

What's so special about Jesus Christ?

What does he mean to you?



The Christadelphians

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What's so special about Jesus Christ?

Many things make Jesus Christ special, some of them surprising, even controversial.

Millions of people who call themselves Christians clearly believe that Christ is special, or they wouldn't think about him every day. And the Bible makes him its central character. One thing it says about him, which is not always properly understood, is that he was just like us in so many ways.

Jesus – The Man

Here is one of those statements about Jesus:

*“Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, **he himself likewise shared in the same**” (Hebrews 2:14), and later, the same writer said:*

*“We do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathise with our weaknesses, but **was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin**. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (4:15,16).*

As someone once said *“He was made like us so that we might be made like him”*, and the first part of that helpful little saying conveys a huge truth. When Jesus Christ lived on earth, first as a carpenter and then as a travelling preacher, he shared all the feelings, desires, wants and upsets that we also feel in our lives. He was

“flesh and blood” and “tempted as we are”. For Jesus was a man and – wait for it – Jesus still is a man, although he has now been exalted to glory and sits in heaven at God's right hand. We know that for sure, in the same way that we know anything and everything about him, because that's what the Bible says:

*“The first man (Adam) was of the earth, made of dust; the second **man** (Jesus) is the Lord from heaven” (1 Corinthians 15:47), and*

*“There is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the **man** Christ Jesus” (1 Timothy 2:5).*

You may be thinking that Jesus was a man when he was on earth, but now he's in heaven. But both these Scriptures were written years after he lived on earth. Think about it. There's a glorified man in heaven who can speak on our behalf and plead our cause. That's a very special thing indeed, even more so when you realise that he's the only person who has ever ascended to heaven. Nobody else has and nobody else will:

“No one has ascended to heaven but he who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven (John 3:13).

The Challenge of Jesus

Some of this might be new to you and you might feel that it's challenging



things you have believed for a long time, or things you always thought were right. If so, you will be like some of those people who heard Jesus teach during the few years when he became a teacher and preacher. They were astounded by what he said, and the authority with which he said it.

Several times we are told in the temporary records that they marvelled at him, or wondered at the gracious words that he spoke. They had never heard a teacher like this before. Some temple guards who had been sent to arrest Jesus came back empty-handed because, they said: *“No man ever spoke like this man!”* (John 7:46).

Special Teacher

Jesus was an extraordinary teacher whose words changed the course of history, as Christian values were adopted in many parts of the world. He taught the master principle of love for God and for our fellows, and made this the rule of his life. It was never true of him that he said one thing and did another. Far from it! Even his enemies had to think hard before they could pin any accusation on him, and then the trumped-up charges related to what he had said, not what he had done.

If he had needed a tombstone, there could have been no finer epitaph engraved upon it than a tribute that was paid him by one of his followers, the apostle Peter, who summed up his life by saying that Jesus. *“went about doing good”* (Acts 10:38).

Later, writing to other believers, Peter amplified that by saying of Jesus that he *“committed no sin, nor was*

guile found in his mouth” (1 Peter 2:22). That might have been a bit long for a tombstone, but no matter! Another remarkable thing about Jesus is that he never needed one!

Man Alive!

After his wrongful conviction, Jesus was executed in a public and humiliating way, allowing his enemies to taunt him and his friends and followers to mourn the way things had turned out:

they thought for the worst! Carefully some of them took his body down from the cross and laid him in a nearby tomb, but there was a Jewish festival about to start so they couldn't prepare the body for burial in the way they wanted to. It was days later when the women came, early in the morning, to do what was necessary.

But it was unnecessary! There was no dead body, for Jesus had risen from the dead, just as he said he would.

It took some believing, for his close followers had seen him die a public and awful death. How could he be alive again? Nobody had ever returned to life after such an obviously cruel and painful death.

What was special about the death of Jesus was that it was all part of God's great plan of salvation for mankind. Everything that Jesus did was done in co-operation with his Father – the things he said, and did; the promises and prophecies he made; the death he died – they were all part of God's escape plan for mankind.

Those are just some of the things that make Jesus special: things that should make him special to you.



Why Did Jesus Come?

It's a reasonable enough question to ask: "Why did he come?", but are you ready for the answer, as it was given by Jesus himself? Here it is.

"I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me" (John 6:38).

Sent by God

Jesus was born on earth because it was in the plan and purpose of God that he should come. He came to do what his Father wanted done, just as others had before him, for much the same reason.

