

Marks Answer

WHO IS JESUS?

© Copyright Rosemary Bardsley 2002

STUDY ONE: MARK'S ANSWER

SUMMARY:

- Jesus is the Son of God: Mark 1:1-15
- Jesus has authority over people: Mark 1:16-20; 2:13-14
- Jesus has authority over truth: Mark 1:21,22
- Jesus has authority over evil spirits: Mark 1:21-28; 3:20-30; 5:1-20; 7:24-30
- Jesus has authority over sickness and disability: Mark 1:30,31, 40-42; 3:1-5; 5:21-43; 7:32-37; 8:22-26; 10:46-52.
- Jesus has authority to forgive sin: Mark 2:1-12
- Jesus has authority over God's law: Mark 2:18-28; 3:1-6
- Jesus has authority over nature: Mark 4:35-41; 6:30-52; 8:14-21, 27-30
- Jesus is the King of glory: Mark 9:2-12; 11:1-10
- Jesus is the Son of God: Mark 14:61-64; 15:39
- Conclusion

INTRODUCTION:

Most of the books written about Mark's gospel tell us that Mark presents the human Jesus, that in the gospel of Mark we see Jesus the man. But, when we let Mark speak for himself we see from his very first sentence that his focus is very definitely on Jesus as the Son of God: 'The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God' (1:1).

To Mark, the question of the reality of Christ's humanity was irrelevant. Everyone knew he was a man. When Mark wrote no one disputed that. The thing that impressed Mark, the thing which the people of his day disputed, and the thing that he wishes to impress upon his readers, is the fact that this real man was also God. So he presents him to us as 'Jesus Christ, the Son of God.' Having introduced Jesus to us in this way Mark proceeds through his Gospel to give us one demonstration after another to validate Jesus' right to this exalted title.

[Historical note: While many people today are so familiar with Jesus being called 'the Son of God' that its significance is lost to us, this was not the case in the time of Jesus and the disciples. To the Jews, as we will see when we study John's Answer to the question, to be the Son of God was to be equal with God; for a man to claim divine sonship was blasphemy against God. It is into this setting, this mindset, that Mark lays it down right at the beginning: Jesus is the Son of God.]

As we see Jesus striding through the Gospel of Mark with all the power and authority of God we are confronted with the challenge: how will we respond to this one who is God? What will we do when confronted by him? Will we recognise him and submit to him in repentance and faith? Or, will we refuse to admit that this man is God, and reject his right to stand in authority over us?

Let us see what Mark has to say about him.

Jesus is the Son of God

[1] Mark's first verification of his statement that Jesus is the Son of God is in 1:3. Here the prophet Isaiah is quoted:

'Prepare the way for the Lord, make his paths straight.'

These words from Isaiah explain the ministry of John the Baptist. What John was doing was *preparing the way for the Lord* .

Who is '**the Lord**' ?

The God of the Old Testament, the God of the Jews.

But, who is it that came after John the Baptist? For whom did John prepare the way?

Jesus Christ.

According to the prophecy, the one who comes after the messenger is the Lord. According to history, the one who came after John the Baptist was Jesus of Nazareth. This prophecy, together with John the Baptist's ministry, identifies Jesus of Nazareth as the Lord. In quoting the prophecy, in recounting John's ministry, Mark identifies Jesus as the Old Testament God, the Lord.

[[2] Further, in John the Baptist's description of Jesus as the one who baptises with the Holy Spirit (1:8), Jesus is again identified as God. Only God can give his own Spirit. If Jesus has the right and ability to baptise with the Holy Spirit, then Jesus can be no one less than God.]

[3] The third word comes from God himself: 'And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." ' (1:11). This declaration leaves us with no excuse. God himself states clearly who Jesus is - his Son.

[4] Mark then shows us Jesus going into Galilee and 'proclaiming the good news of God.' (1:14).

[Here that we run into a problem. The church seems to have restricted the meaning of the term 'gospel' to the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. The gospel, the 'good news', has for the church become 'Jesus died for your sins.' Here in Mark 1 Jesus has not yet died, nor has he made any reference to his dying, yet we are told that he proclaimed the 'good news of God' that is 'the gospel of God' and exhorted his hearers to 'believe the good news!' (1:15).]

Does Mark give us any indication of what Jesus preached that he calls 'the good news'? Yes. He does: 'The time has come. The kingdom of God is near.' (1:15). Obviously this is a summary of Jesus' message. Obviously he did not go around repeating these simple words over and over like a cracked record. In these words Mark encapsulates Jesus' message.

Jesus' first point is **the time has come** . The Greek text is more powerful: the time is fulfilled. What Jesus is saying here is that in his coming all the expectations, all the prophecies, all the plans and purposes of God, all that God promised, have been fulfilled and remain in a state of completion. **In the coming of Jesus, God's time has come. In his coming history reaches its climax, its maturation point, its purpose.**

His second point is **the kingdom of God is near**. Again the Greek text is more powerful, using a verb, not an adverb: the kingdom of God has come, or drawn, near. Jesus is not simply saying that God's kingdom somewhere nearby, but that **with his coming the kingdom of God also comes** . His coming brings the kingdom of God near to the inhabitants of earth. Why is this? At this point in Mark's record we are not told, but as we read through his reports we realise that this is because Jesus is the King. It becomes increasingly evident that this man Jesus is the divine King who rules over all things with all the authority of God. **In him the kingly rule of God confronts every human being.**

If we read further in that same chapter of Isaiah which was quoted in Mark 1:2 & 3 we come to these words:

'You who bring good tidings to Zion,
go up on a high mountain.
You who bring good tidings to Jerusalem,
lift up your voice with a shout,
lift it up, do not be afraid;
say to the towns of Judah,
"Here is your God!"' (Isaiah 40:9)

Just as the words of anticipation in Isaiah 40:3 speak of the coming of John the Baptist, so these words in verse nine speak of the coming of Jesus Christ. Twice they mention 'good tidings', three times they give the command to shout out these good tidings. And what are these good tidings? What is this good news? - 'Here is your God!'

Here is your God!

God has come to us. In this man Jesus, God has come. That is the good news. That is the central basic fact of the gospel.

Why is that so wonderful? Why is this something to get excited about? Why should the prophet say to get up on top of a high mountain and shout it out?

Because, if God did what he ought to do to us, if God treated us as we deserve, he would abandon us. He would condemn us. He would do as he did in the days of Noah. But he doesn't. He comes to us. Just as the prophet said 'Here is your God!' so Jesus says: 'The time has come. The kingdom of God is near.' God is here. In this man Jesus, God is here. **Those who stand face to face with this man stand face to face with God.**

Jesus has authority over people

Having introduced us to Jesus as the Son of God Mark proceeds to give us evidence of Jesus' identity. The first evidence is the authority Jesus has over people. In his encounter with the four fishermen by the Sea of Galilee Jesus commands them to follow him and they do so immediately. No arguing. No discussion. No weighing up of the pros and cons. They recognise in Jesus one who has the power to command their obedience. (Mark 1:16-20). The same thing happens with Levi the tax collector. (Mark 2:14).

Jesus does not hesitate to call Simon and Andrew away from their livelihood. He does not hesitate to call John and James away from their father. He does not hesitate to call Levi, the despised tax-collector and sinner, rejected by good Jews. Jesus stands over and above these human values and considerations. It is his divine right to command both our allegiance and our obedience.

Jesus has authority over truth

In our familiarity with Mark's record we can easily miss this point. He takes only two verses to mention it (Mark 1:21,22). Jesus goes into the synagogue and begins to teach. Mark tells us two things:

(1) the people were amazed at his teaching. The word translated 'amazed' or 'astonished' literally means 'struck out'. In our current Australian idiom we would probably have written 'struck out of their wits'!

(2) This unexpected astonishment is caused by the fact that Jesus 'taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law'. Unlike the teachers of the Jewish law Jesus taught on his own authority. They did not presume to speak in their own name, with their own knowledge. They took their authority from recognised scholars and teachers from the past, quoting, referring, authenticating their teaching by the authority of reputable, respected names. Jesus taught in his own name, with his own authority, his own knowledge, his own understanding and presentation of the truth.

No one pulls him up and contradicts his teaching. The only response recorded here is utter amazement at his authority.

Yet even this amazement is about to be surpassed.

Jesus has authority over evil spirits

While the people are still reeling under the impact of Jesus' authoritative presentation of truth a demon-possessed man cries out. We might notice in passing that the evil spirit is aware of the true identity of Jesus: he calls him both 'Jesus of Nazareth' - a real man, and 'the Holy One of God' - God's Son. But Jesus does not want the testimony of the evil spirit (see also 1:34b). He commands it to be quiet and come out of the man. Immediately the spirit obeys.

Again Mark tells us the people were all 'amazed'. In our English translations the words are often the same. In the Greek they are different. The word used here holds an element of fear or terror, even to the extent of being rendered immovable. They are completely overawed by this authority of Jesus over the evil spirit. Mark tells us that this reaction was so strong that they asked (and the Greek means **kept on** asking) each other 'What is this? a new teaching - and with authority! He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him.' (1:27)

[The discussion evoked by this incident and others (see Mark 1:34b, 39) seems to have continued for some time. In 3:20-30 the debate comes out in the open. Jesus finds himself in the middle of a hornet's nest. His family believe he's out of his mind and want to remove him from the public eye. The teachers of the law believe that Jesus himself is possessed by Beelzebub, the prince of demons, and that it is from this source that he has his amazing, terrifying authority over demons.

Jesus responds to this accusation with a parable about a strong man and one who ties up the strong man and robs him of his belongings. The meaning of the parable is clear: the strong man is Satan; the one who comes and ties the strong man up is Jesus. Having tied him up he robs him of his possessions. In this way Jesus explains what he is doing when he commands evil spirits to go out of the people they possess. The reason Jesus can do this is that he is stronger than Satan - in terms of both authority and power. The true meaning of Jesus' authority over demons is that he is the one who has authority over Satan. In other words, he is God. This is why Jesus ends this discussion with the warning about blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus, the Spirit of God. To attribute the work of the Spirit of God to the power of Satan is to reject God. For one who rejects God there can be no forgiveness.]

In Mark 5:1-20 we find an even more spectacular demonstration of this authority of Jesus over evil spirits.

Again the spirits recognise the true identity of Jesus, this time being even more precise: 'Jesus, Son of the Most High God'. When Jesus asks 'What is your name?' we learn that Jesus is here confronted by not just one, but by a 'legion' of spirits. A legion numbers anything from three thousand to six thousand. Imagine this contest: one man, Jesus, the Son of God, versus as many as six thousand evil spirits. Our minds cannot really grasp hold of that, and this very impossibility is evidence of the

greatness of Jesus' power and authority. Alone he stands against this legion. So aware are these spirits of the authority of this one man that they cringe before him begging his permission to go into the herd of pigs when they come out of the man. They know that they have to leave the man, because Jesus has ordered it. They know they cannot enter the pigs without Jesus' permission. We can almost see them cowering with fear in his presence.

The power of this incident is not lost on the people. They hear the report of what has happened. They come to see if it is true. They see the man totally changed. They see, perhaps, the bodies of the pigs floating in the lake. They hear the story again from those who saw it happen.

And they cannot handle it. They cannot bear to have this powerful person in their town. In their fear they keep on begging him to go away. Afraid of his power. Afraid of his authority. He is too big for them - one man against six thousand demons! They would rather have had the mad man. They would rather have had their herd of pigs. They would rather have had the demons. Any of these, but not the Son of God!

The pathos of their choice is over-whelming.

Mark relates two further occasions where Jesus' exercised his authority over evil spirits. In Mark 7:24 to 30 a Greek woman begs Jesus to drive the demon out of her little daughter. In response to her faith in him Jesus tells her that the demon has left the girl. Let us not fail to notice what has happened here. Jesus is in one place. The demon-possessed girl is in another place. There is no face to face confrontation as in the other occurrences. Mark gives us no record that Jesus spoke to the demon from afar. Yet such is the almighty power of Jesus that the demon must and does obey his will. The woman goes home to find the demon gone, just as Jesus said it would be.

The other incident centres on the boy in Mark 9 whom the disciples could not help.

Jesus has authority over sickness and disability

Mark records various occasions in which Jesus healed sick and disabled people: Simon's mother-in-law (1:30,31); the man with leprosy (1:40-42); the man with the shrivelled hand (3:1-5); the woman with the haemorrhage (5:25-34); the deaf and dumb man (7:32-37); the blind man (8:22-26); and Bartimaeus (10:46-52). We can include here also the restoration to life of Jairus' daughter (5:21-24,35-43).

Revelation 21:4 promises us that death, crying, mourning and pain will be eliminated with the final establishment of God's eternal kingdom. When he reigns, having thrown Satan into hell for ever, having removed completely all trace of sin and rebellion, sickness, pain, deformity, disability and death will no longer exist.

These things are on this earth only because of sin. That initial rebellion in Genesis 3 involved the earth in God's curse (Genesis 3:14-24). At that point suffering, pain and dying began. Sin began to reign. Death began to reign. (See Romans 5:12-17; Hebrews 2:14,15). Every human being born into the world is born under the power of these two tyrants. We all suffer. We all get sick. We all die. In our subjection to these two we are under the power of Satan. He holds us captive.

When Jesus healed the sick and the disabled he was confronting Satan just as surely as he confronted him in casting out demons. In these acts of healing Jesus is undoing the effects of our rebellion, he is undoing the power of Satan. By healing the sick and renewing the disabled Jesus demonstrates his superior power which is over and above the power of Satan. [*See note below.] But behind this, at a far deeper level, when Jesus heals and renews he is exercising his divine right to reverse a condition which is here because of a curse pronounced by God. Only God can revoke his own curse. No one else has that authority.

In these miracles of healing we see that this man, Jesus, is God. He did not heal every sick and disabled person in Galilee and Judea, nor did he revive every one who died. He did not seek them out. He was not on a one man healing crusade anxious to do miracles, anxious to make a name for himself, anxious to eradicate sickness and disability. But, when confronted by it, in his great tenderness of heart, with his acute understanding that these things are the evidence of human rebellion against the rightful authority of God, knowing that these things are on this earth because we have believed the ego-building lies of Satan and let him rule us, Jesus opposes that authority and that despotic rule of Satan and reduces it to nothing, removing the sickness, removing the disability, removing even death.

These healing miracles proclaim the good news: 'Jesus is the Son of God.' They proclaim the good tidings of Isaiah 40: here, in this man, is your God. This man, Jesus, has the power and authority to undo and remove the worldwide effect of sin; this man, Jesus, has the power and the authority to rescue people out from under Satan's power; this man, Jesus, has the power and authority to undo and remove the curse of Genesis 3.

[* It is not the intention three paragraphs back, to indicate that each individual instance of sickness is the result of an immediate and direct action of Satan, but rather to attribute the existence of sickness, disability, and the like on earth to the interference of Satan recorded in Genesis 3. As a result of this interference the first human beings made a choice, a choice which impacts us all. From that choice - the choice of death rather than life - all suffering issues. This will be further addressed in a future study on this site: 'What does the Bible say about Suffering?']

Jesus has the authority to forgive sin

Closely related to the healing miracles, but set apart from them, is the story of the paralysed man in Mark 2:1-12.

Because of the human thoughts that have been laid down in our minds on top of the truth, we stand in danger of misunderstanding this incident. It is quite common for people to draw a straight connection between their individual sins and their sickness. We are told that we are suffering this or that particular illness because we are living with a certain unconfessed, unrepented sin. Another thing we are told is that if we had enough faith, or the right kind of faith, we would enjoy perfect health, and that the illnesses we suffered until we got such faith would now be removed by the exercise of that faith.

In the case of this paralysed man Jesus has ample opportunity to make these two connections; but he doesn't. He makes no such correlation between individual sin and suffering, faith and healing, at all. The only faith we know for sure is present in this incident is the faith of the four men who brought their friend to Jesus, trusting him to help him. Whether or not the man himself had faith is not mentioned.

So the friends come, determined to get the man to Jesus, confident of his help. They expect that Jesus will heal the man, nothing else. They do not see, as Jesus the divine Son sees, that this man has a far more pressing need than physical restoration. Jesus sees past the wretched body to the wretchedness of the man's soul. He sees that this man is far more concerned with the guilt that eats him out inside, robbing him of peace, separating him from God, than he is about his physical disability.

It is to this spiritual need that Jesus addresses himself. Without a moment's hesitation he says to the man 'Son, your sins are forgiven.'

Immediately the teachers of religious law are mentally aggressive. 'Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?'

Why do they say this?

They know the law. They know that all sin is sin against God, and because all sin is sin against God, only God has the authority to forgive it. God is the one offended by sin, only he has the right to remove the offence, and only he can decide and dictate how the offence can be removed. [A study of the book of Leviticus reveals the intricate and specific details of how, according to Law, a person or nation must approach God in order to obtain forgiveness. We also learn from Leviticus how totally our lives are permeated by the sin factor, so totally that it is impossible for us to realise either the magnitude or the multitude of our sins.] God alone knows how sinful we are; God alone can make the blanket statement made by Jesus: your sins are forgiven.

Equally immediate as their mental and emotional reaction to his words is Jesus' knowledge of it. He takes up the challenge. What is easier? he asks. To say 'Your sins are forgiven?' Or to say 'Get up, take up your mat and walk?' If he says 'Your sins are forgiven' no one can prove or disprove that that has actually happened. The evidence is hidden in the mind of God and in the heart of the one forgiven. But to say 'Get up. Take up your mat and walk' has people holding their breath as they watch to see what will happen. If **this** actually happens it will demonstrate the power and authority of the words of Jesus, and indicate that the first word, the word of forgiveness, also happened. (2:10) The second proves the first, not because the paralysis was related to the sins, but because the words of Jesus are shown to be powerful and authoritative.

The people get the message. They had by this time seen Jesus perform many healing miracles, yet they say in amazement 'We have never seen anything like this!' The healing is amazing, but over and beyond the impact of that is Jesus' pronouncement of the forgiveness of this man's sin, which the authority of his word to heal verified. Because the second word of Jesus healed the man, they must acknowledge that his first word forgave the man. They cannot escape the logic of Jesus' words and actions. They stand confronted by it. This man, who calls himself the Son of Man, has authority on earth to forgive sins. (2:10)

But if **only God** can forgive sins, who then is this man who has forgiven sin? There is only one conclusion, a conclusion they do not want to think about. Jesus is God.

Jesus has authority over God's Law

When Mark relates for us Jesus' reply to the question about fasting (2:18-22) he is preparing us to recognise the authority Jesus has over the Law.

John's disciples were fasting. The Pharisees and their disciples were fasting. The disciples of Jesus were not. This has the people puzzled. Zechariah 8:19 tells us that the Jews fasted four times a year, in the fourth, fifth, seventh and tenth months. In addition some of the feast days involved fasting, and individuals fasted for a variety of religious reasons. What is under question in Mark 2 was probably one of those four fasts mentioned in Zechariah. It was a religious, ritual exercise engaged in by people who considered themselves religious. It was part of the piety expected of a good Jew.

But here are Jesus and his disciples not doing the expected religious thing, and the people want to know why. Jesus answers them with three riddles.

(1) **The riddle of the bridegroom (Mark 2:19,20)**. 'How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them?' In these verses Jesus teaches that as long as he is with his disciples they cannot fast. It is inappropriate. It is incongruous. It is impossible. To have **him** with them is an honour that calls for feasting and joy, not mourning and fasting. There will be a time for that, but not now, not while he is with them. Tucked away in this riddle is Jesus' unspoken knowledge of his true identity - an identity that transcends all that human beings see as religious obligation. He, the Son of God, is with them. How can they possibly fast? All the bells on earth should be ringing! All the flags should be flying! All the hearts of men should be overflowing with joy! They cannot fast, for God is with them!

[(2) **The riddle of the new patch on the old garment (Mark 2:21)** , and (3) **the riddle of the new wine in old wineskins (Mark 2:22)** . These two riddles point to the practical impossibility of adding new to old. It can be tried, but it doesn't work: the new is wasted and the old destroyed in the attempt. Ritual fasting belongs to the 'old': the gospel of Jesus is the 'new'. The old focus of ritual observance and external ceremony cannot sustain the addition of the 'new' inner, spiritual life given by Jesus. Nor can this new life of following Jesus survive intact if attached to the 'old'. There is an in-built dynamic of destruction if an attempt is made to combine the two. All of the ritual, ceremonial observances were but shadows waiting for the coming of the reality which is Christ (Colossians 2:16,17). To hold to these old foreshadowings of Christ and to attempt to hold also to Christ, is as foolish and impossible as attempting to remain at the bus stop and also board the bus. Destruction is inevitable. Once the bus has come the bus stop has no more significance. We leave it behind. Jesus knows that he is the one anticipated and prophesied in the Jewish ritual and ceremonial law, and that in his coming all of that is rendered redundant. It pointed to him. Now he has come. It no longer has any purpose.]

These riddles are followed by two incidents in which Jesus openly displays his authority over the law. In Mark 2:23-28 the Pharisees criticize Jesus because his disciples are picking and eating corn on the Sabbath. Jesus refers them to David's action in which he broke the law in order to feed his hungry men. He points out to the Pharisees that, contrary to their understanding, the Sabbath was made to serve man, not man to serve the Sabbath. That which was intended by God to be a rest had been made by their law into a bondage. That which was instituted by God to demonstrate to the Jews that their relationship to him as his chosen people rested entirely on his grace (see Exodus 31:13 and Ezekiel 20:12) had become in their tradition the means by which they merited his approval.

