possible, or even probable, that we are not dealing with a full

72-hour period here. “Three days and three nights” could be an idiomatic expression that refers to parts of three days. 1 Samuel 30 indicates that “three days and three nights” was an expression that did not necessarily mean a full 72 hours. Other examples where variants of the expression “three days” are used includes the following passages: Genesis 42:17-18 (“for three days” = “on the third day”); 2 Chronicles 10:5, 12 (“three days later” = “in three days”) and Esther 4:16–5:1 (“for three days” = “on the third day”).

Do we lose anything meaningful about Jesus’ death and resurrection if Matthew 12:40 is an inexact reference to the time lapse between these two events? The New Testament references mentioned above are inexact as measured by our time-telling standards, but they still establish the fact that Jesus was in the tomb for a long enough period of time that there would be no question he was dead. Being in the tomb *parts* of three days, perhaps about 36 hours (which a Friday crucifixion-Sunday resurrection would allow) is enough to demonstrate this.

However, proponents of a 72-hour burial say that how long Jesus was in the tomb was the sign that he gave of his messiahship. But is this true? While the apostles referred in a general manner to the length of time Jesus was dead and buried, they never used the chronological measurement as the proof. They used such expressions as “after three days” or “on the third day,” but they did not attempt to prove an exact length of time. The apostles spoke of the resurrection itself, not the length of time, as the proof that Jesus is the Messiah. It stands to reason that the *fact* of Jesus’ death and resurrection is what demonstrates him to be our Savior. Whether Jesus was in the tomb two days, three days or ten days has no bearing on the issue of his messiahship.

If we remember that the phrase “three days and three nights” is an expression of the disciples’ culture, rather than scientific exactness, then we should have no problem with understanding Matthew 12:40. The “sign” that Jesus gave was not the length of time that he would be in the tomb, but it was the *fact* that he would die, be buried and be raised to life. We need not be concerned about the exact time Jesus was in the tomb, for our salvation does not depend on that. What is important is that Jesus died and was resurrected to become our Savior (1 Corinthians 15:3-4).



## WAS JESUS CRUCIFIED ON A WEDNESDAY?

In Matthew 12:40, Jesus says that he will be buried “three days and three nights.” Some people teach 1) that this is *not* a figure of speech, 2) that Jesus therefore had to be in the tomb exactly 72 hours, 3) that since he was put in the tomb at evening, he came out at evening and 4) that this necessitates a Wednesday crucifixion. Further, this was supposedly the *only* sign Jesus gave that he was the Christ. Jesus had to be in the tomb exactly 72 hours or else he was not our Savior.

However, our salvation does not depend on the exact length of time Jesus spent in the tomb. The apostles did not teach that. They most often used the phrase “on the third day,” which makes no attempt at hourly precision. The phrase “on the third day” usually suggests *less* than 72 hours, but the apostles apparently were not concerned about the exact length of time Jesus was in the tomb. We do not teach that the 72-hour interpretation of Matthew 12:40 is the only possible interpretation, nor even that it is the “best” interpretation.

Within Christianity, there are three views as to the day of the crucifixion: Wednesday, Thursday and Friday. Although the Friday view is by far the most common, some Christians believe the Wednesday view, and a few the Thursday view. We do not believe it is necessary for the church to have an official position as to which interpretation of Matthew 12:40 is correct. The core issue is that Jesus was crucified, and resurrected on the third day (1 Corinthians 15:3-4).

Let us look at the evidence from Luke, who wrote his Gospel to Theophilus, who apparently did not have the book of Matthew. Jesus predicted that he would be killed “and on the third day be raised to life” (Luke 9:22; 18:33; 24:7, 46). On Sunday afternoon, the apostles described the crucifixion (24:20) and said, “It is the third day since all this took place” (24:21). They understood Sunday afternoon to be on the third day since the crucifixion. But if the crucifixion had been on a Wednesday, Sunday afternoon would have been on the fourth or the fifth day, depending on how one counts.

Were those two disciples mistaken? Luke reports their comment as true, and Theophilus would certainly receive the impression that Jesus was killed on the day before the Sabbath (Luke 23:54). Verse 56 refers to the weekly Sabbath, and that is how Theophilus would have understood verse 54, too, since there is no hint in Luke that there may have been more than one Sabbath that week. The evidence from the book of Luke seems to point

consistently to a Friday crucifixion, and Sunday is the third day from Friday. That is the way Theophilus would have counted it with the evidence available to him.

Jewish custom is to count inclusively, that is, counting the beginning as first. When counting Pentecost, for example, the 50th day is (according to the way we count) 49 days after the wavesheaf. Or when John said “after eight days” (John 20:26, NKJ), he meant “one week later” (John 20:26, NIV). In this customary way of counting days, Sunday would be considered the third day from Friday. Luke tells us that Jesus rose on the third day after the crucifixion.

Another example of inclusive counting is seen in the book of Esther. She promised to not eat or drink “for three days, night or day” and *after* that go to the king (Esther 4:16) — yet she went to the king *on* the third day (5:1). Apparently any portion of the day was sufficient to count for the day and the night. A biblical phrase that seems to us to be precise may not necessarily match modern ideas of exact time measurement.

Because Jews customarily counted inclusively, it is not appropriate to insist that “on the third day” means “exactly 72 hours later.” Where Luke uses the phrase “on the third day,” Mark uses the phrase “after three days” (Mark 9:31). Matthew also uses the phrase “after three days,” and he equates it with “until the third day” (Matthew 27:63-64). Or they may say “three days later” or “in three days” (Mark 10:34; 14:58). We should not read hourly precision into this variety of phrases.

Although the apostles preached that Jesus was raised “on the third day” (Acts 10:40; 1 Corinthians 15:4), they never used that chronology as proof of Jesus’ authenticity. The inspired writers do not seem to be concerned about the exact length of time, nor about the exact description of the three days.

Similarly, the apostles made no effort to say exactly when Jesus was resurrected, although a reading of one Gospel would leave the reader with the impression that Jesus rose on a Sunday. This has been the understanding of the vast majority of Christians ever since.

If Matthew 12:40 is intended to be precise, then the other Gospel writers misled their readers. But if we recognize that Jewish culture did not expect precision of such chronological phrases, we find it easier to understand that Matthew 12:40 could be a figure of speech, not an otherwise unexplained detail that all other passages must be fitted around.

## JESUS THE SAVIOR

## JESUS — ALIVE FOREVERMORE!

Jesus did not stay dead for long. Early Sunday morning, near sunrise, some disciples discovered that the Son of God had risen. They did not see the resurrection itself, but they saw Jesus, alive and well. Over a period of 40 days, they saw Jesus on numerous occasions. Then he rose into heaven.

But Jesus is not taking a vacation. His ministry continues, even in heaven. He serves and leads the church, interceding for us, helping us, preparing us for eternal glory. Christ will return, and after he has subdued every enemy, he will give everything to the Father. Mission accomplished.

### Resurrection

Many people have a hard time believing that Jesus rose from the dead. In their experience, dead people always stay dead. They are skeptical of such an extraordinary claim. The disciples must have been mistaken, they say, or else they made it up.

The disciples were skeptical, too. When they went to the tomb, they expected to find a body. When they did not find a body, they first assumed that someone had stolen it. They did not expect a resurrection. It was only when Jesus *appeared* to them that they believed that he was alive again.



Most Jews believed that there would be a resurrection at the end of the age, when everyone would rise for judgment (Daniel 12:2). But a resurrection into glory before the end was just as unexpected as a crucified Messiah. Although Jesus had taught both these ideas (Matthew 16:21; 17:23; Mark 9:9), the disciples didn't understand or believe this (verse 10). They expected him to stay dead.

But if Jesus is the sinless Son of God, then he is unique among the billions of people, and he did not deserve death. We should be surprised if he were *not* resurrected. We also have evidence that gives us confidence that Jesus rose from the dead (as we will cover in our next article).

Many of us also have experiences in our own lives that convince us that God exists, that he sometimes causes miracles, that Jesus is alive and the Holy

Spirit is active in his people. This gives us further reason to believe that Jesus is alive.

## **Significance of the resurrection**

The resurrection meant life for Jesus—but a far better life than what he had on earth, the glory that he had with the Father before his incarnation (John 17:5). By his resurrection, he was powerfully revealed as the Son of God (Romans 1:4)—the resurrection declared who he had been all along. The resurrection proves that God will judge the world through Christ (Acts 17:31).

But the resurrection also means life for *us*. As Paul says, we will “be saved through his life” (Romans 5:10). If you “believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Romans 10:9). “If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith” (1 Corinthians 15:14). Our salvation depends not just on Jesus’ death, but also his resurrection (1 Peter 3:21).

Justification, most commonly associated with Jesus’ death, is also a result of his resurrection (Romans 4:24-25). Our salvation depends on the entire sequence of incarnation: his birth, ministry, death and resurrection.

Our baptism pictures our participation in Jesus’ death and resurrection. Rising from the water pictures our new life (Romans 6:4) and it pictures our future: “We will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection” (verse 5). “When he appears, we shall be like him” (1 John 3:2). Our resurrected bodies will be like his (1 Corinthians 15:42-49).

God has “made us alive with Christ...raised us up with Christ” (Ephesians 2:5-6). We were “raised with him” (Colossians 2:12). By faith in Christ, we are spiritually united to him. Our sins are given to him and paid by him, his righteousness and life are given to us, and we join him in his resurrection. “He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you” (Romans 8:11). His resurrection is a promise that we will also live again!

## **Ascension**

After Jesus was resurrected, he “gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3). On the last day, “he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight” (verse 9). He did not simply disappear. He went up bodily into the sky, as a visible indication that he was going into heaven. His post-resurrection appearances had come to an end.

(His later appearance to Paul was abnormal—1 Corinthians 15:8.)

As the disciples stared at the sky, two angels appeared and told them that Jesus would return “in the same way you have seen him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11). What were the disciples to do in the meantime? They were to wait in Jerusalem until they received the Holy Spirit (verse 4), and then they were to be witnesses for Jesus throughout the world (verse 8). They testified that he is alive, that salvation is available through him.

## **At the right hand**

Jesus did not just go to heaven—he was “exalted to the right hand of God” (Acts 2:33). “God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior” (Acts 5:31). Being at the “right hand” is a figure of speech meaning “in highest authority.” He is exalted above the heavens, ruler of all things (Hebrews 7:27; 1:2).

At least 12 times, Scripture says that Jesus is at the right hand of the Father. Five of these are quotes from Psalm 110:1: “The Lord says to my Lord: Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.” The picture is that the Father gives Jesus a throne, even while there are enemies to be subdued. God will take care of the enemies; Jesus is secure in his authority. Using the Latin word for “sit,” this is sometimes called the “session” of Christ—being seated on his throne.

## **Ministry**

Using his position of power in heaven, Jesus continues working for our salvation. He sends the Holy Spirit to us (John 15:26; 16:7), and the Holy Spirit testifies about Jesus and helps us understand what he taught (John 14:26; 15:26). The Spirit is the way that the Father and the Son live within us (14:18, 23).

Jesus is our Advocate (1 John 2:1). He is like a defense attorney who “speaks to the Father in our defense”—if anyone accuses us, Jesus is there as a perpetual reminder that our sins have been covered by his sacrifice. It is therefore pointless to make accusations (Romans 8:33-34) — there is no condemnation for anyone who has faith in Christ (verse 1).

The risen Christ intercedes for us, to defend us from accusation and to give us help. “He is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them” (Hebrews 7:25). “Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted” (Hebrews 2:18). Because he can sympathize with our weaknesses, we can be confident that he will give us the help we need in our struggles (Hebrews 4:15-16).

The book of Hebrews calls him our high priest, who sacrificed himself for us and now lives to help us (Hebrews 2:17; 3:1). Since our sins are forgiven through his death, we can approach God with confidence (Hebrews 10:19). “Since we have a great priest over the house of God,” we are encouraged: “let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith” (verse 22).

Jesus is our mediator, who resolves conflicts and brings us to God (1 Timothy 2:5). He ushers us into the throne room of heaven, assuring us that God will hear us with favor. This is part of the ongoing ministry of Jesus Christ.

Jesus is also our Shepherd (John 10:11; Hebrews 13:20), implying that he loves, protects and provides for us. Peter brings similar images to mind when he calls Jesus “the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls” (1 Peter 2:25). Jesus watches over us. The book of Revelation tells us that we are shepherded by a Lamb, a gentle guide who sacrificed himself for us (Revelation 7:17). He will supply our needs, because he knows what they are.

God assigned Jesus to be Head of the church (Ephesians 1:22; 4:15), and the church is to submit to his leadership in everything (Ephesians 5:24). He has supremacy over all things (Colossians 1:18; 2:10). Jesus already has all authority on heaven and earth (Matthew 28:18). God has seated him above every power and authority (Ephesians 1:20-22; Colossians 2:10).

Through faith, we join Jesus in his amazing journey. We are crucified with him, we rise with him, we are joined with him by the Holy Spirit. We will be given glory with him and will reign with him forever (2 Timothy 2:11-12). Believe the good news!

## **Resurrection appearances**

Before dawn, Mary Magdalene finds the tomb open and reports the body gone (John 20:1-2). Other women arrive and are told by angels to tell the disciples (Matthew 28:5-7; Luke 24:1-9). They visit the tomb and find it empty (John 20:3-10).

- 1. Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene (John 20:11-18).
- 2. Jesus appears to two women (Matthew 28:9-10).
- 3. Jesus appears to two men on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-33).
- 4. Jesus appears to Peter (verse 34).
- 5. Jesus appears to 10 of the Eleven (verse 36; John 20:24).
- 6. One week later, Jesus appears when Thomas is present (John

20:26-29).

- 7. Seven disciples see Jesus at the Sea of Galilee (John 21:1-22).
- 8. The Eleven meet Jesus on a mountain in Galilee (Matthew 28:16-20).
- 9. Jesus appears to 500 people (1 Corinthians 15:6).
- 10. Jesus appears to James at another time (verse 7).
- 11. Jesus appears to the Eleven just before ascending to heaven (Acts 1:6-11).

Adapted from Murray J. Harris, *3 Crucial Questions About Jesus*, pages 107-109.

*Michael Morrison*



## ON THE ROAD TO EMMAUS

It's a familiar story, so I'll just go through it quickly, and save my comments for the end. In Luke 24, we read that the women went to the tomb early on the first day of the week, and they found the tomb empty. Two angels appeared, and told them that Jesus had risen. So the women ran to tell the apostles the good news, but the apostles did not believe the women, because their words didn't seem to make any sense. Let's read the story starting in verse 12:

Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb. Bending over, he saw the strips of linen lying by themselves, and he went away, wondering to himself what had happened.

Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; but they were kept from recognizing him.

He asked them, "What are you discussing together as you walk along?"

They stood still, their faces downcast.

One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, "Are you only a visitor to Jerusalem and do not know the things that have happened there in these days?"

"What things?" he asked.

"About Jesus of Nazareth," they replied. "He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place.

In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning but didn't find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see."

He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and

all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus continued on as if he were going farther. 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.

Who were these two disciples? One was named Cleopas, but we do not know the name of the other one. Maybe it was Mrs. Cleopas – we don’t even know whether the person was male or female.

Maybe we can put our own name into the story at this point – maybe Luke doesn’t tell us the name of the other disciple so that we can imagine ourselves as part of this story.

OK, so we were walking with Cleopas on the road to Emmaus, talking about all the things that have happened in the last few days.

Was it only a week ago that Jesus came riding into Jerusalem on a donkey? Weren’t all the children singing Hosanna? Didn’t all this happen to fulfill the prophecy of Zechariah about the king of Israel, riding on a donkey?

We were sure that Jesus was the Messiah, come to rescue us. We were sure that he was going to set up the kingdom of God. He kept talking about it – that’s what he wanted to do, and that’s what we wanted him to do, too.

And we could sure see God working in him. He kicked scoundrels out of the temple courts, and nobody stopped him. He told parables that clearly said God was rejecting the Pharisees and Sadducees, and would give the land to someone else. He showed that all those so-called leaders couldn’t even interpret the Scriptures right.

He predicted the end of the age, and the Son of Man coming in glory with the clouds of heaven. And he gave us signs of a new covenant, a new relationship with God. We were sure that he was the Messiah.

And then he got killed.

I'll skip the gruesome details.

Remember that guy named Judas the Galilean? He said he was the Messiah and attracted a big following on the other side of the Jordan. But he got killed and all his followers scattered. Maybe we got sucked into that kind of thing. Just because we think somebody is the Messiah doesn't necessarily make him the Messiah. Jesus did some amazing stuff – I guess Judas did, too. Lots of people thought he was the Messiah. But they were wrong – and it looks like we were wrong, too.

Now it's time to get out of town, as inconspicuously as possible. We can't do it on Saturday, because that's the Sabbath, and we'll look pretty conspicuous. So we'll just stay inside and keep the doors locked. We can't leave on Sunday morning, because that's when everybody is heading into Jerusalem for more festival celebrations. The best time to leave is on Sunday afternoon, when people start going home to the nearby villages. We'll just blend in with those people, if we leave on Sunday afternoon.

And so here we are, walking away from Jerusalem, talking about what a great disappointment we've had. We thought this was going to be the best week of our life, but boy, did we get all our hopes smashed!

Have you ever felt like that? Have you ever hoped that Jesus would rescue you from some sort of problem or another? Have you ever hoped that Jesus would give you a problem-free life? Have you ever felt that instead, God had abandoned you? If he really existed, then he sure didn't seem to care about you?

That's what these disciples were talking about on the road to Emmaus. Sometimes Christians are on that road, trying to walk away from it all without attracting too much attention to themselves. They were following Jesus, but they became really disappointed in him. Their faces are downcast. They are just trudging along, going away, not quite sure where they are going to.

"We hoped that he was the one who was going to rescue us, but it sure doesn't look like that now." Maybe there won't ever be a rescue, and boy, is that depressing!

And along comes Jesus, and he chews them out, "You idiots! If you don't believe in me after all I've done for you, then good riddance! Just go away. I don't need disciples like you!"

No, Jesus didn't do that, did he? It's true that he doesn't need disciples like us, but it is also true that this is the only kind of disciples he has. We are all weak in faith. If we had been in Jerusalem that year, we would have walked away, too. We would have gone fishing, gone back to whatever it was that we

were doing before. We might have hoped that Jesus would be the Messiah, but we would have given up on that hope.

Sometimes we hear other people talking about Jesus, but it just doesn't make any sense right now. The tomb might be empty, but we can't see Jesus anywhere around. It sure seems like he hasn't done anything for us. He might as well be dead, for all we are concerned.

And so we are walking away from Jerusalem, talking with our buddy Cleopas about how we got ripped off.

Jesus is not offended. He just walks with us for as long as he needs to. We don't even know that it's Jesus, but he is walking with us whether we know it or not. He'll let us talk, and tell our disappointment.

That's OK – Jesus does not feel compelled to be everything that we expected him to be. Sometimes we expected something, or hoped for something, that Jesus really isn't. Eventually, if we give Jesus a chance, he'll explain to us what sort of Messiah he really is.

For Cleopas, he talked about the Old Testament scriptures. For us, he might talk about something else, or explain things in a different way. Did you really want a Messiah who would prevent you from making mistakes? Did you really want a Savior who would suspend the law of cause and effect? Did you want a "Lord" who would do what you wanted him to, as if you are the one who is really in charge?

Do you want a Jesus who shows you mercy, but does not show mercy to other people? Do you want a Jesus who brings you personal happiness while leaving other people in misery? Do you want a Messiah who tells other people to behave themselves, so that you can have a better life?

Just what is it that you wanted from a Messiah? If you are disappointed with Jesus, just what is it that you expected, and was it a realistic expectation?

The conversation could go a thousand different ways, depending on what our difficulty is, but it eventually comes around to this: Didn't the Christ have to be the way he actually is?

Isn't death the biggest problem that humans will ever face? Whether we are rich or poor, good-looking or bad-looking, powerful or weak, all of us are going to die. And if death is the biggest problem we will face, wouldn't it be necessary for our Savior to show that he has been there and done that, and come out OK? Don't we need a Savior who has been killed, and then resurrected?

Isn't one of the biggest problems we face broken relationships? To give us assurance that Christ has overcome that, too, wasn't it necessary for

him to be betrayed by one of his closest friends? Wasn't it necessary for him to be betrayed by his own people, to be betrayed by the best that human governments had to offer at the time?

There is no question about it: Life in this age is far from perfect. Everybody we meet is dysfunctional in some way or another. No matter what sort of people you have to deal with, Jesus has been there, and he's been hurt by it. He knows what we are going through, and by his example, he assures us that we can go through it, too, and come out the other side.

If we want to get away and walk to Emmaus, or even further, Jesus is willing to go with us, and keep talking with us. Eventually the time will come when it begins to make sense again. We will see that Jesus has been with us all along.

And then we'll whip out the handcuffs and lock Jesus up so that he will never leave us ever again. No, it doesn't work that way. Sometimes when we see him, he is soon gone. We have a dramatic moment when our eyes are open, and just as soon as we recognize it, the moment is gone again. We do not get a chance to put Jesus in our briefcase so that we can pull him out whenever we happen to want him.

No, we cannot control him.

So what should we do?

We should return at once to Jerusalem, to hear what the other disciples have to say about Jesus. Yes, he has risen and appeared to Peter – and to James, and John, and even Thomas – and can you believe it, even to a Pharisee named Saul!

We can hear their stories, and we can tell our stories, too, of how we met Jesus. Maybe it was something as ordinary as eating an evening meal; maybe it was an extraordinary experience with miracles at an empty tomb. We can tell of how we were walking in the depths of despair, and Jesus gave us unexpected hope. Or we can talk about how we were wallowing in guilt, and Jesus gave us freedom from our greatest oppressor. Or when we were trapped in a habit of some sort, and Jesus set us free. Or when life seemed pointless, all of a sudden we saw the point.

You know, life on this planet is filled with problems. If we are crippled by the fear of death, Jesus can set us free. If we are poisoned by one bad relationship after another, Jesus can heal us. If we are blind to the needs of other people, Jesus can open our eyes. If we are filled with lame excuses, Jesus can give us strength to be a better person.

Basically, if there were no Jesus, then we'd have to invent one to help

us cope. But the truth is, that we are so dysfunctional that we can't invent a Jesus who can even identify our problem, much less help us cope with it. We need a Jesus who is different than what we want, because there's something seriously wrong about what we want. If we are to rescue ourselves, we need to desire a Jesus who is different than what we desire.

But of course we do not need to invent Jesus – he has been here walking with us all along, for almost 2,000 years now.

He is not in the tomb. He has risen, just as he said. He is not in Emmaus, but he is in his disciples – and we can sometimes see him, even if ever so briefly, when we eat together, and when we help each other, and when we talk with one another.

Each Easter, we celebrate the fact that Jesus rose from the dead. That is really good news for him, you might think, but what does it matter to me? The truth is, that it really doesn't do us much good, until he rises inside each of us. He needs to live in us. He can't do that unless he is actually alive, of course, but he also won't do that unless we let him.

He is walking with us on the road to Emmaus. We may think that we are walking away, but the fact is that we can never get far away from Jesus, because he is walking right beside us – whether we know it or not.

As Paul says in Ephesians, God made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—even when we were totally unaware of it—and God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms—all when we were totally unaware of it. He has been walking with us all along.

Many of you – most of you – already know that this is really good news, because you have seen Jesus in your life. Maybe in the breaking of the bread, maybe in some other way. You've seen that he is not only alive, but that he is living in you.

Others are not quite so sure, and that's OK. Or maybe you were once really sure, but you are beginning to have some doubts. That's OK, too. Sometimes when we are going through a really difficult time, like when we are faced with cancer, or when someone we love has just died, at times like that we have questions that have no answers, and what we need more than answers is just somebody to be with us.

Jesus is that somebody, whether we know it or not, whether we see him or not. He has been in our situation. He has faced betrayal and suffering and death. He knows what we are going through, and he has already gone through it with us, and for us. He is walking with us, even when we are trying

## JESUS THE SAVIOR

to walk away from him.

That is really good news. We have a Savior who will let us walk, and he'll let us talk, and he will never let us get so far away that we can't get back, because he is right beside us all along.

The resurrection of Jesus is really good news, but he is not going to force it on you. Eventually the time will come when our eyes will be opened and we will recognize him for who he is, and we can join the conversation with our story: The Lord has risen, and he is living in me!

*Michael Morrison*

## BELIEVING THOMAS

I don't know how you deal with disappointment, but I have a method I've used since I was a child. I imagine a worst-case scenario, so if it happens, I won't be disappointed, it's just what I expected. If things don't go wrong, I should be pleased. The problem is I'm not, and my negativity makes me and everyone around me miserable.

A few years ago, for Father's Day, my daughter, a psychologist, sent me Eeyore. For those of you who may not know, Eeyore is a character from A.A. Milne's stories of Winnie the Pooh. Eeyore tends to think negatively and cynically about everything. For example, if you said, "Good morning, Eeyore." Eeyore would probably respond, "Good morning – but I doubt that it is, and if it is, it will probably get worse." Or if you said to Eeyore, "Hey, let's have a picnic today," Eeyore would likely reply, "Okay, but it will probably rain, and if it doesn't, ants will probably get into food." Sadly, I can identify with Eeyore.