God has taken the initiative many times to communicate His purpose, and to tell people about His great plan. Always that required people who were sent to do a particular job and sometimes they were able to demonstrate their status as God's representatives by acts of supernatural power. Thus:

- ✓ **Moses** was sent by God from Midian to rescue God's people from slavery in Egypt and he performed many miracles (Exodus 3:12);
- ✓ **John the Baptist** was "sent by God" to announce the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ (John 1:6) and to plead with the people on God's behalf.

Promised Messiah

From very early times, when things had gone badly wrong between the Creator and His creation, God promised to put things right. He was under no obligation to do so, for mankind had created the problem and continues to do so,

by wilfully ignoring God and choosing to live selfishly, in a godless way. Yet, like a golden thread running through Scripture, God's promises speak of one who would:

- ✳ **Destroy sin** in all its aspects (Genesis 3:15);
- ✳ **Conquer and control** everything that opposes God and thus bring a blessing to all mankind (Genesis 22:17,18);
- ✳ **Rule for God on earth**, and make the world a paradise once more (2 Samuel 7:12-16).

Jesus was born at the very time the prophets of God had predicted the Messiah would come, which is why there were people anxiously awaiting a deliverer (see, for example, Luke 2:25,26). But, instead of understanding that Jesus was to bring deliverance from sin before he could establish God's rulership of the earth, most people focused on the idea of political rulership there and then.

People wanted someone who would throw the Romans out and establish a Jewish state once more, so when Jesus demonstrated that he had remarkable God-given powers, they kept trying to make him King, or to acclaim him as their King (John 6:15; Luke 19:38).

Born a King

If they had read their Scriptures more carefully, or had listened attentively to what Jesus was teaching, they would have realised that he was someone very special indeed. He had been sent

by God, as he said himself, but he was no mere prophet. Look at these two Scriptures and notice just who Jesus was:

“God, who at various times and in different ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by his Son, whom he has appointed heir of all things...” (Hebrews 1:1,2);

“When your days are fulfilled and you rest with your fathers, I will set up your seed after you, who will come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his Father, and he shall be my son” (2 Samuel 7:12-14).

Jesus was the Son of God, no less! His coming was a unique event, for he was the “only begotten son of God” (John 1:14,18). Marvellously, when it had proved impossible for men and women to save themselves, for everyone had failed to live up to God’s high standards, God took the initiative and sent His Son.

He caused Jesus to be born of the virgin Mary, by the exercise of His great power – the Holy Spirit – and made it clear to Mary that her child was to become the long-promised King, who would one day rule for God on earth. This is what she was told:

“Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call his name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David. And he will

reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” Then Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I do not know a man?” And the angel answered and said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God” (Luke 1:31-35).

Born a Saviour



The child who was to be born would be Mary’s son, and thus a descendant of King David (just as 2 Samuel 7:12 had promised). He would thus inherit all the characteristics with which we are born – the same feelings, desires and human tendencies. That’s how it would be possible to say of him that he “was in all points tempted as we are” (Hebrews 4:15) and that he shared our nature.

But he was also to be the Son of God, God’s only-begotten Son, and that set him apart from ordinary folk, because he had a very special relationship with God his Father.

That didn’t mean that he was bound to do his Father’s will, and that he couldn’t think or act otherwise. People who think that Jesus had already been in existence in heaven and that he was now relocated on earth for 33 years, before returning to a life in heaven, are wrong on two counts:

- 1 They fail to understand the importance of the role that Mary played in the birth of Jesus. From her he inherited those characteristics that make men and women what they

are – human – with a nature opposed to God and His ways for generations; and

- 2 They cannot then appreciate what Jesus came to do, and the marvelous way in which he accomplished it. And in failing to appreciate it, they do a great disservice to the Lord Jesus, for his conquest over sin was absolutely remarkable and because of this he is worthy of great praise.

Mary was told that Jesus would be a king. Joseph, who took no active part in the birth of the child, but who had an important supporting role, was told about the other aspect of the work Jesus was to accomplish:

“Call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21).