It is as if Jesus said to the Pharisees 'Look! I know what I'm doing when I let my disciples pick corn to eat on the Sabbath. I tell you it's quite okay. I'm not going to bind my men to all your itty-bitty rules and regulations. That's not what the law of God's about at all. I know. It's **my** law!' But he doesn't say it like that. He simply says: 'So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.' If they accept it, they accept it; if they don't, they don't.

That they didn't accept Jesus' claim to have authority over the Sabbath becomes evident in Mark's next account in 3:1-6. The scene is the synagogue. The Pharisees are there, waiting to find fault with Jesus. The man with the shrivelled hand is there, needing to be healed. Jesus is there, the one who has the power to heal, the one who claims to be Lord of the Sabbath. Will he submit to their Sabbath law? Or will he stand in authority over it? He meets the problem head on, despising the eagerness in which the Pharisees wait to accuse him. He makes the man stand up where all can see him. He shoots a loaded question at the Pharisees: 'Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?'

Silence reigns. Had there been a clock that man standing there would have heard it ticking.

But not the Pharisees. They hear only the anger churning in their hearts towards this man who claimed authority over their law, towards this man who would undermine and cast aside all the beloved traditions to which they were bound.

And not Jesus. He also hears their anger, hard and harsh as heavy metal music, clanging in their unresponsive hearts. And he hears as well his own deep distress, his own heart crying, because of their hardness, because of their stubbornness.

But he will not be subject to them. He will not be bound by their misinterpretations of the law. He knows who he is. He knows the law. By his word he heals the man.

So threatened are the Pharisees by what to them seems like a high-handed disregard of the law, they go out and begin to plan Jesus' death. They see clearly what Jesus is doing, but it doesn't enter their minds that he actually has the right and authority to do it. To them he is just a man, usurping for himself the authority of God.

Jesus has authority over nature

When we read the accounts of Jesus' authority over nature we are confronted by some of the most powerful proofs of his identity. Both Mark and Jesus are amazed at the failure of the disciples to perceive the truth about him.

The first occasion on which Jesus controls nature is recorded in Mark 4:35-41. A violent storm hits the Sea of Galilee, so violent and threatening that even the seasoned fishermen are terrified and believe they're about to drown. They have faith enough in Jesus to hope that he might do something, so they wake him up. Just what they expected him to do is not clear, but they were so obviously still controlled by their fear that Jesus rebukes them for lack of faith. They do not yet realise who he is. This surprises him: 'Why are you so afraid? do you still have no faith?' Do you still not realise who I am? Do you still not believe that I am the Son of God? After all you have seen - demons cast out, sickness and disability removed, sins forgiven, my knowledge of the truth, my authority over the law - after all this do you still not believe?

No. They didn't. It hadn't yet got through to them just who Jesus is. They know he is someone special, but just how special is still beyond them.

Because they hadn't yet realised who Jesus really is his authority over the power of the storm terrifies them. They are now even more afraid of him than they were of the storm. They ask the right question: 'Who is this man?' The massive implications of what he has just done begin to dawn on them. 'Even the wind and the waves obey him!' They have seen it with their own eyes. They have felt it with their own bodies. The word of Jesus stopped the storm. But the Old Testament has taught them that it is God who controls nature (Job 38, Psalm 104). Faced with the thought that Jesus might actually be God they are overcome with terror. It is something they don't want to think about. It is a thought from which they shrink with fear.

We move on to 6:30-44 where Mark tells how Jesus fed 5000 men (as well as uncounted women and children) with five small loaves of bread and two fish. Mark makes no comment about how this miracle affected either the crowd or the disciples. He simply tells us what happened. He leaves us to make our own conclusions. To him it is obvious. To Jesus it was obvious. As we shall see below, this creative miracle should have identified Jesus as God. Just as in the beginning God created the world out of nothing, so here Jesus, the Son of God, creates out of next to nothing more than enough food for thousands of people. Think about it: how many supermarkets would we wipe out of bread, how many fish shops would we clean out of fish, if we had to feed this crowd? The magnitude of the miracle is stupendous, the action of the almighty creative power of God.

Mark goes on immediately to a third nature miracle (Mark 6:45-52). Jesus walked on the water. So unexpected and impossible is this that the disciples don't even believe it is really him. They think it's a ghost or a spirit. Real people don't walk on water. Real people **can't** walk on water. But it **is** Jesus, and he **is** walking on the water. Not only that, but as soon as he gets in the boat the wind stops.

Let us look carefully at Mark's comment about what followed. 'They were completely amazed, for they had not understood about the loaves; for their hearts were hardened.' (6:51b,52).

They were completely amazed. English translations fail to convey the impact of the Greek. They were beside themselves with amazement to an immeasurable degree. Totally agitated. Totally overwhelmed with the incredibility and implications of what they have seen.

Why? Why were they so surprised that Jesus could do this?

Because, says Mark, they had not understood about the loaves. Or, as the Good News Bible puts it: 'because they had not understood the real meaning of the feeding of the five thousand.' Had they understood the real meaning of Jesus' feeding the five thousand they would not have been surprised that he now walks on the water. Had they believed then that he was God, this walking on the water would not have knocked them for six. But it did, because they hadn't understood that Jesus is God.

Why hadn't they understood this? Because, says Mark, their hearts were hardened. Petrified. Impenetrable. Unresponsive. Insensitive to the truth that had been blazed before their eyes as Jesus performed miracle after impactful miracle. They couldn't grasp the truth. By now they ought to have understood, but they didn't. They have not yet recognised that this man with whom they walk and talk, with whom they laugh, with whom they sleep and eat, is God.

In Mark 8:1-10 Mark records a second feeding miracle. Four thousand men, seven loaves, and a few small fish. One more creative miracle. One more chance to understand. One more opportunity to see the truth.

But this also appears to fail. A little while later the disciples find themselves with only one loaf of bread (8:14-21). Jesus overhears their discussion about this and asks: 'Why are you talking about having no bread? do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear?' He reminds them of the two feeding miracles, then asks again: 'Do you still not understand?'

After all they have seen him do, after all they have heard him say, the disciples should by now understand who he is. In their blindness, in their deafness, in their hardness of heart, they talk about their lack of bread. The one who created the earth, the one who commands the sun and the rain, the one who gives life to the seeds and fills the earth with goodness for people to enjoy, sits with them in the boat! And they talk about not having enough bread!

Do you still not understand? he asks. Have you still not put it all together and come up with the right conclusion? Have you still not worked out who I am?

Slowly, slowly the cogs begin to turn.

He asks them some time later (Mark 8:27-30): Who do people say I am?

Oh, they reply, some say this and some say that.

But, what about you? You who have been with me from the beginning. You who have seen all the evidence of my authority. You whom I have taught and disciplined. Who do *you* say I am?

Have they got it together yet? Do they dare to put it into words and say it out loud? Would it be blasphemy if they did, because the conclusion they have reached is not true after all? Or is it actually true?

Only Peter is brave enough to speak. 'You are the Christ.'

Matthew records more of Peter's answer: 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.' (Matthew 16:16)

Jesus is the King of glory

It is only after this confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, that Jesus shows his disciples two further things.

He tells them, firstly, of the impending suffering, rejection, death and resurrection that he is soon to experience (8:31). Their understanding is so far from grasping the meaning of this that Mark's comment is that Jesus **began** to teach them about these things.

Secondly, six days later, Peter, James and John are given a brief glimpse of Jesus' eternal glory (9:2-12). There on the mountain top the brilliant, blinding glory that accompanied God's revelation of himself in the Old Testament (Ezekiel 1:24-28; Daniel 7:9,10; 10:5,6), here shines out from Jesus. Then Moses and Elijah turn up. The three disciples are thrown into a confusion of fear. They don't know how to respond. In his panic Peter suggests they make little shelters - one for Jesus, one for Moses, one for Elijah. As Mark tells us 'He didn't know what to say!'

A cloud comes and surrounds Jesus, Moses and Elijah. While they are hidden a voice speaks from the cloud: 'This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him.' The cloud disperses and only Jesus is there.

Why did this happen? Why did Jesus take the three disciples up the mountain to witness this? Peter's thoughtless suggestion is instructive. The disciples had not yet understood the significance of their confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. Peter's suggestion ranks Jesus as equal with Moses and Elijah, even though he has affirmed that Jesus is the Christ, even though he now sees him brilliant with the glory of God. The voice of God says 'This is my Son.' The voice of God says: 'Listen to him!' Do not listen any more to Moses, the Lawgiver. Do not listen any more to Elijah, the Prophet. This is my Son. All that the Law has ever told you finds its fulfilment in my Son. All that the Prophets ever told you finds its fulfilment in my Son. He is all you need.

The cloud lifts. Jesus stands alone. The whole significance of the Law and the Prophets is all in this one man, the Son whom God loves.

We move on now to Mark 11:1-10.

Zechariah 9:9 anticipates this scene:

'Rejoice greatly; O daughter of Zion!
Shout, daughter of Jerusalem!
See, your king comes to you,
righteous and having salvation,
gentle and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'

So does Psalm 118:26,27:

'Blessed is he who comes
in the name of the Lord.
From the house of the Lord
we bless you ...
With boughs in hand,
join in the festal procession
up to the horns of the altar.'

Jesus rides into Jerusalem. The people recognise him as the one who fulfils these prophecies. They see that he is a king, but their thoughts are full of the tyranny of Rome and the expected Davidic king who will re-establish the nation of Israel, rescuing them from their oppressors. Beyond this they do not see. They do not perceive that this king whom they acclaim with shouts and with praises is far more than an earthly king. They do not connect this man with another prophecy from the Psalms:

'Lift up your heads, O you gates;
be lifted up, you ancient doors,
that the King of glory may come in.
Who is this King of glory?
The LORD strong and mighty,
the LORD mighty in battle.
Lift up your heads, O you gates;
lift them up, you ancient doors,
that the King of glory may come in.
Who is he, this King of glory?
The LORD Almighty-
he is the King of glory.' Psalm 24:7-10.

Jesus comes as king. Not as a national king to rescue them from Rome, but as the King of glory, the Lord Almighty. He enters through the gates of Jerusalem, the City of God. He enters through the gates of the Temple, the House of God. But even there, there in the Temple, where everything from the splendour of the High Priest to the repulsion of the blood-stained altar speaks of who he is and what he does, even there he is not recognised. There in the Temple he exercises his kingly authority, and there in the Temple he and his authority are rejected. (Mark 11:11-18, 27-28). The people of Jerusalem, the Pharisees, the priests, do not see that here standing among them is the King of glory, the LORD Almighty.

Jesus is the Son of God

In this way Mark has presented Jesus to us. Having introduced him as the 'Son of God' he has shown us how Jesus acted with divine authority over people, over the truth, over evil spirits, over sickness, disability and death, over the Law and over nature. He has shown us that Jesus has the right to forgive sin. He has shown us that Jesus is the Lord of Glory. In all of these Mark records Jesus doing what only God has the power to do, and doing what only God has the authority to do.

When, during his trial, the High Priest asked: 'Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?' Mark records Jesus' reply as a definite unambiguous 'I am.' 'I am, and you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.' (14:61b,62). Our minds might not see anything powerful in that. We are too familiar with the words that express the deity of Christ, too familiar with the thought that he is seated at the right hand of God, too familiar with the prospect of his second coming.

Not so the high priest. Not so the members of the Jewish Council.

- A man stands before them, claiming to be the Christ, the Messiah, the anointed One, foretold by the prophets as the One in whom all the purposes of God would be fulfilled.
- A man stands before them, claiming to be the Son of the Blessed One.
- A man stands before them, identifying himself as the Son of Man, that Old Testament prophetic figure clothed with the glory of God.
- A man stands before them, claiming that he will sit at the right hand - the place of equal authority and power - of the Mighty One.
- A man stands before them saying that he will come on the clouds of heaven.

The high priest rips his clothes to express his horror. The verdict of blasphemy is unquestioned. The condemnation falls: this man is worthy of death.

Confronted with Jesus' claim to be the Son of God the Jewish leaders see only a man taking upon himself the rights and the role of God. Had he come as a man to lead them as a man they would have received him. In their rejection and condemnation of Jesus they have given their answer to the central question of Bible, and they have got it wrong. In rejecting Jesus' self-description they are rejecting God.

Mark tells us of one man in the trial/crucifixion scenes, who got the answer right. The Roman centurion, posted at the foot of the cross, hearing the final words of Jesus, seeing how he died, said: 'Surely this man was the Son of God!' (15:39)

Conclusion

As we have walked with Jesus through the pages of Mark's Gospel, a tragedy has unfolded, a tragedy of incredible significance. Not the tragedy of the crucifixion of Jesus, but this: that God has come and walked and talked with us human beings, and we have not recognized him. So fixed in our minds are our own god-concepts, so different, so contrary, to what the real God is really like, that when the real God stands before us we think that *he* is the fake.

- To hear the voice of God, and not recognize it: that is the tragedy.
- To see the power of God, and not realize it: that is the tragedy.
- To understand the authority of God, and refuse it: that is the tragedy.
- To stand face to face with God, and not receive him: that is the tragedy.

Mark's answer to the question 'Who is Jesus?' is that in the person of Jesus Christ God has come to us. That here, in Jesus of Nazareth, is the Lord of all.

What is our response?

Do we, like the majority of his contemporaries, like the majority of people through the ages of history, reject him?

Or do we, like the centurion standing by the cross, acknowledge him?

The choice is ours.

WHO IS JESUS?

© Rosemary Bardsley 2002

STUDY TWO: JOHN'S ANSWER - PART 1

SUMMARY:

- John's introduction - Jesus is eternal, Jesus is God: John 1:1-18
- The conversation with Nicodemus - Jesus is the essential focus of faith: John 3
- The first debate - Jesus is equal with God the Father: John 5
- The second debate - Jesus is the Bread of Life: John 6
- Who is Jesus? - The long-expected deliverer: John 7
- The third debate - Jesus' incredible claims about his identity: John 8
- The fourth debate - 'I and the Father are one': John 10
- The final miracle - Jesus is the source of life: he is 'the life': John 11

Towards the end of his Gospel John wrote these words: 'These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name'. (John 20:31)

As we read through John's Gospel we discover a Jesus who makes radical and exclusive claims, claims that express equality with God, claims that state that in him, and in him alone, spiritual life is to be found; we hear him in heated debate with the Pharisees, pressing them to believe that he is the one he claims to be; warning them that unless they believe that he is who he is they will die in their sins. We find here no 'gentle Jesus meek and mild' but a Jesus who knows that he is the Son of God, to whom the same honour is due as is due to God the Father. We find here in John's Gospel a Jesus who leaves us no room for misunderstanding or doubt about his meaning: he says quite clearly: 'anyone who has seen me has seen the Father' (John 14:9); he says quite clearly: 'I and the Father are one' (John 10:30).

Let us open our minds to hear what the words of this Gospel are saying to us.

JOHN'S INTRODUCTION - JESUS IS ETERNAL, JESUS IS GOD: JOHN 1:1-18

Like Mark, but in an entirely different way, John opens his Gospel with a proclamation of the true identity of Jesus Christ. John goes right back before the beginning of time to Christ's eternal existence with God the Father: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.' (John 1:1)

Before John tells us one word about what Jesus said and did in his human existence he wants us to know that Jesus is God. **He is the eternal one**, whose life cannot be given a starting point; even in the beginning John can only say that he 'was'. He cannot say that Jesus came into existence at some point in the beginning, but simply he 'was'. Already, in the beginning, the Word was.

John calls Jesus 'the Word'. By this title John identifies Jesus with God. 'Word' indicates speech, communication, self-expression, self-revelation. **In Jesus, the Word, we see the thoughts and mind of God**. In the Word, God shows us himself.

But so that we don't assume the Word is merely a non-personal expression of God, John tells us that 'the Word was with God'. The English fails to convey the meaning of the Greek. What is being expressed here is both distinction and unity. There is distinction because the Word and God are placed side by side as two separate entities. There is unity, because the Word is described as being, literally, 'towards' God. That is, in total agreement and empathy with, acutely sensitive to his every thought and desire, **so intimately related to him that he reflects accurately every aspect of his being**.

To prevent us making the error of seeing Jesus as some lesser being who perfectly reflects the glory of God, John tells us 'the Word was God.' The Word was God. John does not say 'the Word was like God'. He does not say 'the Word was divine.' The meaning of the original text is clear: the Word was God.

To give weight to his opening statement John goes on to identify the Word as the creator of all things: 'Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made' (John 1:3). In the Old Testament creation is seen as the work of God. So convinced is John that Jesus, the Word, is God, that he presents Jesus as the creator of all things. Nothing, he says, exists apart from the creative power of the Word. John then adds: 'In him was life', teaching us that **Jesus, the Word, is the origin of and the continuing source of life**.

John could not make his point any clearer. Jesus, the Word, is God; the creator of all things, on whom all things depend; the source and giver of life. John wants us to be very sure about this before he relates what happened, for it is only when we know that Jesus is really God that what he said and what he did can impact us with their full significance.

Yet before he recounts in detail the events and conversations in Jesus' life on earth, John gives us a brief glimpse of both the glory of that life and the irony of people's reaction to it. He tells us

(1) 'He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognise him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him' (John 1:10,11).

The Creator comes to his creation, and is not recognised. Those who have life from his hand do not perceive that before them stands their life-giver. So corrupt is their understanding of God that they cannot see him, even though he is right beside them. In rejecting Jesus, they are rejecting God.

(2) 'Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God' (John 1:12).

There were some who did recognise him - they believed in his name, they understood that here before them stood their God, and they received him as God. They acknowledged that all the claims he made were true. To these he gave the right to be called God's children.

(3) 'The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us' (John 1:14).

John wants us to know that the flesh and blood Jesus who lived with us is the eternal Word he has already identified in his opening verses. John here prohibits any thought that denies or reduces the true humanity of Jesus. The Word, who is God, became flesh. Our flesh. The Word, who is God, lived with us, sharing our humanity.

(4) 'We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth' (John 1:14).

'No-one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known' (John 1:18).

In these two statements John introduces a further concept: Jesus is the 'only begotten' Son of God the Father. He is of the same being, the same nature, the same substance, as God the Father. Because of this, when we see Jesus, we see God. When we know Jesus, we know God. In Jesus we are confronted with the fullness of God's grace, the fullness of God's glory, the fullness of God's truth. He reveals God. Absolutely. Perfectly. Completely. Jesus is as fully God as God is God.

All of this John wants us to have fixed in our minds right from the start. We are not faced in the gospel with the example of a good man; we are not called to be the students of a great teacher. John, in this introduction to Jesus, is preparing us to be challenged by the central question of history: are we going to recognise and receive God when he comes to us in Jesus Christ? If we do not see him there, then we cannot see him anywhere, for it is here in Jesus Christ that God's self-revelation is most clear, most precise, most definite and explicit. If our concept of God is different from his self-revelation in Jesus Christ, then our god is not God. We do not know him. We cannot come to him. We do not believe in him. We believe in **something** but that something is not God revealed in the Bible. This is what John is teaching us.

In Jesus Christ, the Word, the eternal God lives among us. Will we receive him? Or will we also be among those who cling to their own concept of god, and receive him not?

THE CONVERSATION WITH NICODEMUS - JESUS IS THE ESSENTIAL FOCUS OF FAITH: JOHN 3

Nicodemus comes to Jesus saying 'We know' We know you are a teacher come from God. We know that no-one can do what you are doing unless God is with him.

Jesus' reply is startling: The truth is, Jesus says, you don't know. You cannot know. You cannot see. Unless you are born again you cannot understand anything about the rule and authority of God. You cannot see God's kingdom. You cannot perceive the reality which is God's kingdom. You cannot enter God's kingdom (John 3:3,5).

In the ensuing conversation Jesus' highlights Nicodemus' ignorance: 'You should not be surprised at my saying ... ' (3:7), 'You are Israel's teacher, and do you not understand these things?' (3:10), 'I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?' (3:12)

Nicodemus fades into silence as Jesus proceeds to teach him the truth.

Three times Jesus tells Nicodemus that whoever believes in the Son has eternal life. (John 3:15,16,18). This 'Son' is identified as 'the Son of Man' (15), and God's 'one and only Son' (16). To define what it means to believe in the Son, we need to look at what Jesus teaches is the opposite of believing in the Son: the one who has not believed is he who 'has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son' (18).

[Let us pause here a while to ask a question: what is it that Jesus says we must believe to have eternal life? What do these verses in John 3 state? That we must believe **in him** . We must believe **in his name**. Consciously, or unconsciously, Christians have made a subtle but significant change here. We quote John 3:16 with ease: for God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life (KJV), but as we quote it we automatically make a mental substitution: 'whoever believes that he died on the cross for our sins ... '.

But Jesus is not saying here that we must believe that he died for our sins; he is saying that the essential prerequisite for eternal life is believing **in him** , believing **in his name** . Unless we believe that he is the Son of God we are excluded from life. Notice John's comment at the end of the chapter: 'Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him' (3:36).]

In the preceding verses John has identified Jesus as:

- 'the one who comes from above' (31),
- 'the one who comes from heaven' (31),
- 'the one whom God has sent' (34),
- the one who 'speaks the words of God' (34),
- the one to whom 'God gives the Spirit without limit' (34),
- the Son whom the Father loves (35), and
- the one in whose hands the Father 'has placed everything' (35).

Either we reject this Jesus, or we believe in (or on) him or his name. Either we refuse to accept him as God, or we receive him as God. That is the central issue. It is this choice that Jesus puts before Nicodemus.

