

JESUS

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WHAT'S SO AMAZING ABOUT

A 30-DAY EXPLORATION

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK



COMMIT TO A DAILY TIME AND PLACE.

Set aside at least 10 minutes, but spend more time if you can.



COME WITH EXPECTATION AND OPENNESS.

Pray before reading: *"Open my eyes so I can see Jesus."*



TAKE YOUR TIME.

If it's too much to take in, do a day over two or three days.



READ WITH A PEN IN HAND AND JOURNAL YOUR JOURNEY.

As you read, mark down what impacts you most. At the end of each day, flip back to the 'A Journal of My Journey' and answer the two questions (see pp 2-9). Write down your answers.



PRAY ABOUT WHAT YOU WROTE DOWN.

God has shown you something, now speak to him in response.



MAKE IT A COMMUNITY EXPERIENCE.

Work through this over six weeks as a small group. In preparation for each weekly meeting, each person commits to reading the next five days of the total 30 days and comes ready to share their written entries in the 'A Journal of my Journey' section. This can be followed by a time of prayer. Week 1: Day 1-5. Week 2: Day 6-10. Week 3: Day 11-15. Week 4: Day 16-20. Week 5: Day 21-25. Week 6: Day 26-30.

Perhaps WhatsApp what you wrote down to others. This practice encourages mutual accountability and provides support and enrichment to members of groups with two or more people, who are also journeying through this exploration of Jesus.

This book was written by Terran Williams in Cape Town, South Africa (2019) for Common Ground Church, as a supplement to a sermon series on Mark's Gospel. Feel free to liberally use this as a PDF, or perhaps print it in book form for your entire church. Give due credit to the author and please see the website www.commonresources.co.za for more free resources like this one. All Bible references are from the NIV 2011.

A JOURNAL OF MY JOURNEY



To deepen the impact of this book on your life and to track what you are learning, flip back here after reading each day and answer the following two questions in the relevant space:

1. Which one or two things do I not want to forget about Jesus?
2. How might I live, think or follow Jesus differently?

DAY 1: BEHOLD THE MAN

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DAY 2: THE IMAGE OF GOD

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DAY 3: RUMOURS OF HIS COMING

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DAY 4: JESUS ON EVERY PAGE

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DAY 5: FOUR PORTRAITS, ONE JESUS

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DAY 6: THE EYEWITNESSES

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DAY 7: THE CHILD WHO WOULD BE KING

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DAY 8: THE TIMES OF JESUS

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DAY 9: ONE OF US

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DAY 10: THE KINGDOM AND THE SPIRIT

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DAY 11: LIKE FATHER LIKE SON

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DAY 12: JESUS THE DRAGON-SLAYER

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DAY 13: A PASSION FOR PEOPLE

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DAY 14: JESUS' INNER CIRCLE

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DAY 15: JESUS THE MIRACLE-MAKER

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DAY 16: THE MASTER TEACHER

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DAY 17: WOMEN AND CHILDREN

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DAY 18: THE PERSONAL TOUCH

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DAY 19: COLLISION COURSE

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DAY 20: TRAGIC FRIDAY

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DAY 21: DRINK THIS CUP

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DAY 22: JESUS IS ALIVE

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DAY 23: THE ASCENT OF JESUS

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DAY 24: WHO DO YOU SAY I AM?

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DAY 25: THE LION WHO IS THE LAMB

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DAY 26: GOD WITH SKIN ON

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DAY 27: THE GOD WHO IS LOVE

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DAY 28: JESUS AMONG THE GODS

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DAY 29: JESUS DEFICIT DISORDER

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DAY 30: WHAT IS A CHRIST-IAN?

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WEEK ONE

BEHOLD THE MAN



Once more Pilate came out and said, "Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no basis for a charge against him." When Jesus came out wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe, Pilate said to them, "Behold the man!" As soon as the chief priests and their officials saw him, they shouted, "Crucify! Crucify!" (1 John 19:4-6)

The most influential person of all time. Jesus stood beaten and bleeding before a crowd. Pilate half-heartedly tried to save him, but the crowd's rejection of him overrode the Roman governor's weak resistance. Surely, Jesus' death would guarantee his disappearance from the pages of history. Rome had previously crucified thousands of people, the names of whom are today lost from our knowledge.

Yet remarkably, millennia later, the humble presence of this man towers over the skylines of human history. As one prominent social novelist of the early twentieth century wrote: "... I am not a believer, but I must confess as a historian that this penniless preacher from Nazareth is irrevocably the very centre of history. Jesus Christ is easily the most dominant figure in all history.¹ Another well-known historian chimes in: "As the centuries pass, the evidence is growing that, measured by his effect on history, Jesus is the most influential life ever lived on this planet."²

The most polarizing person of all time. His unique life invites extreme response. It's no secret that a third of the world's population have given some kind of allegiance to him. Napoleon Bonaparte said, "I know men and I tell you that Jesus Christ is no mere man. Between him and every other person in the world there is no comparison. Alexander the Great, Caesar and I have founded empires. But upon what? Upon force. Jesus Christ founded his empire upon love; and at this hour millions would die for him." His magnetic pull has, it seems, only become stronger: some 50,000 people become Christians daily.

But many do not believe Jesus was or is the Son of God. The people of first-century Palestine responded in the extremes: In the Gospels, anybody who met Jesus Christ only ever had three responses towards him. They were either terrified and wanted to run away, or they hated him and wanted to kill him and stone him to death, or they worshipped him and got down on their knees and gave him everything.³

The most radical claims of all time. Jesus once said, "I tell you, whoever acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man will also acknowledge him before the angels of God."⁴ According to Jesus, what each of us think about him and how we respond to him is what determines our eternal destiny.

With claims like these, Jesus leaves no space for a lukewarm response. Either we abandon ourselves to his care and leadership now, or someday we will stand before

him and feebly answer his question: "Why did you think you knew better than I about how to run your life?"

Passivity and agnosticism are not a rational response. Either he is who he said he is, or he is not. Either we worship him, flee from him, or kill him – but we simply can't give the response typically given in so many cultures today; where many in the church treat Jesus as a cosmic butler, someone to call on when in need, someone who merely enhances our lives and blesses our plans. Surely, one who claims to be the eternal Son of God, the one from whom and for whom all things were made, deserves to be at the very centre of our lives.

In our culture, many treat him as an interesting artefact of history, merely a good man/prophet/sage with a vision for a better world. But look more closely, the kind of person who said the things he said about himself is either hopelessly crazy, or a horrific liar, or he is God in the flesh whose coming rightly split history into BC and AD. He cannot merely be a good teacher.

The most extraordinary life of all time. Over days 7-23, we will explore Jesus' distinctive life story and unparalleled approach to life in great detail. But for now, if Jesus sounds too daunting, just know that he – like Aslan the lion in the Chronicles of Narnia – is not only wild and great, but also unimaginably warm and good.

Not a follower of Jesus? You're invited to take this 30-day journey. Many don't care enough about Jesus to bother investigating him. This is as unwise as ignoring a message from the bank that a very wealthy person has left you a fortune – you might be understandably sceptical, but at least find out more! As you embark on the journey, perhaps pray, "Jesus, if you are real, please show yourself to me." As you will see, this study presumes that Jesus is right about who he said he was: "God with us". Even if you do not accept this conclusion, there is still so much you can learn about him.

If you are a follower of Jesus, may this 30-day adventure revive your faith and life by reviving your appreciation for Jesus. As a Scottish preacher said 180 years ago, "Learn much of the Lord Jesus. For every look at yourself, take ten looks at Christ. He is altogether lovely. Such infinite majesty, and yet such meekness and grace, and all for sinners, even the chief! Live much in the smiles of God. Bask in his beams. Feel his all-seeing eye settled on you in love, and repose in his almighty arms ... Let your soul be filled with a heart-ravishing sense of the sweetness and excellency of Christ and all that is in Him."⁵

THE TRUE IMAGE OF GOD



*Jesus said, "If you really know me, you will know my Father as well." 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."
(John 14:7-11)*

Jesus shows us what God is like. Most of the human race has always believed that "Someone made everything". But what is this God like? If there is a God behind everything we can see, what is this God like? We have no guarantee that the answer will come back favourably. Perhaps God is a monster, or completely disinterested in us.

The Christian answer to the question of God's character is Jesus Christ. Jesus is not only God-like. God, it turns out, is Christ-like. In the same way we need a filter to look at the sun, so Jesus is the filter that allows us to gaze upon God.

Theologian TF Torrance puts this magnificently: "There is in fact no God behind the back of Jesus, no act of God other than the act of Jesus, no God but the God we see and meet in him. Jesus Christ is the open heart of God, the very love and life of God poured out to redeem humankind, the mighty hand and power of God stretched out to heal and save sinners. All things are in God's hands, but the hands of God and the hands of Jesus, in life and in death, are the same".¹

Jesus shows us what we can become. Jesus is "the image of the invisible God",² the Word made flesh.³ In this sense, he not only shows us what God is like, but what humanity looks like at its best. This is why God's plan in the life of a Christian is to slowly conform him or her to the image of Jesus.⁴ As we gaze upon Jesus, we're told that the Spirit begins to refashion us in the image of Jesus. Looking upon him, we start to look a little more like him⁵ – not that our unique personality or culture is lost, only God's idea of redeemed humanity begins to weave into our way of seeing, being, relating and doing.

Yet we tend to remake Jesus in our image. Voltaire's insight about religious people made three centuries earlier is true: "If God has made us in his image, we have returned him the favour."

In non-Christian scholarship and public imagination, we tend to treat Jesus as an open canvas upon which we can project our ideas about God or humanity at its best. For example, in the so-called "third quest of the historical Jesus", driven by the Jesus Seminar, reconstructionist scholars write off the biblical statements about the world-transforming significance of the cross/resurrection event as later theological additions. In its place, various scholars conclude that Jesus was either an Essene mystagogue, a Galilean Chasid, a charismatic wonder-worker, a healer and sage, a

political revolutionary, a Jewish peasant and Cynic philosopher, or a teacher of an alternative spirituality.⁶ In each case, the “rediscovered” Jesus looks surprisingly like those who seek to reconstruct him.

Christians do this too. Every year, a famous theology professor gives his incoming students a test about what they think Jesus is like. Is he moody? Does he get nervous? Is he the life of the party or an introvert? The twenty-four questions are then followed by a second set —with slightly altered language — in which the students answer questions about their own personalities. Each year, the results are remarkably consistent — everyone thinks Jesus is just like them.⁷

When we remake Jesus in our image, we land up with all kinds of Jesus’. Here are some contemporary re-inventions of Jesus: The therapist Jesus who helps us cope with life’s problems, heals our past, tells us how valuable we are and encourages us not to be so hard on ourselves. The open-minded Jesus loves everyone all the time, no matter what (except for people who are not as open-minded as us). The New Age Jesus hates religion, churches, pastors, priests and doctrine, and would rather have us out in nature, finding “the god within” while we attend to our breathing. The platitude Jesus is good for Christmas specials, greeting cards and sermons, all of which inspire people to believe in themselves. The revolutionary Jesus teaches us to rebel against the status quo, stick it to the man, and blame things on “the system”. The boyfriend Jesus wraps his arms around us as we sing about his intoxicating love in our secret place.⁸

Rather, we should find out who Jesus really is. Jesus is the central and defining figure in the spiritual life. His life is, precisely, revelation. He brings out into the open what we could never have figured out for ourselves, never have guessed in a million years. He is God among us: God speaking, acting, healing and helping.

When Jesus asked the Twelve if they were going to abandon him, Peter answered, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. You are the Holy One of God.”⁹ Peter had arrived at the place where we must all go if we are truly going to follow Jesus: he does not impose on Jesus his own ideas or ambitions on who God is or how God must do his work. Peter shows us that we should refuse to mould a glamorous god or gods that appeal to our vanity.¹⁰

As we continue in our exploration of Jesus, let us pray: “Correct my wrong projections and misunderstandings of who you are, and show me who you really are.”

RUMOURS OF HIS COMING



*"But you, O Bethlehem, are only a small village in Judah. Yet a ruler of Israel will come from you, one whose origins are from ancient times."
(Micah 5:2)*

Let's start our biblical exploration of Jesus in the Old Testament, the part of the Bible written before he came to Earth.

If God were to visit our planet, one would imagine he might tell us in advance that this was to be his plan. This is precisely what one finds in the Old Testament. It's as though every page tells us, "Someone is coming!" As we flip through its 39 books, the sound of the approaching footsteps gets louder. He is almost here.

"Supersessionism" is a term used to describe how one movement incorporates and builds on a previous movement. Christianity, for example, claims to supersede Judaism. As understandably upsetting as this claim might be for Jewish people, the Christian answers: "Your texts repeatedly and prophetically point to One beyond them, which we have good reason to believe is Jesus." Then again, Islam claims to supersede Christianity. However, the New Testament does not promise God's sending of anyone beyond Jesus and the Spirit.

Each of the more than 100 prophecies detailing the coming of the Messiah fit into one of three categories:

1. The Messiah's life. He would one day come to the world, born as a child. He would be no ordinary child – his name would be 'Immanuel', which means 'God with us'. He would live a sinless life, one marked by suffering. His appearance would not be more impressive than that of the average person. He would be wise, teaching people what life is really all about. He would perform miracles: heal the blind, enable the lame to walk, even raise the dead. He would come into Jerusalem and announce himself as king, entering not on a war-horse, but on a donkey.¹

2. The Messiah's death. He'd be betrayed by a friend for 30 shekels, which would be used to buy a field called 'The Potter's field'. He would be beaten severely. People would gamble for his clothes. He would have his hands and feet pierced and be killed through torture. His death would be no ordinary death: but would accomplish salvation for others – one prophecy says 'the punishment that brings us peace with God will be upon him'. In other words, God will take the sins of the world, put it upon the Messiah and punish it there – so that we could be reconciled to God.

3. The Messiah's resurrection and reign. After dying, he would rise from the dead, victorious. What's more, his victory would be proclaimed by messengers all across the world. Ultimately, in a cosmic moment called The Day, he would wrap up human history as we know it, deal with every bit of evil in his world, and purge the world of all

tears, suffering, death and poverty, ushering in the new heavens and the new earth, a world marked by justice and peace.

WHO COULD THIS MESSIAH BE? There is only one contender in history. That said, there are three common objections to the claim that Jesus fulfilled prophecy.

1. “Jesus didn’t fulfil all the prophecies.” The Jews in Jesus’ day, suffering under Roman oppression, had held on particularly tightly to those prophecies of a coming King who would restore his people and bring their enemies down. This caused them to expect a military-political Messiah and reject a non-warring, crucified Jesus as a prospect. What they missed is that there were many other prophecies that highlighted the Messiah’s coming to suffer² and not just to rule. Also, their ideas of what his rule would look like were incorrect, and they did not expect the Messianic prophecies to be fulfilled in stages. Indeed, many prophecies await fulfilment when Jesus triumphantly returns.

2. “It’s just a coincidence that Jesus fulfilled these prophecies.” A famous Mathematics Professor, Peter Stoner, took eight of the prophecies about the Messiah, and got hundreds of students to calculate the odds of a man fulfilling these eight prophecies. They calculated it to be one in 10 to the power of 1021.³ That’s like piling silver coins 60 metres high across the whole world, marking one of those coins with a purple dot, blindfolding someone and asking them to find that coin on their first attempt.

3. “Jesus purposely fulfilled the prophecies.” But how could he manipulate the timing and manner of both his birth and his death? Let’s start with timing. The Old Testament prophecies described when he would be born. One prophecy in 600 BC⁴ says that he would arrive in three successive empires’ time, which turned out to be the rule of the Roman empire, which took control of Israel in 63BC. So the Messiah would have to be born after then. Another prophecy⁵ in 450 BC says that he would come to the Temple. Yet, the Jewish temple was destroyed in 70 AD. Remarkably, Jesus was born almost perfectly between these dates.

Now for manner. As for his birth, consider the prophecy about Bethlehem⁶ and the 30 prophecies which say the Messiah would be a physical descendant of King David. Surely, if he wasn’t the Son of God, he would have no control over his place of birth, nor the blood in his veins. As for the manner of his death, one prophecy in 1000 BC⁷ said that the Messiah would have his hands and feet pierced. Only 300 years later, the concept of crucifixion was introduced by the Persians – a way of executing people through piercing their hands and feet.

Jesus alone matches the “fingerprint” of the Messiah. Jesus’ fulfilment of these prophecies against all odds makes it rational to conclude that he will fulfil the final ones when the time is right.⁸ A God who knows the future and is in control⁹, a God who makes a promise and keeps it¹⁰ – this kind of God we can trust.

JESUS ON EVERY PAGE



And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, Jesus explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. (Luke 24:27)

Jesus in the New Testament. Jesus' centrality is most obvious in the New Testament, where 23 out of 27 books mention Jesus in their first verse: 'The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God...'¹ or 'all that Jesus began to do and teach'² or 'a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ'³, or 'the revelation of Jesus Christ'.⁴ In these New Testament documents, over 100 titles and names loom large, including Son of God, Saviour, the Word, Lamb of God, Son of Man, Bread of Life, Light of the World, Good Shepherd, Resurrection and Life, Way, Truth and Life, True Vine, Holy One, the Judge, Deliverer, Rock, Head of the Church, Chief Cornerstone, Firstborn over all Creation, Mediator, Author and Perfecter of Our Faith, High Priest, Bridegroom, King of kings and Lord of lords.⁵

Jesus in the Old Testament. Although Jesus' name does not appear anywhere in the 39 Old Testament books, it seems every page whispers his name. What joins the Old and the New is not mainly a plan or promise, but a Person.

Over and above the direct prophecies (see Day 4), Jesus is pre-pictured or 'future flashed' throughout the Old Testament. As we look at the Old Testament events, institutions and people through the lens of the Gospel, we realize that remarkable parallels and analogies of Jesus' person and work keep on playing themselves out. Long before we come to the main production of the New Testament, hundreds of tantalizing trailers show aspects of what's to come. Long before the Gospel 'officially' gets on the field for the big game of Jesus on earth, it has done many practice runs in anticipation and preparation.

This is true in all 39 books of the Old Testament: In Genesis, Jesus is the Word through whom all things are made. He is Adam who lays down his life for the genesis of his bride, also tempted in a garden by Satan, but unlike Adam he overcame temptation. He is the serpent-crushing seed of Eve. He is Abel, slain though he was innocent, but unlike Abel, his blood cries out for our forgiveness, not our condemnation. He is Noah, the only righteous one who makes it possible for those who trust in his word and work to be participants in the new creation. He is Abraham, led to leave what was comfortable in his mission to bring a blessing to the world. He is Isaac, the son of promise, who trudges up a hill, carrying wood to the place where he will be offered up as a sacrifice – except Jesus was not spared from death. He is Joseph, who loses his coat of glory, who descends into darkness, who finally sits down at the right hand of the King and uses his power to forgive those who have betrayed him.

In Exodus, he is Moses, nearly killed as an infant by a tyrant leader, but survives to do his life's work of resolving a covenant between God and his people. He is the 'I Am' in

the burning bush. He is the Passover Lamb, whose blood is smeared on vertical and horizontal wooden beams so that people who rest under that blood will be spared from the coming judgement. He is the parting of the Red Sea, opening up a way in resurrection power for his people to transition from death to life, from bondage to the Pharaoh-powers of sin and Satan to freedom. Like Moses, he gives people the law by which they will live, only Pentecost upgrades this gift from a law written on stone, to the Spirit etching his ways and wisdom into our very hearts.