To Save His People

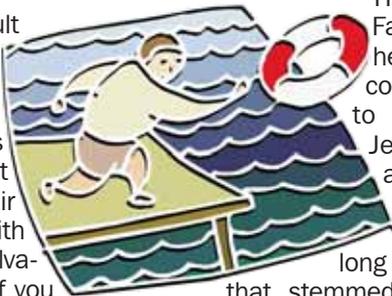
So Jesus came, as a result of a divine initiative, to rescue mankind from sin and death. He was a life bringer and rescuer. It was as if all mankind was about to drown in a sea of despair and then he appeared with an offer of safety and salvation. You could be saved if you wanted to be – if you listened carefully to what he said and did exactly what he told you to do.

That has been the offer Jesus has been making to men and women ever since he began to teach. That is why he came. But it is only possible for him to issue such an invitation because of the way he lived and the things that he chose to do. Look again at what he said about the reason for his life on earth:

“I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me” (John 6:38).

Don’t ever think that was easy, or that there was no personal cost and effort involved. If that thought ever crosses your mind, think of that occasion when, on the eve of his crucifixion, Jesus was with his disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane, just outside Jerusalem. The account tells how, under great stress, his sweat was as though it were great drops of blood falling from him, and he prayed earnestly to his Father for the strength he needed to endure what lay ahead. Of himself, he didn’t want to do it; but he knew that it was his Father’s will that he should die. So he prayed, over and over:

“Father, if it is your will, remove this cup from me; nevertheless not my will, but yours, be done” (Luke 22:42).



He had come to do his Father’s will and do it he would, whatever it cost. God had sent him to save mankind and Jesus was a faithful and obedient Son.

Where everyone else had failed, in the long line of generations that stemmed from Adam, Jesus now succeeded. That is why it can be said of him that he: “was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Hebrews 4:15) and:

“In the days of his flesh, when he had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to him who was able to save him from death, and was heard because of his godly fear, though he was a Son, yet he learned obedience by the things which he suffered” (Hebrews 5:7,8).

What did Jesus Teach?

When Jesus was about to leave earth and ascend to heaven, these were among his parting words to the disciples, a statement that is sometimes called “the great commission”:

*“Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. **He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned**” (Mark 16:15,16).*

The Gospel Jesus taught

Believing the gospel is vital for salvation and obeying it – by being baptized (immersed in water) – is another vital requirement. So, what is the gospel that has to be believed, and how particular was Jesus about this requirement?

We are very well placed to be able to answer that for ourselves for there are four separate accounts of what Jesus taught – in the four gospels. First and foremost, they make it clear that Jesus lived a life that was above reproach. He did everything that was required of him and never did anything wrong – something that sets him apart from everyone else, before or since. He lived according to the highest standards and taught us to try to live in the best possible way.

In the longest recorded account of his teaching, sometimes known as the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus spelled out his vision of life as it should be lived. Here are just a few extracts, and you can read the whole account in



Matthew chapters 5-7:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God” (Matthew 5:3-9).

New Age – New People

Jesus promised his followers, as you can see for yourself, a kingdom (where he would reign as King) which would be of heavenly quality, because it would be established by heaven upon the earth (see Matthew 6:10,13 – the Lord’s Prayer).

In that new society people will be comforted and satisfied to the full: all their needs will be met. They will be shown God’s mercy and will share in a new relationship, with God and with one another. Jesus taught a lot about that coming age, which was to be established on earth, when it becomes the eternal inheritance of those who are saved from sin and death. But who will those people be?

Much of what Jesus taught was about the characteristics and qualities

of those who want to be God's people. In these blessings he describes the sort of people we ought to be –

- ❖ **Poor in spirit** (not proud, arrogant and assertive, but humble and self-denying);
- ❖ **Mournful** (about the way in which sin has got a grip on everything in our godless and heedless world);
- ❖ **Meek** (developing self-control and being able to harness and contain our self-will);
- ❖ **Hungry** (for that which God alone can provide to satisfy our deepest needs and longings);
- ❖ **Merciful** (towards others as we develop a sense of our own need for God's merciful forgiveness of our sins);
- ❖ **Pure in heart** (as we learn to purge out those natural feelings and desires that, unchecked, would lead us away from God);
- ❖ **Peacemakers** (as we try to bring peace to others, both to help them live in harmony with their fellows and as we teach them about the opportunity to be at peace with God).

The Life of Christ

But how do we become new people like that, so we can inhabit the new age, and live with the Lord Jesus forever? The first thing Jesus did to help us was to set an example, so that we have a target at which to aim. The New Testament says that quite clearly when reflecting upon his life:

"To this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow his steps..." (1 Peter 2:21).