But what happens when a human being stands in the presence of God? What happens when a sinner stands face to face with the holiness and perfection of Almighty God? He stands condemned. He cannot live. He is doomed to perish.

What will happen then, when we stand face to face with God in Jesus Christ? The promise of these verses in John 3 is that we will not perish, we are not condemned, we have already eternal life, if we believe in him.

How can this be?

It is because in the coming of the Son of God, God does two things. First, God himself comes to us in his Son. Second, in the death of the Son, God the Father reconciles us to himself, laying on his Son our sin, our guilt, our condemnation.

According to Jesus' word here in John 3, it is when we believe the first, that the second becomes ours as a gift. God gave his Son to die on the cross **so that** whoever believes in him will not perish. The Son of Man must be lifted up **so that** whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

Had the Son of God merely come and revealed the Father to us that coming and that revelation would be a terrible thing. To see God in Jesus, to realise that here in our presence God stands, to see his holiness, to see his power and his majesty, and remain cut off from him by our sin, would be death and condemnation, not life.

But, Jesus says, God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. (3:17). The cross of Christ, by which God forgives our sins, makes it possible for him to grant eternal life to those who believe in the name of his Son. For those who reject the Son, the cross is of no effect, they 'will not see life, for God's wrath remains on (them)' (3:36).

Let us make sure that we understand what John 3 is saying. If we believe *in the name* of God's one and only Son we are not condemned, we have eternal life; if we reject the Son, if we do not believe in his name, God's wrath remains on us, we stand already condemned, we perish.

THE FIRST DEBATE - JESUS IS EQUAL WITH GOD THE FATHER: JOHN 5

The first confrontation between Jesus and the Jews occurred because Jesus healed a man on the Sabbath. In response to their persecution of him Jesus stated: 'My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working.' (Verse 17) To our minds that doesn't sound wrong, but to the Jews it was blasphemy: 'For this reason the Jews tried all the harder to kill him ... **he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God** ' (5:18).

The Jews knew that Jesus' simple statement assumed an equality with God. They were acutely aware that a son is of the same nature as his father. In calling God his Father Jesus made out that he was of the same nature, equal, with God.

Rather than back off and let the matter rest Jesus pushed it further. He leaves no room for anyone to believe that he didn't mean his words to be taken that way. He leaves no room for anyone to think that they heard wrongly. He goes on to claim for himself things that belong only to God, and the reason he does this is his deep desire that the Jews be saved (see verse 34). He enters the debate full on, he punches home truth after truth about himself, because he knows that only if they accept him as the one he claims to be can they be saved.

Let's look at some of his points in this debate.

[a] whatever the Father does, the Son does (verse 19). Here we see unity and equality of action.

[b] the Father shows the Son all he does (verse 20). Here we have unity of plan and purpose.

[c] Just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it (verse 21). Here Jesus claims for himself the life-giving power that belongs to God alone.

[d] The Father judges no-one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son (verse 22). In the Old Testament God is the Judge (Genesis 18:25; Judges 11:27; Psalm 7:11; 50:6; 68:5 (KJV); 75:7; 94:2). Jesus here claims that God has given that role to him. (See also verse 27).

[e] It is the Father's purpose that everyone should honour the Son with the same honour that is given to the Father (verse 23). Jesus is here saying that the same honour is due to him (the Son), that is due to God. To Jewish ears this is a terrible statement. All the praise, all the worship, all the thanksgiving, all the obedience - everything that is owed to God is owed to Jesus. That is Jesus' claim.

[f] Whoever does not honour the Son does not honour the Father (verse 23). The implications of these words are immeasurable. Hear what they are saying! Jesus has just said that the same honour is due to the Son as to God. Now he adds that whoever does not give that honour to the Son is not honouring the Father. Let us think of all the praise, all the worship, all the obedience that people right round the world sincerely believe they are giving to God. These words of Jesus mean that unless these people are honouring him, the Son, they are not honouring God at all. These words of Jesus mean that the only way to honour God is to honour God's Son. To the Jews listening to Jesus these words meant that he was accusing them of not honouring God because they failed to honour **him** .

[g] Those who hear (= believe and obey) the words of Jesus have eternal life, escape condemnation, and have already crossed over from death to life, because just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted to the Son to have life in himself (verses 24-26). Jesus is not claiming here simply to have the power to restore a dead person to life. The mention of 'eternal life' and 'condemnation' indicate that what Jesus is claiming here is to have the authority to reverse God's judgement on sin. Like his claim to have the power to forgive sin in Mark 2, his claim here also goes right back to Genesis 3. There, as a judgement on their sin, Adam and Eve are barred from the tree to life, lest they should eat its fruit and live for ever. Their condemnation bars them from eternal life. Jesus here claims that those who 'hear his words' cross over from death to life, eternal life, and are not condemned.

(Let us note in passing that in John's writings 'hear', 'believe' and 'obey' are frequently used synonymously or as parallels. Often when one is used we are meant to include the other two in our understanding, for that is the way John understands true Biblical hearing, true Biblical believing, and true Biblical obedience. Each one is true only if the other two are also present.)

[h] The Scriptures testify about me Moses wrote about me. (Read John 5:37-46.) There is great sadness in these words. For generations the Jews had been studying the Scriptures, for generations they had been committed to the Law of Moses. Because of this they, of all people, should have been prepared for the coming of the Christ. But they had not understood. They had not believed. The Christ stands before them now in this man Jesus, and they do not recognise him, they do not believe him. It is as if he says to them 'Look, I'm the one you've been reading about! I'm the one you've been hoping for for so long! Look at me! Don't you see! Can't you recognise me!' In their failure to see past his humanity, in their failure to see their God in this man, the Jews demonstrate that they haven't understood God's word at all. They demonstrate that they do not know God at all. The very Scripture in which they looked for salvation has become their condemnation. That is what Jesus told them.

In this first debate with the Jews Jesus has left no room for misunderstanding. He claims for himself equality with God. He makes himself the pivotal point of every person's eternal destiny. He emphasises that everyone's relationship with God is determined by their response to himself.

The Jews are silent.

THE SECOND DEBATE - JESUS IS THE BREAD OF LIFE: JOHN 6

John 6 opens with the record of Jesus' feeding of the five thousand. This miracle becomes both the background and the kick-off point for the second debate between Jesus and the Jews. Whereas Mark omits any comment about the immediate response to this feeding miracle John relates that the people responded with 'Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world' then tells us that Jesus knew that they intended to make him king by force (John 6:14,15). They had, as Mark tells us later, failed to perceive the real meaning of the miracle. They see Jesus purely in earthly terms. They see him as the one who has the potential to set them free from the tyranny of Rome and re-establish Israel as a nation. As we saw in chapter five, they have failed to understand the Scriptures. They are mistaken on two counts: firstly in thinking that this kind of national hero and deliverer is what the prophets promised in the Messiah, and secondly in assuming that Jesus is merely this kind of deliverer.

Jesus attacks this mistaken notion: 'I tell you the truth, you are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate the loaves and had your fill.' (John 6:26) The miraculous sign should, as we have seen in Mark, have pointed them to the fact that Jesus is God, but their focus is on the earthly, on the physical. Jesus exhorts them: 'Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life ...' (6:27). The bread they ate has become a symbol for their physical, national aspirations, for their mistaken concept of the Messiah, contrasted to the eternal, spiritual significance of Jesus Christ.

The conversation goes just the way Jesus wants it to go. The Jews ask 'What must we do to do the works God requires?' His answer faces them with the central issue: 'The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.' (6:29). The Jews realise that Jesus believes himself to be the one God has sent, for they ask him to tell them what he will do to prove it, so they can believe in him (6:30). They refer back past the miracle of the loaves and fishes to the miracle of the manna, the 'bread from heaven', provided for their ancestors in the desert. (See Exodus 16.) It is if they said 'This is what Moses did: he gave us bread from heaven. What can **you** do to prove yourself to us?'

Jesus in reply again points to the earth-bound nature of their understanding. He tells them

- Moses doesn't give you the bread from heaven
- it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven
- the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world (6:32,33).

The Jews are interested. 'Sir,' they said, 'from now on give us this bread.'

Jesus responds with an unexpected, startling declaration:

'I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty.' (6:35).

If they had not heard it in verses 32 and 33, they cannot escape it here. Jesus himself is the true bread from heaven, the bread of God, the bread of life. He is not saying that he **gives** us the bread of life, but that he **is** the bread of life. Apart from him we die. Apart from him we hunger. Apart from him we thirst. Just as physical life depends on food (symbolised by bread) so spiritual life depends on Jesus Christ.

This is the first of the exclusive claims made by Jesus Christ in this Gospel. It is exclusive in that it rules out all other 'breads' of life. Jesus says 'I am **the** bread of life' not 'a bread of life' or 'one of many breads of life'. He is here claiming to be the one and only bread of life. He is claiming that he alone sustains spiritual, eternal life. But it is not the exclusiveness of the claim that offends the Jews; they are quite happy with exclusivism. What bothers them is that Jesus claims to have come down from heaven (see verses 32, 33, 38, 41, 42; also verses 29, 38 and 39 where Jesus claims to be sent by God). The Jews cannot accept this. They think they know who he is. They think they know where he comes from. (6:41,42)

Again in response to their doubts and questions Jesus reinforces his argument. In the ensuing conversation he makes the following claims:

- the Father sent him (44)
- I will raise (the one who comes to me) up at the last day (44)
- no one has seen the Father except the one who is from God, only he has seen the Father (46)
- I am the bread of life (48)
- I am the living bread that came down from heaven, which a man may eat and not die (51)
- if a man eats of this bread he will live for ever (51)
- whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life and I will raise him up at the last day (54)
- my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink (55)
- whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him (56)

- the living Father sent me (57)
- the one who feeds on me will live because of me (57)
- he who feeds on this bread will live for ever (58)

If we take verses 51 to 58 by themselves we can easily be persuaded that these verses are referring to partaking of the Lord's supper, especially if we read them superficially. We can also be easily persuaded that they are pointing us to the crucifixion, the benefits of which are ours through faith. The broken flesh and poured out blood of Jesus Christ are certainly not far away from this passage, as verse 51 tells us: 'which I will give for the life of the world.' But an analysis of the above verses, and a comparison of them with some of the earlier verses in this chapter, indicates that the primary focus of Jesus' argument is not his death, but his identity.

Jesus has already made clear in chapter five that he is claiming equality with God. Here in chapter six he reaffirms that claim and pinpoints the stumbling block to that that claim is. Had he come with great glory, displaying the aweinspiring majesty of the Lord, quite evidently **not** human, these Jews would have received him. They would have recognized that brilliant, glorious figure of Ezekiel's and Daniel's visions. They would have bowed to him in adoration and praise.

But, as they say, 'Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I came down from heaven?'" (6:42) His very evident human reality is the stumbling block to their belief. He is one of them. Just the man from down the road. They cannot believe that he comes from heaven. They cannot believe that God has taken upon himself human flesh and human blood. For this reason Jesus says 'Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.' (6:53) Unless they can accept the fact that this flesh and blood person is the Lord of glory, they have no spiritual life. But this is the very fact that they cannot stomach. It is this very fact that they are rejecting with such vehement opposition that it makes them want to kill him. They will not accept that standing before them in real human flesh and blood is their God.

If we tabulate Jesus' statements in this chapter we can readily see that this is the key issue:

Human response	Verse	Leads to
Comes to me	35	Never go hungry
Believes in me	35	Never be thirsty
Comes to me	37	Never be driven away
Looks to the Son/believes in him	40	Eternal life/raised up on the last day
Come to me	44	Raise him up on the last day
Believes	47	Has everlasting life
Eats of this bread	51	Live for ever
East my flesh/drinks my blood	54	Has eternal life/raise him up on last day
Eats my flesh/drinks my blood	56	Remains in me and I in him
Feeds on me	57	Lives
Feeds on this bread	58	Lives for ever

We see from the above that what is promised to those who eat Christ's flesh and drink his blood is the same as what is promised to those who 'believe', that is, the promise of eternal life. Back in verse 27 Jesus told the Jews to work for the food that endures 'to eternal life'. They asked 'What must we do to do the works God requires?' In reply Jesus said: **'The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent' (6:29).**

But the Jews do not want a flesh and blood God. They do not want to accept that the Son of God stands here sharing their humanity. They will not believe in this one whom God has sent. Even many of his disciples, on hearing the debate of John 6, couldn't swallow his teaching. 'Who can accept it?' they asked each other (verse 60). John tells us (66) that 'from this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.' Perhaps these were those apparent believers to whom Jesus had not committed himself earlier (John 2:23-25), because he knew what was in their hearts. All that remains here at the end of this debate in John 6 are the twelve. Peter's reason for their remaining is 'You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God' (6:68,69). Yet just as Jesus did not commit himself to the many apparent believers in John 2, so here he knows that one of these twelve who remain does not believe.

WHO IS JESUS? - THE LONG-EXPECTED DELIVERER: JOHN 7

Jerusalem is crowded. From all over Judea and Galilee people have come to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles, and as they mingle together in the streets, as they come together at the Temple to offer their sacrifices and observe the age-old rituals involved in this Feast, questions are buzzing, questions about Jesus. John has recorded some of them for us:

- Where is Jesus? (Verse 11)
- Is he a good man? (12)
- How does he know so much when he never went to school? (15)
- Can it be that they really know that he is the Messiah? (26)
- When the Messiah comes, will he perform more miracles than this man has? (31)
- Where is he about to go so that we shall not find him? What does he mean?(35,36)

The most significant of these questions are those focusing on Jesus as the Messiah. Is he the long expected Anointed One, or is he not? (The word 'Christ' is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew 'Messiah'. Both words refer to the deliverer God had promised to send. For the most part the Jews were looking for a political/national human deliverer, whose actions would set them free from the tyranny of the Romans and re-establish Israel as a prosperous, independent nation ruled by a descendant of David, the greatest king in Israel's history. In so limiting their concept of the Messiah the Jews were overlooking those portions of the prophecies which depict the work of the Messiah as encompassing the whole world, and the person of the Messiah as far more exalted than a national hero and a Davidic king.)

The Feast of the Tabernacles, while commemorating the historical experiences of the Israelites under the leadership of Moses (Leviticus 23:33-36, 39-43; Deuteronomy 16:13-17) was also a prophetic anticipation of the coming of the Messiah. On the great day of the Feast a water-pouring ritual occurred. This ritual was a symbolic, prophetic prayer for the coming of the Messiah who would be the source of God's blessings. It is in this setting of Messianic expectation that Jesus makes his declaration in John 7:37,38: 'If a man is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.' It is as if Jesus said: 'You are, in this pouring out of water, anticipating and longing for the coming of God's Messiah and of all the blessings associated with him. You need pour this symbolic water no longer: I am the Messiah. Come to me, believe in me, for it is in me that your expectations are fulfilled and your prayers are answered. He who comes to me, he who believes in me, will receive all the promised blessings.'

On hearing Jesus' words some in the crowd were inclined to believe, some were sceptical, others antagonistic, but they all realised what it was that Jesus was claiming. So vehement are the Pharisees in their refusal to admit the possibility of Jesus' right to make this claim that they consider those who believe in Jesus to be under a curse (verse 49).

As we read through this passage of John's gospel let us not fail to notice where the central focus is: it is on the question of the true identity of Jesus of Nazareth. This is the all-important question. Our answer to this question determines everything else.

THE THIRD DEBATE - JESUS' INCREDIBLE CLAIMS ABOUT HIS IDENTITY: JOHN 8

Already as we have seen Jesus' statements and claims have provoked antagonism in the Jews. They have seen clearly what he is claiming, and they have rejected those claims. But Jesus does not give up. In chapter eight he presses his statements to their ultimate significance, making his claims even clearer. He knows, as only he could know, how imperative it is that they see **and** believe who he really is. He is unstoppably persistent in his presentation of himself as God.

(1) Jesus claims to be the light of the world (John 8:12)

Here we have the second of Jesus' absolute, exclusive claims. He said: 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.'

This statement, like those Jesus made in preceding chapters, is rich with Old Testament images. In the exodus from Egypt the Israelites are accompanied by a pillar of fire and cloud, encompassing them with physical light, and symbolising the presence of the Lord (Exodus 13ff). During the Feast of the Tabernacles, which was probably just finishing when Jesus made this statement, the Temple was illuminated, drawing attention to its significance as the earthly 'dwelling place' of God. In the Psalms light is associated with God:

- Psalm 27:1: 'The Lord is my light and salvation';
- Psalm 36:9: 'for with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light';
- Psalm 43:3: 'Send forth your light ... ';
- Psalm 56:13b: 'that I may walk before God in the light of life';

- Psalm 118:27: 'The Lord is God, and he has made his light shine upon us.' (This last Psalm is filled with joyous anticipation of the coming Christ.)

Isaiah identifies God as the 'Light of Israel' (10:17), identifies the coming Servant of the Lord as 'a light for the Gentiles' (42:6), and in 60:1-3 and 19-20 looks ahead to a glorious time of salvation when the light of the Lord will enlighten and draw to himself people from all nations.

As Jesus stood in the Temple, where the brilliant lights of the Feast of the Tabernacles had recently been extinguished, claiming 'I am the light of the world' all of this richness of meaning pulsed through his words. By these words he identifies himself, not only as the prophesied Messiah/Suffering Servant, but also as God. The symbolic, prophetic lights have gone, but he whom they both symbolised and prophesied is here. Just as they need no more the symbolic, prayerful pouring out of the water, so also they need no more the brilliant illumination of the Temple. What purpose in gazing at a mere symbol when he whom it symbolises is here? What purpose in rejoicing in a prophetic hope when the subject of the prophecy has arrived? There is no more darkness for those who recognise and believe what Jesus is claiming when he says 'I am the light of the world'; those who believe in him, those who follow him both see and know God. 'Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.' **No longer is God hidden in inscrutable darkness: he has come to us in this man, Jesus. Here in this man we see God.** 'If you knew me,' Jesus said, 'you would know my father also' (John 8:19) but those to whom he spoke knew neither him nor his Father.

We must not lose the profound, far-reaching significance of Jesus' simple words. **Knowledge of God is inseparably bound to knowledge of Jesus Christ**. Jesus is making it unquestionably clear that it is impossible to know God apart from knowing who Jesus really is. **He** is the Light of the world. All other supposed lights are not true lights at all; they are either inadequate, inaccurate or false. No matter how enlightened they may suppose themselves to be, Jesus makes it clear that those who do not follow him walk in darkness. Those who do not know God by knowing Jesus Christ do not and cannot know God.

(2) Jesus said: 'if you do not believe that I am the one I claim to be, you will indeed die in your sins.' (John 8:24)

In verse 21 Jesus told his hearers that they would die in their sins. Here in verse 24 he explains **why** he said that. In the intervening verses he has made an emphatic distinction between himself and his hearers. **They** are from below: **he** is from above. **They** are of this world: **he** is not of this world. It is essential that they realise this. If he goes away, if he leaves the earth, and they have not realised and do not realise who he is, then they will die in their sins. This fate is the ultimate disaster. To die with one's sins unrepented of and unatoned for, to die still under the curse of one's sins, this is the epitome of horror. One's eternal destiny depends on this one point: do I, or do I not, believe that Jesus is who he is? Do I, or do not, believe that he is the one he claimed to be?

Jesus uses here in this critical statement the Greek equivalent for the Hebrew words God used in Exodus 3:14. There Moses had asked God what was his name, so he would be able to tell the Israelites who the God was who had commissioned him. God's answer to this request was: 'I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: "I AM has sent me to you."' Here in John 8:24 Jesus says: 'unless you believe that I AM, you will die in your sins' (literal translation).

In the two exclusive claims seen so far (John 6:35 and 8:12) this 'I AM' expression of deity was also used by Jesus. It is used also in those claims we have yet to consider. The significance of it is comprehended in these claims, for he says that those who do not believe in or follow him in terms of these claims are excluded from eternal life. But here in John 8:24 Jesus comes straight out and leaves no room for failure to understand: unless a person believes that he is who he is they will die in their sins. In other words, if a person does not believe that Jesus is the Son of God, so equal to God the Father that he has the right to use God's self-identifying name, that person will die in their sins.

(3) 'He who belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God.' (8:47)

In this section of the debate (John 8:42-47) Jesus answers his own questions about why those listening to his words do not hear or obey what he is saying. The statement above is his final answer. Tucked into it is Jesus' knowledge of his oneness and equality with the Father. In verse 43 he had reasoned: 'Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say.' They are unable to hear what he is saying because their father is the devil, not God. Jesus tells them the truth, but they do not believe him. Why do they not believe him? Because he is God, and only he who belongs to God hears what God says. The reason they do not hear what Jesus, that is, God, says, is that they belong not to God, but to the devil. The whole force of this section is that Jesus identifies himself with God.

The Jew's response to this line of debate is to classify Jesus as a Samaritan and demon-possessed.

(4) 'If a man keeps my word, he will never see death.' 8:51.

This statement has much in common with the statements in 8:24, which we have already considered, and 3:36 which we will consider later. The response it brought forth from the Jews indicates its considerable significance: 'Now we know that you are demon-possessed! ... Who do you think you are?'

(5) 'I tell you the truth, before Abraham was born, I am!' 8:58.

Jesus has just said to the Jews: 'Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad.' The Jews responded 'You are not yet fifty years old, and you have seen Abraham!'