And on and on, every book in the Old Testament is Jesus-shaped. In Leviticus, he is the high priest who enters the Most Holy place on our behalf. In Numbers, he is the rock from which water flows, the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. In Deuteronomy, he is the prophet, like Moses. In Joshua, he is the captain of our salvation. In Judges, the deliverer whose weakness magnifies his saving power. In Ruth, our kinsman redeemer. In 1 and 2 Samuel, our trusted prophet. In Kings and Chronicles, our reigning king. In Ezra and Nehemiah, the rebuilders of the broken-down walls. In Esther, he is our Mordecai. In Job, our ever-living redeemer. In Psalms, our shepherd. In Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, our wisdom. In the Song of Songs, the lover of our souls. In Isaiah, the prince of peace, the suffering servant, the Messiah to whom all nations gather. In Jeremiah, he is the righteous branch. In Lamentations, our weeping prophet. In Ezekiel, the multi-faceted four-faced man. In Daniel, he is the 'fourth man' who preserves us in the fires, as well as the Son of Man who receives worship from the nations. In Hosea, he is the faithful husband, who does not give up on us. In Joel, he pours out his Spirit on all. In Amos, he is our burden bearer. In Obadiah, he is the mighty to save. In Jonah, he is our great foreign missionary. In Micah, the messenger of beautiful feet. In Nahum, the avenger of God's elect. In Habakkuk, God's evangelist, crying "revive your work". In Zephaniah, our Saviour. In Haggai, the restorer of God's lost heritage. In Zechariah, the fountain opened up in the house of David for sin and uncleanness. In Malachi, the Sun of Righteousness, rising with healing in His wings.⁶

Each one of the 66 biblical books serves as a piece of a puzzle. When all the pieces are joined correctly, we see Jesus, in whom all the themes of Scripture converge.

FOUR PORTRAITS ONE JESUS



Around the throne, were four living creatures. The first was like a lion, the second an ox, the third had a face like a man, the fourth was like a flying eagle. (Rev 4:6-7)

In John's vision, four angelic creatures reflect different aspects of God's attributes. Coincidentally, they also parallel the four portraits of Jesus.

What are the Gospels? In the first decades of the church, the apostles, whom Jesus had authorised, spread detailed word about his life, ministry, teachings and saving work. After a decades, as the eyewitnesses and apostles started to die off, four authors wrote these facts down in the Gospels for future generations.

Like four artists interpreting the same subject from different viewpoints and with different styles, the Gospel writers render their distinctive take on the same striking Jesus of history. Some of them were eyewitnesses, but all of them interviewed other eyewitnesses and carried out additional investigative work. Some of them read and drew from each other's work. Some of them pulled together earlier written and oral records about Jesus' teachings, miracles, and the events of his death.

However, these compositions go beyond mere historical biography – their authors hope that as we read of him, Jesus will leap off the page and into our lives. Because these Gospels do not 'contain' Jesus, but merely capture important snapshots of a Saviour whose life continues, he is able to do precisely that. Albert Einstein wrote, 'As a child I received instruction both in the Bible and in the Talmud. I am a Jew, but I am enthralled by the luminous figure of the Nazarene. No one can read the Gospels without feeling the actual presence of Jesus. His personality pulsates in every word.'¹ So true – these four accounts show us how 'long, deep, wide and high is the love of Christ'.²

MATTHEW'S GOSPEL: 'BEHOLD YOUR KING'.³

Matthew, once a tax collector, writes mainly to Jews. He shows us love's length. We see the long-awaited Scriptural prophecies of the coming Messiah King (the Son of David) fulfilled by Jesus. Here, Jesus has the lionlike regal rights of the King of the Jews. Key words are 'fulfilled' and 'kingdom.' Matthew's genealogy traces back to and emphasizes King David and Abraham, the father of the Jews. The Gospel's outstanding feature is Jesus' teachings, arranged in five long sermons. The key verse is, "Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.'"⁴

MARK'S GOSPEL: 'BEHOLD MY SERVANT!'⁵

Mark, a once-failed missionary, interviews Peter primarily as he writes the first of the Gospels in Rome, in the 50s or 60s (AD). Mark shows us love's depth. Here, Jesus

is the Suffering Servant. Six of 16 chapters focus on the final week leading up to the cross. Jesus is ox-like, always on the move (the word 'immediately' is used 41 times). This Gospel's outstanding feature is Jesus' miracles and exorcisms – pushing back the darkness wherever he goes. Contrary to the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, Jesus has no genealogy – after all, a servant does not need one. The key verse is, 'For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.'⁶

LUKE'S GOSPEL: 'BEHOLD THE MAN!'⁷

Luke; an intellectual, a doctor, and a travelling companion to Paul in his missionary journeys, writes this Gospel to the Greeks. Luke shows us love's width. Here, Jesus is the Son of Man whose perfect, yet vulnerable humanity is stressed. His arms reach wide to include the sick and the suffering, women and children, the poor and oppressed, the sinners and the Gentiles. It's not surprising that Luke traces Jesus' genealogy back to Adam, the head of humanity. Neither the lion-face nor the ox-face are highlighted – rather the man-face comes to the fore. Jesus' parables are this Gospel's outstanding feature. The key verse is, 'For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.'⁸

JOHN'S GOSPEL: 'BEHOLD YOUR GOD!'⁹

John, the last surviving apostle, writes the final gospel in the 80s (AD), and to the whole world. John shows us love's height. Here, Jesus is the Son of God who comes down from heaven to earth, then promises to ascend to heaven to pour out his Spirit. Jesus is the eagle who soars over the heavens, tracing his identity not to Abraham or Adam, but ultimately to God himself. Unlike the other three gospels, John's Gospel majors on Jesus' ministry in the south (Judea) and not the north (Galilee), as well as on Jesus' divine nature and not his humanity. At its climax, Thomas falls to his knees and says to Jesus, 'My Lord and my God!' The Gospel's outstanding feature is Jesus' seven signs, each of them revealing something of his divine power. The key word is 'believe' (used 98 times) and the key Scripture is, 'These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and have life in his name.'¹⁰

How do they harmonise? Luke seems to follow Mark's ordering of events very closely, while adding material. They are both chronologically accurate. John, which covers mainly different content, is also chronologically accurate. As we weave these three accounts together, we notice that Jesus cleanses the temple twice, once at the beginning and once at the end of his ministry. Matthew 4-15 is where harmonisation becomes tricky, because Matthew takes the liberty of letting go of a strict sequence, as he clusters teachings and miracles, and how people reacted to Jesus, separately. If we keep this in mind, most of the harmonising difficulties in "the story of Jesus" disappear.¹¹

WEEK TWO

THE EYEWITNESSES



Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses. Since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught. (Luke 1:1-4)

Although few doubt Jesus' historical existence, some people doubt that the four Gospels should be trusted as a source of history about Jesus.

Were Jesus' biographies reliably preserved for us? Although the originals of all ancient documents are now lost, Bruce Metzger, the late Professor Emeritus at Princeton Theological Seminary, said that compared with other ancient documents, there is an unprecedented number of early copies of the New Testament manuscripts which can be dated extremely close to the dates of the original writings. The science of textual criticism proves that the modern New Testament is 99.5 percent free of textual discrepancies, with no major Christian doctrines in doubt.¹

Is there credible evidence for Jesus outside his biographies? Edwin Yamauchi, a leading expert on ancient history says, "We have better historical documentation for Jesus than for the founder of any other ancient religion." Very early non-Christian sources from outside the Bible corroborate that many people believed Jesus performed healings and was the Messiah, that he was crucified, and that despite this shameful death, his followers, who believed he was still alive, worshipped him as God. One expert documented 39 extra-biblical ancient sources that corroborate more than 100 facts concerning Jesus' life, teachings, crucifixion and resurrection.²

Does archaeology confirm or contradict Jesus' biographies? John McRay, a professor of archaeology and author of *Archaeology and the New Testament*, shows how archaeological findings have enhanced the New Testament's credibility. Further, archaeology has established that Luke, who wrote about one-quarter of the New Testament, was an especially careful historian. If Luke was so painstakingly accurate in his historical reporting (of even minor details), on what logical basis may we assume he was credulous or inaccurate in his reporting of matters that were far more important, not only to him but to others as well, like for instance, the resurrection of Jesus?³

Isn't the Jesus of the Bible a recycled version of earlier pagan gods like Mithras and Horus? Instead of sifting through claims from recent popular sources that seem to cite each other in endless circles, trained historians like Tryggve Mettinger go back to the earliest records of these ancient accounts (what they call the "primary sources") to get at the original rendering of the myths themselves. Mettinger finds

that the myths that actually pre-date Jesus' time bear virtually no resemblance to the particular details of Jesus' life. Certain mythical accounts of the mystery-religions only bear some resemblance to Jesus' life after his time – showing that they borrow ideas from Christianity, not the other way around.⁴

Perhaps the real story was changed in the time span between the original events and the writing of the Gospels? Legends tend to form once eyewitnesses have died off, yet critical facts about Jesus are written within 20 years of his death and contained in letters such as 1 Corinthians, and 10 years later in Mark's Gospel, which draws primarily from Peter's eyewitness testimony. Craig Blomberg, a foremost authority on the biographies of Jesus, shows how they reflect eyewitness testimony and bear the unmistakable earmarks of accuracy. Since the Gospel accounts were written down within the lifetimes of people who had been eyewitnesses to the events, the early church could not have taken root and flourished right there in Jerusalem if it had been teaching facts about Jesus that his own contemporaries could have exposed as being exaggerated or false.⁵

In *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, Richard Bauckham shows how the names of eyewitnesses—Simon of Cyrene, his sons Rufus and Alexander, Cleopas, Malchus, and others—are embedded in the Gospels, according to the accepted historiographical custom of the day.⁶

Also, details that are counterproductive are included – such as Jesus' brothers and mother suggesting he was insane, Jesus' cry on the cross ('Why have you forsaken me?'), him choosing women (whose testimonies were disregarded in the ancient world) as the first witnesses of his resurrection. If the Gospels were propaganda, embarrassing details like these would have been removed.

What about the Lost Gospels? Many texts from an ancient semi-Christian Gnostic community were recovered in archaeological finds in the middle of the last century – the Gospels of Thomas, Mary, Philip and more. These were known about and rejected by early Christian communities for the simple fact that they were written in the second and third centuries by people who fictitiously named their Gospels after biblical people. These scrolls make for an interesting read but present a strange, non-historical, non-Jewish Jesus of their own creation, a Jesus who says about Mary Magdalene, for example, 'I will guide her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit like you males. For every female who will make herself male will enter the Realm of Heaven.'⁷ On the contrary, the true Gospels show us a Jesus who dignifies women.

With all these marks of historical reliability, when it comes to the four Gospels, it's better to doubt our doubts about them.

THE CHILD WHO WOULD BE KING



"Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him." (Matt 6:3)

Born of a virgin. Jesus' life on earth begins unprecedentedly. He is born of a virgin. Many theological theories abound about why this was necessary. What Scripture is clear on is that something unusual was happening – God entering the world. This miraculous conception also 'speaks powerfully of new creation, something fresh happening within the old world, beyond the reach and dreams of the possibilities we currently know. And if we believe that the God we're talking about is the creator of the world, who longs to rescue the world from its corruption and decay, then an act of real new creation, anticipating in fact the great moment of Easter itself, might just be what we should expect.¹

Humble beginnings. The real surprise is that the incarnation of the One who made the universe would enter so quietly. God slips in under the radar, getting small, stepping down, bowing low. The place of his birth is a modest village, his crib a livestock feeding trough filled with straw, his parents the poorest of the poor, and his first visitors, shepherds – Israel's lowliest vocation.²

A child of promise. Though the setting is unremarkable, the occasion is not. This is no ordinary child, as each player in the story reveals. Whether it is Gabriel's message to Mary, the heavenly heralds' announcement to the shepherds, Simeon and Anna's praise when Jesus is presented at the temple eight days after he was born, or the tribute from the Persian magi, all resonate with the same idea – this infant is the Saviour of the world.³

An ordinary childhood. Jesus' boyhood is quiet. His "lost years" are not lost at all, just uneventful. Contrary to some fanciful accounts, Jesus works no miracles as a child, but waits until he begins his public ministry.⁴ All we know is that he is growing into a healthy human – growing in wisdom, stature, favour with God and people.⁵ The imagination that would later burst out in his teachings is being formed: he is surrounded by the wildflowers and weeds growing among the crops, the laborious method of separating wheat and chaff, the fig trees and grapevines dotting the hillsides, the fields white unto harvest.⁶ He has no miraculous powers yet, despite the many imaginary accounts written in the second century about 'Superboy' Jesus turning playmates into goats to teach them a lesson, or making people go blind or deaf just for the thrill of healing them.

Jesus' Father's house. We do not know how early Jesus' divine self-consciousness set in, but it had happened by the time he was 12, when he amazed the elders in the temple with his insight into Scripture. He is a child prodigy in matters of wisdom. After

disappearing for three days, his desperate mother finds and rebukes him. His reply, "Why were you searching for me? Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" shows he knows Who he is.

Jesus' knowledge of the world. It is true that Galilee got little respect from the capital down South, Jerusalem – the literature of the time portrays Galileans as bumpkins, fodder for ethnic jokes. But from a global perspective, Galilee was not backwater. It was a crossroads for trade and commerce, where the worlds of Europe and Asia met. This explains why Jesus spoke not just Hebrew and fluent Aramaic, but also Greek.

Jesus' father's work. Joseph, Jesus' adoptive father, passed on his trade skills of carpentry and construction to Jesus. What kinds of homes may they have built? Nearby Capernaum at that time was a beaming, modern, beautifully sculptured Grecian-type city, filled with beautiful, multileveled homes which contained large central gardens, mosaic walks, fountains and even indoor bathrooms and steam baths. What skills would Jesus have acquired? He would have been trained to keep family records, pay bills, order materials, write and sign contracts, and barter – both in the marketplace and with passing caravans – for tools and building supplies. Construction skills would have included a sense of proportion; symmetry; harmonies of colour; adaptation to scale; choice of location; site preparation; laying of foundations and supporting structures; and finishing interiors, including the delicate mosaics and decorative features.

Jesus' family. Jesus had at least four brothers, James, Simon, Joses (or Joseph), and Jude (or Judas), and at least two sisters.⁷ Interestingly, James only seems to have become a Christian once he witnessed Jesus' resurrection,⁸ later becoming the pastor of the Jerusalem church and writing the book of James. Sometime after Jesus was 12 years old, his father Joseph died – placing much of the responsibility and leadership of the family on his shoulders. This would have accelerated his leadership development.

Jesus' appearance. None of the Gospels say anything about his looks. We know nothing about his height, stature or eye colour. We can assume that popular images of 'gentle Jesus, meek and mild' or Jesus having 'model looks' (in the first centuries of the church, the Greeks portrayed him as a young, beardless figure resembling the god Apollo) are inaccurate – his trade would have given him calloused hands, broad shoulders, strong arms and a sunburnt face. Besides, it had been prophesied that the Messiah would grow up 'like a young plant, like a root out of dry ground; having no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him.'⁹

THE TIMES OF JESUS



In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. Joseph went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem. (Luke 2:1-4)

Jesus was a Jew. Descended from David, Jesus was not a Christian, but a Jew. Today's Scripture locates Jesus' place and time in history at the cross-roads of Judaism in Palestine and Roman occupation of the Mediterranean basin. His adoptive father, Joseph, raised Jesus in Galilee, while seeing to it that he was born in Bethlehem, near Jerusalem.

Jesus was amongst the 500,000 to 600,000 Jews living in Palestine, the region their founder Abraham had settled two millennia before. About 18,000 of these residents were clergy and priests.¹

Jesus lived in Galilee. Two to three times a year, the Jews of Palestine would converge in Jerusalem, a city that was home to some 55,000 people. During these major feasts, the city's population could swell to 180,000. The journey back from Jerusalem to Galilee in springtime is a journey from brown to green, from an arid, rocky terrain to some of the lushest fields in the Mediterranean basin. Fruits and vegetables grow in abundance, fishermen work the Sea of Galilee, and beyond rolling hills to the west lies the shimmering blue of the Mediterranean itself.²

Because Galilee was a motley collection of many races and religions, distinctly tainted with foreign and distasteful elements; in the opinion of the religious bigots of Jerusalem, they were generally looked upon with varying degrees of pity and contempt.

Jesus grew up in a multiracial society. The land of Galilee, Judea and Idumea (Edom) was made up of various races or mixtures of races. For example, the Decapolis ('Ten Towns') the other side of the sea of Galilee were mainly Gentiles. Particularly in his business, Jesus would have worked with Canaanites, Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans and various other races from the East. He would have encountered all the assorted forms of racism, prejudice, curses and epithets common in his day.

Roman oppression. Rome had taken military and political possession of most of the Mediterranean basin. Palestine was prized for its exports of fruit, grains, olives, wine, oils, spices, and the by no means meagre returns to Roman treasuries from the heavy system of taxation imposed upon the people. Rome had installed puppet kings, such as the half-Jewish Herod, to represent Caesar in that region.

Jewish resistance. No nation brought Rome more difficulty – there was the constant threat of rebellion from the Jewish people, who saw the Roman invasion as an affront not only to their culture, but to their God. Contrary to the Roman tolerance for many gods, the Jews held tenaciously to the notion of one God, their God, who had revealed to them a distinct culture as the Chosen People.³

Various Jewish groups. For several centuries, Jews danced a tightrope between assimilation and separation, the first required to live in the larger world, the second demanded by their faith. Inside Palestine, Jews divided into sects that can be defined in terms of the way they understood the appropriate degree and sign of separation from a present and powerful Greco-Roman influence.⁴

On one extreme, the rebellious Zealots sought a military insurrection. When Jesus was a boy, Rome crucified thousands of Zealots, a form of execution reserved for the worst of the worst. On the other extreme, the Sadducees remained Jewish in culture, but rejected supernatural beliefs in an afterlife or divine intervention on this earth. It seemed good to them to cooperate with Rome, as since they believed there was no future system of reward and punishment, they may as well enjoy their limited time on earth. A temple-based ruling council of 71 men, called the Sanhedrin, was granted limited authority by Rome in return for scouting out any sign of insurrection.

It was mainly the Pharisees who interacted with Jesus. They were the popular party of the middle class and vacillated between separatism and collaboration. They held to high standards external purity, particularly on such matters as Sabbath observance, ritual cleanliness, and the exact time of feast days. They treated non-observant Jews as 'Gentiles', shutting them out of local councils, boycotting their businesses, and ostracizing them from meals and social affairs.⁵

Jesus and these groups. Jesus managed to confound and alienate each of the groups in Palestine. With his emphasis on another kingdom and his teachings such as the Good Samaritan, he parted from the Zealots. By threatening the temple, he parted from the Sanhedrin (they would crucify him for this). By teaching about the afterlife and the living God, he parted from the Sadducees; and when he broke their laws, he parted from the Pharisees.

Rather, Jesus held out a third way, neither separation nor collaboration, radically changing the emphasis from the kingdom of Herod or Caesar to the kingdom of God,⁶ which turned out, in essence, not to be political-military.

ONE OF US



Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity. He had to be made like them, fully human in every way. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted. (Heb 2:14, 17-18)

On that first Christmas night, the God who knows no bounds took on the shocking confines of a baby's skin, the ominous restraints of mortality. It's true that Jesus might be 'the image of the invisible God' (Col 1:15) and 'the exact representation of God's being' (Heb 1:3) but the few eyewitnesses that night saw only an infant, taking his first breaths into never-before-used lungs.¹

Jesus has shared in our humanity. He was not a mystical drifter appearing out of the fog. He was a real person who sometimes experienced bone-deep exhaustion and famishing hunger, who relished food and wine in the company of friends, who breathed, walked, perspired, slept, ate, sang, laughed, wept and experienced the same sexual drive as the rest of us.