Jesus shows that it is possible for us to live at a higher level than that we

sometimes choose. Man was made in the image of God, which means that we have the God-given potential to aspire to godliness – to live in a way which reflects something of the character and loving nature of our Creator. Jesus was the perfect expression of what might be achieved, which is why he is described as *"the brightness of (God's) glory and the express image of his person"* (Hebrews 1:3). He never once allowed that potential to be limited by an act or word that was disobedient or thoughtless. His was a perfect life and thus he sets us a remarkable example.

What about Us?

It is, of course, very different with us. We do and think things we regret and often have much cause to realise our failings. If we were just left with an example of what could be possible, but were given no indication of how to achieve it for ourselves, we would despair. It would be rather like a master mathematician coming to explain his latest findings, when we were still struggling with basic arithmetic! And the quality of the life of Jesus is so far above us: we can never live like that unless somebody helps us to achieve life at that level of excellence. Yet listen to this:

"Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! ... Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when he is revealed, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:1,2).

This is quite wonderful, because it promises us that we can be like Jesus and explains that *"when he is revealed"* our full potential will also be

revealed. We too can be made in the image of God, according to His likeness. For in the age to come, God will populate this world with people who are like Him and who exhibit godly characters and live a wholly godly life. And the same Scripture tells us how we can begin that process now, for John then says: *“And everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure”*. If this is what we truly want, having that *“hope”* of a better life is the first step towards purity of thought and behaviour.

Repentance and Salvation

All this should focus our minds and help us concentrate on just what it was that Jesus taught. He spoke about the coming Kingdom of God, as we have seen, and his emphasis was upon what needs to be done now to make it possible for us to inhabit that Kingdom, when he rules as King on David’s ancient throne, at Jerusalem.

We have already seen that his parting words included the command to spread the word about Belief and Baptism. Notice what is recorded as his teaching *right at the start* of the preaching work, over three years before. Here’s the gospel record:

“From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand’” (Matthew 4:17).

We can never be good enough ourselves to merit entrance into God’s Kingdom. But we can ask for forgiveness and determine that we will change the direction of our lives. That’s what *repentance* really means –

it means turning around and going in a different direction. Instead of living in a way that takes us further away from God, if we repent we can start to head in the right direction. We can learn to live with God, by reading His life-giving message contained in the Bible, and then trying to do the things that please Him, by obeying His commands. Jesus did that unflinching, but we will fail, that’s in the nature of things. But when we ask for forgiveness, God is always willing to help us again and He will be with us all our life long (1 John 1:9).

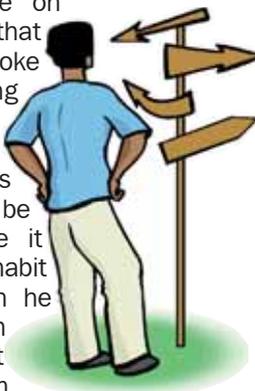
We do not have to go through life alone. We can have a companion who understands our difficulties, because he has been here too, and he is now in a position to both help and support us.

Following Jesus

No sooner had Jesus begun to preach repentance than he said: *“Follow me”* (Matthew 4:19). There were people in those days who left everything that had mattered to them up to that point and went where their Lord led. And there have been many people since who have accepted the challenge to embark on a spiritual adventure that will eventually lead them to the Kingdom of God.

You can be among that number if you want to be, for the invitation is still being issued by Jesus. Whenever you read his words, he is appealing across the centuries for more people to join him in a life-changing process that will give them peace of mind now, peace with God because of all that Jesus has done for us, and everlasting peace in the coming Kingdom of God.

“Take my yoke upon you”, he says, “and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:29,30).



Why Did Jesus Die?

If he lived such a godly life and went about doing so much good; if his teaching was unlike anything that had ever been heard before, why was it that he had to die? And if a death was necessary, why did he have to die such a public and cruel death by crucifixion?

God's Foreknowledge

Those are questions that people have asked for the last 2000 years and they are still vitally important. The death of Jesus on the cross is right at the heart of the Christian gospel. When the apostle Peter addressed the crowd at Jerusalem, just weeks after the death of his Lord, he pulled no punches:

"Him ... you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death", he said (Acts 2:23).