So clearly did the Jews grasp the significance of Jesus' words 'before Abraham was born, I am!' that they immediately picked up stones to stone him. For a man to say what Jesus said here, was blasphemy of the grossest kind. It was claiming for himself the attributes and the name of God. It was a claim to be God. Not only has Jesus clearly used for himself the divine name of Exodus 3:14, he has also ascribed to himself eternal existence. He did not say 'I was' or 'I existed', or even 'I came into existence'. He said 'I am' - he speaks of himself as one existing in an eternal present, without beginning, without ending. He speaks as God. **It is God alone who inhabits eternity, yet here is a man, Jesus of Nazareth, claiming eternity.**

THE FOURTH DEBATE - 'I AND THE FATHER ARE ONE': JOHN 10

(1) Jesus is the gate: 10:7-10.

In Matthew 7:13,14 Jesus said 'Enter through the narrow gate. for wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.'

The same word, variously translated 'door' or 'gate' is used in John 10:7-10, where Jesus identifies himself as the 'door' or 'gate' through which we must enter for salvation, for life, for security. We must not think here that Jesus is simply saying that he is *like* a door. Nor is he saying that he is one of several doors. We must take his claim just as he put it. He is *the* one and only, exclusive entry point, the only valid entry point, the only effective entry point to salvation, security and eternal life.

This claim renders invalid all other offers of spiritual life and salvation. It categorizes them as 'thieves and robbers' whose intent and effect is 'only to steal and kill and destroy'. The exclusiveness of this claim of Jesus is abhorrent in our society, where a live and let live, 'all roads lead to god' mentality dominates. It was equally offensive to the Pharisees to whom it was originally spoken. In this exclusive claim of Jesus Christ every person in every nation, no matter what their existing creed or philosophy, is challenged to rethink their beliefs, to re-evaluate their traditions. In this claim he calls each one of us out of the belief system we have inherited or adopted, and into a positive, responsive relationship with him.

By his own words Jesus Christ here claims that he, and he alone, is the entry point to life. He has no tolerance for any other supposed door, for any other promise of life. He knows their end is destruction, not life.

[There is much that could be said about the symbolism used in John 10:1-21. Two facts are significant here (1) verses 1-6 envisage a large sheepfold in which there is a paid doorkeeper and in which there are flocks belonging to several shepherds. (2) in smaller sheepfolds, which were the property of one shepherd, it was common for the shepherd himself to sleep in the doorway at night, and thus become, to all intents and purposes, the door. In this way the dual images of door and shepherd combine in the one person.]

(2) Jesus is the Shepherd: 10:11-21

In John 10:11-21 there are several elements that the listening Jews found both hard to understand and hard to accept.

a. The claim to be the good Shepherd.

For the listening Jews when Jesus said 'I am the good shepherd', he identified himself as God. The shepherd concept was part of God's self-revelation in the Old Testament.

In Psalm 23 we read: 'the Lord is my Shepherd.' In Psalm 80:1: 'Hear us, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock.' In Ezekiel 34: 'For this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock ... so I will look after my sheep ... I myself will tend my sheep ... I will shepherd the flock with justice ... I will save my flock ... You my sheep, the sheep of my pasture, are my people, and I am your God.'

In addition, the good shepherd claim is a claim to be the Davidic Messiah: 'I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd.' (Ezekiel 34:23).

b. Jesus states that he, the good Shepherd, will lay down his life for the sheep. (10:11,15b).

This conflicted with Jewish Messianic expectations of a conquering national, political hero, who would reestablish Israel as a nation, ruling as King on the throne of David.

c. Jesus states that his sheep know him and listen to his voice (10:14,16).

Jesus repeatedly draws attention to the Pharisees' ignorance of his true identity. It is the focus of the last few verses of John 9. It is assumed in 10:1-6, and here, in John 10:14-16, Jesus points out that those who belong to him know him and listen to his voice. The significance of this cuts deeply. They have just excommunicated the man of John 9 from membership of the people of God. They assume that they know God. They stand here in the presence of one who identifies himself as God - and they do not recognize him; they refuse to listen to his voice. The only conclusion is that they are not his sheep, as he points out in 10:26,27. Had there been any authenticity to their traditions, their ritual, their piety, their obedience, it would have manifested itself here as they stood face to face with God. But they do not know him. They cannot see God here in this man. By their refusal to hear his voice they identify themselves as not his sheep.

d. Jesus calls God his Father (10:14-18)

We have seen the reaction elicited by this claim in John 5:16-18. Despite this aggressive response Jesus persists in relating himself to God in this way, and using this relationship as the validation and authority for all that he says and does. He refuses to back off and dilute this expression of equality with God. Indeed, he will shortly make a statement so blasphemous to Jewish ears that it effectively brought his public ministry to an end and sealed his death warrant. (See 10:30 below).

e. Jesus claims to have the authority to lay down his life and retrieve it again. (10:18).

In verse 18 Jesus makes four statements that portray him as having complete authority over death:

- no-one takes my life from me
- I lay it down of my own accord
- I have the authority to lay it down
- I have the authority to take it up again.

Jesus is not speaking about his death as some unfortunate, unpremeditated death by accident; nor is he speaking as a depressed suicide; nor is he speaking as one who will die because of the wickedness and brutality of others. He speaks here of a deliberate, authoritative, purposeful laying down of life, in an action fully under his own control. This deliberate dying is followed by an equally deliberate, authoritative and purposeful restoration and resumption of life. Death is merely an instrument in the hands of Jesus Christ, an instrument whereby he obtains forgiveness and salvation for his sheep.

[By saying 'merely' I do not reduce the significance or the suffering of Jesus' death, but indicate the completeness of his authority and control over it. He is at no time the helpless victim of death or of those who engineered his death. It is he and he alone who is in control right through the trial, committal and crucifixion, and burial. His claim here in John 10 is validated by the resurrection.]

Confronted by this barrage of transcendental claims those listening are confused and divided (10:19-21). There are many who think that he is either demon-possessed or raving mad. They cannot consider that anyone in control of his senses would say the blasphemous things that Jesus is saying. On the other hand there is a quality to Jesus' words and to his miracles that makes this conclusion questionable.

(4) Jesus said: I and the Father are one (John 10:30)

Jesus said these words in the context of the security of his sheep. His sheep are those who believe (25,26), listen to his voice (27), and follow him (27). Jesus knows his sheep (27); he gives them eternal life, and they will never perish (28); no-one can snatch them out of his hand (28); his Father has given them to him (29); and no-one can snatch them out of his Father's hand (29).

We will pass over, as the Jews did, this reassuring teaching of the security of the genuine believer, and focus with them on the relationship Jesus Christ claims to have with 'the Father'. Not only does Jesus again call God 'my Father' (29), thus making himself equal with God (refer back to John 5:16-18), he also describes the security believers (his sheep) have in **his** hand in the same terms that he describes the security his sheep have in **his Father's** hand. Then as confirmation and affirmation he makes the statement 'I and the Father are one.' (30).

This brings forth an immediate response. The stones are instantly in the hands of the Jews, ready to be thrown, ready to put the perpetrator of such blasphemy to death. 'You, a mere man,' they say, 'claim to be God' (10:31-33).

How accurately they perceive the true meaning of his words! They realise precisely the implications of his claims! But they reject utterly his right to make those claims. They refuse to acknowledge that in this man they are face to face with their God.

(5) Jesus said: The Father is in me, and I in the Father (10:38).

In these simple words Jesus states the significance of his miracles. Even though the Jews will not believe him when he claims equality with God, the very miracles he did should have been sufficient to convince them. 'Believe the miracles,' he said, 'that you may learn and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father.' (John 10:38). Had he stopped with the first part, 'the Father is in me', they would perhaps have excused him, supposing that he meant that he allowed God to control him; but he goes on with the second part: 'I in the Father'. The miracles are visible, tangible evidence of the validity of Jesus' claims to be the Son of God, equal to the Father, each mutually indwelling the other.

Again the implications of Jesus' words make their impact. Again the Jews try to seize him, but he escapes from their grasp.

[Some may be puzzled by the line of argument Jesus used in John 10:34-36, and conclude that here Jesus was saying that he was, after all, just a man. This is not at all the case. What he is pointing out is that if, as in Psalm 82:6, judges who are mere men are referred to as "gods", then how much more right has he whom "the Father has set apart as his very own" and "sent into the world" to say "I am God's Son"? The issue of the argument is the **right** of Jesus Christ to use the title and claim the relationship.]

THE FINAL MIRACLE - JESUS IS THE SOURCE OF LIFE: HE IS 'THE LIFE': JOHN 11

As we have already seen right through the Gospel of John Jesus Christ is associated with life:

- 'In him was life' (1:4);
- 'Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life' (3:36);
- 'The water that I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life' (4:14);
- 'those who hear (the voice of the Son of God) will live' (5:25);
- 'as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself' (5:26);
- 'I am the bread of life' (6:35);
- 'whoever believes in me ... streams of living water will flow from within him' (7:38); 'Whoever follows me ... will have the light of life' (8:12);
- 'I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full' (10:10); and
- 'I give to them eternal life' (10:28).

We have been left with no room for doubt: Jesus Christ, and he alone, is the source of eternal life. Apart from him there is only death and judgement (see John 3:18,36).

The death of Lazarus gave Jesus the opportunity to press this home one more time. He said to Martha: 'I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.' Then he asked her: 'Do you believe this?'

A first glance her answer seems to be side-stepping the issue. But let us look again. Her 'Yes, Lord' answers his question. Yes. She believes what he has just said. Then she goes beyond that and gives the reason **why** she believes what he has just said: 'I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world.' This confession of faith, this acknowledgment of the true identity of Jesus Christ, is the foundation apart from which all additional confessions cannot stand. The promise of life is only for those who believe **in him**. Martha perceived this subtle but essential distinction between believing **in him** and believing **in his promises**. Throughout our study in John's Gospel we have seen this same distinction: Jesus calls people to believe **in him**, to believe that he is the Son of God, sent by the Father into the world.

Here in John 11:25 the promise to those who believe **in him** is two-fold:

- (1) that those who believe in him and die physically, will continue to live spiritually,
- and (2) those who are alive physically and believe in him will never die spiritually.

This promise is based on yet another exclusive claim of Christ: 'I am the resurrection and the life.'

Jesus Christ is the one who has 'life in himself' (John 5:26); he is the one who has 'the power of an endless life' (KJV Hebrews 7:16); he is the one of whom it is said 'in him was life' (John 1:4). It is he who later said of himself: 'I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever.' (Revelation 1:18.)

In this final miracle of the raising of Lazarus Jesus validates all of the claims he has made so far, and anticipates both his own resurrection and the spiritual regeneration and physical resurrection of all believers. In and through this trauma of the death of Jesus' friend God's purpose is that he, **and his Son**, be glorified. In God's divine economy the death of Lazarus has occurred

so that the Son of God would be glorified (John 11:4). And here in this miracle God presents the Jews with one final opportunity to believe in the Christ whom he has sent (11:40-42).

Time and again Jesus has shown by word and action that he has the authority and ability to undo the condemnation and curse of Genesis three. Time and again he has taught that he is the pivotal figure in that liberation, that redemption, that salvation. Here now is a man who believed in him, and he has died. The curse, the condemnation, have been meted out. In this dying of Lazarus we are each confronted with our own dying, with our own subjection to and involvement in that curse.

Can this man, Jesus of Nazareth, face to face with this inescapable result of our rebellion against our Creator, reverse and undo it **here**, in its most feared, most final expression? Yes. He can, and he does. Because he is the resurrection, and he is the life. He stands before the grave. His voice commands the one who is dead. By his word he calls forth life out of death. Just as in the original creative act at the beginning of time the word of God summoned into existence all that is, so here the living Word, the Son of God, calls into life he who was dead.

He reconstitutes the putrefying flesh; he renews the dehydrating blood; he restores the body fluids; he reverses the cold, hard stiffness of death; he resuscitates the heart and the lungs. All of this and more, simply by the power of his word.

And it is done. Lazarus comes forth out of the grave. And Jesus says: 'Take off the grave clothes and let him go.' Jesus is the resurrection and the life, the Son of God, possessed of all the life-giving creative power of the Father, with the authority to recreate, to regenerate, even those who are dead. Even those who are dead in sin. To each one who believes that he is who he is he says: take off the clothes of death, and live. And the creative power of his command effects his purpose.

May we each one with Martha confess:

'I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world.'

Johns Answer 2

WHO IS JESUS?

© Rosemary Bardsley 2002

STUDY THREE: JOHN'S ANSWER - PART TWO

SUMMARY:

- Jesus' exclusive claim - 'I am the way': John 14:6
- Seeing Jesus is seeing the Father - Knowing Jesus is knowing the Father: John 14:7-9
- The mystery of incarnation - 'I am in the Father ... the Father is in me': John 14:10,11
- The promise of the Spirit - a further indication of Christ's deity: John 14:15-16:33
- 'Father ... ' - The Prayer of the Son of God: John 17
- The confession of Thomas - 'My Lord and my God': John 20:22-31

In John 12:44-46 Jesus cried out: 'When a man believes in me, he does not believe in me only, but in the one who sent me. When he looks at me, he sees the one who sent me. I have come into the world as a light so that no-one who believes in me should stay in darkness.'

In these words we are given the precise, central meaning of Jesus as 'the Light of the world.' In this man Jesus, God is seen. In this man Jesus, all the ignorance, all the genuine questions, all the confusion about who God is and what God is like are dispelled. Because this man Jesus has lived among us there is, for those who **see** him, for those who **believe** in him, no more darkness. The nature, the character, the person of God is here before us.

JESUS' EXCLUSIVE CLAIM - 'I AM THE WAY ... ' JOHN 14:6

Jesus takes this concept up and hammers it home in John 14. In the presence of his disciples he lays before them one stupendous claim after another. The first is the well-known verse 6:

'I am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me.'

We must be careful not to let our familiarity with this verse rob it of its power. At least five absolute claims are packed into these few simple words.

[1] 'I am the way' - an exclusive, absolute statement. Jesus Christ here claims that he, and he alone, is the way, that is the **road**, to God. There is no other road to God. Every other supposed road to God does not lead to the God who is the Father of Jesus Christ. Other religious or spiritual roads may lead to some kind of religious or spiritual experience, but Jesus Christ alone is **the one road** to the God of the Bible.

[2] 'I am the truth.' Again, an exclusive, absolute statement. Not only did Jesus teach the truth about God, he claims that he **is** the truth. He, in his person, in his living, in his speaking, is the truth about God. Not **part** of the truth, but **the** truth. Everything outside of Jesus Christ, everything other than Jesus Christ is not **the** truth. It is either **partial** truth and partial error, and therefore misleading and deceptive; or it is total error. Only the person who knows Jesus Christ knows the true, undiminished, unadulterated truth about God. That is what Jesus is claiming here.

[3] 'I am the life.' This identification of himself with life has been a recurring thought in Jesus' teaching, indeed, in John's Gospel. Again Jesus makes a claim that excludes all but himself as the source of a real relationship with God: he and he alone is **the** life. He claims that apart from him there is no spiritual life. Apart from him there is only spiritual death. All of the spirituality, all of the devotion, all of the religious endeavours that abound in various religions all around the world, all of these, no matter how sincere, hold people in spiritual death. Jesus here makes the claim that only in him can a person find spiritual life, for he, and he alone, is **the life**.

[4] '**No-one** comes to the Father except through me.' In case we had not understood the implications of the three claims just made, Jesus spells it out so that there can be no mistake. **No-one** comes to the Father except through him. No matter how important someone is. No matter how religious or spiritual someone is. No matter how many followers someone has, or how many people they have influenced. No matter how good or kind or law-abiding. No matter how devoted. No matter how genuine. **No-one**. Everyone who rejects Jesus Christ cannot come to God.

[5] 'No-one comes to the Father **except through me.** ' If Jesus Christ had no real right to make the claims he did, this would be one of the most repulsive. These three words reduce all of our human ideologies and religions to nothing. These three words stand in stark judgement on all who have promised their followers eternal blessedness or union with the divine. If these three words are true, then all the promises and claims of all other religions, cults and philosophies are empty and false. All of the hype, all of the charisma, all of the countless millions of devotees, all of the pain and the sacrifice - all of this, all around the world, means nothing and achieves nothing of any eternal value. According to these words of Jesus Christ: no-one comes to the Father **except through him.**

The meaning and the force of these simple words of Jesus are clear: *there is no other way.* Those who believe in him must also bear with the hatred and rejection that the exclusiveness of this claim attracts. Only by distorting and reducing the obvious meaning of the words can we escape their absoluteness and their narrowness; but then we would be left with an impotent apology for the Gospel.

SEEING JESUS IS SEEING THE FATHER -KNOWING JESUS IS KNOWING THE FATHER: JOHN 14:7-9

'If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.'

In John 1:18 we read 'No-one has ever seen God.' In 1 Timothy 6:16 Paul reminds us of God who 'lives in unapproachable light, whom no-one has seen or can see.'

Isaiah, confronted with a vision of the Lord in the Temple in Jerusalem, cried out in horror and dismay 'Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty' (Isaiah 6:5). And Elijah over-awed and afraid in the presence of the Lord, 'pulled a cloak over his face' before he stepped into that presence. (1 Kings 19:13). He did not dare to look at God.

Moses, not really appreciating what he was asking, said to the Lord: 'Now show me your glory.' The Lord replied: 'I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. But you cannot see my face, for no-one may see me and live ... When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen.' (Exodus 33:18-23)

And on Mount Sinai the Lord surrounded himself with a dense cloud to keep himself hidden from the people of Israel. There, even the sound of his powerful voice caused the people to tremble with fear, begging Moses 'Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die.' (Exodus 20:19; read chapters 19 and 20.)

These passages help us to understand the awesome claim that Jesus is making here in John 14:7 and subsequent verses.

That which is impossible, that which is potentially destructive to us, here, in Jesus Christ becomes possible, and is potentially life instead of death. Here in Jesus Christ the knowledge of God which had been impossible before is available and accessible to all. That which before had only been seen in shadows and symbols here stands before us in reality. The coming of Jesus Christ removes the darkness. The coming of Jesus Christ removes the questions. The coming of Jesus Christ removes the ignorance. Here in Jesus Christ we both know God and see God.

Here in these words all the skepticism of the agnostics and the denials of the atheists are invalidated. God is known, God is seen, in Jesus Christ.

But still Philip misses the point, as millions since have missed it, and many in the contemporary church still miss it: 'Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.'

The power of Jesus' words has passed right over him. So incredible, so unexpected, is the incarnation that has taken place in the coming of the Son of God to earth in the conception, birth and life of Jesus of Nazareth, that Philip does not realise what Jesus is saying.

To Jesus the surprising thing is Philip's failure to understand: 'Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time?'

For three years Philip had lived with Jesus, hearing his teaching, witnessing the miracles. Both of these were adequate indicators of the true identity of Jesus. (See John 5:36; 6:63,64; 10:25,38; 12:47-49). Certainly, the disciples have understood far more than the general crowds; and Peter has spoken for them in his confession 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!'

But the impact and the implications of that confession have not yet hit them. They do not yet realise the immensity of what is going on here.

Jesus hammers it home: 'Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.'

Now we must understand that Jesus is **not** here making a pantheistic New Age statement, in which he is god because all is one and all is god. If this were true then you and I, and every thing on the earth could make this same claim.

Nor is he speaking as one who thinks that every believer is a reduplication or incarnation of God, as taught by some current pseudo-christian televangelists and writers.

The claim Jesus makes here is unique and radical. It is a claim only he can make. It is a claim that goes beyond all human thought and expectation. In some ways we could say it is the essence of the Gospel. More demanding than the cross. More significant than the cross. If we fail to understand Jesus here, then we cannot rightly understand the cross and the resurrection. If we fail to believe Jesus here, then the cross can do nothing for us, for the cross mediates life and forgiveness only to those who believe.

Anyone who has seen Jesus, has seen the Father.

Here in Jesus Christ the Father is known. If we do not recognise the Father here, if we do not see God here, then we do not know him. If we do not recognise him here, then we will not see him anywhere. If we do not believe that in seeing Jesus we see God, then the god we believe in is not God; it is but a figment of our individual or corporate imaginations. Non-existent. Powerless. (Refer back to 'Who is Jesus? John's Answer: Part One).

The true, the only God reveals himself in his Son, Jesus Christ. Anyone who has seen Jesus, **has** seen the Father. So certain is this, so evident, so unavoidable, so unquestionable, that Jesus asks: 'How can you say 'Show us the Father?' Those who see and know Jesus Christ need have no more questions about God. No more 'Who is God?' 'What is God like?' 'What does he do?' 'What does he say?' 'What does he require of me?' No-one ever again needs to ask even one question. All we need to do is to look at Jesus Christ. Here all the questions about God that have ever been asked and ever will be asked are answered. Standing face to face with Jesus Christ, we see the Father.

THE MYSTERY OF INCARNATION - 'I AM IN THE FATHER ... THE FATHER IS IN ME': John 14:10,11

Jesus is incredulous that after three years Philip has not yet grasped this truth. How can Philip, having **seen** Jesus, still have his darkness, his ignorance, his doubts, his questions? How can he still ask 'Show us the Father'? Repeatedly Jesus has told them in **words** and shown them in **works** that he is in the Father and the Father is in him. The Father has revealed himself in the Son. The Son has revealed the Father. When the Son spoke he spoke the words of the Father. When the Son worked it was the Father working. When the Son worked it was God, the Father, doing his normal divine thing; it was God, the Father, living in the human life of the Son.