Jesus experienced our full emotional range. We wrongly imagine him to be calm, cool and collected as he strode like a robot among excitable humans. Rather, in the Gospels we see how other people affected Jesus deeply: obstinacy frustrated him, self-righteousness infuriated him, simple faith thrilled him. At times he is excitable, impulsively 'moved with compassion' or 'filled with pity'. In him, there is sympathy for a person suffering from leprosy, exuberance over his disciples' successes, a blast of anger at cold-hearted legalists, grief over an unreceptive city... and then those awful cries of anguish in Gethsemane and on the cross.²

The early church quickly abandoned his humanity. On Day 23, we will see how Jesus' feet lift off the ground in his ascension. At that point the Jesus of history (his humanity stressed) becomes the Christ of faith (his divinity accented). Yet we must avoid the error of thinking his humanity has been eclipsed by his divinity. For example, no sooner had the church discovered that the man Jesus was also divine, when many, rightfully worshipping him as God, began to deny that he was fully human. This false teaching was called 'Docetism' (meaning 'appearance'). Docetists claimed that although Jesus appeared to be human, he was not really. To counter this false teaching, the New Testament authors often stress that 'Jesus Christ has come in the flesh'.³

THERE ARE THREE REASONS WHY JESUS' HUMANITY IS IMPORTANT:

1) Jesus can redeem our humanity, because he has assumed it. As foretold, the Seed of Eve – a genuine human being like ourselves – must do battle with the Snake to free humanity once again. Only a Jesus who has assumed our humanity could atone and reconcile it. An angel can be a messenger. A mortal man can be a messiah. But the mediator between God and humankind must be both God and Man.⁴

2) Jesus can comfort us in our pain, because he has felt it. The Son of God has walked in our shoes. If we have experienced the loss of loved ones, the betrayal of friends, dignity-eroding poverty, life-threatening sickness, the brutal oppression of tyrants, discrimination, false accusations, injustice, the shadow of an early death, rejection, and physical and emotional pain beyond imagining, the good news is we have a Saviour who can 'sympathize with our weaknesses.'⁵ For example, let's hone in on his poverty: notice that Jesus' parents couldn't afford a decent place to stay the night he was born. In his travels, he often had no place to rest his head.⁶ When he was crucified, the soldiers divided amongst themselves the clothing on his body, his only possessions.⁷

3) Jesus can help us withstand temptation, because he has overcome it. He has been tempted in every way – in thought, word and deed. The one difference is that he never fell. Having experienced the agony of being tempted, he is compassionate towards our fallibility, and promises to fortify us where we are most prone to fall.⁸

Finally, though Jesus was like us, a simple exploration of his life shows he was not like any of us at all. Philip Yancey says this best: "The more I studied Jesus, the more difficult it became to pigeonhole him. He said little about the Roman occupation, the main topic of conversation among his countrymen, and yet he took up a whip to drive petty profiteers from the Jewish temple. He urged obedience to the Mosaic law while acquiring the reputation as a lawbreaker. He could be stabbed by sympathy for a stranger yet turn on his best friend with the flinty rebuke, 'Get behind me, Satan!' He had uncompromising views on rich men and loose women, yet both types enjoyed his company. One day miracles seemed to flow out of Jesus; the next day his power was blocked by people's lack of faith. One day he talked in detail of the Second Coming; another, he knew neither the day nor hour. He fled from arrest at one point and marched inexorably toward it at another. He spoke eloquently about peace-making, then told his disciples to procure swords. His extravagant claims about himself kept him at the centre of controversy, but when he did something truly miraculous he tended to hush it up. As Walter Wink has said, if Jesus had never lived, we would not have been able to invent him. Two words one could never think of applying to the Jesus of the Gospels: boring and predictable. How is it, then, that the church has tamed such a character—has, in Dorothy Sayers' words, 'very efficiently pared the claws of the Lion of Judah, certified Him as a fitting household pet for pale curates and pious old ladies'?"⁹

THE KINGDOM AND THE SPIRIT



As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love, with whom I am pleased." (Matt 3:16-17)

Especially in the final parts of the Old Testament, prophecies abound of how God will soon take his saving intervention in the world to a new level by 'becoming king',¹ sending the King-Messiah, the Son of David, who would serve as his earthly counterpart, restoring God's people and blessing the entire world, pouring out his Spirit 'on all flesh', bringing about a new creation and a new exodus. By the time of Jesus, this constellation of promises had come to be known as 'the kingdom of God' – an expectation of an unprecedented stage in the dynamic, saving reign of God.

No one knew exactly how this would happen, but one day it did. Jesus' baptism is the moment he steps out of obscurity onto the stage of kingdom come. This first public rising from the waters, descended upon by the dove of the Spirit, being called the 'Son' who 'pleases God', is loaded with meaning that helps us grasp the rest of his life's work:

His baptism was his inauguration as the Messiah-King. Although Jesus is the eternal Son of God, 'Son' also implies Messiah. Psalm 2 prophesies that when God installs his king in Zion, he will declare, 'You are my Son'. The language 'in whom I am well pleased' is taken from Isaiah 40-55, which speaks of the Spirit-anointed, suffering and saving Servant.

There exists a stunning parallel between Jesus' and David's callings and empowerment services as inaugurated kings: Both were chosen by God, commissioned to be king at the age of 30, marked by a powerful anointing from the Spirit, witnessed only by a motley crew of people, before they would widely be recognized as the kings they are.² Like David, in 1 Samuel 16:13, Jesus had the power of the Spirit from this day forward.³

His baptism shows the kingdom to be a New Exodus. 1300 years prior, Israel had been delivered from enslavement in Egypt, as its people passed through the Red Sea, emerging as a freed nation. Most likely, Jesus' baptism was an act of solidarity with the oppressed and exiled nation that needed to repent and enter into the new exodus that the waters symbolize.⁴ As such, God's kingdom is a liberating one – setting us free from our bondage to death, demons, sin, sickness and hell.

His baptism conflates the kingdom with New Creation. In the Targum, a translation of the Old Testament popular in the first century, Genesis 1:2 which speaks of God's Spirit hovering over creation-in-process, is translated as: 'The Spirit of God fluttered like a dove above the waters.' Similarly, a dove once sent out from a floating ark returned with a leaf in its beak, as a sample of the renewed creation God's people would live

in. The descent of the Spirit-dove over the water-glistening Jesus is a picture of the kingdom as the arrival of new creation, where God heals what is broken and promises to bring this world to its originally intended destiny.

The Son and the Spirit. The baptism of Jesus comprises a cosmic rendezvous with the union of Son and Spirit, united together to usher in the kingdom. Jesus as the bearer of the Holy Spirit will also be the dispenser of the Holy Spirit as John the Baptist predicted⁵ – not only did the Spirit come upon Jesus in power, but once Jesus returned to heaven, he then poured out his Spirit upon his church so that we can continue his work of bringing in the kingdom.

Jesus' focus on the kingdom. Jesus' primary message was that the kingdom of God had arrived. So doing, he was announcing that God had at last become king, and that his earthly counterpart had finally taken up his crown and sceptre on the earth. Jesus' entire ministry is the ministry of new creation and new exodus – whether it be exorcisms that plunder Satan's kingdom,⁶ feeding the thousands in the way God had once fed the newly liberated Israel in the wilderness,⁷ or healing the sick.⁸

The kingdom is here, but not yet. Israel had expected this present evil age to end and be eclipsed by a new age/creation/exodus of the kingdom. What no one had expected is that Jesus would usher in the kingdom age right in the midst of the fallen, broken age. So doing, the kingdom dawned on the earth even though darkness will only be finally vanquished when Jesus returns. In this sense, ever since the arrival of Jesus, the kingdom is already here, but it is not fully here. It has come, is busy coming, and yet will only one day come. We live in an age of cosmic overlap. Yet we, like David the king's first subjects, know that we have aligned our lives to God's select king.

Empowered by the Spirit. Why did Jesus not perform miracles before he was baptised by the Spirit? Because he was unable to. Though divine, he had forfeited access to his divine powers when he incarnated. This was part of his full embrace of our humanity. This also encourages us: though human, we too are given the Spirit, and we too, by the power of the Spirit are enabled to usher in the liberating and renewing reign of God – though not to the same degree as he was able to. After all, he alone was given 'the Spirit without measure'.⁹ Nonetheless, we who have at least a small portion of his boundless power can expect to see his kingdom come, if only in part, in our day.

WEEK THREE

LIKE FATHER LIKE SON



*No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.
(John 1:18)*

Yesterday we learnt what Jesus came to do – to usher in the saving reign of God. Today we learn who Jesus is – the Son of God. In fact, when Jesus is baptised, both truths are evident. As he rises up from the water, he is commissioned as God’s Promised King and affirmed as God’s Beloved Son. As the heavens open, and the Spirit descends, the Father whispers, “This is my Son whom I love”. Interestingly, the doting Father would whisper those same words again in the middle and last part of Jesus’ ministry.¹

In fact, in that water-exiting moment, we get an exquisite snapshot into the inner life of God – one God, yes, but somehow also three distinct persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, an eternal community of love. Theologians would later call this three-and-one aspect of God, “Trinity”.

The Father loves the Son. In today’s verse we see that the Son is, on the one hand, God, but on the other hand, in closest relationship with the Father. The Greek language literally says he rested on the Father’s chest. Actually, the use of the word “relationship” is putting it mildly: the Father loves his Son with a unique and quite dazzling intensity – “the Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands”;² “the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does”;³ he did so from before the foundation of the world.⁴ The Son is “the One he loves”;⁵ “my chosen one in whom I delight”;⁶ the One he yearns to glorify, the One for whom he does everything, his Alpha and Omega; all things would be created for him, his image and heir.⁷ As the fourth-century theologian Athanasius put it: “The Son is the Father’s All.”⁸

The Son is close to the Father. God was very rarely spoken of as Father in the Old Testament. Yet Jesus calls him Father some 165 times in the Gospel, even adopting the most intimate language, addressing him as “Abba”,⁹ an Aramaic title of closest child-father affection.

We must separate Jesus’ relationship with the Father from ours. Though Jesus taught the astounding truth that the Father loved us even as he loved the Son,¹⁰ yet we are, by faith in Jesus and the gift of spiritual birth, adopted sons and daughters of God. Jesus is the eternal, divine and redeeming Son. We, however, are temporal, created and redeemed sons/daughters. This difference is so substantial that Jesus never speaks to his disciples of “our Father” but rather “your Father and my Father”.¹¹

The Son came to make the Father known. Though Jesus did not have children, there was something fatherly about him. For example, John wrote of his own transformation from a “son of thunder” (Jesus’ nickname for him) to “the disciple Jesus loved”.

Though John's Gospel starts with the One who rests on the Father's chest, it ends with John himself resting his head on the Son's chest (13:23).

In fact, Jesus had his chest pierced with a spear so that we could know God as our Father. The adoption papers, signed in his blood, afford us the privilege of calling God "Abba".¹²

On earth, Jesus lived and ministered in tandem with the Father. "I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me."¹³ "Though he is equal in Deity as a part of the Trinity, yet on earth he was submissive in his role as human being, as the Son of Man, walking planet earth. Jesus walks in humility before his Father."¹⁴ Jesus never performed a miracle on his own behalf. Jesus didn't live for himself, he lived for his Father. Everything he did was according to the will of his Father.

More than that, his actions were in partnership with the Father. Jesus worked as his Father worked. Jesus said, "My Father is working until now, and I am working. The Son can do... only what he sees the Father doing."¹⁵

On earth, Jesus cultivated continual communion with the Father. As such, he could say to his disciples, "You will leave me alone, yet the Father is with me."¹⁶ During his daily life, he communicated back and forth with the Father incessantly. He did not need to "say his prayers" – his life was a prayer. Keeping constant company with the Father, he stayed true, heartbeat to heartbeat, to the Father's desires. Jesus lived for the Father alone; the Father was enough for him. From eternity past till eternity future this is how it is.

The only break in that closeness was when Jesus was on the cross, where he became a curse for us¹⁷ and cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"¹⁸ But even there the Father did not abandon him. Rather, along with the Son, he absorbed into himself the horrors and grief of our collective sin.¹⁹

On earth, Jesus guarded times of isolated intimacy with the Father. The busier Jesus got, the more solitude he carved into his life. "When he had sent the multitudes away, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray."²⁰ "Early in the morning, Jesus went out and departed to a solitary place; and there he prayed."²¹ "In those days [that] he went out to the mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God."²² If the One who knew unbroken fellowship with his Father needed to pray, how much more should we?

JESUS THE DRAGON-SLAYER



At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him. (Mark 1:12-13)

The baby and the dragon. Every year, Nativity scenes unfold, with children dressed up as donkeys, sheep, shepherds, wise men, daddy Joseph, and, the most important of all, Mother Mary – always holding a “baby boy” doll. We all sing “Silent Night”, snap pics and then queue for hot chocolate.

While there is undoubtedly a loveliness about this saccharine version of the Gospel Narrative, no schools or churches seem to include Revelation 12 in their Nativity plays, where another layer of truth is revealed about the birth of Jesus: Imagine a woman in the throes of childbirth, screaming in pain. Then imagine that standing over the woman is a seven-headed dragon; crouched, poised, salivating and ready to devour the child as soon as it is expelled from the birth canal.¹

This version reminds us that Jesus was born into enemy-occupied territory, where Satan not only slithers like a serpent, but also soars like a dragon and roams like a lion, looking for someone to devour. This best explains the hostilities baby Jesus encountered. Though Mary’s labour pains had begun, every Bethlehem door shut in her face, forcing her to give birth with no midwife present, in an animal-trough. Though the child survived, he soon faced a worse danger yet. Trying to destroy baby Jesus, King Herod killed hundreds of boys in Bethlehem.² Luckily, his parents made it across the border in the shadows of the night, becoming Palestinian refugees in Egypt.³ These stories reek of the odour of dragon-breath.

Combat warriors. Philip Yancey unpacks Jesus’ 40-day temptation by Satan masterfully: “Like single combat warriors, two giants of the cosmos converged on a scene of desolation. One, just beginning his mission in enemy territory, arrived in a badly weakened state. The other, confident and on home turf, seized the initiative. “Although Satan posed the tests, in the end it was he who flunked them. In two tests he merely asked Jesus to prove himself; by the third he was demanding worship, something God would never accede to. The Temptation unmasked Satan, while God remained masked. If you are God, said Satan, then dazzle me. Act like God should act. Jesus replied, ‘Only God makes those decisions; therefore I do nothing at your command.’”

“In these three temptations, Satan proposed an enticing improvement. He tempted Jesus toward the good parts of being human without the bad: to savour the taste of bread without being subject to the fixed rules of hunger and of agriculture, to confront risk with no real danger, to enjoy fame and power without the prospect of painful rejection – in short, to wear a crown but not a cross.⁴

Later demonic temptations. Even Jesus' disciples would take to and promote the slithery idea of a crown without a cross. After hearing Jesus' prediction of suffering and death, Peter said, "Never Lord! This shall never happen to you!" Jesus, smelling dragon's breath, answered swiftly, "Get behind me Satan."⁵

Three years later, in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus seems to have re-enacted the original scene where Adam and Eve were tempted (also in a garden) to find a way of flourishing, outside of trusting in and obeying the Father. The difference is that where they fell, Jesus – pouring blood, sweat and tears – remained standing. The next day, hanging on the cross, serpentine spectators taunted him, "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us ... Let him come down from the cross, and we will believe in him." But Jesus resisted the idea of calling on 72 000 angels and chose instead to bleed out. As Philip Yancey points out, "For Jesus to save others, quite simply, he could not save himself."⁶

Jesus the exorcist. Throughout the pages of the Gospels, Jesus cast demons out as regularly and easily as we might swat flies on a hot day (in fact, one name for Satan is "Beelzebub" – Lord of the flies). One story provides some interesting insight. Matthew 8:28-34 tells of two crazed, violent men who, by the power of the demons that possessed them, know that Jesus is the Son of God and their days are numbered. Though Satan's general work is to deceive, to tempt, to hold people in spiritual blindness, we see here that he may attack in even stronger ways. For reasons we do not know, these men were physically and psychologically bound by Satan's minions. Fascinatingly, these demons beg Jesus, "If you drive us out, send us into the herd of pigs"... and Jesus obliges! This unusual request reveals several things:

1. Satan is on Jesus' leash. This is the second place in the Gospels where Satan asks Jesus for permission, and Jesus gives it.⁷ We must not forget that the devil is not Jesus' opposite equal, but rather a fallen angel.

2. Satan seeks to drive and destroy. Jesus allows all to see what Satan had been trying to do with the bound duo, by letting them have their way with the pigs. Jesus gently woos, Satan drives. Jesus gives life, Satan seeks to suck life out of us. As Jesus says, "The enemy comes to steal, kill and destroy but I have come to give life to the full."⁸

3. Satan's end is inevitable. Though Jesus broke the Dragon's back in his earthly ministry, crucifixion and resurrection, yet "the pigs'" fate in the sea prefigures Satan's final fate when God will throw him into the lake of fire.⁹

A PASSION FOR PEOPLE



When he saw the crowds, Jesus had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field." (Matt 10:36-38)

A heart of love. Jesus did not come to condemn the world, but to save it.¹ He was driven by a gut-wrenching compassion. If we have any doubt that God's heart is an open wound of love, not made of stone, we need but look at Jesus' deep care for the people he encountered in his few years of ministry.

A concern for crowds. In Mark's Gospel, for example, wonder-filled and pressing crowds rally around Jesus. They gather around his healing touch, his amazing teaching, his liberating power. Not once or twice, but chapter after chapter. Some of them become his disciples, but many don't. "The whole town gathered at the door, and Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons."² "Once again Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them."³ "Jesus withdrew with his disciples to the lake, and a large crowd from Galilee followed."⁴ "Then Jesus entered a house, and again a crowd gathered."⁵ "Again Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water's edge."⁶

And on and on, page after page, Mark tells of his ministry to the multitudes – his heart stretching wide to take them all in.

Jesus loved the crowds precisely because he saw the people in the crowd. Jesus does not minister to a faceless crowd. In Mark's Gospel, time and again, we're told of how Jesus hones in on one individual in the crowd: a paralysed man who takes up his mat in front of a crowd, after dropping in on Jesus from an open ceiling,⁷ the woman with the bleeding disorder who sneaks up to him in the crowd,⁸ a deaf man whom Jesus takes away from the crowd to minister to,⁹ and a blind man whose first sight is Jesus.¹⁰ Jesus loved the crowd because he loved individuals.

A downward mobility. Jesus paid most attention to society's bottom-feeders: the dirty, the disfigured, those afflicted with sickness, blindness and rotting skin, the deformed, a haemorrhaging woman; the lunatic and possessed, the abandoned and the hungry who begged for bread on the streets; the women who were used, abused and thrown out like trash; the small unimportant people – widows and orphans; prostitutes and the homeless, the despised rich and the despairing poor, the very young and the very sick. Jesus received all these people, felt their hurt – and reached out to heal them.¹¹ "Blessed are the poor in spirit," said Jesus. One commentary translates it as, "Blessed are the desperate." With nowhere else to turn, the desperate may just turn to Jesus,

the only one who can offer the deliverance they long for. Jesus really believed that a person who is poor in spirit, or mourning, or persecuted, or hungry and thirsty for righteousness has a peculiar advantage over the rest of us."¹²

Grace for the sin-addicted and sin-broken. The Pharisees excluded people they deemed unworthy of synagogue attendance – the licentious and the drunks. They superimposed the teachings of Moses to avoid unclean foods onto the kinds of people they could accept. They feared contamination by the undesirables. Jesus held the opposite belief – holiness could be transferred through merciful interactions with outsiders. Going out of his way to fraternise with the morally compromised and the excluded irreligious, Jesus turned outsiders into insiders.