He was talking to a Jewish audience, both Jews who lived in Jerusalem and those who were visiting from nearby countries. And he laid the blame fairly and squarely upon them. Even though the Romans had undertaken the execution, because they were the governing power and they alone could administer capital punishment, Peter said that the Jews were responsible for delivering Jesus to them. Jewish leaders had laid the charges against him and had insisted upon the death penalty, so Peter charged them as responsible. But the full text of what he

said carries a rather different message, one that is much more hopeful, both for Jews and non-Jews. Here is a longer extract:

"Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves also know - him, being delivered by the determined counsel and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death; whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that he should be held by it" (Acts 2:22-24).

What a remarkable statement he



made. Jesus was delivered (to the Romans) by Jewish people, just as God had determined and exactly as he had foreknown! There was nothing accidental or mistaken about what occurred,

says the apostle, it was exactly as God had arranged should happen. Now that doesn't change the personal responsibility of the Jews in question, although they were offered the chance of repentance and forgiveness, just as Jesus prayed should happen (Luke 23:34; 1 Corinthians 2:8; Acts 2:38).

But it does show that there was something really important going on. This was not just a miscarriage of human justice. It was an act of divine righteousness.

According to the Scriptures

Writing to a group of believers in Corinth, the apostle Paul gave a detailed explanation of what resurrection means and why it is so important. It was certainly important for Jesus, “whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death”, as Peter explained in Jerusalem. But notice what Paul says, in perfect harmony with what we have already seen:

“I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the Scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:3,4).

Twice he tells us that all that happened was **“in accordance with the Scriptures”**, by which he means what we now call the “Old Testament”. And we have already seen that those ancient writings contained the promise of a Saviour and Deliverer who would rescue mankind from Sin and its consequences, would conquer all that opposes the will of God, and would eventually reign as King over a new world order, in which the law of God will be supreme.

For ever since sin entered the world by Adam’s wilful disobedience, and thereafter everybody happily followed his example, by their misdemeanours, the world had been in need of someone who would be able to change the course of events and bring mankind back to God. That was what God wanted, and that was what he urged men and women to try to achieve. Prophet after prophet issued that appeal and

event after event warned the people about the consequences of ignorance and unbelief. Here’s just one such prophet, pleading with God’s people:

“Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; put away the evil of your doings from before my eyes. Cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, reprove the oppressor; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow. ‘Come now, and let us reason together,’ says the LORD, ‘Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool. If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword’; for the mouth of the LORD has spoken” (Isaiah 1:16-20).

Alas! It was refusal and rebellion that prevailed and everything ended in disaster for the nation. They were deported to Babylon, lost their independence, suffered a succession of overlords, and worse was to come when they rejected the Lord Jesus Christ, the Deliverer whom God had sent.

God Sent Jesus

The very same prophet goes on to detail what God would do to remedy what would otherwise have been a hopeless situation. He foretold the coming of one who would:

- ✓ be born of a virgin (Isaiah 7:14);
- ✓ do many Miracles (35:5,6);
- ✓ teach wonderful things (61:1,2);
- ✓ have a special relationship with his Father (42:1; 50:4,5);
- ✓ suffer and die (50:6; 52:14; 53:1-10).



For a long time in Israel, sacrifices had been required to help the people recognise that sin is a terrible thing and that, unless something is done about it, it will prove fatal for the sinner. That was the warning given right back in the Garden of Eden – that if you sin you die – but the warning had gone unheeded, despite being repeated many times over. So it was that everybody had died and there was no way, humanly speaking, of reversing the process.

But God now made such a way, by providing His Son who was to die as a sacrifice for sin. He had clearly spelled out His intention, having also made it clear that there was no other way to save mankind. There was no man who could do what was required (Isaiah 59:16), so God caused Jesus to be born, and that was the first time he came into existence, though he had long been in the mind of God, and part of His gracious purpose.

Jesus was asked to volunteer his life, and to die a sacrifice for sin. It had been prophesied that he would make that supreme sacrifice. For example, the prophet Isaiah had said this:

“He is despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem him. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon him, and

by his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isaiah 53:3-6).

Isaiah had foretold that it would happen that way; but we should make no mistake about it. When Jesus was old enough to read what had been written (in this case some 600 years before his birth), he would have known what was required of him, but it was up to him whether he would do it or not. He once said that himself, in so doing making it clear that the gift of his life was voluntary and was done because of his love for mankind:

“Therefore my Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This command I have received from my Father” (John 10:17,18).

Gift of Love

Two reasons have thus emerged in answer to the question: “Why Did Jesus Die?”

❶ Sin Kills Everybody!