Jesus clearly considers this unique, mutual indwelling as keenly significant. As we saw in John 10:36-39 the Jews realised that when Jesus said 'the Father is in me, and I in the Father' he was claiming deity, he was claiming equality with God. Here in John 14:10 and 11, where Jesus is anxious to get this truth firmly fixed in the disciples' minds before his crucifixion, he states it twice, first with his surprised question 'Don't you believe' and then with his 'Believe me when I say ... '

If they didn't yet believe it, if they couldn't bring themselves to believe it simply on the basis of Jesus' **words** , then, he says, 'at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves.' The things that Jesus did (and the Greek word is the usual word for 'work') form the bottom line for belief. What he did proves that he is who he claims. His works validate his words. Both leave no option: he is the Son of God. As the Scripture says 'God was manifest in the flesh' (1 Timothy 3:16, KJV). Paul's comment on this is 'Beyond all question, the mystery of godliness is great!'

We are still left with a mystery, but it is not a mystery of darkness, ignorance and confusion. It is not a mystery in which we still must ask 'Who is God? What is God like?' It a mystery of awe and wonder. It is a mystery in which we fall on our knees in surprised amazement, and, in adoration and incredulous praise, our only questions are 'How could you do it, Lord?' and 'How could you do it for **me** ?'

The God of love has come down
Into a stable bare,
And clothed himself with human flesh
In that new baby there.
So small. So weak.
How can it be
That here we see
Eternity?

THE PROMISE OF THE SPIRIT - A FURTHER INDICATION OF CHRIST'S DEITY: JOHN 14:15-16:33

Through the rest of John 14, and in chapters 15 and 16, Jesus speaks of his return to his Father and the coming of the Holy Spirit. Both of these assume his deity. Only he who came from the Father can **return** to the Father; only he who is God can send the Spirit of God. There is in these three chapters such a close relationship between the three - Father, Son and Spirit - that each is spoken of in the same terms as the others.

Consider Jesus' references to the coming of the Spirit:

- the Father will give you another Counsellor (14:16)
- I will not leave you as orphans, I will come to you (14:18)
- you will see me (14:19)
- I will show myself to those who love me (14:21)
- My Father and I will come to him and make our home with him (14:23)
- the Father will send the Holy Spirit in my name (14:26)
- I am coming back to you (14:28)
- I will send the Counsellor from the Father (15:26)
- I will send him to you (16:7)
- after a little while you will see me (16:16)

These references tell us:

[1] The Father sends the Spirit and the Son sends the Spirit.

In one statement (15:26) Jesus says that he will send the Counsellor 'from the Father' and further states that this Counsellor is 'the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father'. Here we see Jesus claiming for himself the authority to send the Spirit of God to his followers. Clearly in all of these verses relating to the sending of the Holy Spirit, Jesus displays a knowledge of himself as equal and intimate with God the Father.

[2] The coming of the Spirit is the coming of the Father and the Son.

Some Bible teachers limit Christ's "I will come to you" to his resurrection appearances; others include the second coming. But the occurrence of this promise several times in this section where Christ is specifically and deliberately teaching about the coming of the Holy Spirit, including 14:23 where Jesus says that both he **and** his Father will come to those who love him, indicates that the coming of Christ in the coming of the Spirit is also included in his meaning.

[There is more than one mystery contained in these concepts. Not only do we have the mystery we are focusing on in these 'Who is Jesus?' studies, the mystery of the God incarnate in the person of Jesus of Nazareth; we have here also the mystery of the Trinity; and further, we have the mystery of the indwelling of the believer by the Holy Spirit, which, as the above verses show, is the indwelling of the Father and the Son in the believer.

It is not the purpose of these studies to discuss these additional mysteries. Yet their presence reinforces the claims to full deity that Jesus has made throughout John's gospel. In these passages Jesus is not arguing with the Pharisees in urgent debate; he is not striving to validate his absolute claims. Nor is he trying to establish confidence in his disciples that he really is who he claims. He is speaking naturally and freely, his conversation automatically assuming the existence of his unique relationship with the Father and his unique identity. Because he is who he is, he **knows** that he, together with the Father, will send the Spirit; he **knows** that it is just as much **him** sending the Spirit as it is the Father; he **knows** that when the Spirit comes it is **him** coming, and it is also the Father coming.

Such is his unity and identity with the Father, such is the fullness of his deity, that what one does the other does, what one is the other is. Christ holds no reduction of deity either in himself or in the Spirit. It is the Son who came to earth, but in that coming we see the Father. It is the Spirit who comes to indwell the believer, but in that coming the Father and the Son come to us. A true understanding of the full deity of Christ and a true understanding of the coming of the Spirit go hand in hand. Any reduction or denial of the first, reduces or denies the second.]

'FATHER' - THE PRAYER OF THE SON OF GOD: JOHN 17

In Christ's prayer in John 17 we are given glimpses of the unique relationship between the Son and the Father.

Addressing God as 'Father' Jesus prays:

[1] 'Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you' (verse 1).

Jesus' prayer here is not 'you do this for me so that I can do that for you'. Rather his prayer is grounded in the basic unity between himself and his Father: if **he** is glorified, the Father is automatically glorified. This recalls his teaching in John 5:23: 'He who does not honour the Son does not honour the Father, who sent him.' When we behold the glory of the Son we are beholding the glory of God the Father.

[2] 'This is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent' (verse 3).

Knowing God and knowing Jesus Christ is eternal life. Not one without the other, but both together. There are many who claim to know God, but without the knowledge of Jesus Christ **whom God has sent**, that knowledge is spurious. It is the incarnate Son of God who reveals the one true God. Let us note also that it is **knowing** this one true God, and Jesus Christ whom he has sent, that **is** eternal life. To know God through Christ is eternal life. Eternal life is not something we possess apart from and distinct from God. Knowing him *is* life.

[For those who want to consider the implications of this statement of Christ : this statement indicates the gravity of the current reductions of the gospel, where eternal life is promised quite apart from any genuine knowledge of Jesus Christ. Such a promise is invalid and bears no similarity to the Biblical Gospel. Study the Gospel and the first letter of John in depth: you will notice that eternal life is inseparably linked with the *person* of Jesus Christ.]

[3] 'I have brought you glory ... ' (verse 4) 'I have revealed you ... ' (verse 6) 'I have made you known ... ' (verse 26)

In these statements Jesus sums up his ministry: the ministry of making known the Father. The substitutionary, sin-bearing work of Christ on the cross only comes **after** he has revealed the Father. The primary need of mankind is to **know** God, to be saved from the dark blindness of ignorance of God; salvation from sin is secondary. Essential, but secondary. Without true knowledge of God there is no accurate knowledge of the gravity of sin and its effects because there is no accurate knowledge of God's holiness and sovereignty. The original sin (Genesis 3) involved at its heart rejection of the true knowledge of God and rebellion against his authority. While in his dying Christ undid the legal penalty of sin - separation from God, in his living he demonstrated before our eyes precisely and accurately who God is.

THE CONFESSION OF THOMAS - 'MY LORD AND MY GOD': JOHN 20:22-31

Peter's confession in Matthew 16 - 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God' - expressed the belief of his fellow disciples. It was a bold statement, cutting right across their traditional concepts, drawing condemnation if heard by the leaders of the Jews. To us, in our cross-cultural reading, it has little of its original impact. To them, so impossible was it, so unheard of, so unthought of, that Jesus said: 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven' (Matthew 16:17).

But this daring belief was shattered. The one they believed to be the Son of God was arrested, tried, condemned and crucified - without lifting a finger to stop it all. Where were his power and his glory? Where his claim to equality with God? What of his repeated statements about being the source of life? Death has taken him. Death has held him. He is, after all, just a man.

All of his claims are invalidated. They, the disciples, are mistaken. The Jews were right, after all.

So unexpected is the resurrection, so impossible, so massive in its implications, that Thomas, despite the witness of those who have seen the resurrected Jesus, declares 'Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it' (John 20:25).

He needs to know that what the others have seen is more than a ghostly apparition. Only a real flesh and blood body will convince him that the impossible has happened; only a body still bearing the evidence of its traumatic, savage death.

Then Jesus comes, a Jesus who has heard the agony of his disillusionment and disappointment. Into the locked room he comes and stands before Thomas. Ravaged hands outstretched. Robe pulled aside to reveal the gaping wound. A physical man, yet more than a man, saying to Thomas 'Stop doubting and believe.'

It was not just that Thomas disbelieved the resurrection. What he doubted, what he disbelieved, was everything that Jesus had claimed. Death had invalidated all that Jesus had said about himself. Death had proved him a liar and a fraud. Death had proved him a blasphemer. Just a man, claiming for himself the power and authority and honour of God.

Only a real resurrection could turn that around and authenticate everything Jesus had said. Only a real resurrection can validate his claims. As Paul tells us in Romans 1:4 Jesus was 'declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead.'

Seeing the resurrected body of Jesus Thomas immediately realises the implications. His answer is precise and radical: 'My Lord and my God!' No more doubt. No more disbelief and disillusionment. Standing in the presence of the resurrected Jesus he knows that he stands in the presence of God.

It is to this belief that each of us is called by the Gospel. Jesus says to Thomas: 'Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.' (John 20:29) The focus of belief is the **person** of Jesus Christ. The question we all must answer is: *who do you say that Jesus Christ is?* Is he just a man, whose death invalidated his claims? Or, is he the Son of God, equal with the Father, whose resurrection verified and validated everything he claimed himself to be? Our answer to these questions decides our eternal destiny.

John concludes his chapter with these words: 'Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. ***But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name***' (20:30,31). Here John tells us the purpose of this Gospel: to get us to believe that Jesus is the Son of God, and by that believing to have eternal life.

May our hearts not deceive us into delaying *our* answer to the question: 'Who is Jesus?'

Matthews Answer

WHO IS JESUS?

© Rosemary Bardsley 2002

STUDY FOUR: MATTHEW'S ANSWER

SUMMARY:

- Jesus has the right to command our total allegiance
- Our response to the words of Jesus determines our ultimate destiny
- Jesus claims to be the Son of God
- Jesus is the King in the Kingdom

Having firmly identified Jesus as man by giving us his ancestry (1:1-17) Matthew immediately identifies him also as God: he is conceived by the Holy Spirit (1:18,20) and he comes in fulfilment of the prophecy "they will call him Immanuel" which means 'God with us' (Isaiah 7:14, Matt. 1:23). He then further names him as 'king' (2:2) and 'shepherd' (2:6), both of which are Old Testament roles of God, and records that the wise men 'bowed down and worshipped him' (2:11), something due to God alone. Like Mark, Matthew records the ministry of John the Baptist, in which the coming of Jesus is linked with the coming near of the kingdom of heaven, and during which both the Holy Spirit and God's voice from heaven identify Jesus as the divine Son (3:16,17).

From this point on, although sharing much that is similar, Matthew records more of the teaching of Jesus than Mark does. Whereas Mark puts before us the miracles of Jesus and more or less allows us to draw our own conclusions, Matthew allows us no such liberty. One after another **he records for us the messages of Jesus, messages focusing on the kingdom in which Jesus is the King, messages that teach us that he, the divine King, demands and commands our ultimate and total allegiance.** And all under that one word: 'gospel'.

To these messages we will now turn.

Jesus has the right to command our total allegiance

[1] As we saw in Mark, Jesus commanded Peter, Andrew, James and John to follow him (Matt.4.19). It was not immediately obvious what this following Jesus entailed. Perhaps it seemed at first that it was going to be a life of great excitement and popularity as they associated with this amazing, miracle-working person (4:23-25). Jesus however soon dispels the illusion. It is not a life of popularity and power to which he has called them, but to a life of poverty of spirit, of mourning, of meekness, of mercy, of purity of heart, and of persecution (5:1-10). Those who follow Jesus Christ will be persecuted because of him (5:11); those who honour him will suffer in the same way that the Old Testament prophets who honoured God suffered (5:12). So significant is Jesus that even to suffer because of him is the cause of joy and gladness, and of great reward. (5:12). **(Did you notice how easily Jesus put himself on the same level as God? The suffering of those who suffer for Jesus is on a level with the suffering of the prophets who suffered for God .)**

[2] Jesus commands an obedience which is from the heart rather than mere external observance of God's law (5:17-6:18).

[3] Jesus commands a priority list in which God and his kingdom are our greatest treasure (6:19-34).

[4] There were those who thought they would like to follow Jesus, in fact they came and offered to follow him. But Jesus put before them the costliness of being his disciple:

'Foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.'

'Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead.'

In these two responses to his would-be followers Jesus points out that following him can involve us, on the one hand, in the loss of physical and material comforts, and, on the other hand, in the denial and interruption of our normal human relationships. **He demands a commitment to himself over and above our concern for our own person, and over and above our concern for our relatives** (8:19-22).

[5] In 10:17-39 Jesus itemizes some of the high cost of being his disciple:

- religious persecution (17)
- arrest by secular authorities (18-20)
- betrayal by family members (21,35,36)
- hatred by all (22).

He calls on those who follow him to scorn this suffering, knowing that they have a heavenly Father who knows all about it (29,30), and knowing that, great though this suffering might be it is nothing in comparison with the dread fate that would be theirs if they were not his followers (26-28,32,33), the fate of those who refuse to acknowledge him.

[6] He calls us to love him so much that all earthly loves seem insignificant (10:37).

[7] He calls each one to 'take his cross and follow me', to 'lose his life for my sake' (10:38,39).

In both of these Jesus commands us to deny ourselves; to consider our wants, our desires, our ambitions dead, for his sake. We forgo what we want for what *he* wants. In other words we submit totally to him. Anything less, he says, 'is not worthy of me.' This radical commitment to which he calls us is the complete reverse of the disobedience of Genesis 3. There Adam forced his will over God's. Here we submit our will to Christ's. This is true repentance. **This is true faith: to believe that here in Jesus Christ stands the One who has the divine right and authority to tell us what to do; that here in Jesus Christ stands the God we rejected and rebelled against in Genesis 3, and to submit to this Christ as our Lord. Any lesser belief, any lesser commitment, is not worthy of him.**

This call to self-denial is repeated in 16:24-28. Jesus says: 'If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.' He goes on to explain that it is only in this apparent losing of ourselves that we actually 'find' our life. There is much that could be said here about the implications of this for what we understand as life. Sufficient to say that the life which Adam forfeited by his rebellion against the authority of God, is here, in our submitting to Jesus Christ, given back to us. As recorded repeatedly in John's Gospel, Jesus is 'the life' and the source and giver of life. As Paul states in Colossians 3:4 Christ *is* our life. In our giving up for Christ's sake that which we see as our life, Christ gives to us that which is really our life, the abundant, eternal life which was lost in Adam.

[8] In 13:44 and 45 Jesus gives us two little pictures of the incomparable value of allegiance to him. As we shall see below he is the King in the kingdom of heaven. Here in these verses he indicates that the kingdom of heaven, that is, *his* kingdom, is of more value than everything else we have. **To have Jesus Christ as our King is to have the ultimate treasure.**

[9] The rich young ruler came to Jesus wanting to know what he had to do to get eternal life. Though he had kept the commandments he still felt a lack. When Jesus told him to sell his possessions and give the money to the poor, and follow him, the young man went away sad. He did not value the kingdom of heaven more than his earthly riches. He was not willing to submit to this word of Jesus. He was not willing for Jesus to be his King; **but it is not possible to enter the kingdom while still in rebellion against the King.** This man, as Jesus well knew, was not seeking Jesus and his kingdom, he was not *coming to Jesus*. His quest was not motivated by any quest or desire for God and God's glory, but by a self-centred desire for his own eternal security. To put it bluntly, he couldn't care less about God; all he cared about was himself. For this reason Jesus put to him that unsettling demand, which focused him on the real choice: the choice between himself and Jesus (19:16-30).

Our response to the words of Jesus determines our ultimate destiny

[1] Having told us in 7:1 'Do not judge, or you too will be judged' Jesus presents us with three situations, which all hang together, in which we definitely have to judge.

- The first of these is the choice between the narrow and wide gates (7:13,14). It is, in the ultimate sense, a choice between life and death; a choice between heaven and hell. One way is hard. One way is easy. On the one road there are only a few. On the other there are many. To enter the narrow gate is to choose life and heaven, but it is also to choose difficulty and loneliness. Immediately we choose this way we have passed judgement on those on the other way: by our choice we have declared them mistaken, we have declared them wrong, because no-one would choose this narrow, difficult, exclusive way unless convinced it was the *only* right way. To this point just what the "narrow way" is has not been identified.
- The second is a mixed picture of wolves in sheep's clothing and trees bearing bad fruit. Again we are forced to pass judgement. The question we face here is 'how do we tell who are true followers of Jesus and who are false followers of Jesus?' Jesus' answer to this question is 'by their fruit you will recognize them.' Contrary to the view of some people that 'fruit' equals converts or 'souls' won for the Lord, Jesus makes it quite clear that the fruit his true followers bear is obedience. He says 'Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven' (7:21). There are those who address him in the right manner, who prophesy in his name, who drive

out demons and perform miracles in his name, but his word to them is 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evil-doers!' (7:22,23). All of their profession and confession is meaningless verbiage if it not accompanied and verified by obedience.

- This leads into the third situation, in which the narrow way of the first picture and the second picture's obedience, or doing the will of the Father, are given specific, concrete identification. Jesus' third picture is that of the wise and foolish builders. He commences with 'therefore', connecting what he says here with what has gone before. 'Therefore' he says, 'everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who' and 'everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who ... ' (7:24,26). We know the story: one house stands; one house crumbles. One man enters the kingdom of heaven; one man is refused entry. On what basis do we stand or fall? On what basis do we enter or not enter the kingdom of heaven? By entering through the narrow gate (7:13), by doing the will of Christ's Father in heaven (7:21), that is by hearing and putting into practice the words of Jesus Christ (7:24,26).

From this trilogy of little pictures Jesus makes it quite clear: **our eternal destiny hangs on our response to his words.**

[2] In Matthew 10 Jesus sent out the twelve disciples to preach that 'the kingdom of heaven is near.' Among the instructions he gave them is this: 'If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake the dust off your feet when you leave that home or town' (v.14). He then went on to point out that it will be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for the town that rejects them. This thought will be stated again later, but let us note here that if Christ's words, even when spoken by the disciples, are rejected, the result is unbearable judgement.

[3] We come in chapter 11:20-24 to Christ's rebuke and reprimand of the unrepentant cities. Most of his miracles had been performed in Korazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum. As we have seen already in Mark's Gospel the miracles were indisputable pointers to Jesus Christ's divine identity. For this reason Jesus pronounces "woe" on these cities. The Old Testament has told us of the gross wickedness of Tyre, Sidon and Sodom, and of their destruction by the judgement of God (Isaiah 23; Amos 1:9,10; Genesis 19), yet, Jesus says, if he had performed his miracles in those cities they would have repented long ago and remained to this day. So, says Jesus, it will be more bearable on the judgement day for those cities than for the cities refusing him. **They refused merely God's messengers: these are refusing God's Son.**

[4] The same point is made in a different way in 12:39-42. Here, when the Jews request a miraculous sign, Jesus rebukes them, telling them that the only sign that will be given them is the sign of the prophet Jonah, by which he inferred his death and resurrection. [Note that the resurrection proves Jesus is the Son of God (Romans 1:4).] He then goes on to tell them that the men of Nineveh, who repented at the preaching of Jonah, and the Queen of the south, who travelled from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon, will rise up on the day of judgement and condemn the current generation. This is because Jesus, to whom they refuse to listen, is far greater than either Jonah or Solomon. **Rejection of the message of Jesus is the ultimate calamity because he is the ultimate messenger.**

A supplementary point follows in 12:43-45. When we first read this we wonder 'Why on earth is Jesus suddenly talking about evil spirits? What does he mean by this?' In the light of the preceding verses (39-42) we can understand that Jesus is not teaching us about evil spirits at all, but using a story about evil spirits to illustrate the terrible state in which his hearers, having heard his word and refused both it and him, stood. To have heard *his* word, and refused to listen to it, is to lay themselves open to even more error and condemnation than before. For now, **not only are they misunderstanding all of the revelation of God which they had both in nature and in the Old Testament Scriptures, they are also rejecting God himself, as he here stands before them and speaks to them in the person of his Son.** Their final condition, says Jesus, is worse than their first. **In rejecting him and his message they have made their final rejection of God, beyond which there is no salvation.**

[5] The parable of the sower (13:1-23) is all about our response to the 'message about the kingdom' which Jesus preached. He starts his explanation of the parable by saying 'when anyone hears the message about the kingdom ... ' then goes on to describe four different responses:

- Those who hear the message and do not understand it. Here there is no response at all except refusal and rejection (19).
- Those who hear the word and at once receive it with joy. Here, Jesus says, there is no root. There's no depth. The hearing and the receiving and the joy are superficial. There has been no counting of the cost, no thinking through of the implications, no real understanding of who Jesus is, and what it means to follow him. There has been a hearing and receiving of the *words* but not of the *meaning* or the *significance* of the words. "Quickly" says Jesus, there is a falling away. What had appeared to be a receiving of Jesus' word, was soon shown to be otherwise.
- Those who hear the word, but it is choked by 'the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth' and does not produce the required response. The message is heard, but earthly concerns outweigh heavenly concerns, and material prosperity outweighs spiritual wealth. Jesus and his message are put aside in favour of human, earthly pursuits (22).

- Those who hear the word and understand it. Here is the only right response. The word of Jesus, the message of the kingdom, is both heard and understood. Its significance is probed, its implications are considered, and it is taken on board (23).