There's also a person in the Gospels I can identify with as well. His name is Thomas, one of the 12, usually known as Doubting Thomas. I don't think Thomas was as much a doubter as he was a cynic, the kind of person who believes the worst and doubts the best. I can identify with that.

The first time we meet Thomas in the Gospel of John is in chapter 11 verses 7 through 16. Here Jesus had just told the disciples that he's going back to Jerusalem, and the disciples warn him that he should not go because there are those there who will seek to kill him. Jesus tells them he is going anyway, and invites them to go with him. We notice Thomas's reaction to this in John chapter 11 at verse 16. Thomas says, "Then Thomas called Didymus said to rest of the disciples, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him.'"

Negative? Yeah, but brave. I like that. Thomas was a realist. What I'd like for us to do now is take a look at Thomas's encounter with the risen Christ in the Gospel of John chapter 20 verses 19 through 29, and explore what maybe we can learn from the story about our own doubts and cynicism as well as consider what we learn about God's reality versus our reality. So let's look at John chapter 20 verse 19.

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews [and by this he means the Jewish religious leaders], Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.



Now, we might ask, “Why did Jesus show them the wounds (evidently) in his hands and his side?” I think one reason is to say, “Look, I’m not an apparition. I’m not a ghost. You’re not having a delusion. I’m here, I’m real, it’s the same me. You’re looking at the same Jesus that you have known now for years. The same Jesus whom you saw crucified, and the same Jesus who came out of the tomb is the one who went in, and I’m here, and I’m real.”

When the disciples saw that, they were happy and they rejoiced. We continue reading. Verse 21: “Again Jesus said, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.’ And with that he breathed on them.”

Here we find that Jesus is sending out his disciples. He’s telling them that they’re going out with the same authority and the same mission that he has had from his Father. They are to continue in his ministry on the earth even after he has left and gone back to heaven. He is sending the Holy Spirit, and in the Holy Spirit, they will be able to work with him in his ministry, and then the power of God at work on earth through the followers of Jesus.

The next thing that Jesus says to them after he breathes on them is, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone their sins, they are forgiven. If you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.” This particular verse over the years has been subject to many different interpretations, and indeed it is a challenging verse to look into. The Roman Catholics have used this as a proof of needing to go to a priest and receiving forgiveness for your sins from the priest in the act of confession.

Protestants have looked at it in several different ways, including a communal view, where it is the community of faith, the church, which either lets people into the church, allows them to be baptized, or denies them admission from the church, or even sometimes excommunicates them from the church. But let me give you another view of this scripture which works for me, and I hope that it will work for you. Let me use an analogy:

Let’s say a man robs a convenience store, steals all the money, makes a getaway, but from that day forward, he lives with the feeling of guilt. He knows he has done wrong, and so for the next 20 years every time he sees a police car, every time he hears a knock at the door, he wonders, “Is this it? Have they finally caught up with me? Will I be going to prison now?” He can’t sleep at night. He lives in guilt for all that 20 years, and then suddenly one day, there’s a knock on his door and of all things, it’s the sheriff, so he puts out his hands and says, “All right, put the handcuffs on me. I know you’ve been looking for me. I knew my day would come, take me away to prison.”

The sheriff looks at him and says, “No – you’re not guilty. Let me tell you what happened. Even at the very moment that you robbed that convenience store, the governor simultaneously pardoned you and declared you not guilty. We’ve been looking for you for 20 years to tell you that you are a free man.” The person who robbed the store would probably say, “Why did it take you so long to tell me that? I’ve lived 20 years of my life under guilt, and in fear, and you tell me that I’m not even guilty of a crime!”

To be free, to be declared not guilty and not know it is to continue subjectively to live with the feeling of guilt, not knowing that you’re free. How many people do not know that God and Jesus Christ has indeed forgiven them of their sins, and because of not knowing, they’re living a life of condemnation, a life of guilt, a life where they fear what the final judgment may be? Wouldn’t it be nice if someone would find those people and tell them that they have been declared not guilty, and that in Jesus Christ they are free of the sins?

That analogy works for me and helps me understand what this particular scripture says, for he says, receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven. If you do not forgive them, it is as though they have not been forgiven.

Verse 24: “Now Thomas called Didymus [meaning, a twin], one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came.” I have asked myself the question, “Why wasn’t Thomas there? Was he discouraged, was he like Eeyore, saying, “I knew he was going to die. I knew it was not going to work out. I knew this was all going to fail.” Perhaps, he just in his own mind faced the situation realistically and felt, “It’s all over. Jesus is dead.” The other disciples met; Thomas stayed home.

Verse 25: “So the other disciples told him, ‘We have seen the Lord.’ But Thomas said to them, ‘Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will *not* believe it.’”

This is interesting, that Thomas would not even take the word of the other disciples. Perhaps he was somewhat of a scientist, and without an experiment to verify and prove it, he could just not accept this. “How could this be Jesus? Jesus is dead. People don’t come back from the dead! Do they?”

Isn’t this really a question about God’s reality versus our reality? Thomas, like many of us, knows human reality all too well, and according to human reality, people do not come back from the dead. But in God’s reality, they do. Which reality is more real? I’d say, they’re both real, but God’s reality is

even more real than what we know as humans as our reality.

Let's take another case in point. Can humans walk on water? I think many of us would say, "Well no, of course not. Humans can't walk on water." And yet in Scripture, we're told that both Jesus and Peter walked on water. Which is real? Is it real that humans can walk on water, or is it real that humans cannot walk on water? Have you ever walked on water – and I don't mean ice, I mean water? I have not walked on water – don't know that I could. Why? That's my reality, but in God's reality, according to God's will and by the power of the Holy Spirit, humans *can* walk on water. I ask you, which is most real?

Now, many of us as Christians would say, "Well, God's reality is most real," but then we have to ask ourselves, why is it we're not walking on water? Why is it that we like Peter when he first accepted God's reality and began to walk on water, but then look at the human reality of the high waves, and the wind, and then doubted, and then began to sink, and called out to Jesus to save him.

Isn't that the way it is for most of us? We believe in God's reality, but our human reality often interferes with our acceptance of the reality that is the most real of all. I think we can understand why Thomas had a problem with accepting the fact that Jesus had come back from the dead.

But now let's notice what happens in our story. Let's look at verse 26: "A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.'" Here we have Jesus appearing behind locked doors.

Some say, "Did he pass through the doors, did he come through the walls, how did Jesus get there?" What is clear is that Jesus is no longer veiling his divinity. For the time that the disciples had known him, Jesus was fully human and fully God, but his divinity was veiled, was hidden from them. Now, he is fully present as a human but also in his divinity, and as the Son of God, he is the Lord of all creation, including space and time, and so Jesus appears behind locked doors through closed windows into the room with his disciples.

Let's read on: "Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.'" Verse 27: "Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.'" Here Jesus allows Thomas to make a scientific experiment. Stop doubting – believe – accept God's reality. It is far greater reality than the one that you know as a human. "I am the same Jesus you knew, fully human but

also a fully God, come back from the dead, and I still bear the scars in my body.”

Some ask, “Well, were the scars not healed, why did Jesus still manifest these scars?” One reason is that Thomas and the others would know he was Jesus, he was the same human that they had known for so many years. He is not some different being. He is not some ghost, some spirit, some thing of their imagination. He is really and truly Jesus, fully human and fully God standing before them.

Listen to what Thomas says in his reply, verse 27: “Then he said to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.’” Verse 28: “Thomas said to him, ‘My Lord and my God.’” I don’t think Thomas should be known as Doubting Thomas. In fact, in this verse, he’s probably made one of the most important and powerful statements in the New Testament about the divinity of Jesus Christ. He has called him my Lord.

The Greek word for Lord, *Kurios*, is the same word that’s used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament for the Hebrew word Yahweh. So what Thomas is saying here, in a sense, is “Yahweh, my Lord and my God.”

I feel for so-called Doubting Thomas, and on behalf of all realists everywhere, I would like to suggest that we now call him Believing Thomas, because Thomas now accepts God’s reality as the most real reality of all, and he becomes a faithful believer. Let’s read on and notice how John concludes the story in verse 29: “Then Jesus told him, ‘Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.’”

Thomas was blessed. He saw, he believed, and gave a great profound announcement of faith, and yet, what about you and me today? We have not seen Jesus literally, physically with our own eyes. We have not been able to perform a scientific experiment of touching scars and yet we believe. We *do* know that Jesus is alive. We experience him in the spirit, and he becomes to us over time, communing with him, our best friend.

I was sharing that fact with one of my very close friends who is a non-believer, and I was explaining to him that Jesus is really my best friend. I spent lots of time with him every day. I talk with him, I ask him questions, I share my burdens, I share my problems, and Jesus is always there for me, and he always comforts me, and he always understands. He doesn’t agree with what I do, but he always loves me, and always encourages me, and offers me hope.

My non-believing friend looked at me like, “Yeah, we’re glad that’s working for you.” I knew he didn’t believe, but I did, and I do, and I hope

you as a Christian know Jesus and believe as well, because he is your best friend. He is real. He is alive. Thomas came to know that.

I hope and pray that everyone of us can come and know Jesus as well as Thomas knew him, confess him as Lord and God even though we have not yet seen him. We have not seen the scars in his hand or in the side – or have we? How do you view Jesus when you pray? Do you pray to the Father, through Jesus, and in the Spirit? Do you see Jesus at the right hand of God? How do you view him and how do you picture him? I tell you how I do. When I see Jesus interceding for me, mediating between all of humanity and the Father, but most particularly for me and my time of need, I see the scars in his hands.

I see the scar and the side, and for me, they're still there, even as Isaiah said, "He has born our sorrows. He has taken our iniquities upon us, and by his wounds we are healed." If you have need of a Savior, when you pray, see that Jesus, see the same the Jesus that Thomas saw, the one who forever bears our burdens for us, who has the scars in his hand and the wound in his side, there for us, because he deeply cares for us and always will.

What do we take home from this story? Let's consider some points. We realize the same Jesus the disciples knew is alive today – eternally incarnate and glorified.

We have not seen him with our eyes nor put our hands upon his scars, but we have experienced him in our lives. We believe in him and we know him. In his scars, we believe as Isaiah 53:5 says, "But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities, and upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises, we are healed."

When we go before God's throne of grace, we can believe, as did Thomas, that Jesus is alive, he is our best friend, and he has taken our sins and burdens upon himself, and he has set us free, and given us eternal life. Let's not doubt that, let's be as Thomas, and know for a certainty that Jesus is alive. He is our Savior, our best friend, our Lord, and our God.

*Dan Rogers*

For a Bible study of John 20, see [www.gci.org/co/1304/John20](http://www.gci.org/co/1304/John20).

## EVIDENCE OF THE RESURRECTION

Christians, Jews, and atheists agree that Jesus was crucified and buried. The crucial belief for Christianity is that he was also resurrected — as evidence that he is the Son of God, the teacher of truth, the door and the way of salvation, the firstfruits of the resurrection. This article presents the evidence for his resurrection.

First, most historians agree that the early disciples *believed* that Jesus had risen from the dead. Although at Jesus' death they were dejected and fearful, they were soon dramatically different: They risked their lives repeatedly to preach about Jesus. Even Christians in the second and third centuries (as well as many today) put their lives on the line to preach about Jesus. People sometimes give their lives for erroneous ideas — but only if they think they are true. People do not put their lives on the line for things they don't believe. The disciples never wavered in their belief in Jesus' resurrection. None of them ever changed their story under the pain of persecution. Even agnostic historians can admit that the disciples believed that Jesus had been resurrected.

How did dozens of disciples come to such a conviction? Perhaps the first possibility we could consider is that Jesus didn't really die. Perhaps it wasn't really him on the cross. Maybe Judas led the soldiers to the wrong man, or a substitution was somehow made at the last minute (as some Muslims believe). Is it possible that the disciples were in such a state of shock that they did not recognize the substitute on the cross, nor when they took him down to anoint and wrap his body for burial? Was it then a coincidence that the tomb somehow became empty, and his disciples thought he had reappeared? This stretches the imagination so much that this is not seriously considered.

### Reconstructing the argument

How did people respond to the claims that Jesus had been resurrected? The initial reaction for almost everyone (including the disciples themselves) was probably “That’s



preposterous.” A more serious response is reported in Matthew 28:11-15:

While [the disciples] were going, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests everything that had happened. After the priests had assembled with the elders, they devised a plan to give a large sum of money to the soldiers, telling them, “You must say, ‘His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.’ If this comes to the governor’s ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.” So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story is still told among the Jews to this day.

Some critics believe that this passage was invented by Matthew, but the story is too complex for that. It shows several levels in the argument. It reports not just a distant memory, but a fact that could be verified when it was written: unbelieving Jews were claiming that the disciples stole Jesus’ body while the guard slept.

Matthew probably included this passage in his Gospel to respond to such a claim, and he probably considered it as the claim most worth refuting. The unbelieving Jews apparently agreed that Jesus’ tomb was empty; they made no allegations that Jesus was buried elsewhere, or that the disciples went to the wrong tomb.

To reconstruct the argument:

- First, the disciples say that the tomb is empty.
- The unbelieving Jews then say, that’s because the disciples stole the body.
- The believers then say, We couldn’t have, because there was a guard.
- The unbelievers say (rather than denying the existence of a guard), the disciples stole the body while the guard was asleep.
- Finally, Matthew explains that the guard was bribed to say that this happened while he slept.

The argument assumes that in Matthew’s day, the unbelieving Jews talked of a guard at the tomb. It was the first of many attempts not just to deny the resurrection, but to explain the evidence in a different way.

Perhaps Jesus did not die on the cross — he just went unconscious, and then later revived. Is this a plausible historical possibility? Would Roman soldiers crucify someone and take down a body without noticing that the person was still alive? Would this severely injured person then be able to revive, unwrap his own grave clothes, roll away his own tombstone, and convince his disciples that he had good health? Then after 40 days he would

never be seen again? No, this borders on the preposterous.

Perhaps the disciples helped Jesus revive. They rolled away the stone, unwrapped the clothes, bandaged the wounds, and told a story about getting their leader back alive out of the grave — a story that turned quickly into a tall tale about resurrection and miraculous appearances, a story that the disciples never tried to set straight. Not only is this historically implausible, it turns the disciples into frauds and deceivers — and yet, as we mentioned above, people do not give their lives for something they know is false. This does not provide a believable explanation for the rise of Christianity, rooted in the early first century in the conviction that Jesus had risen from the dead — and this faith spread first in Jerusalem, where the facts could be investigated most easily!

It is not historically likely that Jesus could have survived the crucifixion. Well then, could the disciples have made up the resurrection? Did they steal the body, hide it somewhere, invent the story of a guard, and then preach a resurrection with conviction? This does not make sense, either. These fishermen did not make up the biggest lie in history, going against all the facts of life and death as they knew it, going against all religious beliefs of the day, going against Jewish and Roman authorities, risking their lives to tell the story they made up, without any of them ever betraying the conspiracy. No, these folks were not conniving liars. Their words and deeds do not suggest any such deception. Their behavior matched their message.

As a side point, we might also observe that the evidence of the empty tomb is indirect. (If it wasn't empty, the Jewish leaders could have stopped the whole problem by producing the body.) Yet according to the Gospel stories, the empty tomb did not convince all the disciples. They were convinced only when Jesus appeared, and it is on the basis of the appearances that they preached the resurrection. If they had gone to the trouble of stealing the body, surely they would have used the empty tomb as part of their evidence. The fact that they didn't, tells us that they had what they thought was much better evidence: eyewitnesses of a living Jesus.

As another indirect evidence of the authenticity of their faith, we can observe that the Gospels report that women were the first eyewitnesses of the empty tomb and the risen Christ — and the testimony of women was not accepted in that culture. If the disciples were trying to make up a story, they would have invented witnesses who had more authority. It is not likely that these fishermen would have been so subtle in creating evidence, and yet be so bold in preaching.



What about the fact that the Gospel stories vary somewhat? If this had been an enormous conspiracy, wouldn't they ensure that the story was told in exactly the same way by everyone? The most believable explanation again is that the disciples genuinely believed Jesus to be resurrected, and each one told it the way he or she remembered it.

Now let's consider another possibility: graverobbers (hoping for riches in the rich man's tomb) got the guards to drink so much wine that they fell asleep; then the graverobbers took the body and dumped it in the desert. The guards, wanting to cover up their failure and knowing the fears of the religious leaders, made up the story of the angels and the resurrection, and were bribed to blame the disciples. Then the disciples had hallucinations of a risen Jesus.

However, did all the disciples have the same hallucination, several times, against their expectations, against their religious beliefs? Did the hallucination eat and drink, speak, and then suddenly cease 40 days later? This is not the way hallucinations work. The evidence does not match this hypothesis, either.

Let's consider one more idea, that the idea of resurrection was just a religious allegory (sometimes described as a "myth," meaning religious ideas expressed in allegorical stories), and Christianity made a big mistake in taking it literally for almost 2,000 years.

There are several problems with this idea. First, the Gospels are not written in a mythological style. The resurrection was understood in a literal way even in the first century, when eyewitnesses of Jesus were still available to either support or refute the story. There was no time for legends to develop. The biblical writers give us history: This is what I saw. This is what it meant. They denounce the idea of myth. They are presenting what they saw.

The disciples were not deceived, nor were they deceivers. They tell us what they believed, and it is clear that they believed that Jesus died and was buried and was resurrected. The reason they believed this is because they saw it with their own eyes.

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched — this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may

have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. (1 John 1:1-3)

The disciples believed that Jesus rose from the dead. Why did they believe this? The most plausible explanation is that Jesus actually rose from the dead. All other theories are far-fetched and historically unlikely.

When we also take into consideration the need for God to intervene in humanity to save us, and the Old Testament predictions of a suffering servant who would give his life for his people, the explanation that makes the most sense is that the disciples believed that Jesus was resurrected because Jesus appeared to them and told them he was resurrected. That is why they had such a transformation in their beliefs, and why they preached with such conviction. As Luke puts it, by looking at the evidence we “may know the certainty of the things we have been taught” (Luke 1:4).

*Michael Morrison*

## **THE EMPTY TOMB: REASONS TO BELIEVE**

Jesus Christ's resurrection from a rock sepulcher galvanized the faith of early Christians. The empty tomb and the appearances of the risen Lord were the crowning proof that the Master they loved and served was not just another moral teacher. He was, as he claimed to be, God in the flesh.

This conviction energized the early church. "We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard," the apostle Peter testified to the Jewish religious authorities, who could not quench the faith of those early believers (Acts 4:20).

We who read the accounts almost 2,000 years later need to remember that the resurrection of Jesus Christ was not, as Paul boldly declared before the elite of his nation, "done in a corner" (Acts 26:26). Just the opposite was true. The disciples testified in the laboratory of public scrutiny and debate. People in their audiences could refute them at every point, if they were not telling the truth.

To first-century Christians, the resurrection of Jesus Christ was the pivotal event in history. Their dramatic encounters with Jesus after his escape from the rock tomb were vivid and unforgettable:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched — this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. (1 John 1:1-2).

John, an apostle and disciple of Jesus Christ, wrote as an eyewitness to Jesus Christ's resurrection from the dead (John 20:30-31; 21:24-25).

Luke, an educated man who wrote a detailed study of the life and times of Jesus of Nazareth, authenticated the report that went from tiny Judea into the world beyond: "Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account...so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught" (Luke 1:3-4).

Paul distilled the essence of the new faith he helped spread across the Roman Empire: "What I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians

15:3-4).

## **Full public scrutiny**

The apostles faced the test of informed public opinion, a jury of their contemporaries. Some in their audiences already had Jesus' blood on their hands. The execution of one or two more fishermen from Galilee wouldn't make much difference.

Yet the disciples had unconquerable confidence. Their words still pulsate with moral fervor and authority. The good news of the resurrection was big news on the streets of Jerusalem. It was hard-hitting. It was effective. It changed lives.

“Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know,” Peter trumpeted (Acts 2:22). “God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ” (verse 36).

This bold preaching threw the Jerusalem religious hierarchy completely on the defensive. “You have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood,” they protested (Acts 5:28).

If the disciples had been perpetrating fraud or deceit, their testimony could have been easily overthrown. It wasn't. The willingness to risk all for the truth of the resurrection was convincing testimony from fallible human beings—men who had earlier deserted Christ and fled (Matthew 26:56). That willingness, and the powerful miracles being done in Christ's name, made the gospel compelling. It rocked Jerusalem.

No wonder Christ's newly energized disciples were “highly regarded by the people” (Acts 5:13). Remember something else: Other popular movements had come and gone in first-century Judea. Sensational leaders had arisen before Jesus of Nazareth, people the world at large has forgotten (verses 35-39). One of them, Judas, was also a Galilean, who lived not far from where Jesus was reared.

Around A.D. 6, Judas gathered a following and set himself against the Roman power. His movement failed and he was killed. But no one in the first century claimed that this Judas of Galilee was raised from the dead or that he and his followers had many prolonged talks after a resurrection. Still less did anyone risk life and limb for the Judas movement years afterward. Yet ordinary human beings risked their all for Jesus of Nazareth.

## **History not dogma**

The late F.F. Bruce, evangelical author, notes:

The Christian gospel is not primarily a code of ethics or a

metaphysical system; it is first and foremost good news, and as such it was proclaimed by its earliest preachers.... This good news is intimately bound up with the historical order, for it tells how for the world's redemption God entered into history, the eternal came into time, the kingdom of heaven invaded the realm of earth, in the great events of the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. (*The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?*, pages 7-8)

The disciples were convicted by seeing and touching the Lord Jesus. They believed in the power of the resurrection. Their testimony was believable because they believed. How about us? Do we believe?

We should. The same Jesus Christ who walked the dusty paths of Galilee is alive today, alive and glorified. He intervenes for those of us who turn to him in faith and belief, just as he did for Peter, Andrew, James and John. The empty tomb could not hold him, and the evil powers of this world — natural and supernatural— could not stamp out the truth of his resurrection.

To experience this transforming power for ourselves, to “know Christ and the power of his resurrection” (Philippians 3:10), we will also have to believe in the empty tomb and in the power of the resurrection. We are not asked to make a commitment to Christ without evidence. The empty tomb stands as stark evidence that our Lord and Savior is risen from the dead.

Peter, preeminent preacher of the empty tomb, said it best: “Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that he may send the Christ, who has been appointed for you” (Acts 3:19-20).

The decision is yours. Will you believe?

*Neil Earle*

## THE EMPTY TOMB— WHAT'S IN IT FOR YOU?

We don't know precisely when. We are not sure exactly where. But early one morning nearly 2000 years ago, something happened in Jerusalem that affects the life of every human being who has ever lived.

Jesus, a carpenter from Nazareth, had been arrested, condemned and crucified. As he died, he entrusted himself to his heavenly Father and his Holy Spirit. Then, his battered corpse had lain in a tomb carved out of solid rock, sealed by a heavy stone rolled across the entrance.

Even so, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, had authorized a guard at the tomb. Jesus had prophesied that the grave would not hold him, and Pilate was afraid the followers of the dead man would try to steal the body.

However, that seemed unlikely. Those followers were demoralized and in hiding. They had seen the brutal end of their leader—flogged nearly to death, nailed to a cross and, after six hours of agony, stabbed in the side with a spear. They had taken the battered body down from the cross and quickly wrapped it in linen. It was only intended to be a temporary burial, as a Sabbath was approaching. Some planned to come back after the Sabbath to prepare Jesus' body for a proper burial. They had no illusions about what they would find in the tomb. Their beloved leader was dead—he was going nowhere.

The body of Jesus lay in the cold, dark tomb. Then, sometime early in the morning of the third day, the shroud that covered the mangled flesh stirred, and out of it stepped something that had never existed before—a resurrected and glorified human being. Jesus had been resurrected by his heavenly Father and in the power of the Holy Spirit. Not just in a way that restored his human existence, as he had done for those he brought back from the dead. They would later die again, but Jesus had become a *new* kind of creation, never to die again. He folded the burial shroud, and walked out of the tomb to continue his work. Nothing would ever be the same again.

### **Don't fully understand**

When he was with us on earth, Jesus was one of us, a flesh-and-blood human being, subject to hunger, thirst, weariness and the limited dimensions of a mortal existence. He also lived in communion with God's Holy Spirit, as one of us. Theologians call this "the incarnation." But he was also one with God as the eternal Word or Son of God. This is a concept that is difficult, and perhaps impossible to completely grasp, given the limitations of our

human minds.

How could Jesus be both God and human? The contemporary theologian J.I. Packer put it well: “Here are two mysteries for the price of one—the plurality of persons within the unity of God, and the union of Godhead and manhood in the person of Jesus. . . . Nothing in fiction is so fantastic as is this truth of the Incarnation” (*Knowing God* [Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 1993], 53). It is a concept that is contrary to everything we know about ordinary reality.