Think of the hated tax collectors; Jews willing to collect taxes for Rome from fellow-Jews on a commission-basis. Even the poor were commanded to refuse alms from their filthy money. Yet when Jesus noticed the despised Zacchaeus in a tree, so short he needed help to see over the crowds, Jesus invited himself over to lunch – enough time with Zach to metamorphosise him into a new man.

Metaphors for mission. Jesus never envisioned his church “winning the culture war” through the common agencies of power that others may use – social pressure, shaming, politics or control. Many of Jesus’ parables reveal Jesus’ plan to release a creative minority of disciples who influence and reach cultures and people through humble means of service and love, following in his tow – like sheep among wolves, yeast in bread, salt in meat.

The Great Commission. Just before leaving for heaven, Jesus told his team of disciples to go and make disciples of all nations, promising to support them in their efforts.¹³ So doing, “the story of the Bible” moves from “the widest horizon (i.e., creation and nations) to the narrower (Israel), until it reaches its target: the Son of Man. After the redeeming work of Jesus, the movement is reversed: from the most particular centre (Christ) to Jerusalem, and then to the ends of the earth.”¹⁴

Amazingly, this Galilean, who in his lifetime spoke to fewer people than would fill just one of the many stadiums Billy Graham has filled, changed the world more than any other person. He introduced a new force field into history, and now holds the allegiance of a third of all people on earth,¹⁵ and he calls them each by name.

JESUS' INNER CIRCLE



Jesus called those he wanted, and they came to him. He appointed twelve that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons. These are the twelve: Simon, whom he gave the name Peter, James son of Zebedee and his brother John (to them he gave the name Boanerges, which means “sons of thunder”), Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus, Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.
(Mark 3:13-18)

Why twelve? Jesus chose 12 disciples (aka apostles) as the vanguard for his movement. He was bringing about a new Israel. The old Israel consisting of the descendants of the 12 Patriarchs had failed in its call to take God’s blessing to the world. In fact, 10 of these 12 tribes had lost their faith-conviction centuries before, and later their existence. Jesus was re-constituting the people of God under his leadership, giving Israelites (and later Gentiles) a chance to become God’s outward-facing people in the world.

Why he called them. Today’s passage gives us two reasons: 1) That they might be with him. Jesus needed partners in his work, and friends in his life. In one place he describes them as his new family, his mothers, brothers and sisters.¹ 2) That he might send them out. Jesus had a vision to reach the world, but knew his time was short. He would train them up to be his hands, feet and mouth when he returned to the Father.

A selective Rabbi. Jesus was called a Rabbi,² because a Jewish Rabbi, at the age of 30, would take on a party of young disciples, devoted to learning all they could from him. Jesus’ selection of 12 disciples was Rabbi-like. One key difference – unlike other rabbis, Jesus handpicked his, rather than letting them choose him. Such was Jesus’ magnetism that it took only a few phrases to persuade them to leave their jobs and families to join him. These 12 included two sets of brothers—James and John, and Peter and Andrew—who worked as partners on fishing boats. When he called them they abandoned their business (ironically, after Jesus gave them their most successful fishing day ever).³

WHAT KINDS OF PEOPLE DOES HE CHOOSE?

Jesus chooses a diversity of people. Consider how different Simon the Zealot (a party that violently opposed Rome) is from Matthew the tax collector (employed by Rome’s puppet ruler). Jesus teaches them that following him involves the challenge of loving people very different to themselves – Peter at one stage asks Jesus how many times exactly he is expected to forgive one of these brothers.⁴

Jesus chooses unpromising people. One more grain of evidence the Gospels are historically reliable: the disciples who initially led the Christian church are portrayed

as a bunch of disappointing dimwits – hardly a good PR exercise for the church. Embarrassingly, James and John want to call down fire on an inhospitable town, then later send their mom to beg Jesus to give them the top two positions in his kingdom. Time and again, Peter puts his foot in his mouth – discouraging Jesus from his life’s work, interrupting Jesus at crucial moments with nonsense-speech, and swearing he will never ever let Jesus down. Again and again we find Jesus, deeply frustrated, rebuking his disciples for their dullness and their lack of faith. In his final night before his death, he asks his closest disciples to stay awake for his sake (and theirs) – and they fall asleep! When he is arrested, Peter panics and chops off a servant’s ear, flees for his life, denies his association with Jesus three times to another servant and finally locks himself indoors.⁵

What is clear enough is that Jesus does not call the worthy. Rather, the One who calls slowly, but surely, makes them worthy. Similarly, he does not call the equipped. Rather he equips them for the call. One of Jesus’ happiest moments is when his disciples return from a mission trip, sharing reports that many lives were touched and changed. Jesus seems to draw a great thrill from seeing a ragtag of losers becoming portals of heaven’s power.⁶

Jesus chooses people who stay open to his grace. Judas, who betrays Jesus, lets Jesus down badly, yet again so does Peter. The difference between the two is that Judas, remorseful but apparently unrepentant, accepted the logical consequences of his deed, took his own life, unwilling to receive what Jesus had come to offer him. Peter, humiliated but still open to Jesus’ message of grace and forgiveness, went on to lead a revival in Jerusalem and did not stop until he had reached Rome.⁷

Jesus chooses people who are held by conviction. Despite the disciples’ unpromising start, they do get the job done once Jesus returns to heaven. John, the son of thunder, becomes the apostle of love. Impetuous Peter, whom Jesus first helped bring in an enormous catch of fish, and who later denies Jesus to a nobody, later tells everybody about Jesus – and pulls in a “catch” of 3000 lives at the Jerusalem church’s first-ever open service. As the nascent church spreads, only John is spared finally from martyrdom. Church tradition, for example, says that the brothers Andrew and Peter were crucified – the former in Greece, the latter in Rome (and upside down!).

What conviction lay hold of them? What would transform a group of shivering, shaking, terrified men who had abandoned Jesus into a force that would change the world – even if it meant dying prematurely and far from home? What could explain their transition into men who would stand up to authorities, to scourging, imprisonment, and to execution? In Peter’s words, “This Jesus, God raised up again, to which we are all witnesses.”⁸

JESUS THE MIRACLE-MAKER



When John heard in prison what Jesus was doing, he sent his disciples to ask him, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. Blessed is anyone who does not take offence on account of me." (Matt 11:2-6)

We're not the first people to wrongly assume that if Jesus is real, he will solve our problems. John the Baptist, as a prophet, had prepared the way for Jesus: "One is coming after me." He had pointed to Jesus and declared, "Behold, the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world!" Yet his faithfulness to God's call landed him in prison where he was eventually executed. Perhaps he had hoped Jesus would rescue him from his pit. With no help coming, John the prophet becomes John the doubter: "Jesus, are you really the saving king?" Jesus responds by recounting his healings. While not all, there are many who have experienced his powerful intervention.

Jesus heals. About a third of the stories in the Gospels tell of Jesus' healing power, with about 35 examples being given. In his first year of ministry, what gets his name out there is not his teachings but his miracles. Miracles flowed out of Jesus like water from a tap, whether it is turning water into wine, or taking a pre-teen's packed lunch and feeding thousands with it, or telling the stormy winds and waves that were ruining his sleep to stop – and like a trained dog they do, or visiting a hospital of sorts and telling a man who had been crippled for 38 years to pick up his mat and walk, or (most dramatically of all) visiting the corpse-stenched gravesite of Lazarus where, after wiping away his tears of grief, Jesus commands his friend to come out – and he does!¹

WHY DID JESUS HEAL?

1. His healings are snapshots of Jesus' kingdom. Jesus' list to John of the particular healings he had performed were all mentioned in the prophetic scroll of Isaiah as signs of the coming Messianic kingdom. For example, the blind receive sight,² the lame walk,³ lepers are cured,⁴ the deaf hear,⁵ the dead are raised,⁶ and the good news is preached to the poor.⁷

God's kingdom, though not fully here, has arrived in sample form in the first coming of Jesus. Although the sun has not reached its midday strength, already now shafts of light shine from the horizon, piercing the darkness. The kingdom of God has been unleashed in the world. Not every life is changed by it, but more and more are, daily. Jesus' point to John applies to us too: when doubts arise because it seems that your life remains unchanged, look to those testimonies of changed lives, each of them serving as an antidote to doubt. But, more importantly, look to Jesus as the

great sample of the kingdom – here is One whose first coming is bracketed by two impossibilities: a virgin’s womb and an empty tomb. He entered our world through a door marked, No Entrance and left through a door marked No Exit.⁸

2. His healings are samples of Jesus’ compassion. “Matthew, Mark and Luke give varying accounts of Jesus’ healing a leper, but all three include the same explosive sentence: ‘Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man.’ The crowd must have gasped—had not Moses’ law forbidden such an act? The leprosy victim may have flinched. For how many months or years had he been deprived of the sensation of warm human flesh against his own? That one touch from Jesus brought his state of disease to an end. Shalom was restored. In fact, Jesus’ response to disease set a pattern for the church that formed around him, and Christians proceeded to follow his example of caring for the sick, the poor and the outcast.”⁹

3. His healings are signs of Jesus’ reality. John’s Gospel, for example, is structurally arranged around healing miracles, also called ‘signs’ – in that they signify something beyond themselves. They are “signs” of Jesus’ glory,¹⁰ each highlighting another aspect of his radiant goodness. They are: 1) the miracle of wine-making¹¹ – Jesus is the joy giver, 2) the healing of the official’s son¹² – Jesus the faith raiser, 3) the paralytic’s recovery¹³ – Jesus the grace giver, 4) the feeding of the 5000¹⁴ – Jesus the bread of life, 5) Jesus’ walking on water¹⁵ – Jesus with us in our storms, 6) the healing of the blind man¹⁶ – Jesus the light of the world, and 7) the raising of Lazarus¹⁷ – Jesus the resurrection and the life. These signs remind us that the greatest gift and miracle of all is to have Jesus in our lives.

4. Finally, his healings are NOT meant to be strong-arm conversions. Jesus never performed miracles to manipulate people to convert to him. He knew that although faith may produce miracles, miracles do not necessarily produce faith. On one occasion, he refused to perform miracles, challenging people instead to trust in him even if their problems were not solved. Sadly, they took offence and walked away from him.¹⁸ We who sometimes experience unanswered prayer must not forget Jesus’ promise to John in prison: “Blessed are those who do not take offence”. There is a special blessing for the person who seems to be abandoned in a pit, yet still declares God’s goodness and Jesus’ reality.

WEEK FOUR

THE MASTER TEACHER



When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law. When Jesus came down from the mountainside, large crowds followed him. (Matt 7:28-8:1)

Flipping through the Gospels, one is struck by how much Jesus said and taught – 366 units of teaching that, though usually clustered together in larger sermons or conversations, stand on their own. In the Gospels, Jesus so captivates people that they will sit without food for days just to be filled by his words.

WHAT'S SO AMAZING ABOUT HIS TEACHING?

He brims with wisdom. Jesus gives his most enduring lessons on the spot, in spontaneous response to questions. A woman had seven successive husbands: Whose wife will she be in the life to come? Is it lawful to pay taxes to pagan authorities? What must I do to inherit eternal life? Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? How can a man be born when he is old?¹

He tells stories. Whether they are about a scolding woman wearing down the patience of a judge, a king plunging into an ill-planned war, a group of children quarrelling in the street, a man mugged and left for dead by robbers, a single woman who loses a penny and acts as if she has lost everything,² Jesus told parables, communicating surprising spiritual truths with everyday illustrations. Instead of merely saying, “God loves you no matter what”, he tells of a heartsick father who scans the horizon every night for some sign of his wayward son.³

He is a wordsmith. “Do not worry about tomorrow. Tomorrow can worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.”⁴ “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.”⁵ “Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves.”⁶ “For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.”⁷ “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?”⁸

He asks penetrating questions. “But what about you? Who do you say I am?”⁹ “What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world yet forfeit their soul?”¹⁰ Very often Jesus would answer a question with a question. When people ask why Jesus and his disciples fast so seldom and celebrate so much, he asks, “How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them?”¹¹ When the religious leaders confront Jesus by asking by what authority he is doing these things, he replies: “I will ask you one question. Answer me, then I will tell you.”¹²

He maximises teachable moments. As the two coins of a poor widow drop into the coffer, he teaches his disciples about sacrificial generosity.¹³ Encountering brothers who were squabbling over the correct division of inheritance money, he says, “Watch

out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.”¹⁴ By the way, Jesus speaks more about money and materialism than he did about prayer – a full 16 of his 36 parables deal with possessions and money. He speaks about everyday things and everyday life. In the Sermon on the Mount alone, he speaks of salt, light, pens, brothers, pennies, courts, prisons, fire, eyes, hands, knives, legal documents, thrones, hair, teeth, coats, sun, rain, trumpets, buildings, doors, rooms, perfume, faces, moths, rust, thieves, treasure, masters, money, food, drink, clothes, birds, flowers and so much more. His topics include blessing, persecution, significance, courage, conflict resolution, adultery, lust, divorce, remarriage, the power of words, manipulation, revenge, responding to attack, reputation, temptation, goals, priorities, materialism, anxiety, fashion and image, self-amendment, hypocrisy and decision-making.¹⁵

He teaches for internal transformation. Though Moses’ 613 laws focused mainly on external observance, Jesus taught for a change of heart: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart.”¹⁶ “First clean the inside of the cup and then the outside also will be clean.”¹⁷ A full 20 of his direct commands have to do with overcoming paralyzing fear: “Do not be afraid.”¹⁸

He teaches with authority and boldness. Unlike the Rabbis of his day, Jesus didn’t quote other Rabbis. He would say, “You have heard it said, but I tell you...” He is direct, sure. He did not just share information gleaned from study, but revelation received from heaven. There is a Spirit-empowered weight, liveliness and sharp edge to his words.

He practises what he preaches. Having just washed their feet, he teaches his disciples about servant leadership.¹⁹ He who says, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you”²⁰ later cries out from a cross, “Father forgive them.”

He preaches about himself. If we take Jesus himself out of the equation, many of his teachings lose their meaning. In the parable of the tenants, he is the True Owner’s son who is killed by the wicked tenants (the Judean leaders), who then lose their place.²¹ Then there are his “I am” statements: “I am the bread of life ... the gate ... the good shepherd ... the way ... the vine.”

WOMEN AND CHILDREN



*He asked her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?" Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him." Jesus said to her, "Mary."
(John 20:15-16)*

Jesus was unprecedented as a religious leader in the ancient world for the radical dignity he bestowed on children and women.

Jesus' revolutionary treatment of kids. He called a little child, whom he placed among them. "Unless you become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me."¹ On one occasion, the irritated disciples, fatigued by the long day's journey on foot, attempted to shoo away some children. Jesus became visibly upset and silenced the Twelve with a withering glance and the rebuke: "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them." He cancelled his afternoon's plans, stooped down, scooping each child up in his arms, treating them as the most important people in the world.² (So much for the wooden-faced and joyless Jesus we sometimes imagine.)

Kids in history have Jesus to thank. As the influence of Jesus grew in the Roman Empire, the authorities began to prohibit the widespread practices of abortion, exposure and infanticide.³ In later centuries, Christians started Sunday Schools to teach literacy to kids, which evolved into the modern schooling system.

Jesus' elevation of women. In those days, at every synagogue service, Jewish men prayed, "Blessed art thou, O Lord, who hast not made me a woman." Women sat in a separate section and were forbidden from talking to men outside of their families, or touching any man except their spouses. Some Rabbis instructed it was better that Torah should be burned than taught to a woman. Yet Jesus, who tenderly calls women "daughters of Abraham",⁴ thereby placing them on the same spiritual plane as men, chose to violate these norms in almost every encounter he had with them.

Jesus conversed with women. With a poor woman at a well, who was flummoxed by Jesus' open request for help and interaction with her, Jesus had a personal and theological discussion about her sexual past and her relationship with God. He then went on to use her to lead a spiritual revival.⁵ She had been abused by many men, as her story reveals. She had never been treated like this by a man before.

Jesus invited women to be his disciples. The first Rabbi in history to do so, Jesus commended Mary for sitting at his feet even while her sister Martha demanded she help her in the kitchen. Sitting at one's feet is a technical term for being someone's disciple. Jesus here contravened gender norms – it was the role of women to do the domestic roles, and the role of men to converse with the guest Rabbi and to sit under his teaching. Yet Jesus chides the pot-cleaning Martha: "You are worried and upset

about many things, but few things are needed — or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better.”⁶

Jesus challenged a child-rearing identity. In a culture where a woman’s honour was found in raising children, Jesus was once complimented by a woman who called out, “Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you.” Jesus shot back, “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it.”⁷ His edgy response was not undermining the dignity of raising children, but rather placing it second to a more ultimate calling that even a single woman could fulfil – being his disciple.