Jesus claims to be the Son of God

[1] In Matthew 11:25-27 we are given a glimpse of what was constantly before our eyes in John's Gospel: the relationship between Jesus and God, and Jesus' claim to be the exclusive revelation of the Father. He sees his relationship with God as that of Son to Father. We must remember that John has pointed out to us that Jesus' expression of this relationship brought the immediate charge of blasphemy from the Jews. Jesus himself sees three things issuing from this relationship:

- 'All things have been committed to me by my Father'. In these words Jesus expresses his position of supreme authority and rank in the Father's household or kingdom. Elsewhere, as we see in other studies in this series, this position is described as 'sitting at the right hand of God', 'the firstborn', 'King of kings and Lord of lords'.
- 'No one knows the Son except the Father'. This is confirmed in 16:17 where Jesus tells Peter that it was his Father in heaven who had revealed the true identity of Jesus, the Son of God, to him. It is expressed by Jesus in 11:25, where he praises his Father for revealing the truth to 'little children'.
- 'No one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.' This is an exclusive statement similar to many made in John's Gospel. Irrespective of what we might think we know about God, **Jesus makes it quite clear that to know God, apart from Jesus Christ, is an impossibility. The *only* way to know God is through the revelation of Jesus Christ.**

[2] Having made this stupendous, exclusive claim about himself and his relationship to God, and his revelation of God, Jesus goes on to make what has become one of his best-loved appeals:

'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light' (11:28-30).

At first this seems incongruous and contradictory, coming after Christ's bold claim of the previous verses, and being preceded by his many demands for self-denying allegiance to him. What he has just stated about his relationship to the Father does not sound 'humble'. What he has previously demanded of his followers can hardly be seen as 'easy' and 'light'. So often we ignore the context in which this invitation is given; we drool over its promise of 'rest', we grasp eagerly for the 'easy yoke' and the 'light burden'. We fail to consider the impact of the three commands: 'come to me', 'take my yoke upon you' and 'learn from me.'

There *is* a coming, and it is a coming to him who has just identified himself as the Son of God. There *is* a yoke, and let us not forget that a yoke puts one under the control and authority of another. There *is* a learning, in which we cast out all of our own preconceptions and misconceptions about God, and hold only to that which Jesus reveals to us.

It is only to those who come to Jesus, the Son of God, that the promise of rest is given. It is only to those who submit to his 'yoke', his authority, and who reject all but his revelation of God, that the promise of 'easy' and 'light' is given.

Why is this?

It is because he is the Son of the Father. In coming to him we turn our backs on all of our human strivings to find and to know God. In coming to him we are liberated from all so-called gods that are not God, the service of which holds the whole world in deep bondage. In coming to him we come to the One who is the source and giver of life, who is himself life, who, when we come to him, takes out of our hands the need to save and preserve ourselves in this world and the next, and does it for us. In this is the rest; in this is the easy and light burden: that when we come to Jesus, the Son of God, we let go of everything: our ideas about God, our efforts to secure our eternal destiny, our right to control and order our own lives. We come to him, we submit to his authority, we learn from him - Jesus, the Son of the Father. And he gives us rest.

[3] In Matthew 16 Jesus forces his disciples to put their understanding of his identity into words. When Peter confesses 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God' Jesus replies 'Blessed are you ... for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven.'(17) It is this confession, that Jesus is the Son of God, that is the rock, or foundation on which the church of Jesus Christ is built (18); it is this confession, that Jesus is the Son of God, that releases people from the 'gates of Hades' (18); and it is this confession that Jesus is the Son of God, that is the 'keys of the kingdom of heaven', by which we enter the kingdom of heaven (19). **By proclaiming Jesus Christ, the Son of God, we unlock the doors of heaven.**

[4] Jesus portrays himself as the 'son' who is sent by the 'landowner' and rejected by the tenants (21:33-46). In this parable of the tenants Jesus teaches that he is the Son of God; and that rejection of this Son will result in rejection by God and exclusion from the kingdom of God.

[5] In 22:41-46 Jesus teases the Pharisees with a riddle about the true identity of the Christ. He points out that it is not enough to see him merely as 'the son of David' for David himself calls him 'Lord'. If he is David's 'Lord' he cannot be merely David's son.

[6] During Christ's trial the high priest said 'Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God' (26:63). Let us note in passing that the high priest assumes that the Christ, the Messiah, is the Son of God. If Jesus admits to being one, then he is automatically the other also. In his reply Jesus affirms his divine identity in four ways:

- 'Yes, it is as you say.'
- 'you will see the Son of Man' - another divine title.
- 'sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One' - the position of exaltation and power.
- 'and coming in the clouds of heaven' - he is the coming King.

Immediately the high priest rips his clothes and announces the charge of blasphemy: he has no doubt about the significance of Jesus' words. The verdict is easy; the penalty a foregone conclusion: on such a charge, having so obviously claimed to be God in such clear and unambiguous terms, Jesus is condemned to death.

Jesus is King in the kingdom

[1] In the parable of the weeds (13:24-30,36-43) Jesus is speaking of the kingdom. He begins with 'The kingdom of heaven is like ... ' In his explanation he indicates that the kingdom is the kingdom of 'the Son of Man' (41) and also the 'kingdom of their (the righteous) Father.' By this we can understand that whenever Jesus speaks of the kingdom of heaven, which he does frequently in this Gospel, he is, at the same time, speaking of *his* kingdom, and the Father's kingdom. They are both one and the same. **Jesus Christ, the Son, is King, in the same way that God, the Father, is King.**

[2] Jesus, the Son of Man, is the coming King. This is his message in Matthew 24 and 25. He tells us, among other things:

- His coming will be visible to all (24:26,27).
- His coming will be accompanied by upheavals in the physical world (24:29).
- His coming will cause distress to the nations (24:30).
- His coming will be in the sky, and with power and great glory (24:30).
- He describes his coming as the coming of "your Lord" (24:42).
- Because he is coming his faithful and wise servants will always be ready for him (24:45-51 and 25:1-13). They consider him and his kingdom too important to let themselves be slack and unprepared, no matter how long he is in coming.
- At his coming he will assess whether we have lived for his glory and honour, or whether we have sought to preserve and secure ourselves (25:14-30).
- He will come as the King who sits on his throne as judge of all the earth, and announces the eternal destiny of every human being (25:31-46).

[3] In 28:18-20 we have Jesus' final words. He does not call himself 'King', but he does say 'all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.' On this basis he commands his hearers to 'make disciples of all nations teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.'

Matthew introduced his Gospel with 'A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David' (1:1), which right at the beginning raises the thought of kingship. Immediately after recording Jesus' birth Matthew records the question 'Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?' (2:2). Both John the Baptist and Jesus, as they did in Mark, here summarize their message as 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near' (3:2, 4:17). Whereas Mark showed us by the miracles that Jesus is the Lord of all, Matthew, adding to those same miracles Jesus' teaching, presents Jesus to us as the King of the kingdom of heaven (which, by the way, we must never relegate solely to the future: it is operative wherever Jesus is).

As we have seen in this study Jesus, the divine King, calls us to costly and total allegiance to himself. He demands first place on our priority list. He commands our whole hearted obedience. Our response to the words of this divine King decide our eternal and ultimate destiny. Again the choice is put before us as it was in Mark as we viewed the miracles, as it was in John as we listened to Jesus debating with the Jews. So here we are challenged to make the same decision as we listen to Jesus' teaching: do we accept this man as the one he claimed to be - the Lord, the Son of God, the King of heaven - and in that acceptance, accept also his word which commands us to submit ourselves to him? Or do we refuse both him and his word, and in that refusal refuse also admission into the kingdom of heaven? This is the question Matthew's gospel puts before us.

We read of those who placed
A crown on Jesus' head;
And dressed him
In a robe of royal red.
A kingly staff they gave,
Then knelt and said:
'Hail to the King!'

Their mocking tones we judge,
Their scorn disdain;
And in contempt we hate
That crown of pain.
But from our lips
Comes mockery again:
'He is the King!'

We say the words, but
Where is truth made known?
Confession's truth
Is in obedience shown,
Gives Christ the right
To wear the royal crown:
'I at your feet, my will,
My rights, lay down,
O Christ, *my* King.'
(c) Rosemary Bardsley

Lukes Answer 1

WHO IS JESUS?

© Rosemary Bardsley 2002

STUDY FIVE: LUKE'S ANSWER (PART ONE)

Comment: Because much of what Luke records in his Gospel is also found in Matthew and/or Mark this presentation of Luke Answer (Part One), which is based on his Gospel, is not extensive.

SUMMARY

- A Saviour - Christ the Lord
- Light for the Gentiles/Lifter of the oppressed/Friend of sinners
- The Goal and Fulfilment of God's Self-revelation
- Jesus Christ - the Son of Man
- Son of Man - a reference to Christ's humanness
- Son of Man - a reference to his substitutionary death
- The Son of Man - The Lord of Glory

Like the other Gospel writers Luke wastes no time letting us know who Jesus is.

- He is 'the Lord' whom John the Baptist goes before: Luke 1:17,76.
- He is 'the Lord' for whom John the Baptist prepares a people: Luke 1:17,76.
- He is called 'the Son of the Most High': Luke 1:32.
- He is a king with an eternal kingdom: Luke 1:33.
- He 'the holy one ... called the Son of God': Luke 1:35.
- He is Elizabeth's 'Lord': Luke 1:43
- He is the 'rising sun' who shines 'on those living in darkness': Luke 1:78,79.

All of this Luke tells us, preparing us to receive the One whose birth he is about to describe; all of this he tells us preparing our hearts and minds to acknowledge Jesus Christ, God in human flesh.

A SAVIOUR - CHRIST THE LORD

Luke alone tracked down the shepherds and recorded this joy-filled, excited story of their encounter with the infant Christ. Years later as Luke spoke to them those shepherds still remembered their sheer terror as they were engulfed in the blazing glory of the presence of the Lord; they remembered also the exultant wonder and praise that surged through them as they realised the truth and the impact of what they had heard and seen. These shepherds were the first human witnesses (other than Mary and Joseph) of that incredible event called the 'incarnation'. The message of the angels had been precise and clear: this new-born human baby is: a Saviour,

Christ, the Lord (Luke 2:1-20).

We must not let our familiarity with the story or with these words rob us of the impact and significance of these titles. In the history of God's self revelation it is *he* who alone is Saviour (Isaiah 43:11; 45:21; 49:26; 60:16; Hosea 13:4). Yet here the angels come with the message that this new-born human is 'Saviour'. And he is not just any saviour: he is Christ (that is, the long anticipated Messiah). He is also 'the Lord'. So we must not here suppose that Jesus of Nazareth is a saviour in the same way that Moses or Joshua, or even Cyrus, the unbelieving Persian, was 'saviour'. They were mere human beings, instruments of salvation and deliverance under the almighty hand of God. *This* Saviour is the ultimate Saviour: the Christ, indeed, the Lord. *This* Saviour is God himself clothed in human flesh. As Simeon stated a few days later when he saw this baby at the temple 'my eyes have seen your salvation' (2:30). Here in this human child is the salvation of God. Here in this human child the entire history of revelation, the entire process of God's unveiling of his saving character and purposes finds its fulfilment and maturation. Beyond this child and apart from this child, there is no salvation.

Simeon's faith reveals a further connection: he had been told by the Holy Spirit that he would not die until 'he had seen the Lord's Christ' (2:26). Now, having seen the baby Jesus, he says 'now dismiss your servant in peace for my eyes have seen your salvation' (2:29-30). Simeon *knows* that the Christ (the Messiah) and God's salvation are one and the same, and, as verses 31

and 32 indicate, he also knows that this salvation, as we will see later in this study, is something far more than the national/political salvation which the majority of the Jews expected the Messiah to bring.

As we read further through Luke's Gospel we find the same presentation of Jesus as Lord of all as we found in Mark, as Luke relates many of the same anecdotes from the years of Jesus' ministry. We see him exercising his Lordship (authority) over:

1. evil spirits (4:31-37; 8:26-39; 9:37-45).
2. sickness (4:38-41; 5:12-26; 8:40-48; 13:10-17; 17:11-19; 18:35-43).
3. men (5:1-11, 27ff; 9:1-6, 57-62; 10:1-17; 12:49-53; 14:25ff; 17:7-10).
4. the law (5:33-39; 6:1-11, 17-49; 11:37-54; 13:10-17; 14:1-6).
5. death (7:11-17; 8:40-56).
6. nature (8:22-25; 9:10-17).

In all of these Jesus acts and speaks with all the authority and power of God. He assumes that he has the right to command obedience in all of these situations, and what he says comes to pass. This divine authority over everything includes, as we saw in Mark's Answer, the authority to release men from the power of Satan (Luke 13:10-16) and from the power of the curse of Genesis 3, as the prophecy read in Luke 4:16-21 indicates.

This powerful, all-embracing authority of Jesus Christ was recognized by the Roman centurion in Luke 7:1-11. He knew what authority was, and he recognized it in Jesus Christ: an authority of such a magnitude that a mere word would achieve the desired result. Jesus called this recognition of and confidence in his authority 'faith', and commended the centurion for it.

To such faith he calls us.

THE LIGHT FOR THE GENTILES / LIFTER OF THE OPPRESSED / FRIEND OF SINNERS

This record of the Centurion's faith brings us in touch with a key theme in Luke's report: that Jesus is 'a light for revelation to the Gentiles' (2:32). This was anticipated by Zechariah when he said 'to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death' (1:79), mentioned by the angels 'on earth peace to men' (2:14), rejoiced in by Simeon 'my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people' (2:30,31), and proclaimed by John the Baptist 'And all mankind will see God's salvation' (3:6).

Jesus is not interested in 'the righteous' (5:32). In embracing the Gentiles Jesus embraces all: all who are the under-dogs, the despised, the victimised, the outcast. All who did not fit into the acceptable mould into which 'religious' people demanded they fit - all these felt the love of Jesus' embrace. In his first recorded public speech he referred to this aspect of his mission:

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight to the blind.
to release the oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." (4:18,19)

To those who seemed least to enjoy God's favour or blessing Jesus came with his message of compassion. To those who seemed most to be labouring under the effects of the curse of Genesis 3 he came with his loving, liberating touch. When John the Baptist sent messengers inquiring about his identity Jesus replied: 'Go back and report to John what you have heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor' (7:22). He then went on to say 'Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me' (7:23).

So all-embracing is his love that it gives offence, and he knows it, but he will not allow the cold, hard hearts of the religious elite to curb his compassion. **Consider:**

- He touches the leper (5:13).
- He calls a despised tax-collector to be his disciple (5:27).
- He eats and drinks with "tax collectors and sinners" (5:30;15:1-2).
- He esteems human need more important than religious rules (6:1-11;13:10-17;14:1-5).
- He commands love and mercy towards enemies (6:27-36).
- He treats a widow with compassion (7:11-16).
- He is known as a friend of tax collectors and "sinners" (7:34).

- He recognizes and accepts an expression of love from a sinful woman (7:36-50).
- He makes a despised Samaritan the hero in his story about loving (10:25-37).
- He weeps over the hard-heartedness of Jerusalem (13:34-35).
- He tells parables in which the poor are invited to parties (14:12-23).
- He focus on the individual in need (15:1-7).
- His compassion is not negated by rebellion and wrong living (15:11-32).
- He commends the faith of a Samaritan leper (17:11-19).
- He teaches forgiveness for sinners who trust in the mercy of God (18:9-14).
- He has time for those thought insignificant (18:15-17).
- He makes a point of spending time with the despised and rejected (19:1-10).
- He values the quality rather than quantity (21:1-4).

In all of this Luke portrays the love of God for the whole world in the attitude, words, and actions of Jesus Christ. It is a love that goes beyond friends to enemies; it is a love that reaches out to those who have no significance or recognition in the eyes of either the world or organized religion.

It is *this* Jesus, who thus redefines the mission of God to the lost and suffering world, whom Luke commends to us a Jesus unbounded and unfettered by the traditions, perceptions and expectations of the religious norm. Light in the darkness. Acceptance of the rejected. Love for the despised. Welcome for the outcast. This is Luke's Jesus.

THE GOAL AND FULFILMENT OF GOD'S SELF-REVELATION

Although Jesus, standing in stark contrast to the rigid exclusiveness of his religious contemporaries, redefines the love of God to embrace the despised and the outcast, this is not an entirely new thing.

Jesus does this in fulfilment of prophecy.

When he stood in the synagogue at Nazareth (4:16-21) and outlined his mission as indicated above he did it by reading from Isaiah 61:1,2. When he gave his response to John the Baptist's question (7:18-35), he did so with reference to Isaiah 29:18,19; 35:5,6; 61:1,2; and Malachi 3:1.

Rather than contradict God's prior self-revelation Jesus completes it, bringing it to its consummation. He told his disciples privately:

'Blessed are the eyes that see what you see. For I tell you that many prophets and kings wanted to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it' (10:23,24).

Just prior to this statement Jesus had said: 'No one knows who the Son is except the Father, and no one knows who the Father is except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him' (10:22). As we learn from the other Gospel writers, only those who really see Jesus actually know God the Father. Here, in Jesus, God is revealed. If we do not see him here, then we do not really see him at all. Here all of true prophecy finds its goal: the revelation of the knowledge of God. It is this climax, this end, this absolute and ultimate revelation to which all the previous revelation points with anticipation: that the Son, Jesus, reveals the Father, completely. Beyond Jesus there is no further revelation.

[For further study: read 1 Peter 1:10-12; Hebrews 11:15-16,39-40; Colossians 1:25-2:3. Also be sure to read the two studies on this website titled 'John's Answer'.]

Not only does prophecy reach its fulfilment in Christ's revelation of the Father in his life and ministry, it also finds its ultimate validation in Christ's death and resurrection. Here Jesus willingly submits himself to seemingly unimportant and unnecessary details simply because 'it is written'. All that happened from his entry into Jerusalem (19:28-44, compare Matthew 21:1-11, and read Psalm 118:26; Isaiah 29:3,4; 56:7; Jeremiah 7:11; Zechariah 9:9), through to the rigours of the arrest, trial and crucifixion (22:37; 23:30; 24:25-27,32,44-47; read Psalm 22; Isaiah 53:12; Hosea 10:8), happened in fulfilment of the Old Testament scriptures.

But this fulfilment of the minute details of prophecy fades into relative insignificance as Jesus fulfils in his death and resurrection the big picture placarded prophetically in the history and religion of Israel.

The historic exodus of Israel from Egypt anticipates on a mega scale the redemption/salvation secured by the death/resurrection of Jesus Christ. This was the topic of conversation between Jesus and Moses and Elijah on the Mount of Transfiguration (Luke 9:31, where 'departure' translates the Greek *exodos*). There on that mountain the voice of God the Father came from the cloud 'This is my son, whom I have chosen; listen to him' (9:35) and Moses and Elijah disappeared. The meaning is clear: all the Law

(represented by Moses) and the prophets (represented by Elijah) find their fulfilment in Jesus, God's Son. They find their meaning and purpose and goal in him (24:25-27,44-47). Now that he has come their purpose has been completed. Listen now to him.

Also in Luke 9 we find that Jesus begins to draw the attention of his disciples to his impending death:

9:22 'The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.'
9:44 'The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men.'
17:25 'But first he must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation.'
18:31,32 'We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written by the prophets about the son of Man will be fulfilled. He will be handed over to the Gentiles. They will mock him, insult him, spit on him, flog him and kill him.'
22:22 'The Son of Man will go as it has been decreed, but woe to that man who betrays him.'
22:37 ' ... and I tell you that this must be fulfilled in me. Yes, what is written about me is reaching its fulfilment.'
24:6,7 'Remember how he told you ... "The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, be crucified and on the third day be raised again." '

Perhaps the two most poignant of Jesus' references to his death in fulfilment of prophecy are these:

[1] Luke 13:33: ' ... I must keep going today and tomorrow and the next day - for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem!' He then anticipates his rejection in Jerusalem:

'O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!'

Here we have in Jesus' own words what John described with 'he came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him' (John 1:11). Here the long-standing plan of God for the salvation of the world through the sin-bearing death of his Son hits the road in the heart of Jesus. Misunderstood, despised, rejected, by those he came to save. Love beyond description. Amazing grace.

[2] Luke 22:15: 'I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfilment in the kingdom of God.' Again Jesus anticipates his death, but here it is in the presence of those who (with one exception) love him.

Here he sees his death not in terms of his rejection, but in terms of what it will accomplish for those who believe in him. 'I have eagerly desired ... ' Here at this final predictive Passover meal he gives instruction on the reality it portrays - the substitutionary death, the blood which seals the new covenant (22:17-22). Here at this final Passover meal the true meaning and significance of every Old Testament sacrifice is revealed: Jesus Christ, sacrificed for us. After this there is no more sacrifice; after this there is no further Passover. In the death of Jesus the reality has come, the shadow is rendered redundant (Colossians 2:17; Hebrews 9 & 10). To Jesus, though he shrunk in agony from the shame and suffering of the cross, that same cross was yet anticipated with eagerness for in it the divine purpose was achieved (Hebrews 12:2).

[In God's grand economy, the *history* of Israel finds its culmination in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ: it was this it portrayed, it was this it anticipated. In God's eternal plan of salvation, the *religion* of Israel finds its significance and true meaning and power in the person, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ: without his ultimate priesthood and his ultimate sacrifice it is just another religion. In God's sovereign purpose, the *nation* of Israel fulfils its destiny, its purpose, in the incarnation of the Son of God: Jesus Christ, the one true Israelite, in whom the true God is glorified, in whom true man is identified.