What science is uncovering shows that just because something seems to defy explanation, that does not mean it *isn't* true. Scientists working on the leading edge of physics have come to terms with phenomena that turn conventional logic on its head. At the quantum level, the rules that govern our everyday life break down, and new rules apply, even if they are so contrary to logic as to seem preposterous. Light can act as both a wave and a particle. A particle can be in two places at the same time. Some subatomic quarks must spin twice before they have “gone around” once, while others need to make only half a revolution. And so on. The more we learn about the quantum world, the more unlikely it seems. But experiment after experiment demonstrates that quantum theory is right. But our ordinary experience gives us no clues that this would, or even could, be the case.

What science is uncovering shows that just because something seems to defy explanation, that does not mean it isn't true. Likewise, we accept that even though we may not fully grasp how Jesus was God in the flesh, that was the way it was. We have the tools to investigate the physical world and are often surprised at its inner details. So why should it be a surprise that the spiritual world is also sometimes counterintuitive?

We do not have tools to investigate divine and uncreated realities—we have to accept them the way God reveals them to us. We were told about these things by Jesus himself and by those he commissioned to preach and write. The evidence we have from Scripture, history and our own experience supports the belief that Jesus was one in being with God and one with humanity.

While it is intriguing, it is not essential for us to understand every detail about how this can be. Insisting on it may actually get in the way of fully appreciating what happened on Resurrection morning. When Jesus the man was resurrected, the two natures reached a new dimension of being together that resulted in a new kind of creation—a glorified human being, no longer subject to death and decay.

## Escape from the grave

Many years—perhaps as many as 60—after this event, Jesus appeared to John, the last of his original disciples, who had seen him die. John was now an old man. Jesus told him, “I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades” (Revelation 1:18).

Read that again! Let the impact of it trickle into your understanding. Once we become familiar with a scripture, there is a danger when we read it quickly, thinking we know what it is saying, but end up skipping over important details. Most of us have grown up knowing that “Jesus died for us.” It has become a cliché, and once that happens, it reduces its power to shock. Once a verse or an idea becomes too familiar, it is tempting to hurry through it, thinking, “Yes, I know that.”

When Jesus the man was resurrected, his two natures reached a new dimension that resulted in a new kind of creation—a glorified human being, no longer subject to death and decay.

Revelation 1:18 is a verse that needs to be unpacked carefully. So look again at what Jesus is saying. He *was dead*. He *is now alive*. As if that were not enough, he says he will *stay alive forever*. He also has a key that opens up the way for *others to also escape the grave*. Even death isn’t what it used to be after Jesus’ resurrection.

Wow! At least, we should respond with a “wow.” What this verse is saying is that Jesus has revolutionized what it means to be a human being. Not just for himself, but for everyone. That is the astonishing promise of another verse that has become a cliché: “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that *whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life*” (John 3:16). Jesus, resurrected to eternal life, has opened up the way for us to also live forever.

## But wait—there’s more

Look again at what Jesus prayed before he died: “Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world” (John 17:24). Jesus, having shared our mortal existence for about 30 years, says he wants us to be with him in his immortal environment forever.

Paul, writing to the Romans, believed it: “Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that *we may also share in his glory*” (Romans 8:17-18).

Jesus was the first human to transcend mortal existence, but God never



intended that he be the only one. We were, as Willie Nelson sings, “always on his mind.” “Those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among *many brothers and sisters*” (Romans 8:29).

Although we cannot yet understand the full impact of this, our eternal future is in safe hands. “Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has *not yet been made known*. [So don’t worry about it.] But we know that when Christ appears, *we shall be like him*, for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2). What is his can become ours, his kind of life. God’s kind of life.

Through his life, death and resurrection, Jesus has shown us what it means to be a human being. He is the first to reach the full perfection that God had in mind for human beings from the beginning. But he is not the last.

We can’t get there by ourselves. “I am the way and the truth and the life,” Jesus explained. “No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). But he, “by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body” (Philippians 3:21).

When we read the Scriptures carefully, an exciting preview of the future of the human race begins to unfold.

“What is mankind that you are mindful of them, a son of man that you care for him?” asks the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews. “You made them a little lower than the angels; you crowned them with glory and honor and put everything under their feet” (2:6-8).

This much he knew. He was quoting a Psalm that had been written centuries before. But he continued: “at present we do not see everything subject to them. *But we do see Jesus*, who was made lower than the angels for a little while, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God *he might taste death for everyone*” (verses 8-9).

When the women came back to finish preparing Jesus’ body for burial, they found the stone rolled back and the tomb empty except for the neatly folded shroud and head covering. But that empty space was filled with promise—for them, the other disciples, and for every human being.

Jesus’ destiny is our destiny. His future is our future. The Resurrection of Jesus demonstrates God’s willingness to irreversibly bind himself to all of us in an eternal relationship of love, lifting us up into the very life and communion of our Triune God. That was his plan from the beginning, and Jesus came to save us for that. And he has done it.

*John Halford*



## HE'S ALIVE!

Did it really happen? The question is far more than academic. Because if Jesus Christ really died on a Roman cross and was raised again to life, it changes everything.

### **On the best authority**

It's funny how we sometimes believe things that don't make sense or that have no supporting evidence whatever. Conspiracy theories abound today. The tabloids do a multimillion-dollar business tantalizing believing readers with a steady diet of the sensational, if not the ridiculous. You've seen the headlines: Elvis is still alive. JFK was abducted by aliens. Hitler is living in Argentina. Miners discover an opening to hell. Half alligator, half human baby. World to end in 2005.

There are facts we simply take for granted in our modern world: The world is a sphere, not flat like a pancake. The earth revolves around the sun, not vice versa. A virus causes measles. Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone. Abraham Lincoln wrote the Gettysburg Address on the back of an envelope.

Most of us believe these things, not because we have personally proven them, but because we trust the authorities who tell us they are true. We use the phone; who invented it doesn't really matter to us. We go to the doctor when we get sick; it doesn't matter to us who discovered a given vaccine. We can enjoy a beautiful sunset without giving much thought to planetary dynamics.

We live in a world of facts, but most of the facts we know have little, if anything, to do with who we are and how we choose to live. The resurrection of Jesus is different. It may be easy to believe Jesus was raised, as though it were just another fact for a history exam. But this fact is not like other facts. It changes everything.

If Jesus Christ really was raised from the dead, then he is far more than just another great figure in history. He is who he claimed to be—the Son of God. If that's so, then he, and everything he said, has to be taken seriously. The resurrection of Jesus stands at the heart of Christian faith. We believe in Jesus because Jesus did not stay dead. He told his disciples he would be raised on the third day after his crucifixion—and he was! The fact of his resurrection verified his claims: He was indeed the Son of God. It verified that God had acted decisively to deal with human sin.

## Celebrate!

If there is any one characteristic that is universal among Christians of all denominational stripes, it is celebration of the death and resurrection of Jesus. The celebration may occur in a variety of ways, but ever since that first Sunday morning when the tomb was found empty, Christians have remembered. It's much more than memory. It's participation.

On the night before he was betrayed and arrested for trial and crucifixion, Jesus ate his final meal with his disciples. As he blessed and broke the ritual bread, he told his disciples, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19). As he lifted and blessed the cup of ritual wine, he told them: "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:27-28).

Jesus died for you and me. On the third day, he destroyed the power of sin and death. In him we possess the greatest hope imaginable. There is rich meaning in this simple ceremony we call the Lord's Supper (Jesus' final meal), Communion (communion with God through Christ and with fellow believers) or Eucharist (thanksgiving). Paul wrote: "Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ?" (1 Corinthians 10:16).

When we eat and drink the bread and wine (or grape juice) of the Lord's Supper, something wonderful, yet incomprehensible, is going on. A communion with God is taking place, and through Christ, a communion with all believers. Through this command of Jesus to eat his flesh and drink his blood, we are not only kept in memory of what God has done for us, we are also brought together, united by faith, into an intimate relationship with God and into his presence in a special way.

## Out of slavery

We humans know about slavery to sin. We know the invisible, yet humanly invincible, chains that bind us in self-destructive habits and cravings. We know about the pride, the personal walls, the ego defenses, the crippling envy, the resentment, the greed, the burning lust. We know the powerlessness, the failure, the frustration, the depression. We know the loneliness, the isolation, the fear. We know about the end of it all—the separation we call death.

God, who loves us, knows it too. That's why he sent his one and only Son, who, without sin, subjected himself to the cruel and unrelenting

environment of our sin-darkened world. God’s love is why Jesus took our broken condition on himself, yet without sin, walked in our shoes and suffered, even to death, at the ignorant and violent hands of us sinners. But for Jesus, death was not the end of the story. Because of Jesus, it’s not the end of the story for you and me either. Jesus was raised to life, and through him, we, too, are raised to a bold and fresh and glorious new life—eternal life.

### **Life of the age to come**

We often think of eternal life as something God will give us in the future. But the fact is, Jesus said that those who believe in him, those who eat his flesh and drink his blood, have already entered into eternal life. “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day” (John 6:54). Being raised up at the last day is something promised to those who already possess eternal life!

Maybe we tend to limit our concept of eternal life to the future because the words *eternal life* sound like something we don’t yet have. After all, we are still mortal, and we know we are going to die before we receive immortality. But eternal life and immortality are not the same thing. Immortality refers to our physical bodies. At the resurrection, our mortal bodies will be changed to immortal. But eternal life—or the life of the age to come—is something we entered when we became believers.

Eternal life might be easier to understand when we realize that the Greek words John used in quoting Jesus, *aionios zoe*, are literally translated, “age life,” meaning, “the life of the age to come.” When we became believers, we passed from death to life. We entered into the new life, the life of the age to come. That life, which is a life of joy and self-sacrificial love in the power of God, will fill all the universe after Jesus returns. It has already begun in his believers.

### **Because he lives**

Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life” (John 5:24). Greater words of comfort have never been spoken! It doesn’t matter how far from God we have been. It doesn’t matter how dark and vile our sins have been. When we believe the word of God, the good news that God is redeeming sinners through his Son, God forgives us, accepts us and gives us fresh, new life in his eternal kingdom.

We have it on the highest authority, the very highest, that we will not be condemned on the day of judgment. Jesus says believers have already crossed the great divide separating death from life, and because he lives we are now

on the side of life!

The kingdom of heaven has already begun to show itself in the lives of those who have entered it. Not perfectly. In fact, sometimes we make a rather rotten show of it. Sometimes we drop our cross, or maybe even throw it down, but Christ in us always moves us to pick it up again and follow on. The fact is, now we are his, and he who began a good work in us will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

### **The crux of our faith**

Our Christian faith and hope are based squarely and entirely on the fact of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. On that central truth hangs everything we believe and everything we stand for in earnest hope. Because he lives, we live too!

That's why the Easter season is important to us. It's a time of reflection, self-evaluation, recommitment and rededication. Above all, it's a time of thanksgiving and joy in the unsearchable riches of the grace of God! He died for you and me. On the third day, he destroyed the power of sin and death. In him, we, together with all the saints, even as we tread the path of the cross, possess the greatest hope imaginable.

Praise God! He's alive!

*J. Michael Feazell*

That church, armed with such an improbable claim and beginning from a handful of uneducated fishermen and tax gatherers, swept across the whole known world in the next three hundred years. It is a perfectly amazing story of peaceful revolution that has no parallel in the history of the world. It came about because Christians were able to say to inquirers: "Jesus did not only die for you. He is alive! You can meet Him and discover for yourself the reality we are talking about!" They did and joined the church. And the church, born from that Easter grave, spread everywhere.

Michael Green, *Evangelism Through the Local Church*, Nelson, 1992

Jesus' resurrection was instantly recognized as the firstfruits of general resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:20; Colossians 1:18). Jesus was regarded as the first born from the dead, the one through whom the

## JESUS THE SAVIOR

believing community learned to look for the final coming of the kingdom of God, and the fulfillment of the apocalyptic hope.

Thomas C. Oden, *The Word of Life*, Harper and Row, 1989

There is no justification for reducing the meaning of “the resurrection of Jesus” to something like, “the continuing significance of Jesus,” or “the disciples’ realization that Jesus’ message could not die.” By “resurrection” they clearly meant that something had happened to Jesus himself. God had raised him, not merely reassured them. He was alive again, made alive again with the life which is the climax of God’s purpose for humankind, not merely retrieved from the jaws of death but conqueror over death, “exalted to God’s right hand.” It was this glowing conviction which lay at the heart of the chain reaction which began Christianity.

James D.G. Dunn,  
*The Evidence for Jesus*, Westminster Press, 1985

Through the cross, God meets us in our lostness and finds us, setting us on the road which leads home—a road on which Christ has gone before us, blazing a trail in which we may follow, knowing that by doing so, we pass from death to eternal life.

Alistair McGrath,  
*Understanding Jesus*, Zondervan, 1987

## THE POWER OF THE RESURRECTION

Christians accept the resurrection accounts on faith, but it is a faith sealed by the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit. Faith is not blind, unintelligent trust. Theology has been defined as “faith seeking understanding.” Christians worship God with their minds as well as their hearts.

The four Gospels record an event hard to explain away in face of the most obvious evidence – the existence of the Christian church. Something unprecedented happened in Jerusalem in the first century. This forces the question: What kind of history do we encounter in Scripture?

Arthur Glasser calls the Bible “interpreted history.” He said, “Its great truths [come] enfolded in historical events, human experience, and prophetic exposition” (*Kingdom and Mission*, pages 18, 16). Hugh Anderson sheds more light:

We expect the historian today to be as scientifically accurate as possible in his reporting of facts.... By contrast the historians of Israel viewed history as the sphere of God’s activity. Their purpose in telling the story of Israel was to confront men with the sovereign authority of a high and holy God, calling upon them to surrender their lives to Him. (*Historians of Israel*, Vol. 2, pages 26, 28)

The Gospel writers were in that tradition: They were concerned with spiritual meaning and eternal life. Thus, their writings give us history plus interpretation. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were preachers before they were historians.

Yet the resurrection accounts provide a compelling example of faith meeting understanding. They make sense once the Holy Spirit enables us to believe.

1. First, there is the almost embarrassing honesty of the resurrection accounts. The doubts of Thomas, Peter and the other apostles are candidly set forth (Mark 16:9-14). The New Testament is hard on its heroes. Who in the early church could have written such things about prominent church leaders still alive unless those things were really true? The transformed lives of the apostles are exactly what we would expect if Christ was resurrected (Acts 4:13).

2. Who among the disciples could invent such a story as that of Jesus of Nazareth? The disciples were often chided for their slowness to believe and their lack of spiritual imagination (Matthew 16:5-12). Could they invent such challenging phrases as: “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one



comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6)?

British Bible scholar C.H. Dodd recorded that as a young man he fretted about the time interval between the events mentioned in the Gospels and when those events were written several decades later. He later changed his mind:

When Mark was writing...there must have been many people [alive] who were in their prime under Pontius Pilate, and they must have remembered the stirring and tragic events of that time.... If anyone had tried to put over an entirely imaginary or fictitious account of them, there would have been middle-aged or elderly people who would have said... “You are wasting your breath: I remember it as if it were yesterday (*Tradition: Old and New*, page 41)

Wise words, even though the complexity of the Gospels is part of their fascination.

3. It is still hard to account for the Christian faith’s sweep across the Roman Empire without a spectacular primary cause. The resurrection was that catalyst.

One of the compelling proofs of the resurrection is that the crucifixion left the disciples in despair and that, hopeless, they were transformed by their experience of the risen Jesus.... Even more important was the conviction nourished in Christians that by the resurrection Jesus had been vindicated and had been shown to be the Son of God with power. (Kenneth Latourette, *A History of Christianity*, Vol. 1, pages 58-59)

That power, that life, proved invincible. It still is.

## **JESUS' RESURRECTION PICTURED IN THE OLD TESTAMENT**

In the spring months of each year, our thoughts are directed toward the death and resurrection of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Our spring celebrations are of “first importance” to us, for they remind us of the meaning of Jesus’ death and the importance of his resurrection.

Because of God’s great love for us, he sent his Son to die for us, to redeem us from sin. This is a central truth of our lives as Christians. I hope that we never grow tired of celebrating and observing these monumental events. They should never become stale or routine.

As often as we observe the Lord’s Supper, we should let it remind us afresh of God’s love for us, a love that will never fail, a love that will never get smaller. Though humans may be unfaithful, God will never leave us or forsake us. Though we may struggle and stumble many times, God never abandons us. He is always ready to welcome us back.

As we commemorate Jesus’ death, we are gloriously confident of God’s love for us. We do not need to worry that our sins, no matter how many or how serious, have cut us off from him. God always welcomes his children.

We are mindful that Jesus died because of sin. He went to the cross because humans chose to decide for themselves what is right and wrong. We have all done that, and we have all repented of that — many times. We seek to do God’s will, not our own. We do not want to participate in self-willed life, for that is the approach to life that alienated us from God, sentenced us to death, and led to our Savior’s death. So the Lord’s Supper is a reminder to us to humble ourselves (even as Jesus did, even unto death on a cross) and seek to serve others (Philippians 2:4-8).

Each of us is woefully inadequate to the task set before us! It is hard for us to put aside our own interests and serve others! It is impossible for us to escape this body of death!

The good news is that God has provided the way, and it comes not only through the death of Jesus Christ, which reconciled us to God, but through his life (Romans 5:10). For a balanced understanding of the Christian life, we must remember that our Savior is a living Savior, resurrected from the dead, ascended into glory, seated in a position of honor and power with God the Father. He intercedes for us, and he lives in us, and we in him. Because of his life, we walk in newness of life, living in a state of forgiveness instead of condemnation.

Jesus died for our sins. We also need to remember that he was raised for our salvation. If he had not been raised, Paul said, we would still be in our sins (1 Corinthians 15:17).

## The Festival of Unleavened Bread

The Festival of Unleavened Bread was a reminder for the Jews that they had to leave Egypt in haste. Just as the Passover pictured an escape from death, the Festival pictured an escape from slavery. The Israelites pictured this by living without leaven in their diets for one week.

Spiritually, what do Christians escape from and live without? It is sin. When the Israelites ate unleavened bread, they pictured living without sin. But the festival does not picture *us* putting sin out of our lives. The sin is removed *before* the Festival begins! The Festival of Unleavened Bread does not picture the *removal* of sin — the Passover pictures that. Only Jesus' death can remove sins from our lives. Our role after that is to live a new life, a holy life in the presence of God. How can we live a new life? Only by having Christ live in us — symbolically portrayed in the old covenant by eating unleavened bread. Jesus Christ is the sinless bread of life. He must live in us.

The Festival pictured the life and work of the risen Christ. How does it do that? One powerful symbolism can be seen in the wavesheaf ritual, which was always done during the Festival of Unleavened Bread (Leviticus 23:10-11). It was always done on “the morrow after the Sabbath.” No grain could be eaten until this first sheaf had been waved toward heaven (verse 14). This pictured the rising of Jesus Christ to his Father in heaven. None of the spiritual harvest can be done until the firstfruit, Jesus Christ, had been offered (1 Corinthians 15:20-23).

## A yearly ritual

The old covenant had a yearly ritual regarding the rising of Jesus Christ. It is natural for Christians to have such a celebration, too, since we have a better understanding of what was being symbolized. Christians in some countries call this resurrection festival by a Greek term for the Jewish spring festival — “Pascha.” That is because the resurrection celebration began in Greek-speaking areas when Jewish influence was still strong in the church.

In English, the celebration is named by an Anglo-Saxon word that is sometimes claimed to have a dubious origin — “Easter.” But we do not need to throw out the celebration just because of the name that some people call it! We have many terms in English, such as “Saturday,” that come from pagan names. We do not need to avoid such words. The meaning of a word is

established by how people use it now, not by how they used it centuries ago!

There is no reason to condemn Christians who have an annual Sunday celebration of the resurrection of Jesus. Nor is there reason to condemn the name Easter. Some people condemn the way in which Easter is calculated. It does give us the irony that some Christians celebrate the resurrection before other Christians commemorate his death! But that is not a reason to throw stones at other Christians. God has simply not given us *commands* on how to calculate an *optional* celebration!

The date of Easter is calculated not on the basis of the Roman calendar, but on a combination of equinox, phases of the moon, and the day of the week — similar in many respects to how the date of the wavesheaf ritual was selected. The early Christians calculated the calendar differently from the way the Jews did, and there is no sin in that.

Christians should remember Christ's resurrection, just as we remember his death. The two go together. The New Testament does not require Christians to commemorate the resurrection in any particular manner or on any particular day. Yet millions of Christians throughout the centuries have found it helpful to do so. The Bible does not forbid them to do so.

It is not a sin to celebrate the resurrection, not a sin to use the word Easter, no matter what its origin. It is not a sin to gather at sunrise to worship our Savior. Easter is the spring celebration of Christians honoring the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is not done to honor an Anglo-Saxon goddess.

I encourage Christians to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Some may choose to do it one day, some on another, some perhaps on several days each year. Wonderful! Let good news be celebrated! Christians should rejoice about the victory over sin and death that Jesus won.

## **Other customs**

It is not a sin to paint eggs, or to search for and eat painted eggs. Nor is it a sin to eat chocolate eggs and chocolate rabbits. These things are no more pagan today than the names of the days of the week and month are. Whatever pagan associations these names may have once had are now gone. No one suspects that egg-dyers or egg-hunters are worshipping other gods.

We should not put our focus on customs that have little or nothing to do with the resurrection. But neither do we superstitiously have to avoid those other customs. Some Christians will have nothing to do with such things; others will see no harm in participating in them. Different people will “draw the line” in different places, and we should live in peace with one another. Differences do exist, and emotions can run high on this issue. So seek peace

## JESUS THE SAVIOR

and pursue it. Those who participate in Easter customs need not flaunt it; those who refuse need not make a big deal about it. Neither approach is evidence of being more righteous.

Each of us must answer to the Lord, for it is to the Lord that we live and die — and we are not called to judge the Lord's other servants. We are each called to do the work God has called us to do, and we are to do it whether or not other people are doing what they are supposed to be doing.

We need tolerance, not mutual criticism. We need grace, not more legislation. Let's celebrate and worship together!

*Joseph Teach*

## TRUMPETS: A FESTIVAL FULFILLED IN CHRIST

September is a busy month! In addition to back-to-school activities, there are celebrations of all sorts of things. In the U.S., September 15 is National Cheese Pizza Day and the first Monday of the month is Labor Day, which celebrates the achievements of workers and marks the unofficial end of summer. In Australia, a member of the Commonwealth of Nations, the Queen's birthday is celebrated with a holiday in September.

September often includes the Jewish festival called "Rosh Hashanah," which in Hebrew means "the head of the year." Among the traditions practiced by the Jews on that day are eating the head of a fish to symbolize the head of the year and greeting one another with "L'shanah tovah," meaning "for a good year." Tradition also correlates Rosh Hashanah with the sixth day of creation week, when God made humans in his image.

In the Hebrew text of Leviticus 23:24 the day is referred to as "Zikhron Teru'ah," meaning "a memorial with the blowing of horns." In English, the day is often called the *Festival of Trumpets*. Many rabbis teach that on Rosh Hashanah, a shofar (a trumpet made from a ram's horn) was blown a minimum of 100 times, including a series of 30 blasts indicating the hope of the Messiah's coming. I have a shofar, and I can tell you it's hard to make any sound when you blow into it. I've read that at Rosh Hashanah services, it was common to have a second trained person in the wings just in case the first one was unable to complete the task of blowing the shofar the required number of times.

Jewish sources indicate that three types of notes were blown that day:

- *Tekiah*—a long unbroken tone symbolizing hope in the strength of God and praise for who God is
- *Shevarim*—three shorter, more broken sounds, indicating wailing and sorrow for sin and fallen humanity
- *Teruah*—nine quick, staccato notes (like the sound of an alarm clock) representing the broken hearts of those who come to God.

Regarding *Teruah*, the Talmud says this: "When there's judgment from below, there's no need for judgment from above." Rabbi Moshe Ben Maimon (known as Maimonides), perhaps the greatest Jewish scholar and teacher of the middle ages, adds this important qualification:

It isn't enough that God is my King alone. If all humanity doesn't recognize God as King, then there is something lacking in my own

relationship with God. Part of my love for the Almighty is to help guide all people to an appreciation of Him. Of course this is largely an expression of my deep caring for others. But it also affects my own sense of God's all-encompassing Kingship.

Ancient Israel initially used ram's horns for their trumpets, but Numbers chapter 10 notes that some trumpets were made of silver. The use of trumpets is mentioned 72 times in the Old Testament. They were sounded for various reasons: to announce national crisis, to call the nation to solemn assembly, to make announcements, and as a call to worship. In time of war, trumpets instructed soldiers as to how to prepare for and then proceed into battle. Trumpets also announced the arrival of the king.

In our day, some Christians observe the Festival of Trumpets as a mandatory day of worship, often viewing it as pointing to future events—Jesus' second coming or the rapture of the church. As well-meaning as these interpretations of the festival may be, they miss how it points to what Jesus has done already.

The old covenant, which included the Festival of Trumpets, was temporary, given to point people to the coming Messiah, who is Prophet, Priest, Sage and King. The blowing of trumpets on Rosh Hashanah not only signaled the beginning of a new cycle of annual worship in Israel, it proclaimed the celebratory message, "our King is coming!"