It was necessary, in the wisdom and purpose of God, to show that sin is a dreadful and awful condition. Obeying self rather than God is the very opposite of what life should be like: we were made to worship and praise our Creator. God warned about the consequences of disobedience; nobody took His warnings seriously; after a while sin had got such dominion over mankind that nobody could resist it. Even the best of us lost out in the struggle against sin. Everybody sinned: every-



body died, sooner or later. It was therefore necessary for God, who can never compromise with sin, to state his position publicly and powerfully. He had to show, in a way that could not be denied, that sin is an awful condition and that He is offering a much better way of living, free from sin.

Jesus lived an outstanding life – in which he “*went about doing good*” – yet this lovely man was unjustly accused and wrongly executed, in a public and cruel way. Everybody who thinks about it can thus see how awful sin is and how much they need to find a way of escape from sin and death.

② Love Conquers All!

Nobody forced God to rescue mankind – He did it because He loves us and wants to save us. That’s what the best-known verse in the Bible makes clear (John 3:16). So the cross of Christ was a demonstration of what the love of God is really like – love to the uttermost:

“In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation [to achieve forgiveness] for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” (1 John 4:9-11).

Nobody forced Jesus to die: he gave his life voluntarily for us. So the love of the Father is matched by the love of the Son. It was an act of perfect obedience, but it was done for love’s sake. Years later one man who had been an enemy of Jesus of Nazareth would write something that rings down the centuries and might just sound a note

in your own heart, as you read his words:

“It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20).

Sacrifice for Sins

So it was that Jesus gave himself for our sins, laying down his life in perfect obedience to his Father’s will. In so doing, he conquered sin, because he showed it up for what it is – the very thing we must avoid, and which must ultimately be destroyed. This is how the New Testament explains the effect of the death of Jesus:

“What the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not

walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit” (Romans 8:3,4);

“But this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God, from that time waiting till his enemies are made his footstool. For by one offering he has perfected forever those who are being sanctified” (Hebrews 10:12-14).

When we are baptised into the saving name of Jesus the full effects of his sacrificial death become ours as well and God counts us as His children – His family members. He can then forgive us, sinners as we are, and He will then show His love towards us without reservation – love to the uttermost.



Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?

When he made those accusations about the Jews being responsible for the execution of Jesus, the apostle Peter was speaking just a few weeks after the events and only a few hundred yards from where all this had happened.

He was near the high priest's house, the Procurator's Palace and the site of the crucifixion. And he was speaking to men and women who had been eyewitnesses of the events in question, people who could check the facts out for themselves.

Was it a Hoax?

Some 2000 years after those dramatic events there are people who occasionally suggest that Jesus never died at all – that he just swooned and was rescued by his disciples; or that he died and the disciples secretly hid the body, to make it look as though he had risen. There are a few such alternative theories that appear from time to time, indeed one of them was put about by the authorities to counter the message the apostles were preaching:

"They gave a large sum of money to the soldiers, saying, 'Tell them, 'His disciples came at night and stole him away while we slept.' And if this comes to the governor's ears, we will appease him and make you secure" (Matthew 28:12-14).

A moment's examination shows just

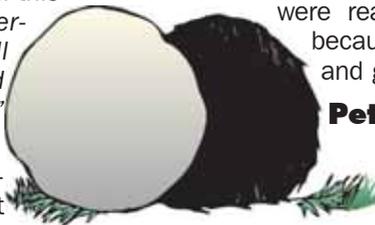
how flimsy that excuse really is:

- ↘ If they were asleep, how could they know it was the disciples who stole the body?
- ↘ If they were guards, who could have been killed if they slept on duty, how could they possibly have slept?
- ↘ If the disciples had indeed stolen away the dead body of their Lord, bruised and battered from his ordeal, why would the women have come looking for the body early that morning?
- ↘ Why would two of the apostles have rushed down to behold the empty grave?
- ↘ Why would the grave clothes have been left in the tomb: what sort of grave robber undresses the corpse?
- ↘ And how could the apostles have gone everywhere preaching that Jesus was alive and well, now living in glory in heaven, if they knew that his body was actually buried somewhere in Jerusalem, and that all their hopes had died with him?

That idea just doesn't make any sense at all, especially when you remember that the followers of Jesus were ready to lay down their lives because of their loyalty to a risen and glorified Lord.