Jesus received the ministry of women. In Mark’s Gospel, the most highly honoured disciple of Jesus is an ex-prostitute who, smitten by his forgiveness, washes his feet with her hair and tears, then anoints him with expensive perfume. Jesus promises, “Wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.”⁸

In the Middle East of that day, teachers lived off the gifts of appreciative listeners. Luke points out that certain women who had been healed by Jesus—including Mary (called Magdalene); Joanna (the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod’s household); Susanna and many others—helped provide for him.⁹ Touchingly, some of these women made the long and dangerous journey from Galilee to Jerusalem at the time of the Passover Feast, and stayed by Jesus at the cross after his closest disciples had deserted him.¹⁰

Women were there when it mattered most. No person in history has been used by God more remarkably than Mary, Jesus’ mother. The first to hear and declare the gospel, she also carried in her body the Son of God. While her heart was being pierced at the execution of her son, Jesus asked his best friend John to care for her as his own mother. Not only were women first at Jesus’ cradle and last at the cross, women in all four Gospels were the first witnesses of Jesus’ resurrection – this, in a world where a woman’s testimony was disregarded! In fact the very first word the risen Jesus says is, “Woman”.¹¹

The apostle Paul would later put it like this: “In Christ Jesus you are all children of God. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”¹² It’s not surprising then that more women than men flocked into the early church in its first centuries – here they were treated with an unparalleled dignity. The first-ever woman to graduate from Oxford tells of what drew her to Jesus: “He never flattered or coaxed or patronised women. He rebuked without demeaning and praised without condescension; he took their questions and arguments seriously; never mapped out their sphere for them, never urged them to be feminine, or jeered at them for being female; had no axe to grind and no uneasy male dignity to defend.”¹³

THE PERSONAL TOUCH



The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, "Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners." (Matt 11:19)

A wide variety of friends. Jesus was "a person for others", keeping himself free—free for the other person. He would accept almost anybody's invitation to dinner, and as a result no public figure had a more diverse list of friends. Holiest man to ever live, he showed no sign of judgementalism. Then, as now, the best way to connect with people is to feast with them. Jesus had a love for food – we read of him eating bread, lamb, fish, eggs and relishing "the fruit of the vine". One story even shows him whipping up a breakfast of fish and toast for his disciples.¹ But what made Jesus come alive was the people he ate with. The Gospel of Luke alone describes no less than 10 meals Jesus enjoyed with friends, from tax collectors and their partners; Simon the Pharisee and his friends to his best friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus. He enjoyed a noon meal with Pharisees and teachers; organised a gigantic miracle feast of fish and bread for 5000 and had a one-on-one lunch with Zacchaeus. In his final days on earth he held the last supper with the Twelve, a late afternoon meal with two disciples on the day he rose from the dead, and a dinner with the 10 of the Twelve that same night.²

Spotting people in the crowds. Jesus loved a crowd of 300 people three hundred times more than he loved one person, because Jesus did not see crowds. He saw people. That's why he would zoom in on a short man hiding in a tree, or a woman who had non-stop internal bleeding. Even while he was on the cross he sensed the torment of his mother and best friend and intervened to comfort them both by giving her a new son and he a new mother. There too, he welcomed a crucified, dying criminal into his eternal care.³

A way with people. The Gospels show that Jesus quickly established intimacy with the people he met. Whether talking with a woman at a well, a religious leader in a garden or a fisherman by a lake, he cut instantly to the heart of the matter, and after a few brief lines of conversation these people revealed to Jesus their innermost secrets. People of his day tended to keep rabbis and "holy men" at a respectful distance, but Jesus drew out something else.⁴

A genuine love and care. Jesus never ministered to people because he wanted something from them, only because he wanted something for them. Consider especially how he treated influential people like Nicodemus or wealthy people like the young ruler. Despite his own financial needs (think of him borrowing a donkey the one time he opted against traveling on foot, or being robbed of his only possession during his execution, the clothing on his back), it never seemed to occur to him that a person with money and influence could be of potential use. Even as a wealthy man turns his back on Jesus, he looks at him and loves him.⁵

The value of individuals to Jesus. French philosopher Jacques Derrida has said: "Today the cornerstone of international law is the sacredness of man as your neighbour, made by God. In that sense, the concept of crime against humanity is a Christian concept. There would be no such thing in the law today without the Christian, Abrahamic and biblical heritage. Before the coming of Jesus, the Greek worldview rested entirely on the conviction that there exists a natural hierarchy. Some men are born to command, others to obey. But in direct contradiction, Christianity introduced the notion that people were equal in dignity—an unprecedented idea at the time, and one to which our world owes its entire democratic inheritance."⁶

Derrida is correct. Jesus would say things like, "If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a person than a sheep! Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Are not sparrows sold two for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows."⁷

His long-term impact on the world. The Roman Empire into which Jesus was born could be splendid, but also cruel, especially for the malformed, the diseased and the enslaved. This one teacher had said, "Whatever you did for one of the least of these ... you did for me." An idea slowly emerged that the suffering of every single individual human being matters and that those who are able to help ought to do so. Hospitals and relief efforts of all kinds emerged from this movement.⁸

The unprecedented personal touch. Leading historian, Paul Johnson, wrote: "Jesus' love of people, as individuals, was in some way his most striking characteristic. He never tired of talking to them and penetrating their secrets. They were drawn to him and only too willing to divulge them. His life was a series of public meetings punctuated by casual encounters which turned into significant events. Jesus not only encouraged these encounters but treasured them. These episodes, though often brief, form the human core of the New Testament and provide a unique satisfaction to the reader. There is nothing like them in the entire literature of the ancient world, sacred or secular."⁹

COLLISION COURSE



While everyone was marvelling at all that Jesus did, he said to his disciples, "Listen carefully to what I am about to tell you: The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men." As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. (Luke 9:43-44,51)

Early in Jesus' public ministry, but especially the second half, Jesus is shown to be on a collision course with the cross. In each Gospel, there comes a point where he turns his eyes to Jerusalem. Thereafter every step he takes – almost everything he says and does – leads closer to his fateful end on Calvary's hill. Event after event, the cross looms taller and taller until a bedraggled, bleeding Jesus is hanging on it.

Mark's Gospel: the gathering storm clouds.¹ From the start of Jesus' ministry, the storm clouds start to gather. After Jesus' early victory over Satan's direct attack in the desert, Satan changes his tactics.

The earliest chapters in Mark's Gospel tell of a growing threat even in his years of wild popularity: There seems to be something evil in the sudden storm that Jesus "rebukes" (the same word is used to describe Jesus' eviction of evil spirits.² The religious leaders especially start to react negatively to the ministry of Jesus.³ Sadly, even his own family⁴ and his disciples⁵ are on the wrong side of the cosmic battle.

But it is the final week of Jesus' life, in Jerusalem, where cumulonimbus clouds threateningly hang overhead. Though there are many disparate religious and political powers in Israel which normally conflict with each other, in these last days, they come into alignment in their resistance towards Jesus – first the priests and scribes,⁶ then the Pharisees and Herodians,⁷ then the Sadducees,⁸ and the scribes once again.⁹ Horror of horrors, they plot to have him killed.¹⁰ Both the Sanhedrin and the Roman government conspire in his death,¹¹ starting with an arrest made possible by Jesus' traitor-disciple, Judas,¹² whom Satan himself had enticed.¹³

After a justice-mocking set of five or six trials, Jesus is finally nailed to that cross, at which point an ominous darkness falls upon the land, revealing that all these human actors have been playing a part in a more cosmic battle.

The rise and fall of Jesus.¹⁴ Let's back up and look more broadly at Jesus' transition from wild popularity to utter alienation, and notice how Jesus largely brings it on himself:

By the time of his first great discourse; the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is a sensation. Unconventional from the outset, he incites curiosity and amazement wherever he goes. His following grows rapidly, but knowing that the people's loyalties run shallow, Jesus does not entrust himself to any.¹⁵ He knows the masses will eventually become disenchanted.

Delightful for many, Jesus is also divisive. He challenges the practices and the prejudices of the religious establishment and he openly confronts its leaders for their lack of genuine spiritual substance. This endears him to the common people who flock to him in great numbers, but those of influence publicly chastise the “ignorant” crowds and begin their plans to silence Jesus, the troublemaker.¹⁶

As time passes, though, the tide of popular opinion turns against Jesus. He does not just criticise the leaders who, unmoved by his miracles, now attribute his power to Satan.¹⁷ He also condemns the crowds as wicked and sinful.¹⁸ He even speaks more and more in parables to obscure his meaning from the unrepentant.¹⁹

After feeding thousands, Jesus delivers what has come to be called the Bread of Life Discourse,²⁰ claiming to be the Living Bread that came down from heaven. Refusing to allow the crowds to forcibly install him as a conquering king,²¹ Jesus laments openly that they come to him merely to have their stomachs filled. There is no sense of spiritual poverty, no genuine hunger for the one Bread that fills the heart forever. They are only interested in material concerns. It becomes clear that following Jesus brings hardship and difficulty, not glory, power and prosperity. The people turn away from him in large numbers and most of his disciples desert him. Though the Twelve remain, Jesus notes that one “is a devil”.²²

In the last year of Jesus’ life, his conflict with the people, especially the religious leadership, intensifies. Jesus rebuked religious self-righteousness more than anything else. He attacks the conduct and doctrine of the religious self-righteous, right down to the way they dress, as well as anything that speaks of shallow religious piety that hides true spiritual poverty.²³ He says these people are like pristine tombs concealing rotting corpses.²⁴

As the group of Jesus’ followers dwindles, he withdraws, spending more time in obscure areas and Gentile regions while investing himself in training the Twelve. He talks plainly of his death that will come soon, and also of his resurrection. These words, though, make no sense to the Twelve. They do not understand what rising from the dead means, since they simply cannot conceive that their Messiah could be killed.²⁵

As Calvary looms before him, Jerusalem is now Jesus’ only objective. He knows what awaits him there. The raising of Lazarus intensifies the resolve of his enemies, who now aggressively plot his death.²⁶ The Triumphal Entry on Palm Sunday creates a surge of attention, but the celebration is short-lived. Before the week is out these crowds will trade their exultant “Hosanna” for a dragon-breathed cry: “Crucify him.” Soon, Jesus will be dead.

TRAGIC FRIDAY



It was nine in the morning when they crucified him. The written notice of the charge against him read: THE KING OF THE JEWS. They crucified two rebels with him, one on his right and one on his left. Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads. At noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And at three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?” (which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”). With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last. (Mark 15:25-29,33-34, 37)

The horror of crucifixion. Decades before his death, Jesus knew what a crucifixion was. When he was a boy, Rome crucified 2000 “criminal” zealots along the roads near Jesus’ home. Roman soldiers would fasten the criminal to a cross, then drive a wrought-iron nail through the front of each wrist into the patibulum crossbeam, severing the median nerve, causing searing pain. The feet would be stacked one upon the other against the vertical stacticulum, and a spike hammered through both arches.

There the criminal would hang, exposed to the elements and to the scorn and ridicule hurled at him by soldiers and mocking bystanders. Death would be agonizing and slow, the result of shock, exposure and, eventually asphyxiation. To ease the pain in the feet, the victim would hang from the nails in his wrists. But hanging from the cross would constrict the diaphragm, hindering breathing. The only way to exhale and get another breath is to pull against the nails in the wrists and push down with the legs, driving the victim’s full weight against the spikes piercing his arches. As the arms would fatigue, cramps would sweep through the muscles, knotting them in deep, relentless, throbbing pain.

The agonising effort could go on for days. Add to this, bodily functions uncontrolled, insects feasting on wounds and orifices, unspeakable thirst. When exhaustion eventually overtakes the victim, he would suffocate. Only broken legs would mercifully hasten death.¹

The cross is central to the story. The Gospels devote nearly a third of their length to the last week of Jesus’ life. All four writers saw his death as the central mystery of Jesus. Only two of the Gospels mention the events of his birth, and all four offer only a few pages on his resurrection, but each chronicler gives a detailed account of the events leading to Jesus’ death.²

Each presents the passion narrative as the climactic revelation that shapes the character of everything that has gone before it. The Gospels are designed, each according to its own perspective, to show how Jesus’ sacrificial life led to his sacrificial death.³

The trials. In the 12 hours before the cross, Jesus faces five or six interrogations, some conducted by the Jews and some by the Romans. In all, not a single witness rises to his defence.

Jesus, who usually kept under wraps his identity as the Son of God, breaks from this when the high priest appeals to the solemn Oath of the Testimony—I charge you under oath by the living God—to ask a question that Jesus as the defendant is required by law to answer: “Tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God.”

At last, Jesus breaks his silence: “Yes, it is as you say.” Only on this day, only when his claims would seem the height of absurdity, did he admit to who he was. “The Son of God,” he told the religious powers, who had him in their grasp. “A king,” he told the Roman governor Pilate, who must have laughed aloud. In the end, Pilate pronounces the harshest verdict permitted under Roman law.

Jesus is degraded. Jesus is stripped naked, beaten until almost unrecognisable, whipped, scorned and mocked, crowned with thorns, and spit on. Nearly unconscious from blood loss, he is forced to drag a heavy beam up a hill.⁴ When the procession reaches the site of crucifixion, Jesus sees before him the heavy upright wooden post permanently in place, to which the patibulum is attached by a mortise-and-tenon joint. Then comes the worst of the degradation.

Crucifixion as a means of execution in the Roman Empire had, as its express purpose, the elimination of victims from consideration as members of the human race. It cannot be said too strongly: that was its function. It was meant to indicate to all who might be toying with subversive ideas that crucified persons were not of the same species as either the executioners or the spectators and were deserving of ritualised extermination. Therefore, the mocking and jeering that accompanied crucifixion were not only allowed, they were programmed into it – the role of the passers-by was to exacerbate the dehumanisation and degradation of the “animal” on the cross.⁵

What makes this even worse is that in the Jewish mind, a man on a cross is a sign that even God has abandoned him. Jesus’ cry of abandonment is appropriate. As Jesus breathes his last, all hope put in this so-called Messiah is vanquished.

But what does it mean? In the context of a faith that proclaims “amazing grace”, the cross would seem to be the ultimately disgraceful event, utterly lacking in anything appealing, winning or redemptive. And yet the predictions of Jesus about his death and his intentional movements toward the cross tell us that he voluntarily and purposefully absorbed all of that, drawing it into himself. But why?

WEEK FIVE

DRINK THIS CUP



While they were eating, Jesus took bread, broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body." Then he took the cup, gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood, poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."

Then Jesus went with to a place called Gethsemane. Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will." (Matt 26:26-28, 36, 39)

On the night Jesus was betrayed, he offered to the world the bread and cup of salvation. He broke the bread – his body would be broken the next day. He invited his followers to drink deeply of the wine – dark red like his blood.

Yet, a few hours later he prayed that he would not have to drink of the cup of the Saviour, one who gives his life in the place of fallen humanity. In answer to the question, "Is there any other way to save the human race?", heaven fell silent. There was no other way. He knew the only way to save us was to not save himself. Jesus resolved, once again, to go through with it ... arrest, trial, crucifixion. What exactly did his death achieve?

On the cross, Jesus lived out his name's meaning. The name Jesus occurs 900 times in the New Testament. Meaning "God saves" it was given by an angel to Mary and Joseph: You are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.¹

On the cross, Jesus demonstrated love. The cross is not just a symbol of sin and death but also a symbol of even more powerful redemptive love. Out of his remarkable brilliance, breath-taking courage, and inexplicable love, Jesus sized up a situation that defeated every human attempt at correcting a sin-corrupted humanity and a fractured relationship between people and their Maker. He identified exactly what would be needed to bring redemption to the world. It would cost him his life.²

Although power can force obedience, only love can summon a response of love, which is the one thing God wants from us and the reason he created us. John's Gospel quotes Jesus as saying: "I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." In case we miss the point, John adds, "He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die."³ God's nature is self-giving; he bases his appeal on sacrificial love.⁴

On the cross, Jesus was "made to be sin". Jesus' cry, "Why have you forsaken me?" tells of a horror that surprised even Jesus. Somehow, he was taking upon himself all of the failure and evil that has pervaded human history. The one who had never sinned was "made to be sin"⁵ and "became a curse for us".⁶ Jesus' cry revealed more than

the decimation of his body or the degradation of his person – somehow all time and space was compressed into that moment and, like a giant sponge, he absorbed all of humanity's filth, hatred, injustice, unbelief, bitterness and lovelessness.

On the cross, Jesus made an exchange. Jesus died for us as our substitute. He was doing what we could not do. Having lived for us, he was now dying for us. Jesus took the punishment our sins deserve. Jesus gave us the acceptance from the Father that only he deserves. "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree."⁷ "Christ suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring us to God."⁸ "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us."⁹ "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way; but the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all."¹⁰

He, who had never sinned, took on himself the penalty, power and horridness of our sin so that we who have sinned can take on his right standing with the Father. Taking our sewage upon himself, he became a cosmic water-purification plant that would pump out forgiveness, hope, life and power to fill every cup with his salvation.

On the cross, Jesus crushed the serpent. Hours after the human race fell under the power of darkness, God warned Satan that one day, a descendent of Eve would crush his skull, even as Satan bit into his heel.¹¹ This is precisely what Jesus did. Satan thought he was overcoming Jesus, but in fact he was only momentarily wounding Jesus. Jesus, on the other hand, was dealing a fatal blow to Satan – by reconciling fallen humanity to a right standing with God, Satan was losing his ground. As one author put it: "Though Jesus was crushed by the ruthless power of Rome, he was himself crushing the serpent's head. The victim was the victor, and the cross is still the throne from which he rules the world."¹²

Will we drink this cup? No one forced Jesus to drink the bitter cup of the Saviour – he chose it freely. Neither does God force us to drink the sweet cup of salvation – we are offered a choice. Jesus says to us: "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them."¹³

JESUS IS ALIVE



For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins, was buried, and was raised on the third day, and that he appeared to Peter and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living. (1 Cor 15:3-6)

The surprise of the resurrection. For the disciples, when Jesus died, there were no poetic reflections on forgiveness, self-sacrifice, and slates wiped clean. There was just a bloody, brutally beaten corpse, now taken down and buried. The women were weeping, the men hiding. And it was night and it was day and it was night again. And it seemed over. For the powers of Rome and Jerusalem, there was the relief of halting a potential revolutionary. Tyranny had won. It occurred to no one that his stubborn followers just might outlast the Roman empire.¹

What a surprise then, when early on that first Easter morning, some wide-eyed women ran back from the tomb, saying it was empty and that Jesus had risen. Far from being the “gullible” men modern sceptics say they were, the apostles responded like any of us would: “Nonsense!”² Yet, by evening, Jesus had made appearances to these shocked disciples, even eating a celebratory meal of “broiled fish”³ with them. For the next 40 days, Jesus would make surprise appearances to these and other disciples, preparing them for the adventures that lay ahead of them. They – and the world – would never be the same after that.

The evidence for the resurrection. Modern sceptics sometimes discount Jesus’ first followers as credible witnesses because they are biased, not impartial to the facts. Yet, this makes them more reliable, not less – who better to preserve the details of Jesus’ life than those who knew him best?

Sceptics might argue that resurrections don’t happen – because science says so. But this is circular reasoning. Isn’t it more scientific to follow the evidence wherever it leads, not superimpose our way of seeing the world onto history? Besides, the disciples were also sceptical by nature – they also didn’t believe in resurrections. For them, such a thing only happened at the end of history.

Nowadays, the vast majority of scholars on the life of Jesus – including those who are entirely secular and have no religious stake in the matter – agree on four facts of history:⁴ 1) Jesus died on a Roman cross on a Friday and was buried in a tomb. 2) That tomb was empty the following Sunday morning. 3) Numerous witnesses testified – great peril to themselves – that they saw Jesus alive multiple times after he had died, that they met with him and even ate with him. 4) Even the sceptic; James, and the mortal enemy of Christians; Saul of Tarsus, were convinced they had seen Jesus risen from the dead, and both willingly died rather than recant – James was stoned, and Paul (formerly Saul) beheaded.⁵

What to do with these facts? Some argue it was a hallucination. Large groups of people (like the 500 listed above) don't have simultaneous visions. Surely, the disciples didn't imagine Jesus eating broiled fish.

Others argue that it was a hoax. Perhaps the disciples stole the body, for example. But that doesn't add up – here are men and women who put everything on the line – their homes, their families, their lives—for their testimony about him. Had they fabricated a fake story; all would have been revealed the moment a knife was held to their throat for their claims about a man who rose again. What else accounts for this transformation of cowardly followers, who had previously deserted Jesus, into fearless martyrs? As the Japanese novelist Shūsaku Endō says, if we don't believe in the Resurrection, we will be "forced to believe that what did hit the disciples was some other amazing event different in kind yet of equal force in its electrifying intensity." If we try to explain the changed lives of the early Christians, we may find ourselves making even greater leaps of faith than if we believed in the Resurrection itself.⁶

JESUS' RESURRECTION CHANGES EVERYTHING FOR US WHO BELIEVE:⁷

1) We can know Jesus is who he said he is – a divine Saviour who had launched his kingdom in the middle of history.

2) What Jesus did on the cross really worked! The resurrection is not a victory after a defeat, rather it is confirmation that what seemed like a defeat was really a victory. As Paul says, "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins."⁸ But he is risen, so in what can only be described as the greatest reversal of fortunes since Cinderella, we have gone from condemnation-death-poverty-grief-shame to righteousness-life-riches-joy-glory.