For me, the most meaningful element of the Festival of Trumpets is how it points to and is fulfilled in Jesus' first coming through his incarnation, atoning ministry, death, resurrection and ascension. Through these "Christ events," God not only fulfilled his covenant with Israel (the old covenant), but changed all time, forever. Jesus is the head of the year—the head of all time, especially since he created time. He is our tabernacle and we have new life in him. As Paul wrote, "If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Jesus is the new (the second) Adam. He succeeded where the first Adam failed. Jesus is our Passover, our Unleavened Bread and our Atonement. He is the One (and only One) who takes away our sin. Jesus is our Sabbath in which we have rest from sin. As the head of all time, he now lives in us, and all our time is holy as we live the new life that is ours in union with him. Jesus, our King, our Lord and Master, has blown the trumpet once and for all!

*Joseph Tkach*





## REJOICE! CHRIST HAS RISEN

In one of Paul's most emphatic statements, he declared, "If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith" (1 Corinthians 15:14). If Jesus Christ did not rise from the dead, everything else is a waste of words. If he is not alive right now, Christianity is a hopeless fraud. But the good news is that Jesus has indeed risen from the dead—as our Savior, and as the promise that we will also rise from the dead.

The doctrine of the resurrection is an essential of the faith. All of Christianity depends on the truth of this doctrine. But it is more than a doctrine—it is wonderful good news, news that should fill us with joy, hope, confidence, excitement and celebration!

1. Did Jesus not only predict his death, but also his resurrection? Matthew 16:21; 17:23; Mark 9:9. Did the disciples understand and believe Jesus? Mark 9:10; John 16:17-18; Mark 16:11; Luke 24:11.

2. What convinced the disciples that Jesus rose from the dead? What did they see in Jesus' tomb on Sunday morning? Matthew 28:1-6; Mark 16:1-6; Luke 24:1-12; John 20:1-8. What evidence did they see later that same day? Matthew 28:7-10; Mark 16:9-14; Luke 24:13-16, 30-43; John 20:10-22. When did they begin to believe?

3. What evidence did the disciples see after that first Sunday? Matthew 28:16-20; John 20:26-29; 21:1-14; Acts 1:3, 9. What did they later testify about what they had seen? Acts 2:32; 3:15; 4:10; 5:30-32; 7:56; 10:39-41; 1 John 1:1.

4. What evidence persuaded Saul of Tarsus, a hostile nonbeliever? Acts 9:3-6. What did he conclude from this experience? Acts 13:33; 22:6-8, 17-21; 26:14-18. What did he then preach? 17:3, 18, 31; Romans 1:4; 1 Corinthians 15:8; 2 Timothy 2:8.

Comment: Although Jesus had clearly predicted his own death and resurrection, the disciples did not believe it. They could not imagine a Messiah who died, and as a result they did not understand any need for a resurrection. Even after Jesus' death, the disciples did not believe. Even after seeing an empty tomb, they did not believe. They did not expect to see Jesus ever again.

What convinced the disciples that Jesus had risen? Jesus did. He appeared to them with real flesh and bones. They saw him and touched him. The disciples saw the risen Christ in several places, in several circumstances. This was not wishful thinking, nor hallucinations.

Hundreds were convinced that Jesus was alive—and they were so convinced that they preached this even when threatened with death. They did not invent the story—people do not risk their lives for something they know to be false. Their boldness shows that they believed, beyond any shadow of a doubt, that Jesus was really alive.

No other explanation makes sense. A badly beaten and left-for-dead victim of scourging and crucifixion could not have escaped the tomb by himself. Nor would it make sense for the Jews or Romans to steal the body. The Jews could have stopped the “heresy” of the disciples if they had simply produced the dead body—but there was no dead body to be found! The empty tomb may not have been enough to convince the disciples, but a full tomb would have been enough to stop everyone.

It was not a hoax. It was not a mistake. Jesus was really alive, and hundreds testified to what they had seen and heard. Even Saul of Tarsus, an enemy of the message, became convinced when Jesus appeared to him. It was not a wishful thought, not a fraud, not a hallucination—it was an event that changed Saul’s life. Jesus’ resurrection changes our lives, too.

5. What does the resurrection prove about Jesus Christ? Romans 1:4; Acts 17:31.

Comment: When God raised Jesus from the dead and he ascended to God’s right hand, it was a stamp of approval on Jesus himself, showing that he was God’s Son and his Messiah. It showed that he was not a sinner, and that what he taught was true.

However, the apostles made little use of this argument. Jesus was the Son of God even before he was resurrected, and what he taught was true, whether or not he was resurrected. The apostles give more emphasis to what Jesus’ resurrection means for us—for our salvation.

6. Is the resurrection of Jesus a prominent part of the gospel message? Romans 10:9; 1 Corinthians 15:4; 2 Timothy 2:8. Is it part of the symbolism of baptism? Romans 6:4; Colossians 2:12; 1 Peter 3:21.

7. Jesus died for our sins, so that we might be forgiven. But is his resurrection also needed for our forgiveness and our justification? Acts 13:37-39; Romans 4:25; 1 Corinthians 15:17. Are we saved not just by Jesus’ death, but also because of his resurrection? Romans 5:10; Ephesians 2:4-6; 1 Peter 1:3.

8. Is Jesus only the first to be resurrected? Acts 26:23; 1 Corinthians 15:20-23; Revelation 1:5. Does his resurrection serve as a promise that we will also be resurrected? Romans 6:5; 8:11; 1 Corinthians 6:14; 2 Corinthians 4:14; 1

Thessalonians 4:14. Has Jesus broken the power of death not only for himself, but also for us? Acts 2:24; Romans 6:9; Hebrews 2:14-15.

Comment: The Jews believed that there would be a resurrection at the end of the age (Daniel 12:1-3; John 11:24). But how did Jesus' resurrection happen before the end came? It signaled the beginning of the end—the old covenant era had come to an end; a new era had begun.

Although the last days began with Christ (Acts 2:16-17; Hebrews 1:2), the new age is not yet completely here. We are living in a transition era. Some aspects of our salvation are already here; others are not yet here. Jesus is resurrected, but believers are not—but his resurrection does affect us, as pictured in our baptism. We are described spiritually as having been raised with Christ so that we might live a new life. This affects the way we live. Since we have been raised with Christ, we are to seek the things that are above (Colossians 3:1-4).

We look forward with confidence to our complete redemption (Romans 8:23). Because God raised Jesus from the dead, we can be sure that God will also raise us from the dead, and we will be like Jesus in his glory (1 John 3:2). His resurrection is therefore tremendously important news not just about Jesus, but also about our own future.

What will we be like in the resurrection? We will be like Jesus Christ. Paul says that our mortal body will be clothed with immortality; it will be changed from perishable to imperishable (1 Corinthians 15:35-53). The old body will rise and will be given new characteristics.

In verse 44, Paul describes our mortal bodies with the word *psychikon* (from psyche, the word for “soul”). He describes the resurrection bodies with the word *pneumatikon* (from *pneuma*, the word for “spirit”). He is not talking about bodies made of soul, or bodies made of spirit—he is just saying that our resurrection bodies will be bodies, characterized in some way by spirit. Our bodies will be raised with a changed nature.

When Jesus appeared to his disciples after his resurrection, his body had flesh and bone, but it also had supernatural capabilities. He was not subject to the same laws of physics. The grave clothes were left in the tomb, but Jesus' body was not. It was changed from perishable to imperishable—a supernatural body. It was his body, but it had been changed.

9. What happened 40 days after the resurrection? Acts 1:3, 9-11. Where is Jesus now? Acts 2:33; 5:31; 7:56; Ephesians 1:20-21; Philippians 2:9; Colossians 3:1; Hebrews 1:3; 8:1; 1 Peter 3:22.

Comment: By visibly rising into the sky, Jesus showed that he was leaving

his disciples and going to his Father in heaven. He would no longer appear in bodily form to them—he was leaving.

But in another sense, in another way, he continued to be with his disciples (Matthew 28:20). He still lives in his disciples (John 15:4; Galatians 2:20; Colossians 1:27). He is the one who sent the Holy Spirit to fill the church (John 16:7; Acts 2:33).

Throughout his epistles, Paul describes the Christian life as being “in” Christ. We are spiritually united to him. Christ is in us as well as in heaven. He can therefore serve as our connection to heaven.

10. What is Jesus Christ now doing in heaven to help us? Romans 8:34; 1 Timothy 2:5; 1 John 2:1. What terms for his work are used in the book of Hebrews? Hebrews 2:17-18; 3:1-6; 4:14-16; 7:24-28; 9:15; 13:20. What is Jesus now doing in the church? Colossians 1:18; Ephesians 5:23; 4:15-16; 1 Peter 2:25.

Comment: Jesus cares for the spiritual health of every believer, interceding for them, forgiving them, strengthening them. We can pray with confidence, knowing that we have a high priest who understands our difficulties. He has not only begun the work in us, he will complete it—he is the author and the finisher of our salvation.

Jesus Christ continues to lead and guide the church he built. He remains actively involved in his people so that we might become more like him, growing in him until we are fully conformed to his image. The church depends on the risen Christ. Our salvation depends on the risen Christ. All our faith depends on the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Jesus’ resurrection was a time of triumph, of victory, of joy, worship and celebration. It was a demonstration of the hope that all Christians have of conquering death, of becoming imperishable, of rising to glory. It expresses faith, hope and joy. It is no surprise that Christians around the world celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

*Michael Morrison*

## CHRIST'S RESURRECTION: OUR HOPE OF SALVATION

“If Christ has not been raised,” the apostle Paul taught his converts, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins” (1 Corinthians 15:17). The resurrection of Jesus Christ is of momentous importance for every Christian, indeed for everyone on this planet.

Because Jesus Christ conquered death, we, too, have a chance to live again — and so do our friends and relatives who have already succumbed to the most certain thing in every life — death. That is why the most exhilarating message human ears have yet heard was the one announced to some devoted but astonished women outside a rock tomb in first-century Jerusalem: “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen!” (Luke 24:5-6).

### **A foundational teaching**

The resurrection of Christ has always been seen as the central teaching of Christianity. “If the resurrection is not historic fact, then the power of death remains unbroken, and with it the effect of sin” (James Hastings, *A Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels*, vol. 2, page 514).

Michael Green in *Man Alive* is emphatic: “Without faith in the resurrection there would be no Christianity at all.” W. Robertson Nicolls, quoting another writer, puts it plainly: “The empty tomb of Christ has been the cradle of the church” (*The Church's One Foundation*, page 150).

### **Anchored to history**

To mention Jesus Christ and his life, death and resurrection is to get to the root of the Christian faith, for Christianity claims a basis in historical fact. “There are ancient myths in pagan literature about dying gods who attained some form of resurrection,” writes Philip Rosenbaum, “but no other sacred writing intersects human history the way the Bible does. For it is the historical fact of Christ's life, death, and resurrection that separate God's Word from all others” (*How to Enjoy the Boring Parts of the Bible*, page 116).

But the New Testament accounts have come under intense scrutiny and attack. Scottish philosopher David Hume argued in the 1700s that miracles — including Christ's resurrection — violated all known workings of natural law. In our century, theologian Rudolph Bultmann concluded, “An historical fact which involves a resurrection from the dead is utterly inconceivable.”

In light of such arguments from rationalists and critics, it is no wonder that theories have been devised for the events of crucifixion week:

- The Swoon Theory: This is the idea that Jesus didn't really die but faked a death on the cross, then coned his disciples that he had conquered death only to live out his life elsewhere.
- The Theft Theory: This is the idea that the disciples, other sympathizers, perhaps robbers or even Christ's enemies, stole the corpse. This is the oldest and most widespread argument against Christ's resurrection.

These are bold contentions, almost as bold as the resurrection claim itself. They are rhetorical daggers aimed at the very vitals of the Christian faith. Peter wrote, "We did not follow cleverly invented stories...but we were eyewitnesses" (2 Peter 1:16).

### **Who is right?**

What about the Swoon Theory? This theory insinuates that Jesus Christ plotted — for whatever reasons — the biggest hoax in history. Did Jesus, by some amazingly cunning strategy, fake a death on the cross?

Let's keep in mind that the four Gospels are the primary documented evidence for Christ's death, burial and resurrection. We have good internal evidence for believing. These writings are emphatic that Jesus Christ's execution was a public and state-certified spectacle (Mark 15:29).

"This thing was not done in a corner," Paul argued before King Agrippa, the most influential Jewish official of his day (Acts 26:26, New King James Version). How right he was. Jesus Christ's mortal enemies — the leadership elite of his nation — were on the scene. They were watchfully determined to stamp out the Jesus movement (John 11:46-53). That is why they schemed behind closed doors to carry out their plot at risk to their own standing among the people (John 7:25-52). It had to be the perfect crime.

Pontius Pilate, the chief Roman official on the scene, double-checked to verify if Christ had died (Mark 15:44-45). The testimony of John 19:23 and Mark 15:39 indicates that at least four Roman soldiers, including a centurion, carried out the execution. You can have faith in the fact that Roman occupation troops of the first century knew what death was.

Consider this: Would Christ's implacable foes — opponents eager to crush out the infant Christian movement have allowed Christ, once in their clutches, to fake a death? This hardly seems logical or consistent with their motives and with the biblical narrative.

John Stott demolished the Swoon Theory with common sense. He asks if we can really believe

that after the rigours and pains of trial, mockery, flogging and crucifixion he could survive...in a stone 366epulcher with neither

warmth nor food nor medical care? That he could then rally sufficiently to perform the superhuman feat of shifting the boulder which secured the mouth of the tomb...without disturbing the Roman guard? That he could appear to the disciples in such a way as to give them the impression that he had vanquished death? ... Such credulity is more incredible than Thomas' unbelief. (*Basic Christianity*, page 49)

### First-century propaganda

The oldest argument advanced against Christ's resurrection is the intriguing theory that Christ's body was stolen. This is a significant claim. The one crowning blow to disprove Christ's resurrection would have been a public display of his body. A display of the corpse would quickly end any "myth" that was allegedly developing about the resurrection of Jesus.

Public exhumings have happened more than once in history; why didn't the rulers of first-century Judea do that? There was a good reason: Christ had been bodily resurrected. The body was gone. The Gospel account makes the most sense.

Don't forget that the rulers of Jerusalem "gave the soldiers a large sum of money" to circulate the story that Jesus' disciples stole his body (Matthew 28:11-15). Yet the Theft Theory, too, is indefensible, no matter who some think the robbers were. In the first place, if the guards were sleeping, how did they know who had stolen the body? Second, the Jerusalem hierarchy had outsmarted themselves — they had posted a guard to prevent this very sort of thing from happening.

As Paul Little asks in *Know Why You Believe*: "What judge would listen to you if you said that while you were asleep, your neighbor came into your house and stole your television set? Who knows what goes on while he's asleep? Testimony like this would be laughed out of any court."

In his book *The Resurrection and the Life*, George Hanson made this point: "The simple faith of the Christian who believes in the Resurrection is nothing compared to the credulity of the skeptic who will accept the wildest and most improbable romances rather than admit the plain witness of historical certainties."

Any explanation, to be credible, must fit all the facts. The Theft Theory doesn't. The case against it is devastating. Even the existence of the New Testament church is evidence that *something* happened in Jerusalem, something no adversary could explain.

There is no doubt that these defenses of the resurrection ring true. Sincere and learned scholars have labored hard to nullify the claims advanced against Jesus Christ's death and resurrection.

## A question of faith

Christianity is more than a series of clever arguments. It is more than a list of intellectual debating points that can be argued back and forth. This is why the validity of the Gospel testimony does not remain at the mercy of the latest “debunking” best-seller or archaeological find in the Middle East. In the end, Christianity rests on faith, faith based on a living and ongoing relationship with Jesus Christ, a living Savior!

Thomas wanted the strongest form of proof: “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were...I will not believe it” (John 20:25). Thomas saw, he tested, and then he believed (verses 26-28). Yet Jesus Christ followed this dramatic encounter with the words: “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (verse 29).

As Oliver Barclay wrote: “The historical Jesus Christ was an amazing power in the lives of men years after his death. It is not so much the fact that a miracle happened.... The chief reason that the disciples spoke so often about it was that Jesus was alive and with them again” (*Reasons for Faith*, page 115).

This is why the disciples came storming out of Jerusalem and so influenced the world with their message (Acts 17:6). The living Christ had changed their lives. He can do the same for you.

*Neil Earle*



## CELEBRATE THE SPRING FESTIVALS

Praise be to God! He has given us the victory through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! The spring festival celebrations remind us of the wonderful truth of the gospel — the good news that Jesus has obtained the victory, and that we share in that victory through faith in him.

We share in his death. “All of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death.... We were therefore buried with him through baptism.... We have been united with him like this in his death.... Our old self was crucified with him” (Romans 6:3-6).

We share in his resurrection. “You have been given fullness in Christ.... In him you were also circumcised...having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God.... God made you alive with Christ” (Colossians 2:10-13).

We share in his victory over sin through the Holy Spirit. “You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you.... By the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body” (Romans 8:9-13).

In the spring festivals, we celebrate these truths! We remember the Lord’s death, and we participate with him as we look forward to his return (1 Corinthians 10:16; 11:26). After commemorating Jesus’ death for our sins, we celebrate his resurrection! The old covenant pictured this in the annual wavesheaf ceremony with just-harvested barley. This simple ritual had an earth-shaking, breath-taking fulfillment in the dramatic rise of Jesus Christ into splendor and glory.

Words cannot describe how important the resurrection of Christ is! If he had not been raised, his death would have been in vain, our faith would be in vain, and our lives would be in vain. We would still be in our sins and captive to death and decay — but thanks be to God, for he has given us victory through Jesus Christ our living Savior. Our eternal life depends on the fact of Jesus’ resurrection.

We celebrate not with rituals using grain, but with open proclamation that our Savior has risen from the dead and has ascended to our Father in heaven. We rejoice that our Savior is not dead, but alive — powerfully alive, with God, interceding for us, living in us, guiding us, strengthening us!

The spring festivals help us focus on the key truths of the gospel. Though we have many physical trials, we rejoice in the good things of God that are pictured in our annual cycle of celebrations. He satisfies our deepest longings,

and he loves us more than we can comprehend. Let us love him with all our being.

*Joseph W. Tkach*

## EASTER SUNDAY

Let's explore Easter Sunday and its message concerning Jesus' resurrection. This celebration powerfully proclaims the gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Details about Easter are often debated, including its chronology and even whether it should be celebrated, given the pagan origins of some of its traditions. Celebrating Jesus' resurrection is not pagan. But we need to go further, understanding that Easter proclaims the very heart of the gospel by celebrating the most significant event in human history—a “game changer” for everyone who has ever lived—an event that makes all the difference in our lives now and for all eternity.

Unfortunately, Easter celebrations often present a truncated gospel—one about a transaction related to personal satisfaction and individual fulfillment. Such presentations say, in effect, “You do your part and God will do his—accept Jesus and obey him, and in return God will reward you in the here and now and grant you entrance into heaven in the afterlife.”

This sounds like a good deal, but it is *right*? It is true that God takes away our sin and in exchange gives us the righteousness of Christ so that we may inherit eternal life. But this is not a transaction—it is not a “deal” at all. The gospel is not about an exchange of goods and services between consenting parties. Marketing the gospel as though it is about a transaction leaves people with a very wrong impression. This approach puts the focus on us—on whether or not we desire to “buy in” to the transaction, or can afford to do so, or think it's worth the cost. The focus of this transactional gospel is on our decision, our action. But the gospel proclaimed in Easter is not fundamentally about us—it's about Jesus, about who he is and what he has done on our behalf.

Together with the other Holy Week celebrations, Easter points us to the “fulcrum” of human history—events that redirected all history to a different end, placing all humanity and the whole of creation on a new pathway. Everything changed with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ!

Easter is far more than a metaphor of new life, pictured by eggs, rabbits and new spring clothing. Jesus' bodily resurrection was far more than the culmination of his earthly ministry. Through the events of Easter Sunday, a new era began and a new phase in the ongoing ministry of Jesus commenced. Jesus now invites those who have acknowledged him as their Savior to join him in that ministry, which is announcing to all humanity the good news of the new life that is theirs in Christ. Notice the apostle Paul's words in 2

## Corinthians:

So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come. The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

As God's co-workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain. For he says, "In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you." I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation. (2 Corinthians 5:16-6:2)

God's plan from the beginning to re-create humanity and all the cosmos reached its climax in Jesus' bodily resurrection. This event of the past reshaped all of time, including our present and our future. Today we are living in "Easter time"—a time that calls us as followers of Jesus to live on mission, a life of great meaning and purpose.

*Joseph Tkach*

## THREE RS FOR EASTER

Teachers tell us that to lay the foundation for a good education, students need to master the three academic Rs—Reading, ‘Riting and ‘Rithmetic. During the Easter season, let’s focus on three spiritual Rs that help us understand God’s plan for all humanity—**Redemption, Restoration and Reconciliation.**

These three are “feel good” words, even when not used in a religious context. We like it when something is reconciled, restored and redeemed. Like when our checkbook reconciles with our bank statement. Or when a broken life is redeemed. How about when something that is broken is fixed and thus restored? I have a huge model of a sailing ship in my office. During the relocation of GCI’s home office from Pasadena to Glendora, it was broken. My good friend Scott Wertz restored it. Now you can’t tell where it was cracked. I love that it looks brand new.

In his parables, Jesus often used the “feel good” aspect of redemption, restoration and reconciliation to help us understand how God “feels good” about bringing humanity to salvation. There is the parable of the lost coin, and also the one about the lost sheep. Jesus wants us to know that God loves us. We are his highly-valued possessions, and he wants us back with him, where we belong.

It’s God’s nature to seek to live in friendly relationship with his creation. Jesus told us: “Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom” (Luke 12:32). How sad that the relationship is often portrayed as almost adversarial: *IF you do everything God tells you, THEN he will, almost grudgingly, let you in.* Many people have received the communion elements, but were worried that they might be eating and drinking damnation to themselves. The assumption is that God is going to strike them for every tiny infraction. What a travesty of the truth!

The night before his crucifixion, Jesus prayed for his disciples, and all who followed them, with these words: “Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world” (John 17:24). Paul added this thought in Ephesians 1:4: “He [God the Father] chose us in him [Jesus] before the creation of the world...” Let’s not read over this exquisite point—*the Triune God wants us!* We belonged to him before the world was created. To borrow an old phrase, we were a gleam in God’s eye before he spoke the cosmos into existence with all its matter, energy and attendant processes and multiplicity of life forms. We belonged to God from even before that beginning. God’s love has been outgoing throughout eternity and he is drawing people back to himself.

All that exists is the fruit of God's free will and divine love. The universe is not necessary and not self-sufficient. The universe and everything in it are contingent and dependent. As created things, we can never be just ourselves alone. God maintains the core of our being, or we cease to exist. But it is his will that we do exist—not just for a few decades, but forever.

Once this fact of God's love and purposes for us and all creation has sunk in, there can be only one response—*gratitude*—and it is expressed in worship. Worship is so much more than singing a hymn, saying a prayer or giving an offering. These are components of our worship, but there is much more to worship than those actions, which usually are done in a church service.

Worship that expresses gratitude to God is not the product of our religious experience, faith, repentance or decision. Instead, as noted by J. B. Torrance, it is “the gift of participating through the Spirit in the incarnate Son's communion with the Father.” In worship, Jesus first offers himself to the Father on our behalf and in our place. Then, on the basis of that self-offering, Jesus shares with us his human-Godward act of worship—his praise, prayer, repentance and adoration. While this response to God in worship becomes our own as we participate in faith, it always is in Jesus, by the Holy Spirit. The ultimate worshiper and our worship leader is Jesus.

Viewed from this Trinitarian perspective, our worship of God is a 24/7 activity. United to Christ and filled with his Spirit, all our time is holy; all our activities are part of a life of worship—a response of gratitude to our triune God. May you all have inspiring and meaningful times of worship during Holy Week, culminating in the celebration of our Lord's resurrection. He is risen!

*Joseph Tkach*

## EASTER IN THE CHURCH

The death and resurrection of Jesus have been the central events of the church's faith confession since it was founded (1 Corinthians 15:1-4). It's not surprising that the Lord's crucifixion and rising to life should become the focal points of communal Christian worship and remembrance.

There is evidence that the apostolic church celebrated Jesus' resurrection in worship gatherings on the first day of each week (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2). The Lord's death was remembered in the bread and wine communion that was probably part of Christian fellowship meals (Luke 22:19-20).

### The "Easter" festival begins

At some point in the first two centuries, it became customary in the church to have a yearly celebration of the Lord's death and resurrection called "Pascha." It is the same word used for "Passover" in the Greek version of the Scriptures. Our Easter<sup>1</sup> season has grown out of the old Pascha celebration. In time, the Pascha became observed throughout the church.

The early church saw the symbolic continuity between the slaughtered lamb of the Passover and the crucified Lamb of God, Jesus Christ. When Paul speaks of Christ as "our Passover Lamb" (Greek, *pascha*) in 1 Corinthians 5:7, he is affirming that the God who acted mightily in ancient Israel's release from Egyptian bondage, typified by the Passover, is the same God who acted in Christ to free us eternally from all spiritual prisons of sin and death.