Peter's Logic

Look again at what the apostle Peter said and note how logical, reasoned and con-



vincing his explanation is. If you read the full account of what he said (in Acts chapter 2, verses 14-40) you will see that he backed up his explanation with references to Old Testament prophecies (like those from Isaiah that we looked at earlier), to try to convince the Jews that what had happened was just what God had foretold. He said:

"Him ... you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death; whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that he should be held by it" (Acts 2:23,24).

Someone once said that he detected a fine hint of scorn in Peter's voice! God raised Jesus from the dead because it could not have been otherwise in the purpose of God. Leaving him dead would have been impossible. For when Jesus had read the Old Testament Scriptures and had realised that he was to give his life as a sacrifice for sin, he would also have read that he was to be given back his life, and that he would thereafter live in glory, at his Father's right hand in heaven.

That's why Peter immediately backs up his assertion by referring to what had been predicted of the Saviour of mankind, 1000 years before that fulfilment. He cited something written by the Psalmist David, which reads:

"You will not leave my soul in Hades, nor will you allow your Holy One to see corruption. You have made known to me the ways of life; you will make me full of joy in your presence" (Acts 2:27,28).

Peter explains that David was not writing of himself, for he died and was

buried like everybody else. Now he shares the unconscious sleep of death, until that day when he will be raised himself, to stand in the presence of Jesus. It was about Jesus that David wrote, predicting that he would not remain dead, but would be raised from death by God. And notice what the apostle adds:

"This Jesus God has raised up, of which we are all witnesses" (Acts 2:32).

Witnesses

The whole point about these contemporary accounts is that they were given by eye-witnesses and were written down by people whose involvement in what had happened was sometimes disappointing. The same Peter, who now makes such confident assertions, was the one who had swung a sword recklessly in Gethsemane, denied Jesus three times, stood far off from the cross, and was then slow to

believe that Jesus had been raised. Like the others, he needed abundant proof before he could accept it. One of their number had stubbornly refused to accept what he was told, presumably because he thought they were hallucinating. Thomas said:

"Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe" (John 20:25),

It was eight days before Jesus next appeared, to challenge Thomas' unbelief and make him a believer.

They were witnesses sure enough, but they demanded, and received, the clearest possible evidence of the res-



urrection. Thereafter they went everywhere sharing the wonderful news about the breakthrough that had occurred. For it was not simply that Jesus had risen from the dead – he had in fact raised three people to life during his ministry. The amazing thing was that Jesus had risen from the dead to be given, by God, the gift of everlasting life. He alone could now say that he was the conqueror of death; the man who was alive for evermore:

“I am he who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and of death” (Revelation 1:18).

Jesus is Alive Today!

If you want to work through a careful analysis of whether or not Jesus rose from the dead, you can do no better than to read chapter 15 of the apostle Paul’s Letter to the Corinthians. He had been an unbeliever himself, totally opposed to this new movement and determined to stamp it out. Then he was given a vision of the risen and exalted Christ, who appeared to him as he neared Damascus, and it changed Paul’s life absolutely.

From then on he was among the most committed and conscientious followers of Jesus, finally laying down his own life rather than deny his Lord. In this letter he spells out the logic of resurrection, starting with the historical facts, about the resurrection appearances, then facing up to the reality that if Jesus did not rise, everything is lost and there is no hope for humanity.

Then he asserts his conviction that

Jesus did indeed rise and goes on to show why this really matters for us. If Jesus was indeed raised, he argues, then it follows that there is hope for us. For the Bible never says that we have immortal souls, but teaches that we are mortal and that when we die, we die! The true Bible hope is bodily resurrection from the dead, and if Jesus rose, then we might also rise:

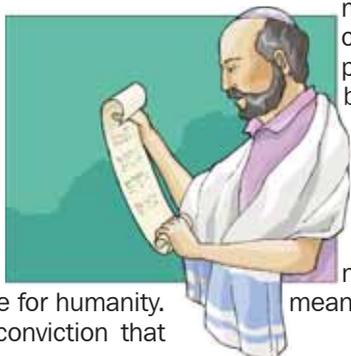
“But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since by man came death, by man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. But each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ’s at his coming” (1 Corinthians 15:20-23).

Coming King

Jesus rose from the dead so that he could be raised to glory at his Father’s right hand and he has lived there now for nearly 2000 years, awaiting the next phase in God’s great plan. He is coming again to earth, this time to reign as King. Paul refers to that when he writes about the possibility that we can be “made alive” at “his coming”.