Because of Jesus Christ, the Passover meal is no longer an anticipation, a looking forward to a long expected fulfilment. Now, in the new perspective given to it by Jesus Christ, it can only be a looking back, a remembering. The Christ of prophecy has come. He has given his body as a sacrifice for our sins, and by that death has established the new covenant which had also been long expected (Jeremiah 31:31; Ezekiel 34:25;36:24-32; 37:26; Hosea 2:18-23; Hebrews 8:1-13; 12:24). When Jesus Christ cried out 'It is finished' (John 19:30) he was not speaking in a superficial way referring to his life or his suffering being ended; his reference was to something immeasurably greater. The word he used was '*tetelestai*' from the Greek *teleo*, which means to bring to completion, to carry out into full operation, to bring something to its appointed goal. Here in the cross/resurrection event Jesus

Christ completes the saving plan and purpose of God. Here all the prophecies contained in the history, religion and nation of Israel are brought to fulfilment. Here is the climax, the reaching of the appointed goal, the end. Beyond this cross/resurrection event they have no purpose. (The word '*tetelestai*' is in the perfect tense, which indicates that what has been done remains done: *it is finished, and it stays finished, God's eternal purposes have been brought to completion, and they stay completed.*)]

So, Jesus here in Luke 22:15,16 says: 'I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you ... I will not eat it again until it finds fulfilment in the kingdom of God.' Here he stands on the eve of the most important day in earth's history. Here he stands knowing that tomorrow the eternal plan of the triune God for our salvation will be achieved in time and space. Here he stands about to accomplish that to which he has been committed from before the beginning of time (Hebrews 10:7; Revelation 13:8). Little did the disciples realise the intensity of Christ's desire to eat this, the *last* predictive Passover. Even less did they realise that tomorrow the *one real Passover*, of which all other were mere shadows, would occur. As he said a little while later: '*... what is written about me is reaching its fulfilment* [Greek: *telos* = consummation, perfect discharge, realisation]' (Luke 22:37).

JESUS CHRIST - THE SON OF MAN

The 'Son of Man' title is one that puzzles many. It is not, as a superficial understanding would assume, merely a reference to Christ's humanness. It refers back to Daniel 7:13,14 where Daniel recorded his vision of a glorious person who 'was given authority, glory and sovereign power' by God, and whom 'all peoples, nations and men of every language worshipped' and whose 'dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.' He is described as 'one like a son of man'. A similar but even more powerful vision is recorded by John in Revelation 1:12-18, also described as 'like a son of man', but also obviously identified as Jesus Christ, because he is 'the Living One' who said 'I was dead and behold I am alive for ever and ever'.

Luke records Jesus' use of this title in a way that maintains this combination of the human and the glorious, as well as incorporating the element of suffering alluded to in the Revelation vision.

Son of Man - a reference to Christ's humanness.

In Luke 7:34 Jesus refers to himself as the Son of Man who 'came eating and drinking'. He thus identifies himself as one of the crowd, indistinguishable, in some ways, from other men. So closely did he identify with the average human being that the religious elite even called him 'a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and "sinners".' It was his obvious, unquestionable humanness that made his absolute, exclusive claims about himself so repulsive to the scribes and the Pharisees, as John recorded: 'We are ... stoning you ... for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God' (John 10:33).

Not only did Jesus, the Son of Man, identify with our humanness, he also identified with the majority of earth's citizens in their poverty: 'Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head' (Luke 9:58). This deliberate identification with us in our material poverty was an essential element of his mission on earth.

As Hebrews records:

'it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering' (2:10)
and 'Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity ... ' (2:14)
'because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted' (2:18);
'for we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are - yet was without sin' (4:15).

These verses from Hebrews teach that for Jesus Christ to be qualified to act as our substitute in the presence of God he had to be perfected by exposure to the same kinds of suffering (testing, temptation) as we are, otherwise his taking our place would be meaningless. He could only be our perfect substitute if he went through what we go through. So, the Son of Man shared our humanity. Incognito. Hidden among the masses of the poor.

The Son of Man - a reference to his substitutionary death

Jesus said: 'The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life' (Luke 9:22).

'The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men' (Luke 9:44).

'This is a wicked generation. It asks for a miraculous sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah. For as Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites, so also will the Son of Man be to this generation' (Luke 11:29,30).

'First he (the Son of Man) must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation' (Luke 17:25).

'We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. He will mock him, insult him, spit on him, flog him and kill him. On the third day he will rise again' (Luke 18:31-33).

'The Son of Man will go as it has been decreed, but woe to that man who betrays him ... Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?' (Luke 22:22,48).

And the angels said:

'Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: "The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, be crucified and on the third day be raised again." ' (Luke 24:7).

In these verses we learn that it is God's decreed purpose that the Son of Man suffer and be killed. It is a divine necessity. It is something that *has* to happen. The one who identified with us in our humanness here identifies with us in our subjection to the curse and condemnation of sin. He takes our place. He bears our sin. He shoulders in his own body the judgement, the punishment due to us. He, the Son of Man, is the sin-bearer. We would all do well here to read again Isaiah 52:13-53:12, where this role of the 'man of sorrows' is passionately portrayed.

The Son of Man - the Lord of glory.

Yet that is not all. As in the visions of Daniel and John, the Son of Man is also a figure of power and glory. Consider the words of Jesus:

'The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath' (Luke 6:5). He here claims for himself divine authority to interpret the significance of the Sabbath laws.

' ... the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels' (Luke 9:26).'

' ... the Son of Man will also acknowledge him before the angels of God' (Luke 12:8).

'You must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him' (Luke 12:40).

'For the Son of Man in his day will be like the lightning, which flashes and lights up the sky from one end to the other' (Luke 17:24, read 17:20-37).

' ... when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?' (Luke 18:8).

'At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. ... pray ... that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man' (Luke 21:27,36; read 21:25-36).

'But from now on, the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the mighty God' (Luke 22:69).

These verses give to the Son of Man an identity far removed from the poor, rejected, suffering, dying human described earlier. Yet it is the same person. That human was also the Lord of glory, the One who comes bringing blinding and inescapable judgement on the inhabitants of earth, the One who sits at the right hand of the Father, assuming his rightful place of authority and power, the One who holds the fate of us all in his hands. The incognito is here seen and known world wide. The one rejected by men is here exalted by the Father and all the holy angels. The one who suffered the taunts and mockery of men is here feared by those same men.

It is *this* glorious Son of Man whom we shall see and whom we shall honour when he returns. At that day his glory will fill the earth as his glory filled the temple in Isaiah's vision (Isaiah 6). Yet we who are united to him by faith will not shrink from him in fear, for we know that, behind the glory, indeed as part of his glory, the Son of Man has nail prints in his hands.

Lukes Answer 2

WHO IS JESUS?

© Rosemary Bardsley 2002

STUDY SIX: LUKE'S ANSWER (PART TWO)

SUMMARY:

- The first sermon Acts 2:14-41
- The second sermon Acts 3:11-26
- Peter's message to the Sanhedrin Acts 4:8-12
- The "good news" Acts 5:42
- Stephen's speech Acts 7
- The conversion of Saul Acts 9, 22 & 26
- Jesus in Paul's preaching Acts 13-28
- Summing up the evidence

We have seen that the primary focus of the Gospel writers is on the **person** of Jesus Christ. The purpose of his teaching and miracles, the central issue of his debates with the Jews, and the demonstration of his great compassion, is to convince us of his true identity and point out to us our appropriate response to him. It is clear from these gospels that unless we see and understand who Jesus is, and acknowledge him to be who he claims to be, we can have no expectation of what the Bible calls 'life', no part in salvation, for 'life' and salvation are indissolubly linked with Jesus Christ.

How then did the apostles preach and teach about Jesus Christ? In what terms did they identify him? How did they phrase their messages and their challenges to respond to him? When we read the book of Acts, Luke's record of the first decades of the church, we find the answer to these questions.

The first sermon: Acts 2:14-41

Peter's sermon, after identifying the unusual phenomena associated with the coming of the Holy Spirit as the fulfilment of the prophecy of Joel, makes the following points about Jesus:

[1] He was 'accredited by God' by the miracles he did (22).

[2] His resurrection from the dead identifies him as the 'Holy One' of Psalm 16:8-11 (24- 32).

[When here in Acts 2:24-32 (like Paul in 13:35) Peter calls Jesus 'your Holy One' they both link this identification to Psalm 16:8-11, where the resurrection of God's 'Holy One' is predicted. The fact that Jesus was raised from death to everlasting life confirms the fact that he is indeed the Holy One of the Psalm. By the resurrection all of his claims to equality and identification with God are validated and vindicated. Had he made those claims, without having the right to make those claims - just a man assuming the role and rights of God - no resurrection would have taken place.]

[3] Jesus has been raised up by God and seated at God's right hand, the position of power and authority (33-36).

[4] From this position Jesus has 'poured out' the promised Holy Spirit (33).

[5] Psalm 110:1 is quoted, where David states 'The Lord said to my Lord' (34).

[6] The conclusion of all this is 'Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ' (36).

Let us be careful to notice that, while there is mention of the death of Jesus, it is not in terms of its substitutionary, sin-bearing purpose and effect, but in terms of the enormity of the Jew's error - that they have crucified the One who is their Lord. **Peter identifies Jesus as the Holy One, the Lord, the Christ; the One who now sits in the position of authority and power at the right hand of God the Father.**

In response to this presentation of the true identity of Jesus Christ, and with the evidence of it blazed before their eyes with the visible and audible manifestations of the Spirit of Joel's prophecy, Peter's hearers are 'cut to the heart'. These Jews now see what they could not see before. They now realise that Jesus was in fact the One he claimed to be. Gripped by this realisation they have only one question: brothers, what shall we do? (37)

If Jesus is who he claimed to be, and if we now understand it, if we now see it - that this man Jesus is the Holy One, the Lord, to whom all authority and power is given - if this is true, what can we do? - we who have denied and rejected him? Confronted by the Lord, **seeing** him whom no one can see and yet live, what can anyone do?

To this one question there is but one answer: repent (38). Change your mind, turn to God. Affirm that he is who he is, and that it is he, not you, who has the power and the authority to run your life. Reverse the rebellion of Genesis 3 and return to God. But this repenting, this turning to God is given a specific focus. It is evidenced by being baptised 'in the name of Jesus Christ'. Interestingly the original text here translates 'upon the name of Jesus Christ.' **The repentance and the baptism to which Peter calls his hearers rests on their confession of the name of Jesus Christ - that is on their acknowledgement, their real, practical belief, that he is who he claimed to be.** Their repentance and baptism is not simply towards 'God': it is towards and in the name of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Peter here commands that his hearers publicly confess and demonstrate that they now believe that Jesus Christ is God - in whose presence repentance is the only appropriate response, and whose name they now acknowledge by baptism. In the act of baptism spoken of here by Peter three thousand people demonstrated that they now believed that Jesus was both Lord and Christ. This was no easy step. Baptism was one thing, but baptism in the name of Jesus Christ was another. **By submitting to *this* baptism they signify that they have finished with their opinion that Jesus was a mere man claiming equality with God, for which claim they had crucified him. By submitting to *this* baptism they confess that his claim was legitimate, that he is indeed the Son of God in the fullest, ultimate sense.**

To the Jews participating in this baptism in the name of Jesus Christ, and to all the unnumbered onlookers, this was radical in the extreme. At this point the *symbolism* of baptism - that in this act we indicate our dying and rising again with Christ - has not been taught. That comes later in the ministry of the apostles. Here these three thousand Jews proclaim: we are repenting - we are changing our minds about Jesus of Nazareth, we hereby acknowledge and recognize him as our Lord and our God. Then on the basis of this repenting, this radical change in belief, expressed in the public confession of baptism, they are promised the forgiveness of sin and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (verse 38).

The second sermon: Acts 3:11-26

Again reminding the Jews of the crucifixion Peter identifies Jesus as

1. glorified (verse 13),
2. God's servant (verse 13),
3. the Holy and Righteous one (verse 14),
4. the author of life (verse 15),
5. raised from death by God (verse 15),
6. the Christ (verse 18),
7. in heaven (verse 21),
8. the prophet like Moses - failure to acknowledge him results in severance from God's people (22,23),
9. the promised descendant of Abraham through whom all peoples of the earth will be blessed (25), and
10. God's servant (NIV & GNB) or Son (KJV) (26) [The Greek *paida* means either].

What does it mean that God has glorified Jesus? Peter takes care to identify the God of whom he is speaking as the God of the Old Testament - 'the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers'. This is the God whose glory filled the temple (Isaiah 6) and who stated 'I will not give my glory to another' (Isaiah 42:8; also see 48:11). Yet here Peter says that this God has glorified his servant Jesus. We are reminded here of what we have understood from the Gospel of John (1:14; 17:1-5) and from Mark's account of the transfiguration (9:1-13). The glory of God was present and observable in Jesus Christ. Paul speaks of this (2 Corinthians 4:6); the letter to the Hebrews tells us of it (Hebrews 1:3). By the resurrection and ascension God has confirmed all that Jesus claimed about himself, and the healing miracle of Acts 3, done in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, confirms that this same Jesus has returned to his eternal glory and sits beside his Father in the position of all honour and glory.

In calling Jesus 'the Holy and Righteous One' Peter clearly identifies him with the God of the Old Testament. 'The Holy One of Israel' is one of the names of God favoured by the prophet Isaiah. He often uses it when rebuking his hearers for their rejection of God. (Isaiah 1:4; 5:24; 31:1; 45:11), but more significantly he uses this name in the context of salvation and rejoicing (Isaiah

12:6; 29:19; 41:14,16; 43:3,14; 47:4; 48:17; 49:7). In addition to this, God is identified as the 'Holy One' in that magnificent passage in Isaiah 40:21-31, where he challenges 'to whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?' (verse 25).

The listening Jews know without a doubt that the Holy One is God, and that he alone is the creator, the giver of life, and he alone is the Redeemer. When Peter here calls Jesus 'the Holy One' he is making the statement that in rejecting Jesus of Nazareth his hearers had rejected the Holy One; in rejecting Jesus they had followed in the footsteps of their fathers and rejected their God.

They had failed to listen to Jesus, they had refused to accept his claims. Peter here reminds them that Moses warned them of the seriousness of rejecting the teaching of the 'prophet like me'. Peter here tells them that if they do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as God - which was the primary impact of his teaching - then by that refusal they seal their own fate, they identify their own position - outside of the people of God.

To further confirm the true identity of Jesus Christ and to further convict his hearers of the enormity of their refusal to acknowledge him, Peter indicates that Jesus is the promised seed of Abraham through whom all peoples of the earth will be blessed. He points out that God sent Jesus *first* to the Jews. The clear inference is that in rejecting Jesus Christ the Jews are refusing the one and only God-given way of blessing.

Let us take note in passing that the concept of repentance - 'by turning each of you from your wicked ways' (26) - is again associated with a true recognition of Jesus Christ. Further, let us note that this repentance is considered by Peter as the promised blessing brought by the seed of Abraham.

Peter's message to the Sanhedrin: Acts 4:8-12

In addition to referring to the resurrection of Jesus Christ, which is itself a declaration of his deity, Peter makes this significant statement:

'Salvation is found in no-one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.' (12).

These words clearly identify Jesus as the one and only source of salvation. But in doing this they in fact do far more, for to the Old Testament mind, God alone is the Saviour (2 Samuel 22:3; Psalm 106:21; Isaiah 43:3,11; 45:15,21; 49:26; 60:16; Jeremiah 14:8; Hosea 13:4), and in him alone is salvation found (Psalm 3:8; 25:5; 27:1,9; 35:9; 37:39; 42:5; 62:1,7; 67:19,20; 95:1; 118:14; Isaiah 12:2). Let us note particularly the exclusive statement made by God in Isaiah: 'I, even I, am the LORD, and apart from me there is no saviour' (43:11). Yet here in Acts 4:12 Peter, standing in a life threatening situation, where discretion would have been in order, does not hesitate to identify Jesus Christ as the one and only source of salvation. The inference of Peter's words is startlingly clear. By his statement Peter affirms the deity of Christ.

The "good news": Acts 5:42

Acts 5:42 makes a simple but instructive statement:

'Day after day ... they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.'

Modern evangelicalism has focused the good news, the "gospel", on the cross. But here, in the immediate post-natal period of the gospel, it focuses on Christ himself. The one significant thing that the apostles are intent on making known is that Jesus is the Christ. This reflects the focus of Mark in his opening verse: 'The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God' (Mark 1:1). In this verse Mark uses the two terms 'Christ' and 'the Son of God' synonymously. The 'Christ' is 'the Son of God.' This concept is also contained in Peter's answer to Jesus' question: 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God' (Matthew 16:16), and Martha's confession of faith in John 11:27: 'I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world.'

The primary fact of the good news is that God has come to us in the person of his Son. Why is this good news? Because before his coming mankind, including the Jews, lived in ignorance of God. In blind darkness we groped after God and didn't find him, couldn't know him. In the person of his Son he stands in our midst. When we see who this man Jesus really is, the darkness is dispersed, the blindness is ripped away. When we see him we see God. When we know him, we know God (John 14:7-9). This is the primary and central focus of the good news.

[This summarization of the gospel is also seen in Acts 8:5 and 12.]

Stephen's speech: Acts 7

Most of Stephen's speech is given to reminding the Jews of their consistent rejection of God's servants throughout their history. He then calls Jesus 'the Righteous One' (as Peter did in Acts 3), and accuses the Jews of his murder (52). Most Old Testament references to 'the righteous' concern God's faithful people. Two point to the expected Messiah. In Isaiah 53:11 God speaks of 'my righteous servant', and in Jeremiah 23:5 of 'a righteous branch' that he will raise up in the line of David. This righteous branch of David is further identified as 'a King' (Jeremiah 23:5); following this a very definite statement is made about him: 'This is the name by which he will be called: The LORD Our Righteousness' (23:6b).

As Peter reminds us in 1 Peter 1:10 the old prophets didn't understand the full significance of their messages. Jesus also mentioned this in Matthew 13:16,17. Although to our post-incarnation understanding this passage in Jeremiah clearly speaks of the incarnation, so unexpected was the concept of God coming to earth as a man that it would not have entered their minds to even think of it. When Stephen here identifies Jesus of Nazareth whom they crucified as 'the Righteous One' the Jews are completely stirred up, not with conviction and remorse at having killed the one who is actually their Lord, but with fury that Stephen should so identify Jesus as the Righteous One (7:54). This response to Stephen's statement about Jesus' identity parallels their response to the statements Jesus made about himself which we looked at in John's Gospel.

Rather than back off and save his life Stephen pushes the point further. Seeing a vision of the ascended Christ he states:

'Look, I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.' (Acts 7:56).

As Peter has done in Acts 2:33,34 and 5:31 Stephen states that Jesus is at the right hand of God. This is the position of power and authority. This is the position of exaltation. This is the position to which no mere man can ascend. This is the position of equality.

The Jews are totally aware, as they were with Jesus' own claims, of the implications of this statement. Their religious fury overtakes them. Their zeal for their God motivates them. In seeking to protect his honour, which is to their minds undermined and placed in jeopardy by Stephen's words, they stone Stephen to death. **The radical violence of their reaction reflects the radical significance of Stephen's statement.**

The conversion of Saul: Acts 9, 22 & 26

Approving the radical action of these Jews is Saul. Zealous for the name of the Lord, thoroughly trained in the Jewish law, convinced of the blasphemy of statements and claims being made concerning the deity of Jesus of Nazareth, Saul undertook a systematic persecution of those who believed in Jesus Christ. It does not occur to him that those statements and claims could possibly be right.

What went through his mind when the light from heaven surrounded and blinded him on the Damascus road? His knowledge of the Old Testament scriptures would tell him that in this blazing brilliance he was in the presence of the Lord. Moses had seen the Lord's glory, and the brilliance of it remained reflected in his face (Exodus 34); the tabernacle was so filled with God's glory that no-one could enter it (Exodus 40:34,35); similarly the glory of the Lord filled the temple (1 Kings 8:10,11); Ezekiel saw a brilliant figure surrounded by radiant light, and stated 'this was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord' (Ezekiel 1:26-28).

Saul, the one so vehemently opposed to all who claim that Jesus is the Son of God, is here in this glorious, radiant brilliance, confronted by God. He knows this. When the voice speaks he knows it is the glorious Lord of the Old Testament speaking. And in those words spoken by that Lord '*why do you persecute me?*' is the first ominous indication of what is about to be revealed.

Fearfully, disbelieving the implication, he asks: **'Who are you, Lord?'**

The dreaded answer comes: *I am Jesus ...*

I am Jesus.

The glorious Lord of the Old Testament, the One who had revealed himself to Moses, to the temple priests, to Isaiah, to Ezekiel, in indescribable radiance, speaks from the brilliant heavenly light on the Damascus road, and says: I am Jesus.

I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.

There is nothing Saul can say. All of his convictions and arguments have been wiped out. All of his zeal has been proved misdirected. Nothing remains but for him to do a complete about face and submit to the one he now knows is his Lord. This change, this repentance, is the only viable course of action. 'What shall I do, Lord?' he asked (Acts 22:10). As Ananias explained to him later 'The God of your fathers has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth. You will be his witness to all men of what you have seen and heard' (22:14,15). Saul 'was not disobedient to the vision from heaven' (26:19); he immediately began 'to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God' (Acts 9:20), and 'baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ' (9:22).