Originally, the great Paschal celebration of the church was a unified commemoration of the suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension of the Lord. Only later were the events divided into separate commemorations, with the ascension observance being moved to the 40th day of the Easter season.

Gradually, in the early centuries of the church, with an increasing emphasis on Holy Week and Good Friday, Pascha took on its distinctive character as the Christian celebration of the resurrection. Good Friday commemorated Jesus' crucifixion and death. The feast of the resurrection, which completed the work of redemption, became the most prominent part of the Christian Pascha, and identical with our Easter Sunday.

Since as early as the fourth century, Resurrection Sunday (what we call "Easter Sunday" in the English language) has been the center of the Christian liturgical year and calendar.

## When to observe Easter?

Before A.D. 325, Christian communities in different regions celebrated Easter on a variety of dates and on different days of the week, and not always on Sunday. However, the Christian Council of Nicea of that year issued the “Easter Rule.” The Council decided that the resurrection of Jesus should be celebrated by all churches throughout the world on the same Sunday.

The council standardized the Easter observance date so that Easter is the first Sunday following what is called the Paschal Full Moon for the year. The date of Easter Sunday can range between March 22 and April 25, depending on the lunar cycle.

The Eastern Orthodox churches use the same calculation, but base their Easter date on the old Julian calendar and use different Paschal Full Moon tables. The situation is that the Orthodox Easter Sunday in most years follows the Western Easter by one or more weeks.

Discussions began in the last century in hopes of forging a possible worldwide agreement on a consistent date for Easter. Various proposals were put forth by churches, Christian organizations and clergy of various denominations. One idea is to disregard the moon altogether in determining the date of Easter. None of the proposals have been adopted by any church up to now.

Whatever change in the Easter date occurs in the future, it won’t affect our worship. Christians do not worship days or “holy time.” They use such days and seasons as opportunities to worship Christ. Easter is a time when we can reflect on and contemplate the meaning of the wondrous events of our common salvation — a pure gift of God in Christ.

## Endnote

<sup>1</sup> Some claim the word “Easter” is “pagan” because it may have once been associated with ancient heathen gods. However, Christian churches were celebrating the resurrection of Jesus in spring long before the English word “Easter” was used by English-speaking Christians. The objection against “Easter” is irrelevant in other nations because a different word is used for the Christian spring festival. In most other languages of the world, the name for the festival is derived from *Pesach*, the Hebrew name of the Jewish Passover. The holiday is called in French Paques, Italian Pasqua, Spanish Pascua, Scottish Pask, Dutch Paasch or Pashen, Danish Paaske, and Swedish Pask, to name a few.

*Paul Kroll*



## JESUS THE SAVIOR

## **CELEBRATING THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS CHRIST**

On a Sunday morning long ago, when the disciples of Jesus first encountered their risen Lord, they “came to him, clasped his feet and worshipped him” (Matthew 28:9). Since that time, Christians have set aside time each year to commemorate the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. This observance has been known in other languages as the (Christian) Passover. English-speaking peoples refer to it as Easter.

By the middle of the second century, different dates had emerged in different Christian communities for the annual celebration of the resurrection of Jesus.

The traditions of some Christians in Asia Minor was to have their annual celebration on the same calendar date each year (the Jewish date of Nisan 14). They ended a period of fasting on Nisan 14 and celebrated the Lord’s resurrection. These communities claimed to have received this tradition from the apostle John.

Most Christians outside of Asia Minor had their own early tradition regarding the celebration of the resurrection of Jesus. This was based on the Roman calendar, rather than on the Jewish calendar. The tradition of most Christians from the second century forward was to have their annual celebration of the resurrection of Jesus on a Sunday, near the time of the spring equinox. They claimed to trace their tradition to Peter and Paul.

Eventually discussion arose between those Asian churches that followed the Nisan 14 tradition (known in church history as Quartodecimans [fourteeners]) and the rest of Christianity, which followed the Western tradition, as to how best to determine the date for the Christian celebration of the anniversary of the Lord’s resurrection.

Around A.D. 154, Polycarp, bishop of the church at Smyrna in Asia Minor, visited Anicetus, bishop of the church at Rome. They discussed their different practices, and each recognized that the other had a legitimate tradition. They agreed to respect one another’s customs.

A generation later, about A.D. 190, Victor, bishop of Rome, tried to impose the Western tradition on the churches in Asia Minor that still followed the Nisan 14 tradition. Polycrates, bishop of Ephesus, resisted this, and his appeal to fellow Christians for tolerance was supported by some Western bishops, including Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons in Gaul (modern France), even though these bishops did not follow the Nisan 14 tradition. Victor was persuaded not to insist, and the two traditions regarding the

resurrection celebration continued together for another 150 years (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, chapter 24).

The council of Nicea (in Asia Minor) resolved the differences in A.D. 325. In the interest of uniformity, the Council decreed that the churches of Asia Minor would abandon the Nisan 14 tradition and adopt the majority tradition, that of the Western churches. Henceforth all Christian churches would be expected to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus on the Sunday following the full moon after the equinox of March 21. The practice of celebrating the resurrection of Jesus on Nisan 14 persisted for a while in a few areas of Asia Minor.

Both ways of understanding the date for celebrating this festival trace back to apostolic traditions. One focused on the day of the month (as determined by a Jewish calendar). The other traditional observance, known today in English-speaking nations as Easter (nations using French, Spanish, Italian and Greek still refer to this observance of the resurrection of Jesus as *Passover*), focused on a day of the week determined by the Roman calendar.

The Roman calendar, since its reform by Pope Gregory XIII in 1582, is the basis of the calendar we use today. To continue the Nisan 14 tradition today is to follow an ancient Christian tradition based on a Jewish liturgical calendar. But there is also something to be said for celebrating the crucifixion and resurrection of our Lord at the same time, measured by the same calendar, as the rest of our fellow Christians in the Western world. The purpose is to commemorate a sacred event—not to make a particular day sacred.

### **Easter—Festival of Ishtar?**

The annual Christian festival that celebrates the resurrection of Jesus, known in English-speaking lands as Easter, is sometimes said to be named after a Teutonic pagan goddess, *Eastre* or *Eostre*. This notion seems to have originated with the eighth-century English monk Bede.

Alexander Hislop, in his book *The Two Babylons*, mistakenly equated the goddess *Eostre* with the Babylonian-Assyrian fertility goddess *Ishtar*, and with the Phoenician fertility goddess *Astarte*. Questionable word-origins and the mistaken research of Hislop has led some to conclude that the festival of Easter is pagan in its name and its origins.

However, the annual spring celebration of the resurrection of Jesus was not called Easter until centuries after Christians began celebrating it, and etymological authorities (those who study word origins) have cast doubt on Bede's theory.

In a footnote in a mid 19th century edition of Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*, the translator, Isaac Boyle, suggested that "our word, Easter, is of Saxon origin, and of precisely the same import with its German cognate Ostern. The latter is derived from the old Teutonic form of *auferstehn*, *auferstehung*, i.e. resurrection."

The *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Baker Books, 1984) article on Easter, after mentioning Bede's account, says it is "more likely" that the word Easter "came from a German root for dawn or east (the time and place of the rising sun)." The *Oxford English Dictionary* relates Easter and the east to a common root meaning dawn or morning. If these are accurate, Easter did not derive from the name of a spring goddess Eastre. Rather, both words came from a root that means "dawn," or "morning/rising/new light," or by extension, "resurrection."

More likely than Bede's explanation, it is possible that the resurrection celebration was named Easter because the word described the promise of new light and new life brought to humanity by the new-risen Son.

### **Eggs—not just for pagans?**

Some pagan religious practices involved sin, error, distortion and sometimes horror. However, pagan religious philosophies also contained what C.S. Lewis called "good dreams"—hints and shadows of truth given by God to the pagans to prepare their minds for the fulfillment that would one day come in Jesus Christ.

The early Christians appear to have been alert for any sign of these hints in pagan belief and practice that in some way could be seen as foreshadowing the work of Christ. Such practices provided Christians with points of contact that enabled them to present the gospel of Jesus Christ in terms familiar to the pagans.

When Paul was in Athens, he noticed an altar "to an unknown god." He must have realized that here was a symbol of a god whose existence the pagan Athenians suspected but who they realized they did not know. That was the God he wanted to tell them about! So he took their familiar symbol and drew out of it a new and unfamiliar significance. What might have been an obstacle to the gospel became a bridge for the gospel.

Paul's genius for bridge-building is seen again in his letter to the church at Corinth. Christians there could not understand the idea of a bodily resurrection from the dead, so Paul used the analogy of a seed to explain the concept. Just as a seed falls to earth and "dies" only to rise again in a different form, he explained, so it is with the human body, which dies then rises

renewed to eternal life.

The Greek Corinthians were familiar with Adonis, a “corn god” who died and rose again every season, symbolically parallel to the grain sown in the field to “die” and “rise again” the next spring. So Paul made use of the kernel of truth in their symbology, to build a bridge to Jesus, the true fulfillment of their symbol.

How did eggs and rabbits come to be associated with the celebration of Christ’s resurrection? Pagan philosophies had great interest in new life, in renewed life and fertility, visible in and symbolized by the fertility and life of nature and the seasons. They used symbols such as eggs and rabbits to represent that new life. This interest in new life was recognized by early Christians as something God had given them that might help pagans understand the concept of the new life offered through the gospel.

In a similar way as Paul used themes familiar to pagans such as the altar to the unknown god and the image of a seed “dying” to bring forth new life, so Christians from the first century forward have used motifs familiar to pagans, but have shown how Jesus Christ was the true fulfillment dimly foreshadowed in pagan observances and symbols. In this way symbols of new life such as rabbits and eggs became associated with the festival of Easter, which was a festival celebrating the risen Christ, who brings new life to redeemed humankind.

## **THE PASSOVER-EASTER-QUARTODECIMAN CONTROVERSY**

Early church history contains records of an obscure, but once quite heated controversy — the Quartodeciman controversy. (Quartodeciman refers to the 14th day of the month.) It is sometimes called the Passover-Easter controversy. Others have called it the Easter controversy or the Paschal controversy. Perhaps it is not even fair to call it a controversy.

That some scholars refer to it as an Easter controversy is unfortunate, since Easter is an English word. Today the word implies, for most English-speakers, a host of cultural assumptions alien to the original controversy. The disputants in the Quartodeciman controversy did not use “Easter” to describe what they were arguing over. Therefore, to describe the Quartodeciman controversy as a Passover-Easter controversy can obscure the nature of the dispute rather than clarify it.

### **Focus on three events**

The controversy involved three events: the controversy between Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna, and Anicetus, the bishop of Rome, that occurred around A.D. 155; the more heated controversy between Polycrates, the bishop of Ephesus, and Victor, the bishop of Rome, that broke out around 195; and the decree of Constantine following the Nicene Council in 325.

Scholars disagree about the controversy’s details. They do agree that its arguments revolved around whether the primary Christian spring festival should happen on a day of the month (Nisan 14, the Passover day) or on a day of the week (Sunday).

Eusebius is our primary source for the controversy between Polycarp and Anicetus. Polycarp knew the apostle John and was of such stature that many considered him John’s spiritual, though not apostolic, successor in Asia Minor. Polycarp believed that Nisan 14 was the correct time for the spring festival, but Anicetus, bishop of Rome, favored Sunday.

An annual Lord’s Supper was not the issue, neither was Easter, or at least what we think of as Easter. No one was arguing that the Lord’s Supper should only be kept once a year. No one was arguing over Easter bunnies and colored eggs.

Furthermore, none of the Quartodecimans claimed that it was wrong to celebrate Jesus’ resurrection. To the contrary, the evidence indicates that both

Polycarp and Anicetus celebrated Jesus' resurrection annually. Polycarp's claim seems to have been that the best day to do so was on Nisan 14. Anicetus argued for Sunday.

What is more intriguing for us is that Polycarp claimed his practice came from the apostle John. In other words, the practice of celebrating Jesus' resurrection on Nisan 14 was an apostolic practice, at least for the apostle John. His argument was not so much scriptural as it was traditional.

Eusebius, in his *Ecclesiastical History*, chapters 23 to 25, makes it plain that the Quartodeciman controversy involved in part when to celebrate Jesus' resurrection. He tells us that the churches in Asia Minor, focusing on the crucifixion as of primary importance, argued for Nisan 14 as the day to commemorate the entire story of Jesus' death, burial and resurrection. The church at Rome, focusing on the resurrection, argued that there was no need to depend on the Jewish calendar and that Sunday was the most appropriate day of all.

### **Not about day of Jesus' resurrection**

No one in the Quartodeciman controversy argued over the actual day of the resurrection. This was not in dispute. When Rome said they memorialized the resurrection on Sunday, neither Polycarp nor anyone else argued that the resurrection wasn't on Sunday. The argument was not over the day of Jesus' resurrection, but over what day was most appropriate to commemorate it annually.

To resolve the dispute, Polycarp traveled to Rome. A since-lost letter by Irenaeus, quoted by Eusebius and others, tells us what happened:

When the blessed Polycarp was at Rome in the time of Anicetus, and they disagreed a little about certain other things, they immediately made peace with one another, not caring to quarrel over this matter. For neither could Anicetus persuade Polycarp not to observe what he had always observed with John, the disciple of our Lord, and the other apostles with whom he associated. . . . Neither could Polycarp persuade Anicetus to observe it.

So what did they do with this impasse? Did Anicetus call Polycarp a Jew for commemorating the resurrection on the Passover? Did Polycarp call Anicetus a pagan, or one who had denied the faith for celebrating the resurrection on a Sunday? Did he accuse him of breaking God's law? Not at all. Both men decided they would not quarrel. They chose to live in peace.

What happened next we would have thought extraordinary. Irenaeus'

letter records that Polycarp and Anicetus took the Lord's Supper together. It didn't matter to them what season or day it was. Taking the Lord's Supper together symbolically showed their unity in Christ. After this, "they parted from each other in peace."

We can be certain that this happened because Irenaeus' letter, written only a few decades after the original event, called on another bishop of Rome to repent and follow the well-known example of his predecessor.

A few decades later Polycrates and Victor did not get along nearly as well. The discussion began to degenerate. In anger, Victor excommunicated the Quartodeciman Polycrates and those who shared his views. Many bishops protested, such as the aforementioned Irenaeus, though they did not agree with the Quartodeciman position. Victor's attempted excommunication apparently failed.

By the 300s the Quartodecimans were much less influential. Though the Nicene Council dealt primarily with the issue of the Word's eternal divinity, it also considered and rebuked the Quartodeciman position. Where once churches found unity despite their diversity, some types of diversity were now beginning to be seen as a threat to unity.

The passage of several hundred years since John's death saw the church combat many heresies. Not every diversity had proven healthy to the faith. As persecution became less of a problem, the church spent more time defining orthodoxy. The Nicene Council decreed that Christians should celebrate Jesus' resurrection on a Sunday.

After the Council's close, Emperor Constantine supported its judgment with a vile anti-Semitic attack against the Quartodecimans. He ordered a severe persecution of those who refused to comply.

## **Celebration of Christ's resurrection**

In summary, the Quartodeciman controversy was not an Easter-Passover controversy, as we understand those terms today. The Roman church apparently did not initiate the celebration of Jesus' resurrection, and the Asian churches had no objection to this practice. Evidence indicates that they and the apostle John did the same. It was not a matter of "false Christians" at Rome rejecting God's law, substituting pagan festivals for God's Holy Days. There is no evidence that the early Roman church chose Sunday as the day of their celebration just to be different than the Jews. They chose Sunday based on their understanding of when the Gospels said Jesus rose from the dead.

The issues that separated the Quartodecimans from other Christians were



over the timing of their customs, not the value of the customs or the timing of the resurrection. Initially, those holding differing views considered each other Christian. They understood each other to be a part of the body of Christ. To display their unity they took the Lord's Supper together whatever the date.

It should go without saying that celebrating the foundational events of our faith, especially events having to do with Jesus' earthly ministry, is fitting. Celebrating his resurrection is the joyful response of believers to the message: "He is risen!"

It is not surprising that early Christians formalized such celebrations as a part of their annual cycle of worship. By contrast, those who argue over dates often miss the profound significance of the events being celebrated.

*Ralph Orr*

## WHAT DOES JESUS HAVE TO DO WITH EASTER?

Hints of sunrise dimmed the eastern stars. Through the darkness Mary Magdalene hurried to the garden tomb that Joseph of Arimathea had donated for Jesus' burial. She and the other women could not sleep. They arose early to finish their hastily done job of preparing Jesus' body for burial. There had not been enough time to buy all of the spices and to wrap the body properly before the Sabbath. Now that the Sabbath was over, the job could be completed.

Grief, love, adoration and faith brought these women to the tomb. Through his life and teaching, Jesus had shown them, as no one before him, the riches and depths of God's love. Now he was dead. The hopes and dreams they identified with him seemed dead as well. Crucified, mocked for claiming to be king of the Jews, his message announcing the kingdom of God appeared frustrated, beyond hope of being true.

Was Jesus a false prophet? Did he cast out demons by Beelzebub, the prince of demons? If so, how could they explain the good in his ministry? What prophet except Jesus ever healed a man born blind? Did this not make him greater than Elijah? And his teaching, did it not sound greater than that of Moses? With such tragedy, what would tomorrow bring?

"Who will roll the stone away?" they asked. "How can we use these spices if we can't get in the tomb?" As they hurried along, the women felt an earthquake. The soldiers guarding the tomb would later report that at the time of the earthquake a dazzling angel appeared. The angel rolled away the stone that sealed the tomb. Initially frozen with fear, the soldiers fled the garden before the women arrived.

As the women approached the garden the eastern sky proclaimed dawn's coming. The darkness shrouding the world would soon pass away. Dawn's bright light was about to shine on the earth. The Lord would have his day.

In the predawn light the women saw the open tomb. Mary Magdalene, disturbed as to what this might mean, looked in. Shocked to find no body, she ran to tell Peter. "They've stolen his body! We don't know where they've taken him!"

As the sun slowly rose in the eastern sky, the women returned to the tomb. The rays of early morning had nearly chased away the blindness that darkness brings to all.

Mary Magdalene wept. Two men approached her. They asked, "Woman,

why are you weeping?” She explained her deep sorrow. “They have taken my Lord! I don’t know where they have put him.”

After saying this, Mary turned around. Again she was asked: “Woman, why are you weeping? Are you looking for someone?” Mary assumed the man speaking to her was the caretaker. “Please sir, if you have taken him away, tell me where you have put him.”

The man said, “Mary.” Joy and exaltation exploded within her. Only one person could say “Mary” that way. “Teacher!” she cried.

“Go Mary. Go and tell the others. Tell them that you have seen me. Tell them that I am risen and will be ascending to my Father and your Father. Tell them, Mary.”

Fearful to speak at first, Mary and the other women with her could not contain their joy for long. “He is risen!” they proclaimed. “He is risen!”

Awakening before first light, Mary sleepily prepared herself a cup of coffee. While it brewed, she stumbled to the bathroom where she showered and dressed in her Sunday best. Time to get the kids up, she thought.

Quietly she walked to the girls’ bedroom. Slowly opening the door, she paused to look at her daughters’ innocent faces. Elizabeth, age 7, and Ruth, age 5, lay sound asleep.

Since her husband, Jim, died four months ago in a car accident, life had been rough. Raising two girls while working full-time was hard. Mary’s nearly unbearable grief compounded her struggle. Jim had been a loving and caring man. When he was alive, life had seemed so good. Mary’s emptiness was deep and profound.

Mary walked over to Elizabeth and Ruth’s bunk bed. She gently nudged them. “Get up girls. It’s time to get ready for church.” “Oh Mom,” groaned Elizabeth. “It’s not even light yet.”

“It will be shortly. Look out the window. It’s getting lighter all the time.” “Can’t we sleep for just a few more minutes?” pleaded Elizabeth.

“No, I’m sorry. We don’t want to be late for church. You and Ruth need to eat some breakfast and then get dressed. No more talking. Climb out of those beds. You can eat cereal while I cook you some eggs.”

Secretly Mary agreed with Elizabeth. It would be nice to sleep in today. During the week she rarely got enough sleep. But this Sunday was special. It was Easter. So, tired or not, she and the girls were going to church.

Jim had always taken the family to the early Easter morning worship

service. A devout Christian, Jim had wanted his children to learn to rejoice over the resurrected Christ. He had especially liked the early service. It helped him imagine what that morning must have been like when Jesus, resurrected, first showed himself to the women. For Jim, Easter dawn had had a special meaning.

This Easter would be the first since Jim's death. Until this morning, Mary had put that fact out of her mind. But now, as the girls ate their cereal and she cooked the eggs, the thought overwhelmed her. Mary wept.

"Mommy, why are you crying?" asked Rachel. "I'm sorry, dear. I was just thinking of your father." "I miss Daddy," Rachel said sorrowfully. "So do I. So do I."

Mary wiped the tears from her eyes and her cheeks. Giving her girls a big hug, she said: "Go ahead now and eat your eggs. You need to hurry so you can get dressed. Don't forget the pretty new dresses I bought for you." "Hurray! New dresses!" they shouted as they gobbled down their breakfast.

After breakfast Mary had to settle a few sibling squabbles, remind the girls to hurry up and then help them comb their hair. Finally they were ready. Gathering her purse, Bible and car keys, Mary hurried the girls out the front door.

"Come on Ruth. Get in the car. What are you doing?" "Mommy, my foot came out of my shoe." Having solved that crisis, Mary backed the car out of the driveway. The sun was beginning to rise, its warm rays dispelling the chill of night. By now the girls were excited, wanting to show off their frilly new dresses and talking about the chocolates they would enjoy later that day.

Mary did not share their joy. Despite the beautiful spring morning, she felt no excitement. She had no anticipation. Mary was tired and depressed. Why get up so early? Why go to church at all? Try as she might, all she could think about was Jim. If only he were here. Why are we doing this anyway?

A few blocks away a small crowd was gathering at the church. As they usually did for Easter, people came in their finest. New dresses were everywhere. The sanctuary would be nearly full. People who rarely made it to church often came to one of the Easter services.

The worshippers commented on the beautiful sunrise and the lovely lilies placed near the pulpit. The pastor, Henry Greenloe, had prepared a finely crafted sermon. He had prayed that God would use his message to move the uncommitted to faith in Christ.

Just a few minutes before church started, Mary's car approached the church parking lot. By now some of the depression had left. She had begun

to fondly remember Easter's past. As a child she had had the same excitement that Elizabeth and Ruth now had. And she had learned from Jim to focus more on what Easter was about than on how it was observed.

"Easter is about hope," she told herself. "It's about how death is not the end. It gives us a reason for carrying on, no matter what the trials of life."

After parking the car, she and the girls walked toward the front door of the church. As she approached the building, she looked up to read the sign that announced this week's sermon. In bold letters it simply read, "He Is Risen!"

Mary paused. Clasping her girls' hands a little tighter she said to herself: Yes, we should be here, if for no other reason than this: Jesus is alive. Nothing remains the same. Death has no lasting claim. The Sun of Righteousness has arisen. Jesus is alive! He is risen!

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Paul leaned over the parchment. His letter to the Corinthian church was becoming unusually long. Yet before he stopped writing he needed to cover one more subject.

Paul was concerned. The problems at Corinth were not simply behavioral. Members there had begun to doubt the central truths of the faith. The salvation of some was in jeopardy.

With a heavy heart he wrote in what we now call 1 Corinthians 15: "I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain."

After so much struggle, after what Jesus had done for them, the last thing Paul wanted for the Corinthians would be that their faith had been in vain. So, to emphasize the situation's seriousness he wrote, "For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance."

Paul understood that time can blur the vision. Priorities can become confused. Apathy can set in. Paul wrote to fight against such corrosion, praying that the Holy Spirit would give him the words the church needed to hear.

What was of first importance? Paul reminded them it was "that Christ died for our sins ... that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day." For Paul, the gospel did not leave Jesus on the cross. It also raised him from the grave. Paul supported his testimony of Jesus' resurrection by listing many of its eyewitnesses. Starting with Peter, Paul's list grew until finally he wrote,

“And last of all he appeared to me.”

That appearance forever changed Paul’s life. It should forever change ours. Nothing before or since has been as historically important as the resurrection of our Lord. All eternity hinges on that event.

Paul went on to say, “This is what we preach, and this is what you believed.” How could some Corinthians believe there is no resurrection?

Paul understood that one cannot abandon the doctrine of Jesus’ bodily resurrection without also abandoning the faith. Paul affirmed: “If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God.”

A few lines later he wrote: “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost.”

Paul assured the Corinthians that departed Christians were not lost, for “Christ has indeed been raised from the dead.... In Christ all will be made alive.”

As Paul concluded his letter, he did not realize how important his words would become. What was initially a letter to one congregation became an everliving epistle to the whole church in every age.

Through the centuries Christians have found strength in his words. They have faced adversity, poverty, suffering and death by focusing on Paul’s reminder of the reality and centrality of the resurrection of their Lord Jesus Christ.