3) New creation is already partly here; but will fully come one day. "What creation needs is neither abandonment nor evolution but rather redemption and renewal; and this is both sampled and guaranteed by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Jesus's resurrection is the beginning of God's new project not to snatch people away from earth to heaven but to colonize earth with the life of heaven."⁹

4) In Christ, we will live forever. In an age when most people ebb between the fear of death and the futility of life,¹⁰ the cornerstone of Christian hope is the future resurrection of believers.¹¹

5) Jesus is alive. We do not live on the memory of a great person, or even his past achievements. Since he is alive, in him we can live, and move and have our being.

6) After suffering, comes glory. God will make up to us any suffering on our path of following Jesus. Resurrection power follows our crucifying experiences. Therefore, we must let nothing move us, for our labour in the Lord is not in vain.¹²

THE ASCENT OF JESUS



Jesus said, "Unless I go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you." (John 16:7) "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and to the ends of the earth." After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. (Acts 1:8-9)

What has come down must go up again. Forty days after his resurrection, the Son of God returned to heaven. Acts 1 tells the story of Jesus disappearing from sight, leaving behind his dumbfounded disciples who looked like children who had lost their parent. Two angels, sent to calm them, asked them why they were still looking into the blank sky.

We can sympathise with their momentary stun – they had just experienced a seismic transition moment in the mission of the Son of God. No longer would he walk upon the earth as one of us, now his headquarters would be in heaven at the right hand of his Father. The Jesus of history had just become the Christ of faith.

The rest of the New Testament, after the four Gospels and Acts 1, tells of Jesus' people keeping a vibrant but spiritual connection with Jesus who is now in heaven – still the same person, but now cosmically multiplied in his accessibility, reach, glory and potency.

WHAT IS JESUS DOING UP THERE?

1) He is seated on a throne as King of the universe. In his first message to thousands of Jews in Jerusalem, Peter quoted a Messianic psalm: "The Lord said to my Lord: 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.'", then declared, "Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah."¹

2) He is building his church. Jesus promised, "I will build my church".² The fact that there are close on 4 million churches in the world means he has been very busy. We might be embarrassed at times by the church of Jesus, but we must never forget that "God placed all things under Jesus' feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way."³

3) He is praying for his own. "He is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to pray for them."⁴ He will never abandon us. One powerful example of this is when the first martyr is being killed, we're told that "Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 'Look,' he said, 'I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.'"⁵ At Stephen's time of greatest need, Jesus compassionately stands to his feet, ready to reach out to and receive his dying disciple.

4) He is pouring out his Spirit. The One who has gone up has sent Another down. Before ascending to heaven, Jesus promised a replacement for his presence on earth – the Holy Spirit. He said this was even better than his physical presence upon the earth.⁶ But how so? It's better in two ways:

The Spirit internalises Jesus' presence. Jesus on earth stood alongside his disciples, but now he can live inside of us. We can know Jesus more closely now than Peter and John did in the years they trekked with him through Israel's towns and countryside. Ten days after Jesus' ascension, the ragtag church of 120 were praying in an upper room in Jerusalem, when the Spirit was finally and wonderfully poured out upon them. So ecstatic were they that onlookers asked if they had been drinking. Peter assured them that this abundant joy was not the effect of alcohol but the presence of the now-invisible Jesus: "These people are not drunk, as you suppose. It's only nine in the morning! No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: 'In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people.'"⁷

The Spirit universalises Jesus' presence. While his feet touched the ground, Jesus was limited to one place at a time, now we can all have access to Jesus through his Holy Spirit, regardless of our latitude and longitude. On the day of Pentecost Peter declared, "Jesus, exalted to the right hand of God, has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear."⁸ Peter was in effect saying, "Jesus, large and in charge, might be ruling in heaven, but because of the Spirit's presence, he is at the very same time also close and accessible to each of us right now."

Though his first disciples met the Jesus of history, and then later experienced him also as the Christ of faith, most modern converts come to him in the opposite order. As we hear people who already know Christ declaring to us the gospel, Jesus Christ himself makes a personal introduction to us by his Spirit. Our eyes are opened spiritually. Only thereafter do most of us then immerse ourselves in the Gospels to find out more about this magnificent person's redeeming escapade on planet Earth.

WHO DO YOU SAY I AM?



“Who do you say I am?” Peter answered, “You are the Christ.” Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him. (Mark 8:29-30)

The title ‘Christ’ is a magnificent title, that encapsulates an entire story that reaches into the past and the future. The term appears some 500 times in the New Testament.

CALLING JESUS “CHRIST” MEANS:

To praise him as the promised Messiah. The Old Testament promised a mighty and merciful king who would serve as God’s earthly counterpart and rule forever: “For to us a child is born, a son given, and the government will be on his shoulders. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever.”¹

To trust him as bringer of “the kingdom of God”. Especially as ancient Israel’s fate took a turn for the worse, the late prophets spoke of a coming disruption, when God would eclipse the present evil age with the coming kingdom age.

Isaiah’s prophecies especially show the stark contrast: injustice and war (God’s reign hidden) eclipsed by justice and peace (God intervenes to make things right); darkness (God not known) replaced with light (God known); the absence of the Spirit with abundant outpourings; oppression with salvation; guilt with forgiveness; sickness and brokenness with healing and wholeness; distress and despair with peace, comfort and joy; the nations no longer oppressing God’s people but now flooding in to pay tribute to their God and king. In this kingdom God overcomes his enemies of rebellion, arrogance and idolatry, death is swallowed up, resurrection bodies are given to all, and fallen creation is revived and renewed.

Israel’s inflamed hopes. By the time Jesus arrived, no such kingdom had materialised. Centuries had flown by since the prophecies, and one foreign power after another tyrannised their nation. Jews in Jesus’ time were unsure what to do with these promises. Most tended to politicise the promises – they hoped for a military Messiah who would drive out the Romans. In fact, many pretend Messiahs arose, claiming to be the One, only to be killed, each death making a mockery of a dying hope. This is why Jesus hushed up his claims of Messiahship – he knew it would be misunderstood and would likely lead to a sooner-than-planned death.

Jesus has launched the kingdom. Jesus was all about the kingdom. He proclaimed the kingdom: “The time has come. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe the good news!”² He demonstrated its delivering and healing power: Every demon cast out, every broken body healed – this was a sign of kingdom come. He taught mainly about the kingdom: “To what shall we liken the kingdom of God? Or with what

parable shall we picture it?"³ He told his disciples to re-organise their hope, lives and ministries around it: "This, then, is how you should pray: your kingdom come, your will be done."⁴ "Seek first the kingdom of God ... and all the other things will be added."⁵ "As you go, proclaim this message: 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely give."⁶ *His death* was the judgement and defeat of the dark powers of this age, his resurrection the embryonic arrival of the new age, *his ascension* the assumption of the throne as the true Master of the Universe, *the sending of his Spirit* the foretaste of what's to come.

To live in the already and the not yet. The great surprise is that, instead of terminating the present evil age and establishing the coming kingdom age at the same time, we live in an age of overlap. In his first coming, Jesus has initiated the future age right in the midst of the present age. This means that in Christ we can have a real experience of the future age, but it is not the full meal but rather an *hors d'oeuvre*.

Yet the future has actually broken into the present. We live in between the times. It's like the first shafts of the sun on the morning's horizon. The sun cannot be fully seen, but already shafts of light invade the darkness – we experience salvation, peace, joy, the Spirit and powerful answers to prayer. The future is already here, even though it is not yet completely here. This explains why Jesus sometimes speaks of the kingdom in the future tense ("I will not drink again from the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God") and sometimes right here in the present ("If I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you").⁷

Though still locked into battle with the powers of darkness, the church that calls Jesus "Christ" is caught between a victory and a triumph. To illustrate, in World War 2, the allies had two moments of victory over the Nazis. The first was D-day, when they gained ground in Europe. As of this time, the war was *won*. Although complete victory was then guaranteed, it only came later on V-day, the day the war was finally *done*. In the same way, ever since Christ's death and resurrection, the war has been *won*. Ultimate victory, when the war is *done*, is now just a matter of time.⁸

To anticipate the Great Day. Jesus will return in glory, visibly and in power,⁹ and not secretly and in weakness like in his first coming. Not only a few, but all will know about it. In his first coming he came to bear judgement on our behalf. But in his second coming he will bring judgement on the world's evil, and salvation to all who wait for him.¹⁰ Upon seeing him, those who know him as Christ will rejoice,¹¹ while those who don't will grieve.¹² He will finally decimate evil and suffering, poverty and exploitation and restore his people in justice and peace, while renewing his cosmos in radiant beauty and goodness.

THE LION WHO IS THE LAMB



In your relationships with one another, have the same attitude of mind Christ Jesus had: Who, 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 human being, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore 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 acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord. (Phil 2:5-11)

“Lord” is a title used for Jesus 700 times in the New Testament. As with the name “Christ”, so “Lord” tells an amazing story.

CALLING JESUS “LORD” MEANS:

To acknowledge his voluntary downward journey. How low was the Son of God willing to go for us? Paul, in his letter to the Philippians, mentions several down-steps the Son of God was willing to take: 1) He became human, forfeiting the divine privileges and powers that were his as the eternal Son of God. 2) Not any human, he became a lowly servant. He was not born in Caesar’s household in the capital city, but rather into a low-class family in the Roman empire’s dry outback; northern Palestine, owned by the tyrant Caesar. 3) He “became obedient to death” – here is a servant willing to lay down his life in his service of others. 4) He downgraded to the extreme – dying the most degrading death of all; public, naked crucifixion.

Willingly “humbling” one’s self was unheard of. In the Roman Empire, someone might be humbled, by losing money or status or title. No one deliberately humbled himself, yet Jesus chose this – he “humbled himself”.¹

To celebrate his sudden upward exaltation. “Therefore God exalted him to the highest place,” says Paul. In a matter of weeks, Jesus was resurrected from the dead and ascended to the throne. We rightly rejoice when a deserving underdog comes out on top. In these two quick successive steps, Jesus is now the unrivalled in his royalty, unparalleled in his power, unmatched in his might. He will never suffer again (the only suffering he still experiences is the freely chosen sympathy he feels towards his creatures.)

Jesus has the name that is above every name. He is “Lord of Lords and King of Kings” – there is no other authority, whether angelic (above the earth) or despotic (on the earth) or demonic (below the earth) in the world whose power comes near to his own.

To deny and defy self-exalted Lords in the history of the world. First-century Christians paid a terrible price of persecution and martyrdom when they refused to declare Caesar as Lord, reserving this acclamation for Jesus alone. Augustus Caesar, who had managed to reunite the empire after the civil war sparked by Julius Caesar's assassination, commissioned the Roman poet Virgil to deify his reign. Sounding like an Old Testament prophet, he declared that "a new human race is descending from the heights of heaven," a change that would come about due to "the birth of a child, with whom the iron age of humanity will end and the golden age begin". But Virgil wrote these messianic words not about Jesus, but about Caesar. In fact, Augustus borrowed the Greek word for "Gospel" or "Good News" and applied it as a label for the new world order represented by his reign. The empire declared him a god and established rites of worship. His enlightened and stable regime, many believed, would last forever.

Meanwhile, in an obscure corner of Augustus' empire the birth of a baby named Jesus was overlooked by the chroniclers of the day. In fact, the Gospel writers would mention Augustus only once, a passing reference to set the date of a census that ensured Jesus would be born in Bethlehem.²

To remember he is the Lion who is the Lamb. In a remarkable vision, the old man John the apostle has a heavenly vision, in which the sealed scroll that tells the meaning of the world cannot be opened. His head drops in despair. Just then he is consoled: "Do not weep! See, the Lion of Judah has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll." John looks up, eager to see this lion, but is surprised to see something else: "Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing at the centre of the throne."³

There is a beauty in this vision that helps us hold together in our minds the person and work of Jesus. He is a roaring lion, but he is also a slain lamb. He carries the sceptre of authority, but he has also carried the cross. He has risen, but he has also gone to the depths. He is majestic, but he is also meek. He is King, but he is also kind. He stands tall, is exalted to the heavens, but he also kneels down to scoop us to his chest. He is seated on a throne, but he has also walked in our shoes. He is fierce, but he is also fatherly. He receives our tributes and worship, but he also washes our feet. Until we understand this about Jesus, the scroll of life's true meaning remains sealed – we do not know how to find our freedom in surrender to him, our glory in hardships, nor our greatness in serving others.

WEEK SIX

GOD WITH SKIN ON



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." Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:27-28)

"Son of God" is another title for Jesus, used 231 times in the New Testament. It emphasises Jesus' deity, placing him as a member of the Trinity. The word "Trinity" is a theological catch-term that pulls together many surprising discoveries in the unfolding story of Jesus.¹ Of the truths about God being Three-in-One, the one that jars people most is Son of God. How can a man be God?

The fact that Jewish people were the first to believe speaks volumes about Jesus' claim to be God. First-century Jews were radically non-disposed to believe any human could be divine. Pantheistic Eastern religions understood god to be the spiritual force in everything (for someone to say, "I am part of god" or "I am one with god," was not terribly unusual) and many Western religions (such as the Greeks and Romans) were "polytheistic" and believed in various gods who could take on human guises. But when the Jews spoke of God, they meant the beginning-less Creator who was infinitely exalted above everything else. It had been burned into their minds and hearts that we must not worship any created, earthly thing. It permeates the Ten Commandments. So, when Jesus claimed to have the same name as Yahweh, the "I am",² he was making the most stupendous claim that anyone had ever made, and it is not surprising that those who heard him say it immediately tried to kill him.³

SO, WHY DID THOSE PEOPLE WHO WERE LEAST LIKELY IN THE WORLD TO BELIEVE, CONCLUDE THAT JESUS IS DIVINE?

The way he was. The disciples who knew Jesus more "up close and personal" than any other concluded that Jesus had a moral glory, a transcendent personal greatness that matched the claims he made, a tenderness and a power, a truth and a love, which combined in ways none of them had ever seen.

The things he said. Jesus preferred to limit direct claims to be the Creator, but he dropped clues all the time. To a lame man, and an adulterous woman he says commandingly, "Your sins are forgiven" – as though he was personally sinned against by their every sin. To Jerusalem, he remarks, "I am sending you prophets, wise men and teachers" as if he was not only a rabbi standing before them, but the sovereign God of history.⁴ To others he says he existed before he was born; that the honour due the Father is due him; that judgement on the final day falls to him; that he alone can satisfy the deepest chambers of our hearts (as drink for the thirsty and bread for the hungry). Let's be honest, Jesus may be tender and meek, but his claims are hard, daring and divisive. "Unless you believe that I am He, you will die in your sins."⁵ "Before Abraham was born, I am."⁶ "He who sees Me sees the One who sent Me."⁷ "He who believes in the Son is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already."⁸

The miracles he performed. Jesus does more than talk. He acts. He says he is the bread of life, then he multiplies bread to feed thousands. Twice. He says he is resurrection and life, then he raises a dead man to life. He says he is light for the world, then he gives light to the sight of a man born blind.⁹ Sometimes his talk is his action – he confidently rebukes the wild waves, and they instantly calm. For his disciples, however, it took his resurrection for the lights to fully come on. For the most part, Jesus’ disciples struggled to be fully persuaded he was the Messiah before they had spent at least two years with him, but it is doubtful that any one of them grasped that he was, in fact, more than a Messiah, he was the Creator come in the flesh. When Thomas finally got it, he fell before Jesus and cried out, “My Lord and my God.”¹⁰ Jesus received his worship – something no other man, nor angel in Scripture, was allowed to do.

The prophecies about him. Though only a small portion of Jews believed the coming Messiah would be God himself, once the disciples encountered Jesus’ resurrection, they re-read the Old Testament. They realised then that it had always been God’s plan to come to this world personally, born as a child of a virgin, a child named “Immanuel”¹¹ and “Mighty God.”¹²

The experience of his presence. What the Jews discovered on Easter Sunday, they experienced on Pentecost, when Jesus powerfully poured out his presence and his promise began to come to pass, a promise only God could make, “I will be with you even to the end.”¹³

How else do we make sense of such a man? These Jewish disciples began to worship him as “the Word who became flesh”, “the Alpha and Omega” and “the Son of God”. They concluded that, as insane as it is to believe that a man could be God, it is more insane to believe the alternatives – that Jesus was lying or crazy.

People who have read and pondered Jesus’s words, deeds, and life have groped for good ways to describe and explain what they see. And many begin to realise that the remarkable claims of Jesus about himself may be the only way forward. One writer puts it like this: “Imagine a man in whom the overwhelming, all-at-once perspective of ‘God of everything’ is not a momentary glimpse from which he rebounds, reeling, but a continual presence which in him is somehow adapted to the scale of the human mind, so that for him, uniquely, the shining is not other, but self. He’s the creator in the midst of the thing made.”¹⁴

This brings us to the most startling of all the strange juxtapositions of Jesus’ life—the apparent “madness” of his claims to be divine beside the humility, compassion and tenderness of his character. Then again, this is what we would expect if a good God were ever to put skin on.

THE GOD WHO IS LOVE



She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins. All this took place to fulfil what was said through the prophet: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means 'God with us').

(Matt 1:21-23)

Making the world from nothing was a stunning work of wonder, to be sure. God becoming one of us, however, walking with us, being near us—knowing human joy, sharing human sorrow—is beyond wonderful. It is sublime.¹

Jesus once said, "To see me is to see the Father."² When the Son of God took on human flesh, he was giving us a sense of what God is like. In the same way we need a filter to look at the noon sun, so Jesus in his earthly life is the filter through whom we see God. The question we answer today is: If Jesus is God-with-us, what does this tell us about God? In the main, it tells us God is love, a very unique kind of love:

God is vulnerable love. Of the many reasons for Incarnation, surely one was to answer Job's accusation: Do you have eyes of flesh?³ For a time, God did. If only we could hear the voice from the whirlwind and, like Job, hold a conversation with God himself! But wait, God is not mute: The Word spoke, not out of a whirlwind, but out of the human larynx of a Palestinian Jew. In Jesus, God lay down on the dissection table, as it were, stretched out in cruciform posture for the scrutiny of all sceptics who have ever lived.⁴

Though Jesus set aside his divine powers and invulnerability, he somehow was still fearless. That's why he can say to us, "Fear not." Don't be afraid of the storm.⁵ Don't be afraid of death – if I have your hand, it is just sleep.⁶ And at the end of his life, when we see him bound and on trial, he seems most free of all, confidently telling one of his judges that he has no power to do anything that isn't part of the divine plan.⁷ "Think of Jesus at his trial," says one biblical commentator. "Was he the prisoner, or were his accusers? He was calling the shots, not they. In this age that values freedom almost more than anything else, Jesus confronts us as the most liberated man who ever lived."⁸

God is humble love. Before Jesus, almost no pagan author had used the word "humble" as a compliment. Yet the events of Christmas point inescapably to what seems like an oxymoron: a humble God. "God is great!" – the cry of Islam – is a truth we learn which needs no supernatural being to teach us. That "God is little" – that is the truth which Jesus teaches.⁹ Here is a king who—out of love—removes his crown, sets aside his sceptre, takes off his royal robes, dons the garb of a common beggar, and lives among the poorest of his subjects. Never ceasing to be king, he gets low, so low he willingly dies the death of a despised criminal—all to serve his own. That is what happened. God got small—an unimaginable event.¹⁰ Humility, which was scorned in the ancient world, became enshrined in a cross and was eventually championed as a virtue.¹¹

God is compassionate love. Three times that we know of, suffering drove Jesus to tears. He wept when his friend Lazarus died. Another time, tears came to Jesus when he looked out over Jerusalem and realised the fate awaiting that fabled city, like a parent grieving as his child goes astray. Finally, Hebrews tells us Jesus “offered up ... loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death”. But of course he was not saved from death.¹²

One spiritual seeker wrote, “I could never myself believe in God, if it were not for the cross. In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it? I have entered many Buddhist temples and stood respectfully before the statue of the Buddha, his legs crossed, arms folded, eyes closed, a remote look on his face, detached from the agonies of the world. But each time after a while I have had to turn away. And in imagination I have turned instead to that lonely, twisted, tortured figure on the cross, brow bleeding from thorn-pricks, intolerably thirsty, plunged in Godforsaken darkness. That is the God for me! He suffered for us. Our sufferings become more manageable in the light of his. To our wounds only God’s wounds can speak.”¹³

God is approachable love. How would you speak to a frightened child? You would crouch down, get low, stoop to her level to gently calm her and draw her to yourself. It’s the natural thing to do. This is precisely what God has done.¹⁴

Jewish children also learned stories of the sacred mountain in the desert that proved fatal to everyone who touched it. Mishandle the ark of the covenant, and you died. Enter the Most Holy Place, and you’d never come out alive. Among people who walled off a separate sanctum for God in the temple and shrank from pronouncing or spelling out the name, God made a surprise appearance as a baby in a manger. What can be less scary than a newborn with his limbs wrapped tight against his body? In Jesus, God found a way of relating to human beings that did not involve fear.¹⁵

JESUS AMONG THE GODS

Today we pan out into human history and look at Jesus against the backdrop of every other great person or religious founder. As we do, we notice his striking uniqueness:

Only Jesus both claimed divinity yet lived the most beautiful life.¹ Consider two groups of people in history:

Group one – the true greats. Jesus is one of the very few people in history who founded a great world religion, like Buddha or Mohammed, or who, like Plato or Aristotle, has set the course of human thought and life for centuries. There are, say, 10 or so people whose great impact stems from their brilliant teaching or admirable lives.