God’s Kingdom is to be established on earth and God has made it possible for us to share in the greatest and most wonderful future we could ever imagine. He plans to make this world a beautiful environment in which men and women will live forever. It will be a world full of God’s glory and you could be there.

It all depends what Jesus means to you, and what you mean to him.



What Should He Mean to You?

If you decide that Jesus is indeed a special person, so special that you would rather like to have known him, and to have lived at that time when he was around, it's still not too late.

Never Too Late

Have you ever missed out on something you wanted to see or do, like an invitation when you mistook the day or the week? It's easily done.

Jesus once told a parable about a man who was holding a great banquet and he sent out invitations, but those invited were busy with other things.

One had just bought a plot of land, another some oxen, and a third had just got married and wanted to be alone with his wife. So they made their excuses, but they don't seem to have thought how the man who had invited them would interpret their refusals.

From his point of view they would have been saying that owning things, being at work, and family life were much more important to them. The record just says that the master of the house was angry (Luke 14:16-24) and that instead he extended the invitation to others, this time to people who were in need of a good meal – and they came!

What about Jesus?

The depiction of Jesus in the gospel accounts is intended to help us get to

know a man who is unlike anyone else who has ever lived. He stands apart for lots of reasons.

He could cure the insane, help the sick, feed a multitude and even raise the dead. All those things make him remarkable, and so do the things that happened to him. God was his Father. He was raised from the dead. He ascended to heaven, where he sits now, arrayed in glory. Those things make Jesus unique.

Whilst the Bible recognises and explains all that, there is something else that it chooses to highlight to evidence his remarkable accomplishments. Jesus was perfectly obedient to his Father's will and loved him to the very limit – to the very end.

Writing to believers at Philippi, in ancient Macedonia, the apostle Paul told them about the way in which Jesus had come to an awareness of what God wanted him to do, as he read and studied the Old Testament Scriptures. He appreciated that he was to be God's servant, who was to do God's will, and this is how he reacted, as Paul explains it:

"(He) made himself of no reputation, taking the form of a servant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted him and given him the name which is above every name, that at the



name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:7-11).

Perfect Obedience

We have been pondering these very issues as we have contemplated the remarkable achievements of Jesus – the things that make him so special. Jesus was, and is, a man apart and he deserves our appreciation, gratitude and thanksgiving.

Paul says that everyone should bow the knee to Jesus – should recognise his achievements, and confess that he is indeed the Lord of life. But, of course, to use those words – “Jesus is Lord” – is to acknowledge his lordship over our lives, and in the process we would begin to give glory (or worship) to God. And that’s what Paul is in fact urging us to do.

If you read the full setting of those words from Philippians, you will see that the apostle is encouraging us to try to live like Jesus, to make his values ours and his priorities the ones by which we too will live. For he adds this vital thought:

*“... that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, **work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for his good pleasure” (Philippians 2:11-13).***

Offer of a Lifetime!

If we want to respond to God’s invitation – to find a better and more fulfilling life, with Him and with the Lord Jesus Christ – we have both to work things out for ourselves, and let God influence the things we think about and do.

Nowadays there are lots of people who will tell you what’s right, and what’s not; what you ought to do, and what you shouldn’t do. In some cases that can help, and we hope that you have found this consideration helpful. But you need to read the Bible for yourself, to check things out and to

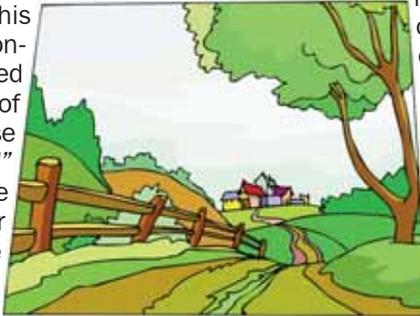
make sure that you’re on the right road – the one that leads to a new and lasting relationship with God. What you will find, if you read carefully, is that your new life in Christ starts when you understand and believe the gospel message.

Long ago, the apostle Paul went to talk to some people in Corinth about the gospel and their response could be summed up in just three active words:

*“Many of the Corinthians, **hearing, believed and were baptized” (Acts 18:8).***

Baptism into the saving name of Jesus, which comes after proper understanding and belief, is the way in which we make that necessary change of direction and start a right relationship with God. Jesus is a very special person and he can make our lives special too, if we choose to live with him, both now and for evermore.

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