For almost two millennia Christians have mourned the death of loved ones. For almost as long, the words of 1 Corinthians 15 have lifted their spirits and given them hope. Take the resurrection of Jesus away and you destroy their hope. The gospel does not leave Jesus on the cross or in the grave. It proclaims, “He is risen!”

For two millennia believers have said, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.” Let’s continue to say that we are not ashamed. *Why* are we not ashamed? We are not ashamed, for he is risen!

*Ralph Orr*

## IS IT A SIN TO OBSERVE EASTER?

Some Christian churches teach that Christians should not observe Easter because the holiday supposedly originated in paganism. We feel especially qualified to address this issue, for we once taught this but have come to understand that our objections were misguided.

In its worst form, the idea is that people who assemble on Easter morning, who participate in such customs as decorating or hunting for eggs, are unwittingly worshipping an ancient pagan goddess. But this is based on several misunderstandings, and the New Testament gives no grounds for prohibiting Christian fellowship and worship on Easter.

### The word “Easter”

Let’s examine a few objections that are sometimes made against Easter and see whether they have any merit. Let us start with the word “Easter” itself. (This objection is irrelevant in many nations, because the word for this holiday in other languages has no connection with the word “Easter.” Jesus’ resurrection was being celebrated centuries before the word “Easter” became associated with it.) Critics claim that the word “Easter” comes from the name of a Germanic goddess of spring, *Eastre*. Venerable Bede, an English monk who lived in the eighth century, taught this. However, many English words, such as “cereal” and “Saturday,” come from the names of pagan deities — but it is not a sin to use such words.

Bede may have been wrong, and the word “Easter” may not have come from the name of a goddess. The King James translators certainly did not understand the word “Easter” in this way when they used it to translate the Greek *pascha*, or Passover, in Acts 12:4! Another explanation is that “Easter” derives from an Old German root, *ostern*, for dawn or east, which is the time and place of the rising sun. This makes more sense as a reason why a day commemorating Jesus’ resurrection would have been called “Easter.” Jesus is thought to have risen shortly before sunrise on Sunday (Matthew 28:1; Mark 16:2). Since he is called “the sun of righteousness” (Malachi 4:2; Psalm 84:11), it would be appropriate to call a day in honor of his resurrection, “Easter” — the dawn of the Rising Son, Jesus.

In any case, even if the word “Easter” was associated with an ancient goddess, it does not mean we cannot use the word today. We have many words in the English language that were connected with ancient deities. For example, our word “cereal” comes from the name of the ancient goddess of agriculture, Ceres. The word “cloth” comes from Clotho, the spinster

goddess who was said to spin the thread of life. The word “hymn” is thought to come from the god of marriage, Hymen, and in ancient times meant any song offered in praise or honor of a god or gods. But when we use “hymn” in church services we mean a song sung in praise of the one true God. When we use the word “cereal” we’re not thinking of the goddess or worshipping her, but of corn flakes or granola. Cloth is fabric to us, not Clotho.

## Sunrise services

In connection with the word “Easter,” the concept of an Easter *sunrise* service is also labelled as pagan by detractors. They point to Ezekiel 8:14-17, which describes individuals with their faces toward the east, worshipping the sun. This practice in Ezekiel is called idolatry and an abomination in God’s sight. Easter is said to be a replica of this vain worship in ancient Israel.

However, in Ezekiel the individuals were forsaking the worship of the true God, as is evidenced by them turning their backs on the temple of the Lord (verse 16). They were purposely worshipping the sun. When Christians attend an Easter sunrise service they worship God and Christ, remembering and rehearsing the meaning of Jesus’ resurrection. The rising of the sun reminds them that Jesus is the dawn of our salvation, and that he rose early Sunday morning.

Did pagans worship the sun? Yes, they worshipped many things, including stars, the moon, many animals, and even the earth itself. Devout Christians see this, and sometimes confuse ancient forms with modern substance. They point to the association of some modern traditions with ancient religious celebrations, and shout “pagan.” They think, “Once pagan, always pagan.” While they may admit the transforming power of Christ for people, they act as if Christ cannot transform days, customs and traditions. Yet many of the practices God approved for ancient Israel had previously existed in paganism. Sacrifices, prayers, temples, priests, harvest festivals, music in worship, circumcision and tithing all had ancient pagan counterparts. God can transform days and customs for his use. The fact that Christians use some of the same methods as pagans does not mean that we worship the same gods.

The annual festivals or holy days God gave Israel as part of the old covenant were based on the cycle of the moon. The festival of Trumpets came on the new moon of the seventh month. Israelites even had a new moon celebration with a blowing of trumpets (Psalm 81:3). Yet, the moon was regularly worshipped as a god or goddess in nearby cultures. That’s where we get our name for “Monday.” It was the day of the moon’s worship.



Even though pagans worshipped the moon god on the day of the new moon, the Israelites could worship the true God on the same day. Just because pagans did something does not automatically mean that God's people cannot do it.

God transformed many pagan customs into a form of worship devoted to him. Even the sun, worshipped as a god by many pagan cultures, God used to symbolize an aspect of Jesus' glory. Luke called him "the rising sun" (Luke 1:78). Jesus is also called the "bright Morning Star" in Revelation 22:16. God can use symbols misappropriated by pagans and transform them for his own use, making them acceptable for worship.

The point is that even if there once was a pagan "Easter" festival, and even if the word had some pagan significance, it doesn't matter. No one takes the phrase "Easter sunrise service" to mean a pagan rite or thinks that he or she is worshipping the sun.

As pointed out about Monday, all the names of the days of the week have a pagan significance on which different deities were worshipped. Sunday was the day of the sun; Monday was the moon's day; Tuesday was Tiw's day; Wednesday was Woden's day; Thursday was Thor's day and Friday was Frigga's day. The latter four were all Norse deities. But we don't worship pagan gods when we say or use these names for our days. We don't think of worshipping old gods when a new day comes. That's the way it is with the word "Easter." Whether or not it had a pagan connection in the past doesn't matter. We don't think of it in these terms anymore; the word does not mean that any more.

The same applies to worship services on Easter Sunday morning or during resurrection Sunday. If there were pagan "resurrection" celebrations to various gods on Sunday — and there probably were — it doesn't matter. God's people can use those days to worship Christ, and they are not stuck in some time warp that turns them into unwitting idolaters. The words and the days have no power of their own; they do not change adoration of God into secret veneration of an idol. In modern times, on Easter Sunday, Christians worship Christ. That's what is important. Christians who keep Easter are not pagans. They do not worship nor regard pagan gods. They honor Christ as Lord and Savior.

Unless we are to conclude that celebrating Christ's resurrection is in itself a detestable thing, its celebration on what was once a pagan holiday is irrelevant.

## Eggs and rabbits

We should explain one other objection to Easter. What seems particularly offensive to some people is the use of colored eggs at Easter. A related objection has to do with references to rabbits, which are known for their prodigious reproductive capacities.

Of course, pagan people used eggs in rituals and ceremonies dedicated to their gods and in fertility rites. But let's first ask why eggs might have been used in religious activities. They are a symbol of new life, and thus would have been a ready metaphor of fertility. Since nature comes alive in the springtime, we shouldn't be surprised that eggs may have been associated with festivities at this time. It is also true that many of the pagan fertility rites were associated with abominable practices such as temple prostitution and other revelry.

On the other hand, let us look at fertility and eggs from another point of view. God created the egg. Since he is the giver of life, it would not be wrong to think of the egg as a reminder of the blessing of life that God gives to us. We don't confuse the egg with life. We know God created life and that it comes from him through the egg. Fertility is something God himself commanded. He told Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply (Genesis 1:28). Children are a blessing from the Lord. So is an abundance of livestock and birds. The ability of life to reproduce is a great and necessary gift of God.

The ancients were not wrong in understanding the key role of fertility in life, nor in knowing that sex and reproduction are gifts of God. What they erred in was worshipping the created rather than the Creator, and then worshipping in ways that were abominable to God — such as in fertility revelry and temple prostitution.

But there is nothing inherently evil about eggs or rabbits. When associated with Easter, neither are used in the way pagans may have used them. In fact, eggs are hardly thought of in a religious way at all. The egg-hunting festivity is merely a secular time of fun for children, and nothing more. We put chocolate rabbits in Easter baskets, but they have no religious association. The pagan linkage simply no longer exists. Just as the word "cereal" is no longer pagan, the eggs and rabbits are no longer pagan. There is no need to look on eggs or bunnies as evil, for God created both.

## Not commanded in the Bible

Another objection to Easter observance made by some is that it is not mentioned in the Bible. These people feel we should not set apart any day for worship unless it is specifically mentioned in the Bible. Since there is no

example of celebrating the resurrection, these people say we should not do it.

Of course, there is no command in the New Testament not to celebrate Jesus' resurrection. But that doesn't matter. If we could only have those religious worship times and activities that the New Testament specifically mentions, then we would be able to do very little in terms of worship and Christian ceremony. None of the apostles are shown to have performed a wedding ceremony or conducted a funeral, for example. But these are a part of our lives and Christian worship.

The central issue regarding Easter observance is this: How much freedom do Christians have in the new covenant, either individually or as a church, to express their faith, worship and thanks toward Christ in forms not found in the Bible? Are Christians ever free to do anything new in worship? May church leaders establish special days to celebrate the great acts of salvation?

True, the Bible nowhere tells us to celebrate Easter. But it also nowhere says not to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus on this day. The fact is, the Bible gives examples where God permitted human beings to set up times and forms of worship other than what he specifically commanded.

When Israel added Hanukkah and Purim to its religious calendar — events that celebrated God's saving acts in Jewish history — these were acceptable to God. So, too, was the addition of the synagogue and its traditions; God did not command it, but he allowed the innovation. Jesus attended temple worship during Hannukah, then called the Feast of Dedication (John 10:22), and he attended synagogues (Luke 4:16). In John 7:37 Jesus referred to the Jewish water-drawing ceremony, which pictured the salvation they looked for. Jesus did not condemn this ceremony but used it as a convenient vehicle for explaining that he was the one who would bring true salvation.

Examples such as these have led many Christians to conclude that the church also has the freedom to add to its calendar festivals that celebrate God's intervention in human affairs. This would include the birth of Jesus at Christmas and his resurrection at Easter time.

It is not a sin to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ at Easter. After all, his resurrection is a cause of great rejoicing and celebration. It is our hope for eternal life (1 Corinthians 15:12-26). God is pleased to see his people worshipping Jesus and commemorating this event that is so important for their salvation.

Love, not command, is what motivates many Christians to celebrate

Easter. To criticize those who choose to practice their faith in this spirit of devotion conflicts with many New Testament principles. The fact that non-Christians or even some Christians celebrate Easter as a secular holiday, or perhaps even in a profane way, is no reason to avoid Easter. That's not the problem of Easter but of the people who celebrate it in a wrong manner.

The decision to observe Easter, and if so how to observe it, is a personal matter. The church hopes that Christians who celebrate Easter and those who do not are both seeking to honor Jesus Christ (Romans 14:5-6). We encourage all who celebrate Easter to make Christ the center of their celebration.

## A NOTE ABOUT EASTER

Christians should remember Christ's resurrection, just as we remember his death. The two go together. The New Testament does not require Christians to commemorate the resurrection in any particular manner or on any particular day. Yet millions of Christians throughout the centuries have found it helpful to do so, and the Bible does not forbid them to do so.

Some churches stigmatize their members against celebrating Jesus' resurrection. Often, this is based on accusations made without investigating to see whether they are true. Rhetoric about pagan customs in northern Europe, for example, is irrelevant, because Christians were celebrating Jesus' resurrection long before northern European customs were involved.

It is not a sin to celebrate the resurrection, and not a sin to use the word Easter, no matter what its origin. It is not a sin to gather at sunrise to worship our Savior. Easter is the spring celebration of Christians honoring the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is not an occasion to honor Eostre, an Anglo-Saxon goddess.

I do not think we can be "neutral" about celebrating such a key event in our Savior's life, such a key event in our own salvation. Christians are not neutral about the victory over sin and death that Jesus won. So I *encourage* Christians to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Some may choose to do it one day, some on another, some perhaps on several days each year. Wonderful! Let good news be celebrated!

It is not a sin to eat chocolate eggs and chocolate rabbits, or to eat eggs that have been colored and dyed. These things are no more pagan today than the names of the days of the week and month are. The same logic that one might be offended by the word "Easter" would suggest that the same person should be offended by "Sunday," "Thursday," or "Saturday." Whatever pagan associations these names may have once had are now gone. No one suspects that egg-dyers or egg-hunters are worshiping other gods.

I encourage people to celebrate Jesus' resurrection, but I am not exhorting people to immerse themselves in customs that have little or nothing to do with the resurrection. But neither do we superstitiously have to avoid Easter eggs and other customs. Some Christians choose to avoid such things; others see no harm in participating in them. Different people will "draw the line" in different places, and here I ask that we live in peace with one another. Differences do exist, and emotions can run high on this issue. So seek peace and pursue it. Those who participate in all the Easter customs need not flaunt

it; those who refuse do not need to make a big deal about it.

Each of us must answer to the Lord, for it is to the Lord that we live and die — and we are not called to judge the Lord's other servants. We are each called to do the work God has called us to do, and we are to do it whether or not the other person is doing what he or she is supposed to be doing. We need tolerance, not mutual criticism. We need grace, not more legislation. Let's celebrate and worship together!

*Joseph Tkach*

## THE ASCENSION AND THE RETURN OF CHRIST

In Acts 1:9, we are told: “After Jesus said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.”

I would like to address a simple question: why? *Why* was Jesus taken up in this way? But before we get to that, let’s read the next three verses:

They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. “Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.” Then they returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day’s walk from the city. (verses 10-12)

This passage makes two basic points— that Jesus ascended into heaven, and that he will return. Both of those items are important in the Christian faith, and both are included in the Apostles’ Creed, for example. First, Jesus ascended into heaven. This is commonly known as the Ascension, which is celebrated each year 40 days after Easter, always on a Thursday.

The second point this passage makes is that Jesus will return— he will return in the same way that he ascended. I believe that this latter point is the *reason* that Jesus ascended in a visible way— to emphasize that he will return in a visible way.

It would have been easy for Jesus to simply tell his disciples that he was going to his Father, and that that he would come back — and then he would simply disappear, as he did on other occasions, just this time never to be seen again. I don’t know of any theological reason why Jesus would have to ascend in a visible way. He did this to make a point, to teach a particular lesson, to the disciples — and through them, to us.

By visibly going up into the air, Jesus made it clear that he wasn’t just disappearing— he was going to heaven, and there, he would be at the Father’s right hand to intercede for us as our eternal High Priest. As one writer put it, Jesus is “our Man in heaven.” We have somebody in heaven who understands who we are, understands our weaknesses, understands our needs, because he *is* a human. Even in heaven, he is still a human as well as being God.

Even after the Ascension, Scripture calls him a man. When Paul was preaching to the Athenians at the Areopagus, he said that God would judge

the world by a *man* he has appointed, and that man is Jesus Christ. When he wrote to Timothy, he called him the man Christ Jesus. He is still a human, and he still has a body. His body rose from the dead, and his body ascended into heaven.

Which leads to the question: *where is* that body right now? How can a God who is omnipresent, not limited to space and matter, also have a body that is localized in a particular place? Is the body of Jesus floating somewhere in outer space? I don't know. I don't know how Jesus appeared behind locked doors, either, and I don't know how he could ascend into the air, contrary to the law of gravity. Apparently the laws of physics don't apply to the body of Jesus Christ. It's still a body, but it doesn't have limitations that we think are part of having a body.

That still doesn't answer the question of where the body is right now, but that's really not the most important thing we need to worry about, is it? We need to know that Jesus is in heaven, but we do not need to know just *where* that is. It is more important for us to know about the *spiritual* body, the way in which Jesus is living on earth right now in the church. He is doing that by means of the Holy Spirit.

When Jesus ascended bodily into heaven, he was giving a visible sign that he continues to be human as well as divine. That gives us assurance that he is a high priest who can sympathize with our weaknesses, as it says in Hebrews 4:15. The visible rising into heaven makes this point: that Jesus didn't just go away — he continues his ministry in a different way, as our high priest, our intercessor, our mediator.

## Another reason

I see a second reason, too, for why Jesus went up in a visible and physical way. Jesus had told his disciples in John 16 that “It is *for your good* that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.” I am not sure why, but apparently Jesus had to go into heaven before the Day of Pentecost could happen. When the disciples saw Jesus rise, they were also left with the promise of the Holy Spirit.

So there was no sadness involved, at least the way that Acts tells the story. There was no sorrow that the good ole days with Jesus in the flesh are a thing of the past. There was no idealizing of the past. Rather, there was an anticipation of the future, a looking forward to even greater things, as Jesus had promised.

As we read forward in the book of Acts, we see an excited buzz of activity among the 120 disciples. They were meeting together and praying and



planning for work to do. They knew they had a job, and that is why they selected another apostle to replace Judas. They knew they had to be 12 people, representative of the new Israel that God was forming. They had a business meeting because they had business to do. Jesus had already given them the plan, to go into all the world as his witnesses. They just needed to wait in Jerusalem, as he had told them, until they were filled with power from on high, until they had received the promised Comforter.

So Jesus' ascension into heaven was a dramatic drum roll, a moment of suspense, as the disciples waited for the next stage of the rocket to ignite and blast them into greater and greater service. As Jesus had promised them, with the Holy Spirit they would do even greater things than Jesus had done. The visible ascension of Jesus into heaven was a promise of greater things to come.

Jesus called the Holy Spirit "another Comforter," and it so happens that Greek has two different words for "another." One means something similar, and the other means something different, and Jesus used the word for something similar. The Holy Spirit is similar to Jesus. The Spirit is a personal presence of God, not just a supernatural power. The Holy Spirit lives, and teaches, and speaks, and makes decisions. The Holy Spirit is a Person, a divine Person, part of the one God.

The Holy Spirit is so similar to Jesus that we can also say that Jesus lives within us, within the church. Jesus said, I will come and abide with the person who believes. I will live in them — and he does that in the Person of the Holy Spirit. So Jesus went away, but he did not leave us as orphans, on our own. He returns to us through the Holy Spirit living in us.

But he will also return in a physical and visible way, and I think this is the main reason he took the trouble to ascend in a physical and visible way. We are not to get the idea that, "Jesus is already here in the form of the Holy Spirit, so he has already returned and we shouldn't expect anything more than what we already have."

No, Jesus says here that his return is not a secret, invisible thing. It will be as clear as the rising of the sun. It will be visible to everyone, just as the ascension was visible to everyone on the Mount of Olives nearly 2000 years ago.

That gives us hope, that we *can* expect more than we have right now. Right now, we see a lot of weakness. We see weaknesses in ourselves, and weaknesses in our church, and weaknesses in Christianity as a whole. We certainly *hope* that things get better than this, and we have assurance from

Christ that he will indeed intervene in a dramatic way, to give a quantum leap to the kingdom of God. He is not going to leave things the way they are.

He will come back in the same way that the disciples saw him go into heaven. That means visibly, physically. It even means a detail that I wouldn't think all that important: the clouds. Just as he ascended into the clouds, the Bible says he will return with clouds. I don't know the purpose of the clouds — they seem to symbolize the angels that come with Christ, but it seems that there will be physical clouds, too.

But that is a minor point. The main point is that Christ will return in a dramatic way. There will be flashes of light, loud noises, phenomenal signs in the sky, and everyone will see it. There will be no mistake about it. No one will say, It happened over there. When it happens, it will happen everywhere, and there won't be any questions about it.

When it happens, Paul tells us in 1 Thessalonians, we will rise to meet Christ in the air. This is what is known as the rapture, and this won't be a secret rapture. It will be a very public rapture, as everyone will see Christ returning to earth. So we will participate with Jesus in his ascension, just as we join him in his crucifixion and in his burial and in his resurrection. We will also ascend into heaven, to meet the Lord as he returns, and then we shall also return to earth.

### **Does it make any difference?**

We don't know when this will be, so does it make any difference in our lives? It should. We find practical conclusions from this in 1 Corinthians and in 1 John. Let's look at 1 John 3: 2-3: "Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Everyone who has this hope in him *purifies himself*, just as he is pure."

Then John goes into a section that argues that believers obey God; we do not want a sinful life. There is a practical implication for our conviction that Jesus will return and we will be made like him. The result is that we try to get rid of sins. That doesn't mean that our efforts are going to save us, or that our failures are going to sink us, but it does mean that we try not to sin.

The second biblical conclusion to this is in 1 Corinthians 15, at the end of the resurrection chapter. After explaining about the return of Christ and our resurrection into immortality, Paul writes this in verse 58: "Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain."

## JESUS THE SAVIOR

So there is work for us to do, just as there was work for the first disciples. The commission that Jesus gave them is also given to us. We have a gospel to preach, a message to proclaim, and we have been given the Holy Spirit in power to be able to do it. So there's work to do.

We do not need to stand around gazing at the sky, waiting for Christ to return. For that matter, neither do we need to be gazing at the Scriptures for clues as to exactly when this might be, when Scripture tells us quite plainly that it isn't for us to know. Instead, we have the promise that he will return, and that should be enough for us. There is work to do, and we need to give ourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because we know that our labor in the Lord is not in vain.

*Michael Morrison*

## CELEBRATING JESUS' ASCENSION

Many Christians celebrate the Ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ. Some celebrate exactly 40 days after Easter; others celebrate the following Sunday.

The Ascension does not have quite the same prominence in the Christian calendar as the “big three”—Christmas, Good Friday and Easter. Perhaps this is because we underestimate the importance of this event. We may even think of it as anticlimactic, after the trauma of the Crucifixion and the triumph of the Resurrection.

This is a mistake. The resurrected Jesus did not just stick around for 40 days and then retreat to the safety of heaven, his work on earth now done. The ascended Jesus remains forever fully human, as well as fully divine and fully involved. This revelation helps us to understand the nature of his High Priesthood. Jesus is eternally our Intercessor. The nature of the atonement itself is not merely about what Jesus has done, but who he is and forever will be.

The Bible records the Ascension as the next step or event in Jesus' work. In Acts 1:9-12, we are told:

After he [Jesus] said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. “Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.” Then they returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day's walk from the city.

These verses make two basic points: that Jesus ascended into heaven and that he will return. But there is more to ponder. In Ephesians 2:6, which is one of my favorite verses, Paul adds a perspective not to be missed:

Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in our transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ *and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus.*

Here Paul explains the implication of the new life we have in union with Jesus Christ. He often used the phrase “in Christ” in his letters to help us understand our new identity. To be “in Christ” is to share not only in Jesus' death, burial and resurrection, but also in his ascension by which we, in some

sense, even now live with him in “the heavenly realms.” Being “in Christ” means that when God looks at us he does not see us alone in our sins. He sees us with and in Christ, for that is now who we are.

In the book *The Message of Ephesians*, the late John Stott comments on Ephesians 2:6:

What excites our amazement...is that now Paul is not writing about Christ *but about us*. He is affirming not that God quickened, raised and seated Christ, but that he quickened, raised and seated us with Christ.... Fundamental to New Testament Christianity is this concept of the union of God’s people with Christ (emphasis added).

Paul further emphasized this truth in Colossians 3:1-4:

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

After Jesus was resurrected, he was recognizable by those who knew him, but he was not quite the same. He was able to move in and out of the dimensions that we experience as human beings.

Being “in Christ” means that as Christians we live in two realms—the physical world of everyday reality and the “unseen world” of spiritual reality. We do not yet experience the full glory of our resurrection and ascension with Christ, but Paul tells us that it is no less real. The day is coming, he says, when Christ will appear, and in that day we will experience fully the reality of who we have become.

God did not merely forgive our sins and then leave us on our own to try to be righteous. God made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions. He then raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms. That is what being “in Christ” means. We are no longer who we are alone, but who we are in union with Christ, sharing in all he has accomplished for us, in our place and on our behalf. We belong to Jesus Christ!

This is the foundation of our faith and hope. God has made us one with Christ so that in him we can share in the relationship of love that he has with the Father and the Spirit. In Christ, the eternal Son of God, we are the Father’s beloved children in whom he is well pleased. Ascension Sunday is a good time to remind ourselves of this life-changing good news.

*Joseph Tkach*

## RESURRECTION AND ASCENSION: WHAT IT MEANS TO BE ‘IN CHRIST’

“In Christ.” It’s a phrase we’ve all heard. Albert Schweitzer called “being-in-Christ” the prime enigma of the apostle Paul’s teaching. Schweitzer was one of the most outstanding Germans of the 20th century—a theologian, musician and great missionary doctor, winner of the Nobel Peace prize in 1952. Schweitzer was not an orthodox Christian, but few people evoked the Christ-like spirit more powerfully.

In his 1931 book, *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*, Schweitzer made the point that other religions, prophets, soothsayers and philosophers seek after “God” in some form or another. But Schweitzer saw that for Paul, the Christian hope and daily living was more specifically and surely focused—it is new life in Christ. Paul uses the phrase “in Christ” numerous times in his letters. A good example is 2 Corinthians 5:17, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come.”