Group two – the self-proclaimed gods. In history there have been a number of humans who have implicitly or explicitly claimed to be divine beings from other worlds. Many of them were demagogues; many more of them were leaders of small, self-contained sects of true believers.

What is unique about Jesus is that he is the only member of the first group of persons who is also a member of the second. Everyone in the first group besides Jesus denied deity. Muhammad would never, ever have claimed to be Allah, nor did Confucius identify himself with heaven. Even Buddha said, "Don't worship me. I am not a god. Don't look to me. Look to my dharma, my teaching." Contrast these men with Jesus, who claimed to be more than a man, and told people to place their trust in him, not only in his teachings.

All the rest of the members of the second group, claiming to be God, were generally not able to convince anyone but a small number. Why? Because it is virtually impossible to live such an extraordinary life that most people would be forced to conclude you were not merely a human being. Generally, the self-centred claim of deity does not lead to the self-sacrificing life, yet in the whole history of the world, there is only one person who not only claimed to be God himself but also got enormous numbers of people to believe it by virtue of his beautiful life.

Only Jesus, going beyond mere teaching, acted in history to redeem the world.² Buddha claimed to be a teacher. Mohammed claimed to be a teacher and a prophet. Jesus alone said he was teacher, prophet and Saviour. A Saviour is someone who acts in history and does for others what they could not do for themselves.

What makes the Christian faith unique is that it is built, not primarily on the words of Jesus, but on his works. This is why people try to discredit Christianity by casting doubt on Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Yet the historical evidence is strong – there was a day in history when the Spirit descended on Jesus, a day when Jesus called disciples, and a day when he died (likely the middle of the Spring month of Nissan, AD 33). Two days later he was raised, 40 days later he returned to the Father, and 10 days later he poured out his Spirit upon the wide-eyed disciples, lighting the

flame that would be driven on across the world by the winds of heaven. These are facts of history. In fact, the apostle Paul, when interrogated by a king for why he spread the message of Jesus, would say, "What I am saying is true and reasonable. None of this has escaped your notice, because it was not done in a corner."³ Paul's point was that this king could go and research the data for himself – Jesus lived, died and rose again.

Only Jesus brings about a grace revolution. Outside of the Christian faith, the great religions are based on works, not grace. One must earn their approval with God, or their entrance into heaven, through religious devotion or good deeds.

Yet, Jesus – because he loves us – voluntarily offered himself on the cross to pay for our full acceptance with God. When we trust in him and receive his sacrifice on our behalf, we become reunited with God forever. This is an act of sheer grace – Jesus lives the life we should have lived and dies the death we should have died.

This distinction is starkly demonstrated by comparing Jesus' parables with similar stories from other religions. For example, in Buddhist literature, there is a story of a son who becomes rebellious, leaves home in a huff, and later sees the error of his ways and returns home to be reconciled with his family. When compared with Jesus' parable of the prodigal son, it's the ending of the two stories that reveals the difference. In the Buddhist story, the errant son is required to work off the penalty for his past misdeeds through years and years of servitude. In contrast, in Jesus' story the repentant son is warmly embraced by a loving father who showers him with undeserved forgiveness, and costly lavish grace.⁴

The pivotal difference between Jesus and the religion-founders is that Jesus claims to be God searching for us. Every other religion has a founder that says: "If you're searching for God, I'll show you the way to God." Then along comes Jesus, who says, "You will never find the way on your own. I am God come to find you." In this sense, religion is humanity's search for God – at the cost of our diligent efforts, whereas Jesus is God's search for us – at the cost of his perfect life and saving death. This makes all the difference when it comes to doing God's will. Instead of saying, "I will obey so that God will accept me" (a strenuous obedience under the shadow of fear), we say, "In Jesus, God has already accepted me, now I will obey" (a joyful obedience under the glow of grace).

JESUS DEFICIT DISORDER



The Son is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. (Colossians 1:17-18)

Christians notoriously tend to forget about Jesus. No sooner have they given their allegiance to him than they start to be absorbed by lesser things directly or indirectly related to Jesus – church-life, outreach or social justice causes related to his name, morals and ethics springing from his teaching, interesting theories about the end of the world, or, lamest of all; the latest scandal or celebrity in the Christian world.

While most of these things are important, unless one is principally focused on Jesus – who he is, what he has done – then we inevitably exaggerate or distort these lesser things. The authors¹ of the book *Jesus Manifesto* masterfully goad Christians back to the centrality and supremacy of Christ:

“What is Christianity? It is Christ. Nothing more. Nothing less. Christianity is not an ideology. Nor a philosophy. Christianity is the good news that Beauty, Truth and Goodness are found in a person. Biblical community is founded and found on the connection to that person. Conversion is more than a change in direction; it’s a change in connection.

“The major temptation of the church today is JDD: Jesus Deficit Disorder. In parts of the church, the person of Jesus is increasingly politically incorrect, and is being replaced by the language of ‘justice,’ ‘the kingdom of God,’ ‘values,’ and ‘leadership principles.’ Yet, the centre and circumference of the Christian life is none other than the person of Christ.

“All other things, including things related to him and about him, are eclipsed by the sight of his peerless worth. Knowing Christ is Eternal Life. And knowing him profoundly, deeply, and in reality, as well as experiencing his unsearchable riches, is the chief pursuit of our lives, as it was for the first Christians.

“It’s possible to confuse ‘the cause’ of Christ with the person of Christ. When the early church said, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ they did not mean ‘Jesus is my core value.’ Jesus isn’t a cause; he is a real and living person who can be known, loved, experienced, enthroned and embodied. Focusing on his cause or mission doesn’t equate to focusing on or following him. It’s all too possible to serve ‘the god’ of serving Jesus as opposed to serving him.

“It is possible to emphasize a spiritual truth, value, virtue, or gift, yet miss Christ who is the embodiment and incarnation of all spiritual truth, values, virtues, and gifts. Seek a truth, a value, a virtue, or a spiritual gift, and you have obtained something dead. Seek Christ, embrace Christ, know Christ, and you have touched him who is Life. And in him resides all Truth, Values, Virtues and Gifts in living colour.”

In today’s scripture, we read the words Paul wrote to the church in Colossae precisely because they evidenced JDD. Instead of gazing on Jesus and merely glimpsing at the

other things, the Colossians were gazing upon lesser things such as angels, rituals, submission to religious officials, legalism and the pursuit of spiritual experiences and, along the way, lost sight of Jesus. So Paul reminds them (and us) who Jesus is:

Jesus is “before all things”. The word “before” has two meanings. First, it means “chronologically before”. Jesus, as co-creator with his Father, existed before all creation did. Second, it means “ahead of” – a reference to his supremacy. Jesus is pre-eminent over all creation. As such, he not only created but owns, cares for and controls everything. He is supreme over every aspect of his universe. He is Lord of the macro-universe and every galaxy within – including the Whirlpool, Sombrero and Starburst galaxies. He is Lord of the micro-universe within every atom – including every quark, gluon and neutrino. He is Lord of everything between – including every planet, whale, sparrow, plant and child.

Jesus “holds all things together”. According to Paul, we as humans – along with all of creation – find our meaning and continuing existence in him. As the two authors of Jesus Manifesto put it, “Jesus Christ is the gravitational pull that brings everything together and gives them significance, reality and meaning. Without him, all things lose their value. Without him, all things are but detached pieces floating around in space.”²

Jesus is to be preeminent in everything. He is Lord of creation, the church and the new creation. Yet Paul’s prayer that “in everything he might be preeminent” suggests that Jesus’ supremacy needs to be worked into our hearts and lives. So many people have failed to recognise who Jesus is, and – even more tragically – so many Christians fail to really recognise just how supreme, and therefore sufficient, Christ is. After all, Jesus’ supremacy guarantees his sufficiency to save, secure, satisfy and sustain us. If he is not Lord of all, then he cannot help us. But if he is, then we can surely trust him. The authors of Jesus Manifesto add their prayer to the prayer of Paul: *“May God have a people on this earth who are a people of Christ, through Christ, and for Christ. A people who are consumed with God’s eternal passion, which is to make his Son pre-eminent, supreme, and the head over all things visible and invisible. A people who have discovered the touch of the Almighty in the face of his glorious Son, serving him out of an enraptured heart that’s been captivated by his irresistible beauty and unfathomable love.”*³

WHAT IS A CHRIST-IAN?



When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realised that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus. (Acts 4:13)

The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch. (Acts 11:16)

A Christian is someone who lets Jesus rub off on them. In Acts 4, the very men who had earlier arranged for Jesus' crucifixion, lament that although Jesus is no longer around, his followers have started to become like him. In the Gospels, Peter and John receive some of Jesus' strongest rebukes and fail dismally to reflect Jesus, but over a period of years, at least a little bit of Jesus starts to rub off on them.

Jesus calls his followers his "sheep",¹ "friends",² and "brothers" (and "sisters").³ The earliest Christians described themselves as believers,⁴ but mainly as Jesus' disciples – a word used 256 times in the New Testament. The enemies of the early disciples gave them nicknames such as "people on the Way",⁵ and "the Nazarene sect".⁶ But most influentially, in Acts 11, also quoted above, they call them "Christians". The citizens of Antioch, trying to make sense of this fledgling spiritual community, notice that they seem to centre around a man called "Christ" – as such they are "Christ-ians" – literally, "little Jesuses".

A Christian is amazed, not necessarily amazing. The popular, but fabricated, New Age Jesus is someone who, ahead of their time, realised their God-consciousness and now wants to show us how we too can realise our divine identity. But the real Jesus of Scripture holds the unrivalled place as the unique Son of God, who alone lived perfectly, and who alone achieved the salvation of the world. Although a Christian might do great things with great love, first and foremost, we are not meant to be amazing, but amazed. Everything – all our prayers and obedience's – flows out of that grace-stunned heart.

A Christian has a live connection to the living Christ. Standing in a vineyard, Jesus compares his disciples to branches plugged into himself as the Vine. We don't only have his teaching, or his salvation, we have him. As wonderful and important as studying our Bible is, we must remember that it may authoritatively describe Jesus, but does not contain or replace Jesus. In the same way that God once said that even the universe cannot contain him, so the Bible, expansive and rich as it is, cannot contain Jesus. Jesus once challenged the Pharisees: "You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life."⁷ Think about it. Jesus is standing right before them, but they can't see him because their heads are in a book. The book tells us about Jesus, which is why we read it, yet the Spirit helps us to experience and interact with this same Jesus here and now. We get to walk and talk with the Author and the Grand Subject of the Bible.

A Christian does not pick and choose. We live in a day of customisable spirituality where we take what we like and leave behind the parts we don't like. But the moment we accept Jesus as the final and definitive revelation of God, we no longer do that. Jesus, being the Master of the Universe, is not someone we co-opt for our ends. Rather we take him as he is, lay everything down, and re-organise our thinking, our values, our lifestyles around him. He is the blazing Sun around which the planet-parts of our lives revolve and are held together. We notice especially that Jesus has no vision at all for solitary followers. He calls John, Peter, Thomas and Nathaniel to follow him together. That's why, the moment he ascends to heaven, John and Peter and all the disciples group with other followers of Jesus in faith-communities given to enjoying and spreading the fame, the salvation and the message of Jesus.

A Christian is someone who gives their all to Jesus. First, Jesus gives himself to us in salvation, but then we learn, slowly at times but surely, to give ourselves back to him in discipleship. Although Jesus calls us into community, he still challenges us personally. Read the Gospels again and see him spurning popularity, directing most of his comments not to the masses but to serious seekers. He constantly pushes them (and us) toward a deeper level of commitment: You cannot serve two masters. Forsake the love of money and the pleasures the world has to offer. Deny yourself. Serve others. Take up your cross. Lose your life to save it. The first will be last. The meek will inherit the earth. Rejoice in persecution. It's better to give than to receive. Turn the other cheek. We note that all the major symbols that Jesus uses for discipleship involve whole-hearted commitment: the yoke of burden, the cup of suffering, the towel of servanthood, and finally the cross of execution.⁸

A Christian has a growing appreciation for Jesus. In CS Lewis' book, *Prince Caspian*, Lucy enters Narnia again. She hasn't seen Aslan (the lion figure who represents Christ) for a long time. When they are wonderfully reunited, Lucy says, "Aslan, you're bigger now."

He replies, "Lucy, that's because you are older. You see, Lucy, every year that you grow, you will find me bigger." May God so open our eyes to see Jesus bigger and bigger the longer we trust and follow him.

JESUS' STORY:

A CHRONOLOGICAL SYNTHESIS OF THE GOSPELS

(Taken from Michael Eaton, The Jesus of the Gospels: The Approach of Maximum Faith)

		MARK	LUKE	MATT	JOHN
I. BEGINNINGS OF THE STORY					
1	Headings and prologues	Mk.1:1	Lk.1:1-4	Mt.1:1	John 1:1-18
II. BIRTH AND CHILDHOOD OF JESUS					
2	Genealogy			Mt.1:2-17	
3	Two children to be born		Lk.1:5-80		
4	Announcement of Jesus' birth to Joseph			Mt.1:18-25	
5	Birth of Jesus and what followed		Lk.2:1-39	Mt.2:1-23	
6	Jesus as a boy		Lk.2:40-52		
III. THE MINISTRY BEGINS					
7	John and Jesus	Mk.1:2-11	Lk.3:1-18	Mt.3:1-17	
8	A preview – Herod		Lk.3:19-20		
9	John and Jesus		Lk.3:21-22 completes 3:1-18		
10	Genealogy		Lk.3:23-38		
11	Temptation	Mk.1:12-13	Lk.4:1-13	Mt.4:1-11	
12	John the Baptist and a week in the life of Jesus				John 1:19-2:12
IV. JESUS' EARLIEST DAYS OF MINISTRY – JERUSALEM AND SAMARIA					
13	Removing the profiteers from the temple				John 2:13-22
14	Nicodemus				John 2:23-3:21
15	John and Jesus				John 3:22-36
16	Leaving Judea, travelling through Samaria				John 4:1-42
V. GALILEE: THE FIRST STAGE					

17	Arriving in Galilee			John 4:43-46a	
18	The nobleman's son			John 4:46b-54	
19	Summary statements	Mk.1:14-15	Lk.4:14-15	Mt.4:12-17	
20	A forward look: Nazareth		Lk.4:16-30		
21	Calling disciples	Mk.1:16-20		Mt.4:18-22	
22	A summary			Mt.4:23-25	
23	A day in Capernaum	Mk.1:21-38	Lk.4:31-44	Mt.8:14-17;	
24	Calling Peter		Lk.5:1-11		
25	A leper healed	Mk.1:39-45	Lk.5:12-16	Mt.8:2-4	
26	A paralytic	Mk.2:1-12	Lk.5:17-26	Mt.9:1-8	
27	Call of Levi	Mk.2:13-17	Lk.5:27-32	Mt.9:9-13	
28	Fasting	Mk.2:18-22	Lk.5:33-39	Mt.9:14-17	
29	Plucking corn	Mk.2:23-28	Lk.6:1-5	Mt.12:1-8	
30	Withered hand	Mk.3:1-6	Lk.6:6-11	Mt.12:9-14	
VI. A SECOND STAGE IN THE GALILEAN MINISTRY					
31	Withdrawal	Mk.3:7-12		Mt.12:15-21	
32	Apostles	Mk.3:13-19	Lk.6:12-16	Mt.10:1-4	
33	Accusation	Mk.3:20-30			
34	Jesus' family	Mk.3:31-32			
35	Relationship to Jesus	Mk.3:33-35			
36	Sermon on the Mount		Lk.6:17-49	Mt.5:1-8:1	
37	Centurion's servant		Lk.7:1-10	Mt.8:5-13	
38	The widow of Nain		Lk.7:11-17		
39	John's doubts		Lk.7:18-35	Matt.11:2-19	
40	A sinful woman		Lk.7:36-50		

41	Jesus' helpers		Lk.8:1-3		
42	The sower	Mk.4:1-9	Lk.8:4-8	Mt.13:1-9	
43	Purpose	Mk.4:10-12	Lk.8:9-10	Mt.13:10-17	
44	Sower	Mk.4:13-20	Lk.8:11-15	Mt.13:18-23	
45	Light hidden	Mk.4:21-25	Lk.8:16-18		
46	Growing seed	Mk.4:26-29			
47	Wheat, weeds			Mt.13:24-30	
48	Mustard seed	Mk.4:30-34		Mt.13:31 - 35	
49	Wheat, weeds			Mt.13:36-43	
50	Treasure			Mt.13:44	
51	The pearl			Mt.13:45-46	
52	The net			Mt.13:47-50	
53	Old and new			Mt.13:51-52	
54	Jesus' family		Lk.8:19-21	Mt.12:46-50	
55	The storm	Mk.4:35-41	Lk.8:22-25	Mt.8:23-27	
56	A demoniac	Mk.5:1-20	Lk.8:26-39	Mt.8:28-34	
57	Jairus' girl	Mk.5:21-43	Lk.8:40-56	Mt.9:18-26	
58	Two blind men			Mt.9:27-31	
59	A demon-possessed mute man			Mt.9:32-34	
60	Jesus' compassion			Mt.9:35-38	
61	Nazareth	Mk.6:1-6a		Mt.13:53-58	
62	A festival in Jerusalem				John 5:1-6:1
VII. THE LAST DAYS IN GALILEE AND FURTHER AFIELD					
63	Apostles	Mk.6:6b-13	Lk.9:1-6	Mt.10:5-11:1	