Schweitzer summarized Paul’s thoughts on this subject:

For him [Paul], believers are redeemed by entering already, through the union with Christ, by means of a mystical dying and rising again with him during the continuance of the natural world-era into a supernatural state of existence, this state being that which they are to possess in the kingdom of God. Through Christ we are removed out of this world and transferred into the state of existence proper to the kingdom of God, notwithstanding the fact that it has not yet appeared. (*The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*, page 380)

Schweitzer shows Paul to have kept the two aspects of Christ’s coming held together in an end-time tension—kingdom living now and full kingdom life yet to come. But how does all this work, and how does it fit in with the most important event in human history—the resurrection of Jesus Christ?

### **The heavenly realms already?**

For starters, the mystical theme is a vital key to understand such powerful passages as Romans 6:1-5:

Don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we

have been united with him like this in his death, we will also be united with him in his resurrection.... Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.

This is classic Paul. For him the resurrection was the hinge doctrine of Christianity. Not only were Christians symbolically buried with Christ in baptism, but they were symbolically raised with him as well. Only it goes a bit deeper than mere symbolism. There is a hard bite of ultimate reality to this exalted theologizing.

Note how Paul develops this theme further in Ephesians 2:6: “Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in trespasses—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus.”

How could this be? Paul is speaking somewhat metaphorically. He tells us that through God’s saving power demonstrated in Christ’s resurrection, we already enjoy participation through the Holy Spirit in the heavenly realms where God and Christ dwell. This is one of the benefits of life “in Christ” and his resurrection and ascension. Being “in Christ” makes all this possible.

### **The resurrection factor**

Once again we have to stand in awe of the multitudinous dynamics flowing from the resurrection of our Lord and Christ, knowing it was not just the greatest event in history but also a vital guiding principle for everything the believer can hope and expect here below. “In Christ” is a phrase that penetrates deeper than mere symbol or analogy. It links up with the other phrase, “seated in the heavenly realms.”

Note the rich expositions of Ephesians 2:6 from some expert commentators. Here is Max Turner in *The New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Version*:

To say we have been made alive with Christ appears to be shorthand for saying “we shall be resurrected with Christ to new-creation life,” and we may speak of that as though it were an already accomplished event because first, the decisive event of [Christ’s] resurrection lies in the past and secondly, we already begin to participate in aspects of that new-creation life in our present union with him. (page 1229)

We are united with Christ through the Holy Spirit. Note Francis Foulkes’ comments on Ephesians 2:6 in *The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*:



In Ephesians 1:3 the apostle has said that God has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. Now he says more specifically that our life has come to be there, enthroned with Christ.... Humanity, by virtue of Christ's conquest of sin and death and by his exaltation, is lifted "from the deepest hell to heaven itself" (Calvin). Citizenship is now in heaven (Philippians 3:20); and there, and not under the limits imposed by the world...true life is found. (page 82)

Notice John Stott's remarks on Ephesians 2:6 in his book, *The Message of Ephesians*:

What excites our amazement, however, is that now Paul is not writing about Christ but about us. He is affirming not that God quickened, raised and seated Christ, but that he quickened, raised and seated us with Christ.... Fundamental to New Testament Christianity is this concept of the union of God's people with Christ. [They possess] new solidarity as a people who are "in Christ." By virtue of their union with Christ they have actually shared in his resurrection, ascension, and session.

By "session" here Stott refers theologically to the present reign of Christ over all creation. Nor, says Stott, is this talk of our reigning with Christ a piece of "meaningless Christian mysticism." It is instead a meaningful piece of Christian mysticism that goes even beyond that. Stott adds:

In the "heavenly places," the unseen world of spiritual reality, in which the principalities and powers operate (3:10; 6:12) and in which Christ reigns supreme (1:20), there God has blessed his people in Christ (1:3), and there he has seated them with Christ.... It bears witness to a living experience, that Christ has given us on the one hand a new life and on the other a new victory. We were dead, but have been made spiritually alive and alert. We were in captivity, but have been enthroned.

Max Turner is right. There is more than mere symbolism here. What Paul is explaining is the implication of our new life in Christ.

### **The practical implications**

First, Christians are "as good as there," in reference to their salvation. Christians who are "in Christ" have been "covered" by Christ. They take on his death, burial, resurrection and ascension and can be said to be already in

some sense living with him in the heavenly places. This teaching was not meant to be an idealistic teaser. It was originally written to Christians living in dire straits in the corrupt cities they inhabited, cities without the civil and political rights we often take for granted. Death from the Roman sword was a grave possibility to Paul's readers.

Thus Paul lifts his reader's spirits with a further thinking out of the core doctrine and distinctive of the new faith—the resurrection of Christ. Being “in Christ” means that when God looks at us he does not see our sins. He sees Christ. There is no more encouraging teaching than that. This is reemphasized in Colossians 3:3: “For you died and life is now hidden with God in Christ.”

Secondly, being “in Christ” means Christians live in two realms—the physical world of everyday reality and what Stott calls the “unseen world” of spiritual reality. This has implications for the way we view this world. We are to live balanced lives. We bear primary allegiance to the kingdom of God and its values on the one hand but, on the other, are not to be so heavenly minded that we are no earthly good. It's a tightrope, and every Christian needs help from God to walk it securely.

Thirdly, being “in Christ” means we are trophies of God's grace. If God has done all this for us, if he has in some senses already inducted us into the heavenly realms, then that means we are to live as ambassadors for Christ. Francis Foulkes puts it this way:

The purpose of God for his church, as Paul came to understand it, reaches beyond itself, beyond the salvation, the enlightenment and the re-creation of individuals, beyond its unity and fellowship, beyond even its witness to the world. The church is to be the exhibition to the whole creation of the wisdom and love and grace of God in Christ.  
(page 82)

How true! Being “in Christ,” being given new life in Christ, having our sins hidden to God through Christ—all this means we are to exhibit the Christ-like life to the people we meet. We Christians may march to a different drummer, but we have a Christ-like concern for the people who share physical life with us.

God has displayed his resurrection power to us to be a daily demonstration of God's goodness, to show by our good works that he exists and that he cares mightily for every person on this globe. Christ's resurrection and ascension powerfully affects our worldview. The challenge before us is to live up to this high calling 24 hours a day.

JESUS THE SAVIOR

*Neil Earle*

## JESUS: OUR TRUE WORSHIP LEADER

In his first letter to his young protégé Timothy, the apostle Paul shared this profound truth: “There is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Timothy 2:5). Though the Christian church is blessed with many inspiring and skillful worship leaders, only Jesus, through the power of the Holy Spirit, leads us into the presence of God. He is our true worship leader.

Regardless of the particular form or style, behind all true worship is the mediating ministry of our high priest, Jesus Christ. According to the author of Hebrews, Jesus is “a great priest over the house of God” (Hebrews 10:21), “a minister [*leitourgos*] in the sanctuary and in the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, not man (Hebrews 8:2, NASB).

When we hear the word “worship,” we typically think of worship practices like praying, singing and receiving an offering. But worship is much larger than that. Properly defined, worship is a lifestyle that expresses grateful response to God for all he has done for us in Christ. Included is the way we treat others, based on the truth that we have been reconciled to God through Christ (2 Corinthians 5:18).

Paul reminds us that this life of worship is one of self-sacrifice: “I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship” (Romans 12:1). “Proper worship” translates *logikos latreia*, which is translated as “reasonable service” in the NKJV, “spiritual worship” in the NRSV, and “intelligent service” in the YLT. True worship includes all of these.

In the Old Testament, Israel’s worship was led by the high priest, who served as the representative of all Israel, standing in solidarity with the people. In his full humanity, Jesus stands in solidarity not only with Israel, but with all humanity. In his full divinity, Jesus reconciles humanity to God. Jesus’ once-for-all, self-offering sacrifice brought complete redemption and forgiveness. In referring to Jesus as priest “in the order of Melchizedek,” the author of Hebrews was explaining a special aspect of Jesus’ role as our high priest in representing us to the Father and the Father to us. Unlike Melchizedek, however, Jesus’ priesthood is eternal.

The God-man Jesus, who has rightly been referred to as “the perfect fusion of undiminished deity and complete humanity,” is both the recipient and the giver of worship. By always being in communion with the Father in prayer and worship, Jesus modeled for us throughout his earthly ministry

what it means to be in relationship with the Father and the Spirit. Whereas Israel's high priest temporarily carried the names of Israel's 12 tribes on his breastplate, Jesus, our high priest, forever bears the names of all humans within his own representative humanity. Our Lord affirms this through the prophet Isaiah: "I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands" (Isaiah 49:16, NRSV).

As our high priest, Jesus reveals the Father to us. In his high priestly prayer to the Father, he declared, "I made your name known to them, and I will make it known" (John 17:26, NRSV). As the one mediator of a new covenant, Jesus shows God to be a Father who desires his children's presence (Hebrews 9:15; 12:24). This gives us cause for worship, reminding us that Jesus is both the center and mediator of that worship. In Jesus, humanity meets God in person!

In *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, James B. Torrance notes that our worship is Unitarian when it's about techniques of experiencing God on our own. But our worship is Trinitarian when it's about Jesus, our elder brother and great high priest, who draws us into the eternal communion of love that characterizes God's life as loving Father, beloved Son and Holy Spirit. As our true worship leader, Jesus goes to the Father in our name and simultaneously comes to us in the Father's name.

The author of Hebrews makes the same point in this way: "Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters. He says, 'I will declare your name to my brothers and sisters; in the assembly I will sing your praises'" (Hebrews 2:11-12). As we worship in spirit and in truth, we join our voices with that of Jesus in praise to God. Jesus stands in our midst as one of us, taking us into God's presence. And he stands with the Father, bringing God into our presence in perfect unity and love for all eternity.

*Joseph Tkach*

## STAY FOCUSED ON JESUS

Jesus must remain our focus throughout the year. He alone is the final and ultimate revelation of who God is (Hebrews 1:3) and he alone is our mediator: “For there is one God, there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human” (1 Timothy 2:5 NRSV).

Jesus’ two natures—divine and human—are inseparably united in what theologians call the *hypostatic union*. And Jesus’ mission shows just how much God is *with* us and *for* us. Indeed, we can’t overstate the importance of Christ’s *vicarious* work—his work in our place, on our behalf. The truth that the atonement is accomplished by, in and through the incarnate Son of God, is truth that sets us free. Knowing who Jesus is and what he has done for us helps us grow in understanding the reconciliation we have with God and each other. In Christ, through the Holy Spirit, we are set free to love. Allow me to explain some related concepts:

### Vicarious

In *A Passion for Christ, the Vision that Ignites Ministry* (a book Gary Deddo and I highly recommend), brothers Thomas, James and David Torrance define the word *vicarious* as “speaking and acting in place of another, on that other’s behalf.” They note that this is exactly what Jesus did for us in his life, death, resurrection and ascension. To speak of Jesus’ vicarious humanity is to indicate that all Christ did in his humanity was done in our place and on our behalf.

Recently, I’ve written about Jesus being baptized for us, going through the wilderness and being tempted for us, dying and entering into darkness for us, and rising from death into life in order to take us with him in the ascension to our Father. In all this work for our salvation, Jesus did not play a merely instrumental role (like a tool used to build something). Rather, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit planned together for Jesus to fulfill in his own Person and work the pivotal role in our salvation. The atonement, in its entirety, is accomplished in, with and through Jesus: “In him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28).

### Objectification

God *objectified* himself in Christ without becoming impersonal. When the Son of God became human, he became an *object* we can see and touch and worship. He was God to man. And when Jesus assumed our humanity, he also became the appropriate response from man to God as led by the Holy

Spirit. Note T. F. Torrance's comment in his book, *God and Rationality*:

[Jesus Christ] is in Himself not only God objectifying Himself for man but man adapted and conformed to that objectification, not only the complete revelation of God to man but the appropriate correspondence on the part of man to that revelation, not only the Word of God to man but man obediently hearing and answering that Word. In short, Jesus Christ is Himself both the Word of God as spoken by God to man and that same Word as heard and received by man, Himself both the Truth of God given to man and that very Truth understood and actualized in man. He is that divine and human Truth in His one Person. In his incarnate constitution as God and man joined in reconciling union, Jesus Christ is both the objective revelation of God and the appropriate response and conformation of man to divine revelation. He is not only the Truth (cf. John 14:6) spoken from the highest, he is also the perfect response to that Truth, heard and actualized from within the ontological depths of the fallen humanity he assumed in the incarnation.

## Mediation

I like to say that in the Incarnation of Jesus, we have “double fact.” Others call this the “twofold, inseparable movement of mediation.” First, as Torrance likes to phrase it, “Jesus is God’s language to humanity.” But it doesn’t stop there. Second, Jesus is humanity’s true and faithful response to God. Jesus Christ is our true word and gives true speech for humanity to God. In other words, Jesus Christ mediates the things of God to humanity and simultaneously mediates the things of humanity to God.

Let me illustrate this from God’s relationship with Israel, beginning with Abraham. The eternal Son of God, who is one with the God revealed in the Old Testament, later reveals himself, the Father and the Spirit when he becomes incarnate as the person Jesus Christ. Lovingly and patiently, God worked in covenant relationship with Israel as his chosen people. We see this with Abraham when God provided a sacrifice in place of Isaac, Abraham’s beloved son. In this event there not only was instruction against child sacrifice, it served as the prototype of what the Son of God would do himself following the Incarnation.

Because God knew that Israel would not (indeed could not) fulfill their side of the covenant to live as holy, obedient people, God gave his people under the old covenant a liturgy different than that of the pagans. While Israel

and the pagans all celebrated spring and fall harvest festivals, Israel was given divinely prescribed patterns for worship that signified the fact that only God can forgive sin, remove guilt and reconcile people to himself. All of Israel's sacrifices and ordinances, as well as the priesthood itself, were *vicarious* ways of covenant response to God.

Because of God's faithfulness and love for Israel, he gave them an experiential way to worship. However, as the Old Testament tells us, Israel repeatedly abandoned worship as given to them by God. In doing so, they failed the mediating priestly mission that they had been given on behalf of all nations. In contrast, Jesus, through his life, death, resurrection and ascension, was the perfect, unfailing response to God that Israel was unable to provide.

Jesus not only took on Israel's affliction of failure, he assumed all of humanity's brokenness and made it his own in order to heal it. In this we see Jesus' twofold ministry, the "double fact" I mentioned above. Jesus mediates and intercedes from God to humanity and from humanity back to God. The old covenant highlights this truth in a number of ways: "I shall be your God and you shall be my people," "I am holy, be you holy," and "I will be your Father and you will be my son." These declarations concerning Israel are fulfilled perfectly in Jesus who is both the covenant-making God and the true, singular, faithful Israel. Note this related comment from T.F. Torrance in one of his papers:

It is the whole incarnate life of Christ vicariously and triumphantly lived out from his birth to his crucifixion and resurrection in perfect obedience to the Father within the ontological depths of his oneness with us in our actual fallen existence, that redeems and saves us and converts our disobedient alienated sonship back to filial union with the Father. That is the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ ("The Atonement, The Singularity of Christ and the Finality of the Cross: The Atonement and the Moral Order," 1993).

Jesus is fully God and fully human—God with us and God for us. He is the Word spoken to humanity and the Word heard and received by humanity. He is God's relationship to us—through him we are in relationship with God. He is the God others could see and hear and worship and he is our worshipful response to God. Jesus is our atonement. He is our mediator. He is our focus—not just during Easter season but every day of the year. It is in Jesus that we live and move and have our being.

*Joseph Tkach*



## JESUS THE SAVIOR

## JESUS' BENEDICTION

Often when travelling, I'm asked to speak to churches, conferences and board meetings. Sometimes I'm asked to give the closing benediction. When doing so, I often use the blessing Aaron proclaimed over the children of Israel in the wilderness (the year after their flight from Egypt, long before entering the Promised Land). On that occasion, God was instructing Israel concerning administration of the Law. The people were restless and rather passive (after all, they had been slaves all their lives!). Likely, they were wondering: "God delivered us out of Egypt through the Red Sea, and gave us his Law. But here we are, still wandering in the wilderness. What now?" God did not reply with details of his plan for them. Instead, he encouraged them to look to him in faith:

The Lord said to Moses, "Tell Aaron and his sons, 'This is how you are to bless the Israelites. Say to them: 'The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace.'" (Numbers 6:22-26)

I envision Aaron standing before God's beloved children, arms outstretched, proclaiming this benediction. What an honor it must have been to pronounce the Lord's blessing upon his beloved. As you'll recall, Aaron was the first high priest from the tribe of Levi:

Aaron was set apart, he and his descendants forever, to consecrate the most holy things, to offer sacrifices before the Lord, to minister before him and to pronounce blessings in his name forever. (1 Chronicles 23:13)

Pronouncing a blessing was a profound act of worship—representing God to his people in order to encourage them—in this case during the difficult sojourn between Egypt and the Promised Land. This priestly benediction invoked God's name and blessing, so that his people might live with assurance of the Lord's mercy and provision.

Though this benediction was first spoken over a people weary and frustrated with wilderness wandering, I see an application for us today. There are times when we're unsure about the future, feeling like we're wandering in a wilderness of our own. At such times we need words of encouragement to remind us that God has blessed us and will continue to keep us. We need to remember that God does make his face shine on us, is gracious to us, and

gives us peace. Above all, we need to remember that because he loves us, God has given us his Son, Jesus Christ—the great and ultimate high priest who, himself, fulfills the Aaronic blessing.

Holy Week (also called Passion Week) begins in a week and a half with Palm Sunday (Jesus' triumphant entrance into Jerusalem), followed by Maundy Thursday (commemorating the Last Supper), Good Friday (where God's goodness toward us was manifested in the greatest sacrifice of all) and Holy Saturday (when Jesus lay in the tomb). Then comes the glorious eighth day—Easter Sunday, which celebrates the resurrection of our great high priest, Jesus, the Son of God (Hebrews 4:14). This season of the year powerfully reminds us that we have been and continually are blessed “in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ” (Ephesians 1:3).

Yes, we all face times of uncertainty. But we rest in peace knowing how greatly God has blessed us in Christ. Like a mighty river whose waters flow from its source out to far lands, God's name moves before the world. Though we don't see the full extent of this movement, we stand in awe at what we do see. Truly God has and is blessing us, and Passion Week is a powerful reminder.

Though the people of Israel heard Aaron's priestly benediction and, no doubt, were encouraged, they soon forgot God's promises. Part of the reason had to do with the limitations, even failings, of the human priesthood. Even the best and most faithful of Israel's priests died. But God had something (someone!) better in mind. The book of Hebrews reminds us that Jesus, who lives forever, is our *permanent* high priest:

Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them. Such a high priest truly meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. (Hebrews 7:25-26)

The image of Aaron stretching out his arms over Israel to impart a blessing points us to an even greater high priest, Jesus Christ. The benediction that Jesus pronounces over God's people far exceeds Aaron's blessing (though it extends, intensifies and personalizes it):

I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, “Know the Lord,” because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more. (Hebrews 8:10-12)

Jesus pronounces a benediction of forgiveness that reconciles us to God, healing our broken relationship with him. It's a benediction that transforms us—extending deep into our hearts and minds. It draws us up into deepest fellowship and communion with God. Through the Son of God, our brother, we know God as our Father. And by his Spirit we become his beloved children.

As I reflect on Passion Week, there is another reason this benediction has great significance for us. As Jesus was dying on the cross, his arms were outstretched. His precious life, poured out as a sacrifice for us, was a benediction—a forever blessing on the world. Hanging on the cross, Jesus asked the Father to forgive us in the midst of our sin, then he died that we might live.

Following his resurrection, and just before his ascension, Jesus gave another benediction:

When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. (Luke 24:50-52)

In essence, Jesus was saying to his disciples, both then and now, “I myself bless you and keep you, I make my face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; I lift up my countenance upon you and I give you my peace.”

May we continue to live under the benediction of our Lord and Savior, no matter what uncertainties we may be facing.

*Joseph Tkach*

## THE COMING OF THE LORD

What do you think would be the biggest event that could occur on the world scene? Another world war? The discovery of a cure for some dread disease? World peace, once and for all? Contact with some extraterrestrial intelligence?

For millions of Christians, the answer to this question is simple: The biggest event that could ever occur is the second coming of Jesus Christ.

### **The Bible's central message**

The whole story of the Bible centers on the coming of Jesus Christ as Savior and King.

In the Garden of Eden, our first parents, by sinning, fractured their relationship with God. But God foretold the coming of a Redeemer who would repair that spiritual break. To the serpent who tempted Adam and Eve to sin, God said, "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 3:15).

This is the Bible's earliest prophecy of a Savior who would smash the power that sin and death hold over humans ("he will crush your head"). How? By the sacrificial death of the Savior ("you will strike his heel"). Jesus accomplished this at his first coming. John the Baptist recognized him as "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29).

The Bible reveals the central importance of God becoming flesh at the first coming of Jesus Christ. The Bible also reveals that Jesus is coming now, in the lives of believers. The Bible also states that he will come again, visibly and in power. Jesus Christ actually comes in three ways:

### **Jesus has already come**

We humans need God's redemption — his rescue — because Adam and Eve sinned, bringing death on the world. Jesus accomplished that redemption by dying in our place. "God was pleased," wrote Paul in Colossians 1:19-20, "to have all his fullness dwell in him [Jesus Christ], and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross." Jesus healed the breach that first occurred in Eden. Through his sacrifice, the human family is reconciled to God.

Old Testament prophecy pointed to the kingdom of God in the future. But the New Testament opens with Jesus "proclaiming the good news of

God. “The time has come.... The kingdom of God is near,” he said (Mark 1:14-15). Jesus, the King of the kingdom, was walking among humans! Jesus offered “for all time one sacrifice for sins” (Hebrews 10:12). We should never underestimate the importance of Jesus’ incarnation, life and work two millennia ago.

Jesus came. Also —

### **Jesus is coming now**

There is good news for those who believe in Christ: “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world.... But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions” (Ephesians 2:1-2, 4-5).

God has raised us with Christ, spiritually, now! Through his grace, “God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus” (verses 6-7). This passage describes our present condition as followers of Jesus Christ.

God “has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade” (1 Peter 1:3-4). Jesus lives in us now (Galatians 2:20). We have been born again, spiritually, and can see the kingdom of God (John 3:3).

Asked when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied: “The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say ‘Here it is,’ or ‘There it is,’ because the kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17:20-21). Jesus Christ brought the kingdom in his person. Jesus lives within Christians.

In the same way, as he now lives in us, he inaugurates the kingdom of God. Jesus’ coming to live in us also anticipates the ultimate revelation of the kingdom on earth at Jesus’ second coming.

Why does Jesus live in us now? Notice: “It is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Ephesians 2:8-10). God has saved us by grace, through no effort of our own. But though works cannot earn us salvation, Jesus lives in us so that we may now do good works and thereby glorify God.

Jesus came. He is coming. And —

## Jesus will come again

After Jesus' resurrection, as his disciples watched him ascend to heaven, two angels asked: "Why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11). Yes, Jesus is coming again.

At his first coming, Jesus left some messianic predictions unfulfilled. This was one reason his own people, the Jews, rejected him. They saw the Messiah as a national hero who would free them from Roman domination.

But the Messiah was to come, first, to die for all humanity. Only later would Jesus Christ return as a conquering king, and then not just to exalt Israel, but to claim all earth's kingdoms as his own. "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever" (Revelation 11:15).

"I am going...to prepare a place for you," Jesus told his disciples. "And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am" (John 14:23).

Later, the apostle Paul told the church how "the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God" (1 Thessalonians 4:16). At Christ's return, he will raise to immortality the righteous dead and change to immortality the faithful who are still alive, and they will all meet him in the air (verses 16-17; 1 Corinthians 15:51-54).

## But when?

Throughout the centuries, speculation about the second coming has caused uncounted arguments — and untold disappointment when various predictions failed. Overemphasizing the when of Jesus' return can divert our minds from the central focus of the gospel — Jesus' saving work for all humans, accomplished in his life, death, resurrection and continuing work as our heavenly High Priest.

We can become so engrossed in prophetic speculation that we fail to fulfill the rightful role of Christians as lights to the world, exemplifying the loving, merciful, Christ-like way of life and glorifying God by serving our fellow humans.

"When anyone's interest in the Scriptural announcements of the Last Things and the second advent degenerates into a subtle drawing up of precisely worked-out future events, then he has strayed a long way from the

content and spirit of Jesus' prophetic utterances," says *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* on Luke, page 544.

## **Our focus?**

If knowing when Christ will return is not possible (and therefore, by comparison to what the Bible *does* tell us, unimportant), then where should we focus our energies as Christians? Our focus should be on being ready for Jesus' second coming *whenever it occurs!*

"You also must be ready," Jesus said, "because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him" (Matthew 24:44). "He who stands firm to the end will be saved" (Matthew 10:22). We need to be ready for him to come into our life right now, and to direct our life right now.

## **The Bible's focal point**

The whole Bible revolves around the coming of Jesus Christ. As Christians, our lives should revolve around his coming, too.