64	Herod reacts	Mk.6:14-16	Lk.9:7-9	Mt.14:1-12	
65	A flashback	Mk.6:17-29			
66	Reporting back to Jesus	Mk.6:30-32			
67	The 5000	Mk.6:33-44	Lk.9:10-17	Mt.14:13-21	John 6:2-15
68	On water	Mk.6:45-52		Mt.14:22-27	John 6:16-21
69	Peter's request			Mt.14:28-33	
70	The day after				John 6:22-71
71	Gennesaret	Mk.6:53-56		Mt.14:34-36	
72	Tradition	Mk.7:1-23		Mt.15:1-20	
VIII. AVOIDING CAPTURE					
73	Further afield	Mk.7:24-30		Mt.15:21-28	
74	Leaving Tyre	Mk.7:31-37		Mt.15:29-31	
75	The 4000	Mk.8:1-9a		Mt.15:32-39	
76	Dalmanutha	Mk.8:9b-13		Mt.16:1-4	
77	The 'leaven'	Mk.8:14-21		Mt.16:5-12	
78	Half-cured	Mk.8:22-26			
79	Caesarea Ph.	Mk.8:27-30	Lk.9:18-21	Mt.16:13-20	
IX. AFTER CAESAREA PHILIPPI					
80	A prediction	Mk.8:31-37	Lk.9:22-25	Mt.16:21-26	
81	The Coming	Mk.8:38-9:1	Lk.9:26-27	Mt.16:27-28	
82	Transfiguration	Mk.9:2-10	Lk.9:28-36	Mt.17:1-9	
83	Elijah	Mk.9:11-13		Mt.17:10-13	
84	The boy	Mk.9:14-32	Lk.9:37-45	Mt.17:14-23	
85	Half-Shekel			Mt.17:24-27	

86	The greatest?	Mk.9:33-37	Lk.9:46-48	Mt.18:1-10	
87	Mistaken zeal	Mk.9:38-50	Lk.9:49-50	Mt.18:6-14	
88	Mercy			Mt.18:15-35	
89	At the feast of tabernacles				John 7:1-10:21

X. JOURNEYING TO JERUSALEM

90	A village rejects Jesus		Lk.9:51-56		
91	I will follow...		Lk.9:57-62	Mt.8:18-22	
92	The 72		Lk.10:1-12		
93	Unrepentant towns		Lk.10:13-16	Mt.11:20-24	
94	Return of 70		Lk.10:17-20		
95	The Rejoicing of Jesus		Lk.10:21-24	Mt.11:25-27	
96	An invitation			Mt.11:28-30	
97	Good Samaritan		Lk.10:25-37		
98	Martha and Mary		Lk.10:38-42		
99	Lord's Prayer		Lk.11:1-13		
100	Beelzebul		Lk.11:14-23	Mt.12:22-32	
101	Make the tree good			Mt.12:33-37	
102	Return of Unclean Spirit		Lk.11:24-26	Mt.12:43-45	
103	True blessedness		Lk.11:27-28		
104	Sign of Jonah		Lk.11:29-32	Mt.12:38-42	
105	The Lamp of the Body		Lk.11:33-36		
106	Pharisees		Lk.11:37-54		
107	Beware of leaven		Lk.12:1-15		

108	Rich fool		Lk.12:16-34		
109	Readiness		Lk.12:35-41		
110	Steward and servants		Lk.12:42-48		
111	Not peace but a sword		Lk.12:49-59		
112	Repent or perish		Lk.13:1-5		
113	Barren fig tree		Lk.13:6-9		
114	Woman with infirmity		Lk.13:10-17		
115	Mustard seed		Lk.13:18-19		
116	Leaven		Lk.13:20-21		
117	Narrow door		Lk.13:22-30		
118	Lament over Jerusalem		Lk.13:31-35		
119	Healing on the Sabbath		Lk.14:1-6		
120	Wedding feast		Lk.14:7-11		
121	Great banquet		Lk.14:12-24		
122	The cost of discipleship		Lk.14:25-33		
123	Worthless salt		Lk.14:34-35		
124	The lost sheep		Lk.15:1-7		
125	The lost coin		Lk.15:8-10		
126	The lost son		Lk.15:11-32		
127	The dishonest manager		Lk.16:1-13		
128	Answering Pharisees		Lk.16:14-17		
129	Divorce		Lk.16:18		
130	The rich man and Lazarus		Lk.16:19-31		
131	Temptations to sin		Lk.17:1-4		

132	Increase our faith		Lk.17:5-6		
133	Unworthy servants		Lk.17:7-10		
134	Ten lepers		Lk.17:11-19		
135	Coming of the Kingdom		Lk.17:20-37		
136	Persistent widow		Lk.18:1-8		
137	Pharisee and tax collector		Lk.18:9-14		
138	In Judea	Mk.10:1		Mt.19:1-2	
139	Divorce	Mk.10:2-12		Mt.19:3-12	
140	Children	Mk.10:13-16	Lk.18:15-17	Mt.19:13-15	
141	Rich ruler	Mk.10:17-31	Lk.18:18-30	Mt.19:16-20:16	
142	A feast				John 10:22-11:1
143	Prediction	Mk.10:32-34	Lk.18:31-34	Mt.20:17-19	
144	James and John	Mk.10:35-45		Mt.20:20-28	
145	Blind men	Mk.10:46-52	Lk.18:35-43	Mt.20:29-34	
146	Zacchaeus		Luke 19:1-10		
147	Ten minas		Luke 19:11-27		
148	MISSING TEXT				John 11:2-57

XI. THE LAST WEEK

149	Entry into Jerusalem	Mark 11:1-11	Luke 19:28-40	Mt.21:1-11	
150	Jesus weeps		Lk.19:41-44		
151	The fig tree	Mk.11:12-14			
152	The temple	Mk.11:15-19	Lk.19:45-48	Mt.21:12-17	
153	The fig tree	Mk.11:20-26		Mt.21:18-22	

154	Authority?	Mk.11:27-33	Lk.20:1-8	Mt.21:23-27	
155	Two sons			Mt.21:28-32	
156	Wicked tenants	Mk.12:1-12	Lk.20:9-19	Mt.21:33-46	
157	Wedding feast			Mt.22:1-14	
158	Paying taxes	Mk.12:13-17	Lk.20:20-26	Mt.22:15-22	
159	Resurrection	Mk.12:18-27	Lk.20:27-40	Mt.22:23-33	
160	1st Commandment	Mk.12:28-34		Mt.22:34-40	
161	David's Son	Mk.12:35-37	Lk.20:41-44	Mt.22:41-46	
162	Scribes	Mk.12:38-40	Lk.20:45-47	Mt.23:1-39	
163	Widow's mite	Mk.12:41-44	Lk.21:1-4		
164	The fall of Jerusalem	Mk.13:1-31	Lk.21:5-33	Mt.24:1-35	
165	That day	Mk.13:32-37	Lk.21:34-38	Mt.24:36-25:46	
XII. DEATH AND RESURRECTION					
166	Tuesday evening	Mk.14:1-2	Lk.22:1-2	Mt.26:1-5	
167	Bethany	Mk.14:3-9		Mt.26:6-13	John 12:1-8
168	Jerusalem				John 12:9-50
169	Judas	Mk.14:10-11	Lk.22:3-6	Mt.26:14-16	
170	Preparing for Passover	Mk.14:12-16	Lk.22:7-13	Mt.26:17-19	
171	After sunset	Mk.14:17	Lk.22:14-16	Mt.26:20	John 13:1-20
172	MISSING TEXT	Mk.14:18-21		Mt.26:21-25	John 13:21-30

173	First cup		Luke 22:17-18		
174	Bread and wine	Mk.14:22-26	Lk.22:19- 20	Mt.22:26- 30	John 13:31- 38
175	Prediction of betrayal		Lk.22:21- 23		
176	Greatness in the kingdom		Lk.22:24- 30		
177	MISSING TEXT				Jn.14-16
178	Denial foretold	Mk.14:27-31	Lk.22:31- 34	Mt.26:31- 35	
179	MISSING TEXT		Lk.22:35- 38		
180	Gethsemane	Mk.14:32-42	Lk.22:39- 46	Mt.26:36- 46	Jn.17
181	Arrest	Mk.14:43-52	Lk.22:47- 53	Mt.26:47- 56	Jn.18:1-11
182	Before Annas				Jn.18:12-14
183	Denial				Jn.18:15-18
184	Trial before Sanhedrin, mockery	Mk.14:53-65	Lk.22:54	Mt.26:57- 68	Jn.18:19-24
185	Denial	Mk.14:66-72	Lk.22:54- 62	Mt.26:69- 75	Jn.18:25-27
186	Mockery		Lk.22:63- 65		
187	Trial before Sanhedrin	Mk.14:61-64	Lk.22:66- 71		
188	Before Pilate	Mk.15:1-5	Lk.23:1-7	Mt.27:1-2	Jn.18:18-38
189	Death of Judas			Mt.27:3-10	
190	Before Pilate			Mt.27:11- 26	
191	Mockery			Mt.27:27- 31	
192	Before Pilate	Mk.15:6-15	Lk.23:13- 25		Jn.18:39- 19:16a

193	MISSING TEXT	Mk.15:16-20			
194	Crucifixion	Mk.15:21-32	Lk.23:26-43	Mt.27:32-44	Jn.19:16b-27
195	Jesus' death	Mk.15:33-41	Lk.23:44-49	Mt.27:45-56	Jn.19:28-37
196	Burial	Mk.15:42-47	Lk.23:50-56	Mt.27:57-61	Jn.19:38-42
197	The guard			Mt.27:62-66	
198	Resurrection	Mk.16:1-8	Lk.24:1-12	Mt.28:1-8	Jn.20:1-10
199	Report of guard			Mt.28:9-15	Jn.20:11-18
200	Emmaus		Lk.24:13-35		
201	MISSING TEXT		Lk.24:36-49	Mt.28:16-20	Jn.20:19-23
202	Thomas				Jn.20:24-29
203	MISSING TEXT		Lk.24:50-53		
204	MISSING TEXT				John 21

REFLECTIONS & QUESTIONS

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A series of horizontal dotted lines for writing reflections and questions.

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10 Matthew 16:26

11 Matthew 9:15

12 Mark 11:27-33

- 14 Luke 12:15
- 15 Matthew 5-7
- 16 Matthew 22:37
- 17 Matthew 23:36
- 18 In Matthew alone, see 6:25, 8:26, 9:2, 10:28, 10:31, 14:27, 17:7 and 24:6.
- 19 John 13:3-17
- 20 Matthew 5:44
- 21 Mark 12:1-12

DAY 17 WOMEN AND CHILDREN

- 1 Matthew 18:2, 3, 5
- 2 Matthew 19:13-15
- 3 Historian OM Bakke wrote a study called *When Children Became People: The Birth of Childhood in Early Christianity*, in which he noted that in the ancient world, children usually didn't get named until the eighth day or so. Up until then there was a chance that the infant would be killed or left to die of exposure—particularly if it was deformed or of the unpreferred gender.
- 4 Luke 13:16
- 5 John 4:1-42
- 6 Luke 10:38-42
- 7 Luke 11:27-28
- 8 Mark 16:9]
- 9 Luke 8:1-3
- 10 Yancey, P. *The Jesus I Never Knew*. Zondervan, 1995.
- 11 John 20:15
- 12 Galatians 3:28
- 13 A quote by Dorothy Sayers

DAY 18 THE PERSONAL TOUCH

- 1 John 21:4-13
- 2 Luke 5:27-39; 7:36-50; 9:10-17; 10:38-42; 11:37-54; 14:1-24; 19:1-10; 22:7-38; 24:13-35; 24:36-53
- 3 Luke 19:1-10; Mark 5:21-34; John 19:25-27; Luke 23:40-43
- 4 Yancey, P. *The Jesus I Never Knew*. Zondervan, 1995.
- 5 Mark 10:21
- 6 Keller, T. *Making Sense of God*. Penguin Books, 2016.
- 7 Matthew 12:11-12; 6:26; 10:29-31
- 8 Ortberg, J. *Who is this Man? The Unpredictable Impact of the Inescapable Jesus*. Zonderman, 2012.
- 9 Johnson, P. *Jesus: A Biography from a Believer*. Penguin Group, 2010.

DAY 19 COLLISION COURSE

1 Morphew, D. *Demonstrating the Kingdom: Tools For Christian Discipleship* (Kingdom Theology Book 2). Vineyard International Publishing, 2019.

2 Mark 4:39

3 Mark 2:1-3:6; 3:22-30; 11:27-33

4 Mark 3:20-21, 31-34

5 Mark 8:33

6 Mark 12:1-12

7 Mark 12:13-17

8 Mark 12:18-27

9 Mark 12:28-34

10 Mark 11:27-28; 14:1

11 Mark 14:53-15:15

12 Mark 14:10

13 John 13:2

14 Koukl, G. *The Story of Reality: How the World Began, How It Ends, and Everything Important that Happens in Between*. Zondervan, 2017.

15 John 2:24-25

16 John 5:18; 7:1, 19

17 Matthew 12:22-29

18 Matthew 11:20-24

19 Matthew 13:10-17

20 John 6:1-71

21 John 6:15

22 John 6:70

23 Luke 18:9-14

24 Matthew 23:27

25 Mark 9:9-10

26 John 11:47-53

DAY 20 TRAGIC FRIDAY

1 This paragraph adapts and combines:

Rutledge, F. *The Crucifixion: understanding the death of Jesus Christ*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2015,

Koukl, G. *The Story of Reality: How the World Began, How It Ends, and Everything Important that Happens in Between*. Zondervan, 2017, and

CT Davis,, *The Expos. Bible Comm*, Vol. 8

2 Yancey, P. *The Jesus I Never Knew*. Zondervan, 1995.

3 Rutledge, F. *The Crucifixion: understanding the death of Jesus Christ*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2015.

4 I used some wording Rick Warren used in a sermon on the cross.

5 Rutledge, F. *The Crucifixion: understanding the death of Jesus Christ*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2015

DAY 21 DRINK THIS CUP

1 Matthew 1:21

2 Ortberg, J. *Who is this Man? The Unpredictable Impact of the Inescapable Jesus*. Zonderman, 2012.

3 John 12:34

4 Yancey, P. *The Jesus I Never Knew*. Zondervan, 1995.

5 2 Corinthians 5:21

6 Galatians 3:13

7 1 Peter 2:24

8 1 Peter 3:18

9 Galatians 3:13

10 Isaiah 53:6

11 Genesis 3:15

12 Stott, J. *The Cross of Christ*. InterVarsity Press, 1986.

13 John 6:53-56

DAY 22 JESUS IS ALIVE

1 This paragraph combines adapted quotes from:

Koukl, G. *The Story of Reality: How the World Began, How It Ends, and Everything Important that Happens in Between*. Zondervan, 2017, and

Yancey, P. *The Jesus I Never Knew*. Zondervan, 1995.

2 Luke 24:11

3 Luke 24:42

4 According to an exhaustive analysis by Gary Habermas in *The Historical Jesus* surveying 1400 academic sources published since 1975, printed in English, French, and German.

5 Koukl, G. *The Story of Reality: How the World Began, How It Ends, and Everything Important that Happens in Between*. Zondervan, 2017.

6 Keller, T. *Making Sense of God*. Penguin Books, 2016.

7 Bird, M. *Evangelical Theology: A Biblical and Systematic Introduction*. Zondervan, 2013.

8 1 Corinthians 15:17

9 NT Wright

10 Hebrews 2:14-15

11 Romans 8:24-25

12 1 Corinthians 15:57-58

DAY 23 THE ASCENT OF JESUS

1 Acts 2:36-28

2 Matthew 16:19

3 Ephesians 1:22-23

4 Hebrews 7:25

5 Acts 7:55-56

6 John 16:7

7 Acts 2:15-16

8 Acts 2:33

DAY 24 WHO DO YOU SAY I AM?

1 Isaiah 9:6-7

2 Mark 1:14-15

3 Mark 4:30

4 Matthew 6:9

5 Matthew 6:33

6 Matthew 10:6-8

7 Matthew 12:28

8 Revelations 20:10

9 1 Thessalonians 4:16

10 Hebrews 9:28

11 1 Thessalonians 4:17

12 Revelations 1:7

DAY 25 THE LION WHO IS THE LAMB

1 Ortberg, J. Who is this Man? The Unpredictable Impact of the Inescapable Jesus. Zonderman, 2012.

2 Yancey, P. The Jesus I Never Knew. Zondervan, 1995.

3 Revelations 5:6

DAY 26 GOD WITH SKIN ON

1: 1) There is only one God not three. 2) The Father is God. 3) The Son is God. 4) The Spirit is God 5) Though they are one in divinity, they are distinct from each other as persons.

2 John 8:58

3 (This is an adapted excerpt from Tim Keller, Making Sense of God.)

4 (This sentence adapts Philip Yancey, The Jesus I Never Knew).

5 John 8:24

6 John 8:58

7 John 12:45

8 John 3:18

9 (These 6 sentences quote Greg Koukl. *The Story of Reality*)

10 John 20:28

11 Isa 7:14

12 Isaiah 9:6

13 Matthew 28:20

14 (This entire paragraph is an adapted quote from Tim Keller, *Making Sense of God*.)

DAY 27 THE GOD WHO IS LOVE

1 Koukl, G. *The Story of Reality: How the World Began, How It Ends, and Everything Important that Happens in Between*. Zondervan, 2017. (To be theologically pedantic, God the Son became one of us, not God the Father or God the Spirit. But since the Father and the Spirit so radically identify with, and live in and with, the Son it is as though they too became one of us.)

2 John 14:9

3 Job 10:4

4 Yancey, P. *The Jesus I Never Knew*. Zondervan, 1995.

5 John 6:16–24

6 Mark 5:35–43

7 John 19:11

8 Keller, T. *Making Sense of God*. Penguin Books, 2016.

9 Yancey, P. *The Jesus I Never Knew*. Zondervan, 1995.

10 Koukl, G. *The Story of Reality: How the World Began, How It Ends, and Everything Important that Happens in Between*. Zondervan, 2017

11 Ortberg, J. *Who is this Man? The Unpredictable Impact of the Inescapable Jesus*. Zonderman, 2012.

12 Yancey, P. *The Jesus I Never Knew*. Zondervan, 1995.

13 Stott, J. *The Cross of Christ*. InterVarsity Press, 1986.

14 Koukl, G. *The Story of Reality: How the World Began, How It Ends, and Everything Important that Happens in Between*. Zondervan, 2017

15 Yancey, P. *The Jesus I Never Knew*. Zondervan, 1995.

DAY 28 JESUS AMONG THE GODS

1 This argument pulls together an argument Tim Keller makes in a sermon, as well as in *Making Sense of God*.

2 Eaton, M. *The Plan and Purpose of God*. Africa Leadership School, 2014.

3 Acts 26:25-26

4 Strobel, L. Are there many paths to God? Study Guide, 2007.

DAY 29 JESUS DEFICIT DISORDER

1 Sweet, L., & Viola, F. Jesus Manifesto: Restoring the Supremacy and Sovereignty of Jesus Christ. Thomas Nelson, 2010.

2 Sweet, L., & Viola, F. Jesus Manifesto: Restoring the Supremacy and Sovereignty of Jesus Christ. Thomas Nelson, 2010.

3 Sweet, L., & Viola, F. Jesus Manifesto: Restoring the Supremacy and Sovereignty of Jesus Christ. Thomas Nelson, 2010.

DAY 30 WHAT IS A CHRIST-IAN?

1 John 10:27

2 John 15:15

3 John 17:17

4 Acts 2:44

5 Acts 9:2

6 Acts 24:5

7 John 5:39-40

8 Yancey, P. The Jesus I Never Knew. Zondervan, 1995.