Jesus came. He is coming through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit now. Jesus Christ will come again. Jesus will return in all glory to "transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body" (Philippians 3:21). Then, "the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God" (Romans 8:21).

Yes, I am coming soon, says our Savior. As Christians, believers in and disciples of Jesus Christ, we all can reply in unison: "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus" (Revelation 22:20).

*Norman Shoaf*



## NO ONE KNOWS WHEN CHRIST WILL RETURN

The Bible nowhere tells us, directly or indirectly, when Jesus Christ will return. *When Jesus returns is not as important as whether we are ready when he does.* Yet people for nearly 2,000 years have constructed elaborate prophetic outlines that can distract people away from the gospel and crush believers' faith.

### **The early Christians' view**

The earliest Christians apparently expected Jesus to return almost immediately. At his ascension to heaven, his disciples asked, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). They grossly underestimated how much time would pass before Jesus' return.

As the disciples stood gazing upward, two angels asked: "Men of Galilee...why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven" (verse 11).

Jesus' return was sure. The disciples didn't need to worry about when it would occur. God wanted them to stop gazing into the sky and get on with preaching the gospel.

The disciples' early epistles show the belief most of them apparently carried to their graves: that Jesus' return would be soon. For instance, Paul wrote of how "we who are still alive" would be caught up together with the resurrected saints at Jesus' coming (1 Thessalonians 4:15-17). Paul later had to soften this view and correct Christians who, thinking time was short, had become idle busybodies (2 Thessalonians 2:1-2; 3:11).

The book of Revelation laid out a grand drama stretching till the end of time. This book included the thought that Jesus' return might be more remote than previously thought. The saints were to live and rule with Christ for 1,000 years (Revelation 20:4). Grasping the Bible's statement that a day is as 1,000 years (2 Peter 3:8), some saw an analogy between history and the seven days of creation. They concluded that the present age would run 6,000 years before a 1,000-year rest under Christ.

Prompted as well by Zoroastrian (Mandean) cosmology and the emphasis on the Psalmist's thousand-year days in 2 Peter 3:8, Christian theologians of the 2nd century A.D. transformed world history into a world week, and the seventh day thereof into the world sabbath, a

jubilee of sweetness, peace, and earthly delight after six thousand-year days of human labor. (*Century's End*, by Hillel Schwartz, New York: Doubleday, 1990, page 10)

Christians came to believe that Jesus would return in the distant future.

## **Looking for a kingdom**

For some time, Christians, including Irenaeus (circa 115-200) and Justin Martyr (circa 100-165), continued to look for Christ to set up a literal kingdom of God on earth. In the third century, Origen (185-254) asserted that the kingdom existed not in time or space but in believers' souls. "For a collective, millenarian eschatology Origen substituted an eschatology of the individual soul" (*The Pursuit of the Millennium*, by Norman Cohn, New York: Oxford University Press, 1970, page 29).

By the fifth century, Christianity was the Roman Empire's official religion, and the church could no longer be seen as a "little flock" at odds with the world. Now Augustine (354-430) wrote *The City of God*, treating the book of Revelation as a spiritual allegory and saying the Millennium was realized in the church. The church rejected the doctrine of a literal Millennium. But believers went on embracing ideas like the "last days," the Antichrist and the warrior Christ who would physically return to conquer the world.

## **Warrior Christ vs. Antichrist**

Believers fearfully watched for the evil Antichrist, with whom the returning Christ would war.

People were always on the watch for the "signs" which, according to the prophetic tradition, were to herald and accompany the final "time of troubles"; and since the "signs" included bad rulers, civil discord, war, drought, famine, plague, comets, sudden deaths of prominent persons and an increase in general sinfulness, there was never any difficulty about finding them. Invasion or the threat of invasion by Huns, Magyars, Mongols, Saracens or Turks always stirred memories of those hordes of Antichrist.... Above all, any ruler who could be regarded as a tyrant was apt to take on the features of Antichrist. (Cohn, page 35)

Popes were often associated with the Antichrist. So were the Muslims, who controlled the Holy Land and upon whom Europe's Crusaders descended in the 11th, 12th and 13th centuries. So were the Jews.

As the year 1000 approached, various teachers predicted that the world

was about to end and that Jesus Christ would appear. An army of pilgrims sold their belongings and trekked to Jerusalem to await Christ. Terror filled them at every storm, comet and other event of nature. They fell to their knees at every crack of thunder, expecting the earth to open and give up its dead. Every meteor over Jerusalem brought Christians into the streets to cry and pray.

### **Dates that failed**

More concerned with the date of Jesus' return than with how Jesus commanded his followers to live until he came, prognosticators went on misreading prophecy:

- During the great plague of Europe (1348-1352), prophets said the end was at hand and that Christ would appear within 10 years.
- The Roman Catholic Church has often figured in end-time scenarios. For example, John Wycliffe, a 14th-century reformer, said the Catholic mass was Daniel's abomination of desolation.
- Martin Luther (1483-1546) believed the church's final conflict with evil would pit it against the Turks and the pope.
- John Knox, in 1547, saw the pope in Daniel 7:24-25.
- In 1806, at Leeds, a hen laid eggs bearing the words, "Christ is coming." Many visited the spot and "got religion." Then someone discovered that the ink-inscribed eggs had been forced up into the chicken's body.
- John Wesley said the end would come in 1836. Others suggested 1830 and 1847.
- Based on the text of Daniel 8:14, a New England farmer named William Miller expected the world to end in 1843 or 1844. His followers pinpointed Oct. 22, 1844.
- Unwilling to accept the Great Disappointment that resulted when Oct. 22 passed without Christ's return, some explained that Christ began to cleanse the "heavenly sanctuary" on that date. They thus gave birth to the modern Adventist movement.
- Charles Taze Russell, whose public Bible studies formed the foundation of the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, said Christ had returned to earth in 1874 and would begin his visible reign in 1914. Jehovah's Witness literature later spoke of "the Creator's promise of a peaceful and secure new world before the generation that saw the events of 1914 passes away."

- Contemporary failed speculations include those of Edgar C. Whisenant, who in 1988 listed 88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Be in 1988 (when Christ failed to return, he predicted the rapture for 1989); a book produced in Georgia that placed the rapture on Oct. 8, 1992, at 12:55 p.m. Eastern Daylight time; and a Korean prophet's assertion that the rapture was set for midnight, Oct. 20 or 28, 1992. (In South Korea, 20,000 Christians left school or quit jobs to await the end.)

## Differing views of the Millennium

For nearly two centuries, many fundamentalist and evangelical Christians have embraced a school of prophetic interpretation known as *premillennial dispensationalism*, or simply *dispensationalism*. Adherents of dispensationalism teach that Bible prophecy pinpoints the route world events will march toward the return of Christ. His return will inaugurate his millennial rule on earth. Thus believers mine the apocalyptic significance of Daniel, Revelation and other Bible prophecies.

Early Christians were premillennialists. But by the time of Augustine (354-430), the church concluded that the millennial period (which may or may not equal exactly 1,000 years) was not totally in the future. Jesus had already bound Satan, said the new orthodoxy, and the church already existed in an age of grace. Most Christians held this view, known as amillennialism, until after the Reformation. It is still the most common view.

During the 17th century, the Puritans asserted that the New Testament church fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies about Israel. The promises of Israelite (church) prosperity were realized in the Reformation. They looked for a worldwide revival of faith before Jesus returned. Many Protestants held to this postmillennialism for two more centuries.

Around the turn of the 19th century, some Christians saw the political and social chaos of the period as a signal that Christ would return soon. The Old Testament prophecies, many decided, literally referred to Israel and not the church. Thus some began to expect the Jews to return to Judea before Jesus' second coming.

Onto the scene stepped one of the most important propagators of dispensationalism: John Nelson Darby. Darby was born in London in 1800. Darby, an Anglican clergyman, became disturbed with apathy among Christians. Scholarship had begun to question the Bible and Christian beliefs. By 1828, Darby came to believe that the whole church was apostate.

Darby believed that God has dealt with humanity through a series of

different dispensations, or ages. He read Revelation not as an overview of church history, but as a prediction of events to occur at the end time.

Rejecting the optimism of both amillennialism and postmillennialism, he taught that the final cycle of prophetic events would begin with a secret, pretribulation rapture of believers. After this, the world would experience the Great Tribulation for seven years, culminating in the return of Christ.

In reckoning prophecy, Darby rejected the day-for-a-year idea. He taught that when the Bible said a day, it meant a day. So when Daniel wrote of the beast's 1,260-day rule, he meant a literal three and a half years. Only after Christ's return would the Millennium unfold. Satan's final rebellion, the resurrection of the dead and the final judgment would follow.

William Miller's work sank because he set dates and belabored one or two scriptures to the exclusion of others. Darby avoided these traps. Instead, he appealed to "the signs of the times" to insist that the end was near, without setting dates. He incorporated all the Bible prophecies into a large, complex system, reinforced with numerous proof-texts. Then he promoted his teachings through preaching and writing.

Darby's teachings attracted thousands of British and U.S. Bible students who feared theological "liberalism" and who took special interest in Bible prophecy, particularly end-time scenarios.

The 20th century's towering figure in premillennialism was Cyrus Scofield. Convinced of Darby's dispensational scheme, Scofield published his *Scofield Reference Bible* in 1909. It combined the biblical text with detailed notes that clearly and confidently explained the dispensational view. Printing the notes on the same page with the biblical text made the notes seem to take on the same authority as the biblical text.

Scofield's teachings included a "gap" between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2, the identification of the "Gog" of Ezekiel 38 with Russia, predictions about the Jews' return to Judea and the teaching that true Christians would vanish at the rapture while deceived, "professed Christians" would follow the Antichrist into the Great Tribulation.

Scofield's Bible was revised in 1917, just when the British mandate over the Holy Land fueled the premillennialist belief that the Jews would return to their promised land. *The Scofield Reference Bible* went on to sell millions of copies throughout the world. Dispensationalism, with its emphasis on "literal" Bible interpretation and detailed end-time prophetic scenarios, remains the focus of millions of Christian evangelicals to this day.

## Primary point of prophecy

Today's chaotic world almost begs us to look for cosmic significance in its machinations. We yearn for Jesus to come and straighten out the mess. But prophetic speculation is still ill-advised in any year.

Prophetic misfires destroy faith. Timothy P. Weber wrote:

Many loyalists will be bothered to see how many times their teachers' minds have changed and how easily they have substituted one sure fulfillment for another... Many of the popular Bible teachers have missed the mark on numerous predictions, especially on the date for Christ's return. Yet they rarely explain or apologize; they just move along with newer, updated editions or different projections. ("If the Rapture Occurs, This Magazine Will Be Blank," *Christianity Today*, Jan. 11, 1993, pages 60ff.)

### "The Lord Is at Hand"

"If Christians of the first generation assumed that theirs was the generation that would witness the second coming, those of later generations have learned to be more cautious.... Each Christian generation...should live as though it might be the last one, while bearing in mind that Christians in the remote future may look back on the first 2000 years AD as the early period of church history. The second coming of Christ remains the hope of his people, as it is also the hope of the world (without the world's necessarily being aware of this); but its timing is not of the essence of the hope.

If one asks what, in that case, is to be made of the NT [New Testament] assurance that the Lord is at hand, an answer may be found in a sermon entitled "Waiting for Christ" by the 19th-century English preacher John Henry Newman. He pointed out that, before Christ's first coming, the course of time ran straight toward that event, but that since then the course of time runs alongside his second coming, on its brink. If it ran straight toward it, it would immediately run into it; but as it is, the great event is always at hand throughout the present era. The course of time will one day merge in the presence or parousia of Christ. If reckoned in terms of the succession of years, final salvation is nearer now than when Christians first believed; but personally, Christ is not nearer now than he was in NT times, and he is as near now as he will be when he returns.

There are times when the partition between his presence now and

his coming parousia becomes paper thin; one day it will disappear completely and this mortal life will be swallowed up in the eternal order....

For each believer the partition disappears in the moment of death; at the last advent it will disappear on a universal scale. (“Second Coming of Christ,” *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*).

## **Glossary**

**Millennialism.** The belief in a period of the rule of Christ on earth. The most literal view understands this time as being 1,000 years.

**Amillennialism.** The belief that Christ is already ruling on the earth.

**Premillennialism.** The belief that Christ will return before his earthly reign.

**Postmillennialism.** The belief that Christ will return after an earthly reign that does not require his physical presence.

*Norman Shoaf*

## HERE HE COMES, READY OR NOT

Don't you wish that Jesus would return? That any day now all the wretchedness and wickedness that we see continually around us would end and that God would usher in a time when "the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (Isaiah 11:9)?

The New Testament authors lived in expectation of the Second Coming that would deliver them "from the present evil age" (Galatians 1:4). They exhorted Christians to prepare themselves spiritually and to be morally alert, knowing very well that "the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night" (1 Thessalonians 5:2), unexpectedly, without warning beforehand.

When Jesus lived, just like today, people were anxious to know when the end would come so they could get ready for it. Interestingly, Jesus' reply implied that they should stop speculating and always be ready anyway without being prompted by prior indicators.

### Jesus answers the disciples

Look closely at the accounts in Matthew 24 and Luke 21 where Jesus explains to the disciples that the temple would be destroyed (this happened in A.D. 70). What was Jesus really saying? Was he telling us to look for the signs of the times?

"Tell us...what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age" (Matthew 24:3) the disciples asked Jesus privately. Believers have had the same question ever since. How will we know more or less the hour when our Master comes? We feel a need to know. But Jesus points us to a different need — the need to be ready regardless of history's times and seasons.

The immediate answer Jesus gave conjures up (in the biblically literate mind) images of the figurative, frightening four horsemen of the Apocalypse (see Revelation 6:1-8) that have ignited the imagination of prophetic and fantasy writers for centuries. False religion, war, famine, deadly disease — sounds like our age right here and now? Yes, it does, and it was meant to sound that way. In fact, it was meant to sound like every age.

Some — many if you think about it — have said that what Jesus was saying is that when we see an intensifying of war, famine, and these other things, it means the end is near.

Stimulated by this idea of things getting really bad before Christ returns, fundamentalists have tried, in their zeal for truth, to flesh out what they view as end-time references in prophetic scriptures, especially in the book of Revelation. But what was Jesus saying? He does not discuss the idea of



intensification. He seems, rather, to be discussing the constant condition of humankind.

There has been – and always will be until he comes again – many deceivers who come in Christ’s name, as well as “wars and rumors of wars...famines and earthquakes in various places” (Matthew 24:5-7). Has there been, since Christ came, a generation spared these things? These prophetic words of our Lord find fulfillment in the human record of every age of history.

Yet today, as in the past, people look at world events and some, even some leading Christian opinion makers, claim prophecy is unfolding and the end is near.

Of course, all of us want the end to be near, and we desire our Savior’s return. However, Jesus himself said, in suggesting our response to what some call the signs of the times: “See to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come” (verse 6).

### **Don’t be afraid – be ready**

Regrettably, sensational end-time scenario preaching in public campaigns or through television, radio and magazines is often used in the cause of evangelism to frighten people into believing in Jesus Christ. Shape up or burn up is an option given. If you don’t give your life to Jesus, you will be a victim in the violence to come.

We forget how Jesus himself evangelized — how he brought the good news. He evangelized above all through kindness and mercy — look at the examples in the Gospels and see for yourself.

Paul explains it clearly when he says: “Do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God’s kindness leads you toward repentance?” (Romans 2:4). It is God’s goodness expressed to others through us that brings people to Jesus. We can be sobered by the concept of divine judgment, but we should not evangelize through threats of apocalyptic retribution.

Jesus pointed to the need to make sure we are spiritually ready for his return whenever it will be. That was his emphasis. That is more important than trying to establish something beyond the scope of human knowledge — “no one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (verse 36). Being better informed than the angels instead of being better prepared for his coming is where some people focus. Jesus concentrated on our being prepared.

In reinforcing this point to his disciples Jesus used various illustrations and analogies. For example, “as it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man” (verse 37). At the time of Noah there were no

signs of imminent disaster. No discussion of wars and rumors of wars and famine and disease. No threatening clouds on the horizon, just sudden rain.

Relatively peaceful prosperity and moral depravity appeared to have gone hand-in-hand. They “knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man” (Matthew 24:39).

What should we learn from the reference to Noah? To look at the weather patterns and watch for the telltale signs that may inform us of a date that the angels are ignorant of? No, it rather reminds us to “be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you unexpectedly like a trap” (Luke 21:34).

Jesus also presented the parable of the 10 virgins to hammer this idea home. I understand this more since I lived in Africa for several years. Once I was to perform a wedding at noon, and even by 3 p.m. the bride had not arrived — she had delayed her coming! Some of the attendants fell asleep while waiting. At one point I noticed the bridegroom himself beginning to nod off.

What was the message of Jesus’ story? Lest you fall asleep, have your lamps filled with oil so that your light can shine. Use the Holy Spirit. Be generous, welcome the stranger, visit the sick, be Jesus in your community (Matthew 25:31-46). If we do so, that is like giving people food in due season, when they need it. “It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns” (Matthew 24:46).

We know that Christ lives in us (Galatians 2:20), that his kingdom has begun in us and in his church, that there is a gospel work to be done now wherever we live, and that “in this hope we are saved” (Romans 8:24) – in the hope of the return of our Lord.

“The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise” (2 Peter 3:9). “So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him” (2 Peter 3:14).

*James Henderson*

## ADVENT: JESUS YESTERDAY, TODAY AND FOREVER

Sometimes we are so excited about celebrating the Incarnation of the Son of God at Christmas that we neglect Advent, the season that begins the annual Christian worship calendar. Advent spanning the four Sundays preceding Christmas. The word “advent” is from *adventus* (Latin), meaning “coming” or “arrival.” Advent celebrates Jesus’ three “comings” (typically in reverse order): future (Jesus’ return), present (in the Spirit) and past (Jesus’ incarnation/birth).

Our understanding of Advent is enriched when we note how these three comings interrelate. The author of Hebrews used this phrase: “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Hebrews 13:8). Jesus came in the Incarnation (yesterday), he lives in us now through the Spirit (today) and will return as King of kings and Lord of lords (forever). Another way to look at this is in terms of the kingdom of God. Jesus’ incarnation brought the kingdom to humanity (yesterday), he invites believers to enter in and participate in that kingdom (today) and when he returns, he will reveal the already-existing kingdom to all humanity (forever).

Jesus used several parables to explain the kingdom that he was establishing: the parable of the seed, which grows invisibly and quietly (Mark 4:26-29); the parable of the mustard seed, which grows from a small seed to a large bush (Mark 4:30-32); and the parable of the yeast, which leavened all the flour (Matthew 13:33). These parables show that the kingdom was brought to earth at the Incarnation and still exists as a reality today. Jesus also said, “If I cast out demons by the Spirit of God [which he did], then the kingdom of heaven has come to you” (Matthew 12:28; Luke 11:20). The kingdom is here, he said, and the proof is in the exorcisms and other good works of the church.

The power of God is continually manifest through believers who live in the reality of the kingdom. Jesus Christ is the head of the church yesterday, today and forever. Just as the kingdom was present in the ministry of Jesus, it is present now (though not yet fully) in the ministry of his church. The King is among us; his spiritual power is in us, even though his kingdom is not yet operating in full power. Martin Luther analogized that Jesus has bound Satan, but with a long chain: “He [Satan] can do no more than a bad dog on a chain, which may bark, run here and there, and tear at the chain.”

The fullness of the kingdom will come—that is the “forever” we hope

for. We know no matter how much we try to live in a way that reflects God, we cannot transform the entire world into God's kingdom today. Only Jesus can do that, and he will at his glorious return. So while the kingdom has a present reality, its fullness is in the future. Though largely hidden today, the kingdom will be completely manifested at Jesus' final advent.

Paul spoke often of the kingdom in its future sense. He warned against the things that prevent people from "inheriting the kingdom of God" (1 Corinthians 6:9-10; 15:50; Galatians 5:21; Ephesians 5:5). As his language often reflected, Paul predominantly thought of the kingdom as realized at the end of the age (1 Thessalonians 2:12; 2 Thessalonians 1:5; Colossians 4:11; 2 Timothy 4:1, 18). However, he also understood that wherever Jesus is, his kingdom is now present, even in what he called "this present evil age" (Galatians 1:4). Since Jesus lives in us now, the kingdom is now present and, as Paul taught, we are now citizens of the kingdom of heaven (Philippians 3:20).

Advent is also spoken of in terms of our salvation, which the New Testament refers to in three tenses: past, present and future. The past tense is our finished salvation. It is what Jesus accomplished in his first coming—through his life, death, resurrection and ascension. The present tense is what we have now—Jesus living in us and inviting us to participate in his kingdom work. The future tense is the fullness of salvation, which we will experience when Jesus visibly returns and God is all in all.

It's interesting to note that the Bible emphasizes the visibility of Jesus' first coming and final coming. In between the "yesterday" and "forever," Jesus' present coming is invisible, in that we do not see him walking around as they did in the first century. However, because we are now ambassadors for Christ (2 Corinthians 5:20), we are called to represent the reality of Christ and his kingdom. So while Jesus may not be visible, we know he is with us and will never leave or forsake us, and others can see Jesus through us. We are called to make visible some of the glories of the kingdom—doing so by allowing the fruit of the Spirit to flow through us and by keeping Jesus' new commandment to love one another (John 13:34-35).

When we understand that Advent focuses on Jesus yesterday, today and forever, we are better able to understand the four traditional Advent themes: hope, peace, joy and love. As the Messiah the prophets spoke of, Jesus is the reality of the *hope* that sustained God's people. He did not come as a warrior or conquering king but as the Prince of peace, showing that God's plan was to bring *peace*. The theme of *joy* focuses on the joyous anticipation of the birth and return of our Savior. And *love* is what God is all about. God, who is love,

JESUS THE SAVIOR

loved us yesterday (before the foundation of the world) and continues to love us (individually and intimately) both today and forever.

*Joseph Teach*

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This book is a corporate product, a collaborative effort. Some chapters give the name of the author at the end. Others are corporate products, perhaps drafted by one person but extensively edited by others. Most of the authors were, at the time of writing, employed by Grace Communion International.

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## JESUS THE SAVIOR

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## **ABOUT THE PUBLISHER...**

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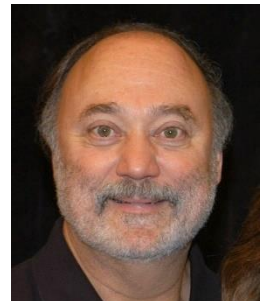
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N.T. Wright, University of St. Andrews  
William P. Young, author of *The Shack*

Programs are available free for viewing and downloading at [www.youreincluded.org](http://www.youreincluded.org).

### **Speaking of Life...**

Dr. Joseph Tkach, president of Grace Communion International, comments each week, giving a biblical perspective on how we live in the light of God's love. Most programs are about three minutes long – available in video, audio, and text. Go to [www.speakingoflife.org](http://www.speakingoflife.org).





## GRACE COMMUNION SEMINARY

Ministry based on the life and love of the Father, Son, and Spirit

Grace Communion Seminary serves the needs of people engaged in Christian service who want to grow deeper in relationship with our Triune God and to be able to more effectively serve in the church.

Why study at Grace Communion Seminary?

- Worship: to love God with all your mind.
- Service: to help others apply truth to life.
- Practical: a balanced range of useful topics for ministry.
- Trinitarian theology: a survey of theology with the merits of a Trinitarian perspective. We begin with the question, “Who is God?” Then, “Who are we in relationship to God?” In this context, “How then do we serve?”
- Part-time study: designed to help people who are already serving in local congregations. There is no need to leave your current ministry. Full-time students are also welcome.
- Flexibility: your choice of master’s level continuing education courses or pursuit of a degree: Master of Pastoral Studies or Master of Theological Studies.
- Affordable, accredited study: Everything can be done online.

For more information, go to [www.gcs.edu](http://www.gcs.edu). Grace Communion Seminary is accredited by the Distance Education Accrediting Commission, [www.deac.org](http://www.deac.org). The Accrediting Commission is listed by the U.S. Department of Education as a nationally recognized accrediting agency.

## **AMBASSADOR COLLEGE OF CHRISTIAN MINISTRY**

Want to better understand God's Word? Want to know the Triune God more deeply? Want to share more joyously in the life of the Father, Son and Spirit? Want to be better equipped to serve others?

Among the many resources that Grace Communion International offers are the training and learning opportunities provided by ACCM. This quality, well-structured Christian Ministry curriculum has the advantage of being very practical and flexible. Students may study at their own pace, without having to leave home to undertake full-time study.

This denominationally recognized program is available for both credit and audit study. At minimum cost, this online Diploma program will help students gain important insights and training in effective ministry service. Students will also enjoy a rich resource for personal study that will enhance their understanding and relationship with the Triune God.

Diploma of Christian Ministry classes provide an excellent introductory course for new and lay pastors. Pastor General Dr. Joseph Tkach said, "We believe we have achieved the goal of designing Christian ministry training that is practical, accessible, interesting, and doctrinally and theologically mature and sound. This program provides an ideal foundation for effective Christian ministry."

For more information, go to [www.ambacol.org](http://www.ambacol.org)