[Here in this conversion of Saul we see the true significance of repentance. **Repentance has primarily to do with our belief about who God is. The Son of God, Jesus Christ, confronts us and commands us to believe in him. This command requires us to abandon our own concepts of who God is and see that he, Jesus Christ, is the Lord.** He tells us, as we saw in the Gospel of John, that unless we honour him as God we are actually not honouring God; that only in seeing him and knowing him do we actually see and know God. Here on the Damascus road Saul repented. He let go of his prior understanding of who God is and brought his mind into submission to Christ. The radical change that Saul experienced was not primarily concerned with turning from sins, but with coming to and acknowledging the true God, and in that acknowledgement turning from the one foundational sin of rejecting the one, true God. The essential focus of this change was the identity of Jesus Christ. It is only subsequent to this change, this conversion, that the forgiveness of Saul's sins is mentioned (Acts 22:16). It is evident that this forgiveness is not the *purpose or motivating cause* of Saul's repentance, but its automatic consequence and effect. He repented because Jesus Christ is the Son of God, the Lord. He is given forgiveness of sins only on the basis of this repentance. There can be no forgiveness unless the prior radical change of mind has occurred. (Note that this priority is one of necessity, not of time; the act of repentance/belief precedes forgiveness of theological necessity; in terms of *time* they are simultaneous).

This is demonstrated in Jesus' commission to Saul: 'I am sending you to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me' (Acts 26:18). This change of mind, this turning, this repentance, this replacing of our god-concept (termed 'darkness' and 'the power of Satan') with the knowledge that Jesus Christ is the Lord, must first occur 'so *that*' forgiveness of sins can be granted. It is only when Christ is honoured and received as God that God promises to forgive sins.]

Jesus in Paul's preaching, Acts 13-28

[1] In Antioch in Psidia, Acts 13:16-41, Paul identifies Jesus as the promised son of David (22-23, 34), the long-expected Messiah (24-25), God's Son (33), who was crucified in fulfilment of prophecy (26-29), raised from death by God (30-37), and by that resurrection identified as the 'Holy One' (35-37). Paul told his hearers that everyone who believes in Jesus receives the forgiveness of sins, that is they are legally acquitted (justified) (38,39), and he urges them to make sure they believe (40-41).

[2] To the Philippian jailor, Acts 16: Having witnessed the prayerful joy of Paul and Silas, and confronted by the awesome, miraculous power of God in the earthquake, the Philippian jailor asked 'Men, what must I do to be saved?' The situation is that of threatened suicide, Paul's answer is precise and direct: 'Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.' Following this clear assurance Paul further spoke the word of the Lord. Summing up what happened to the jailor and his household Luke writes: 'the whole family was filled with joy, because they had come to believe in God.' Let us note: not because they had received salvation, not because they had received forgiveness of sins, but because, in believing in Jesus, they had come to believe in God. In knowing God through his Son Jesus they have fullness of joy.

[3] In Thessalonica, Acts 17, Paul explained and proved from the Scriptures that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead, and affirmed that the Jesus he proclaimed was the Christ.

[4] In Athens, Acts 17, Paul identified the Athenians' 'unknown god' as the Creator of all, on whom all men are dependent for life. Because of this - because we are all God's 'offspring' - Paul said that it is unthinkable that God can be represented by a man-made image. This sin of idolatry, of worshipping false gods, God 'overlooked' in the past, but now that he has appointed as judge a man whom he has raised from the dead, all men everywhere are commanded to repent.

[The significance of this statement is lost unless we remember that the resurrection of Jesus Christ affirms his deity. Here were the Athenians with all of their gods; Paul told them that the time when God overlooks such ignorance has come to an end because God has now appointed one man by whom he will judge the world. By this man and his claims, which were validated by the resurrection, the whole world, and its gods, stands judged and condemned. By his identification of the one true God all other gods and their worship are proved false.]

[5] In Corinth, Acts 18, Paul 'devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ.'

[Hidden away among Luke's reports of Paul's ministry is this comment about Apollos: 'he vigorously refuted the Jews in public debate, proving from the scriptures that Jesus was the Christ.' (18:28)]

[6] In Ephesus, Acts 19 & 20, Paul argued persuasively about the kingdom of God. As a result of his preaching and confrontation with evil in the name of the Lord Jesus, that name was held in high honour and people who believed in Jesus Christ abandoned their practice of sorcery and the worship of images. Paul 'declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.' (These are not two different actions, but two ways of expressing the same action.) He summarized his work as an apostle as 'testifying to the gospel of God's grace', 'preaching the kingdom' and proclaiming 'the whole will of God.'

[7] In explaining his ministry to Agrippa, Acts 26, Paul says 'I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds.' He maintained that he was saying only what Moses and the prophets had said 'that Christ would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would proclaim light to his own people and to the Gentiles.'

[8] In Rome, Acts 28, Paul 'explained and declared to them the kingdom of God and tried to convince them about Jesus from the Law of Moses and from the prophets.' For two years he 'preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ.'

Summing up the above evidence:

On the basis of the resurrection of Jesus, the law of Moses, and the prophets, Paul, like Peter, sought to convince his hearers about the true identity of Jesus Christ. In doing so he challenged them to repent: that is, change their allegiance and come under the authority of the kingdom of God. To those who so repented and acknowledged Christ as the Divine King forgiveness of sin was granted by the grace of God.

While the **effect** of the cross is not absent - the forgiveness of which Paul spoke can only come from the cross - it is not the focus of Paul's preaching. One can assume with reasonable certainty that Paul in his on-going teaching explained the significance of the cross, but such explanations are not recorded as the thrust of his evangelism. Focus on the cross comes later, in his letters to those who are already believers in Christ. To those letters we will now turn, asking the question 'What significance does the true identity of Jesus hold in Paul's letters to those who already believe in him?'

Pauls Answer

WHO IS JESUS?

© Copyright Rosemary Bardsley 2002

STUDY SEVEN: PAUL'S ANSWER

Paul's introductions to his letters

The following table identifies the titles Paul gives to Jesus in his introductory comments in his letters.

'Christ Jesus' or 'Jesus Christ'	Romans 1:1,6; 1 Corinthians 1:1,2; 2 Corinthians 1:1; Galatians 1:1; Ephesians 1:1; Philippians 1:1; Colossians 1:1; 1 Timothy 1:1; 2 Timothy 1:1; Titus 1:1; Philemon 1.
God's 'Son'	Romans 1:2
The Son of God	Romans 1:4
Jesus Christ our Lord	Romans 1:4
The Lord Jesus Christ	Romans 1:7; 1 Corinthians 1:2,3; 2 Corinthians 1:2; Galatians 1:3; Ephesians 1:2; Philippians 1:2; 1 Thessalonians 1:1; 2 Thessalonians 1:2; Philemon 3.
Their Lord and ours	1 Corinthians 1:2
Christ	Colossians 1:2
Christ Jesus our hope	1 Timothy 1:1
Christ Jesus our Lord	1 Timothy 1:2; 2 Timothy 1:2
Christ Jesus our Saviour	Titus 1:4

In contrast to the overwhelming concentration of modern evangelicalism on Jesus as 'our Saviour', we see in the above introductory greetings that Paul identifies Jesus primarily as Lord and Christ. He is called 'Saviour' only once (Titus 1:4), while God is called 'Saviour' twice (1 Timothy 1:1 and Titus 1:3). We note that Jesus is called 'our hope' in 1 Timothy 1:1, and it is instructive that in these two instances where Paul calls Jesus 'Saviour' and 'hope' that he also refers to God as our Saviour. In this way, even as he calls Jesus 'Saviour' and 'our hope', he is identifying him as having equal standing with God.

From his introductory comments we can reasonably conclude that the identity of Jesus Christ as *Saviour* was not of primary significance in Paul's mind. Overwhelmingly his focus is on Jesus as Lord and Christ. If we consider also the content of the letters we see that what Paul finds necessary to give teaching on is how our belief in this Lord and Christ affects our relationship with God, and how it ought to affect our relationship with our fellow human beings. Having reminded his readers that the One in whom they believe is both Lord and Christ, Paul proceeds to outline the ramifications of this. Already in Jesus Christ's own teaching he has indicated that *he* is the bread of life, the light of the world, the resurrection and the life, the way, the truth and life. He has taught us that these things which we see as our salvation are not separate and distinct from him, but that they are intrinsically *in him*. The dichotomy in which we understand that we receive Jesus Christ and he gives us salvation as something distinct and separate from himself, so that our salvation is more or less the reward for believing in him, or, for believing in the effectiveness of his death on the cross, cannot hold. Rather, when we receive Jesus Christ we are in that act, receiving salvation in its most absolute and complete sense, whether we realize it or not.

Let us look now at the letters of Paul and consider his understanding of the person of Jesus Christ and the relationship of the person of Jesus Christ to our salvation.

The Letter to the Romans

Having taken more than his usual time to reaffirm the identity of Jesus Christ in his introduction to this letter Paul expresses his desire to visit the Roman Christians, then proceeds with two and a half chapters' teaching on our sinfulness before launching into a five and a half chapter description of the effect of the gospel. We may take note of the following statements:

[1] '... in preaching the Gospel of his Son' (1:9). Paul here identifies the content, focus and source of the Gospel: God's Son. He does not specify either the death of Christ or the salvation achieved by Christ, but simply 'his Son'.

[2] 'This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe' (3:22) and 'so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus' (3:26b). In both of these we see that the focus of faith is Jesus. Those who have faith in Jesus Christ are justified, accepted as righteous.

[3] 'The words 'it was credited to him' were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness - for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.' (4:23,24). Here the focus of faith is neither Christ nor his cross-work, but God the Father.

[4] 'God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood.' (3:25a). This is one of the few statements in the Scripture where the death or cross or blood of Christ is stated as the object of faith.

In addition to the above, 'faith' is referred to by itself without any object or focus, in the following:

- 1:8: ... your faith is being reported
- 1:12 ... encouraged by each other's faith
- 1:17 ... a righteousness that is by faith from first to last
- 1:18 ... the righteous shall live by faith
- 3:27 ... on that (principle) of faith
- 3:28 ... a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law
- 3:30 ... God will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith
- 3:31 ... do we nullify the law by this faith?
- 4:5 ... his faith is credited as righteousness
- 4:9 ... Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness
- 4:13 ... through the righteousness that comes by faith
- 4:16 ... the promise comes by faith
- 5:1 ... we have been justified through faith
- 5:2 ... we have gained access by faith.

As we look at these we may be tempted to think that faith stands alone, and has value irrespective of its focus, or that we are left to ourselves to work out just who or what it is that we are supposed to believe. Does Paul clarify the issue anywhere? Yes. He does. In the next section of his letter, chapters 9 to 11, where he is addressing the question of the fate of Israel, he makes a clear statement concerning precisely what it is that we must believe. Having identified Jesus as 'Christ, who is God over all, forever praised' in 9:5, he teaches in 10:8-13:

1. We will be saved if we confess with our mouth : 'Jesus is Lord'. Here is the verbal expression of the belief that Jesus is God.
2. We will be saved if we believe in our heart that God raised Jesus from the dead. Considering that Paul has stated in 1:4 that the resurrection proves that Jesus is the Son of God, this belief that God raised Jesus from the dead, is believing that he is the divine Son.
3. It is this belief and confession that saves and justifies.
4. The Lord blesses richly all who call on him.
5. All who call on the name of the Lord will be saved.

From these we understand that faith is of no account in itself. By 'faith' Paul means what he defines here: the belief and confession that Jesus is the Lord, the Son of God; it is faith in this name, it is calling on this name, that ushers a person into salvation. Let us take good note here that salvation is not the focus of faith, but comes to us through faith. We do not believe, we do not focus our faith, in salvation (justification, righteousness, and so on): we believe and confess that Jesus is the Lord, and through that confession, through that faith, we receive not only the Lord but along with him his gift of salvation as well.

Let us note also that in the remaining chapters of the letter Paul consistently refers to the gospel in a way that focuses it on the person of Jesus Christ. Just as in 1:9 he calls God's good news 'the gospel of his Son' so here also Paul defines it as: 'the gospel of God' 15:16; 'the gospel of Christ' 15:19; 'my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ' 16:25. Just as in John 3:16 our minds subconsciously insert a reference to the saving death of Christ, so also here. We automatically redefine the gospel as

the cross-work of Jesus Christ rather than the *person* of Christ. If we read further in we Romans find that *obedience* is seen by Paul as the appropriate response to the gospel, along with faith (1:5; 6:17; 15:18; 16:26). This of necessity focuses on a person: one obeys a person, not an action. But this aspect of obedience will be dealt with in a separate study.

The first letter to the Corinthians

Let us notice first of all that Paul describes Christians as those 'who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ' (1:2), and he refers to his preaching as 'our testimony about Christ' (1:5) and 'the testimony about God' (2:1). In 1:24 Christ is called 'the power of God and the wisdom of God' and in 3:11 the only 'foundation'.

The cross of Christ comes into focus in 1:17, 18 & 23 and in 2:2. In these verses Paul states that the message of the cross is 'foolishness to those who are perishing', that the proclamation of 'Christ crucified' is 'a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to Gentiles', and that all Paul was interested in preaching was 'Jesus Christ and him crucified.' As we have seen in other 'Who is Jesus?' studies, the identification of Jesus as 'Christ' (= Greek *christos* = Hebrew Messiah), is also his identification as the 'Son of God.' To the Jews the concept of a crucified Messiah is a stumbling block. To the Gentiles (Greeks), the concept of a Son of God, or God, being crucified is foolishness. Paul states in 1:17 and 2:1-5 that he purposely refused to reduce the offensiveness of this message by clothing it with human eloquence. He told it as it was: the Christ/Messiah, the Son of God, was crucified. The offense, the foolishness, lies not in the crucifixion, but in the crucifixion of *the Christ, the Son of God*. But it is precisely the fact that it *is* the Christ who is crucified that gives the cross its power. This is taken up in chapter 15.

Here Paul spends half a verse stating 'that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures' (15:3b), then six verses identifying the witnesses to Christ's resurrection (4-9). He then spends a lengthy section (12-34) chewing over the implications of denying Christ's resurrection. If Christ has not been raised, he states, then 'our preaching is useless and so is your faith' (14), 'your faith is futile; and you are still in your sins' (17), 'we are to be pitied more than all men' (19), so 'let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die' (32). To those who deny the resurrection he says: 'come back to your senses as you ought, and stop sinning' and calls them 'ignorant of God' (34). Why such strong speech? Because, as he has pointed out in Romans 1:4, the resurrection proves that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. **To deny the resurrection of Christ is to deny his deity; to deny his deity is to render all he said invalid, nullifying all his claims about himself, and all that he promised. All that he has promised to those who believe in him depends on his being who he claimed, which in turn depends on his resurrection.**

In other words, the crucifixion means precisely nothing, if it is not followed by the resurrection. The resurrection proves that Jesus is the one he claimed to be. **The crucifixion is meaningful then only if we first understand and believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.**

The second letter to the Corinthians

Although not much doctrinal teaching is given in 2 Corinthians there are a few salient points:

[1] In 1:19 Paul identifies 'the Son of God, Jesus Christ' as the subject of his preaching.

[2] In 2:12 he calls the gospel 'the gospel of Christ'.

[3] In 2:14 & 15 Paul places side by side two interesting expressions. Instead of saying 'the gospel' he says 'the fragrance of the knowledge of God' and 'the aroma of Christ', thus implying that 'the knowledge of God' and 'Christ' are one and the same message.

[4] In 3:7-18 he teaches that the 'veil' with which Moses had to cover his face to hide the glory of God is taken away in Christ, and that now we, having seen Christ, behold and reflect the glory of the Lord. As Paul states 'whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away'. This is for Paul the surpassing glory of the gospel: that in seeing Jesus we with unveiled faces now see the Lord.

[5] This thought continues with greater clarity in 4:1-6. Here Paul points out that the 'god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God' (4); and that God has 'made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ' (6). Here the gospel is seen as the 'gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God' and, 'the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ'. For this reason what Paul preached was 'Jesus Christ as Lord' (5); it is through this preaching of Jesus Christ as Lord that God is known. The whole focus of the gospel here is God's self-revelation in his Son, Jesus Christ.

We see here in 2 Corinthians 4:1-6 that that which has been hidden, and is still hidden from those who do not know Christ, that is, the glory of God, is revealed in Jesus Christ. We are here reminded again of the words of Isaiah 40:5 'and the glory of the Lord will be revealed' and of Habakkuk 2:14: 'for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.' We are reminded also of those words of Jesus in John 17:4: 'I have brought you glory on earth by completing the

work you gave me to do'; and also of John (1:14): 'we have seen his glory ...' This is the primary and most important statement of the gospel: in seeing Jesus we see God. Without this breaking into our darkness, our blindness, our ignorance, we cannot see God, we cannot know God; nor can we receive from the hand of a God we do not know, the benefits of the second statement of the gospel, which concerns the cross.

[6] In chapter 11 Paul gives a warning not to pay any attention to those who corrupt the gospel by preaching 'a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached' (4). We know from the above that he preached Jesus Christ as Lord, in whom the glory of God is revealed. Any Jesus less than this is not the Biblical Jesus; to embrace any lesser Jesus is to embrace something that is a different gospel.

The letter to the Galatians

Paul's purpose in writing to the Galatians was to abort the corruptions of the gospel which were being taught there, namely, that it is necessary to keep the Jewish law in order to remain in a right relationship with God. Because of this his emphasis is on the completeness of the cross-work of Christ and our full assurance of salvation, based on that work. But even here, where he is fighting to maintain that by means of the substitutionary death of Christ we are justified, acquitted and removed from the curse resting on those who disobey the law, even here that death is never the focus of faith. Faith is always 'faith in Jesus Christ' (2:15,16; 3:22,26); 'faith in Christ' (2:16); or 'faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me' (2:20).

In recalling his dramatic experience of the Damascus road Paul states 'But when God ... was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles ...' In this statement we have both Paul's understanding of his conversion - God revealed his Son, and his one-word summary of his preaching content - 'him', that is God's Son.

Equally instructive is Paul's description of the Galatians' pre-conversion and post-conversion states: 'formerly ... you did not know God ... but now ... you know God' (4:8,9). For Paul the Gospel is, first and foremost, the revelation of the true God, and believing the Gospel involved a turning away from 'those who by nature are not gods' (4:8).

The letter to the Ephesians

Our usual way of viewing our salvation is to see it as something separate and apart from Jesus Christ, something that he gives to us. And indeed it is something he gives to us, but not in such a way that we can have the salvation apart from him. The fact is that when we have him, we also have salvation. It is impossible to have one without the other. Paul expresses this right through the first three chapters of Ephesians, by use of the little word 'in'. Almost every aspect of our salvation that he mentions he roots fairly and squarely 'in Christ.'

Consider:

- 1:3 we have every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms *in Christ*.
- 1:4 we were chosen *in him* before the creation of the world.
- 1:6 he has freely given us his grace *in the One he loves*,
- 1:7 *in him* we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.
- 1:11 *in him* were also chosen.
- 1:13 we were marked *in him* with the seal, the promised Holy Spirit.
- 2:6 we are seated in the heavenly realms *in Christ*.
- 2:7 God has expressed his kindness to us *in Christ Jesus*.
- 2:10 we are created *in Christ Jesus*, to do good works.
- 2:13 *in Christ Jesus* we who were far away have been brought near.
- 2:14 *he himself* is our peace.
- 2:22/3 *in him* we are being built into God's dwelling place.
- 3:6 we are sharers together in the promise *in Christ Jesus*
- 3:12 *in him* we approach God with freedom and confidence.

Everything is *in Christ*. If we recollect Christ's self-description in John's Gospel we will understand that this is the only way it can possibly be. Salvation is eternal life, and Jesus claimed repeatedly to be 'the life'. Salvation is not something Jesus gives away, distinct from himself, but rather that which is essentially part and parcel of knowing him. Did he not say in John 17:3: 'Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent'? **Knowing Jesus Christ is having eternal life: knowing Jesus is being saved**. All of the benefits of salvation, many of which are listed above, are *in Christ*. If we do not know him we are not saved.

Yet incredibly, many within the church persistently offer the world salvation apart from any true knowledge of God or his Christ. Persistently many within the church fail to identify the Jesus whom it offers to the world. Persistently many within the church assume that the world knows already who Jesus is. Persistently many assume that the world knows God, and that all the world has to do is to accept the forgiveness God offers to the world through the cross-work of Jesus.

Paul makes it quite clear here in Ephesians that such a course of approach is wrong. Salvation resides *in Christ*. Apart from the Biblical Jesus there is no salvation. Christ, not his cross, is the primary focus of Biblical faith.

The letter to the Philippians

As we read through Philippians we notice:

1. Paul describes gospel preaching as preaching 'Christ' (1:15,17,18).
2. He describes the gospel as 'the gospel of Christ' (1:27).
3. He teaches that the goal of God's action in Christ (incarnation, death, resurrection, exaltation) is that 'at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, ... and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father' (2:6-11).
4. He states what he values most is 'the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord'; and his own goal is 'to know Christ and the power of his resurrection' (3:8,10).
5. Similarly, two times he encourages his readers to 'Rejoice in the Lord' (3:1, 4:4) and describes believers as those who 'glory in Christ Jesus' (3:3).

Everything centres on the person of Jesus Christ.

The letter to the Colossians

When we come to the letter to the Colossians we enter different territory. Whereas in the other centres to which he wrote Paul had to address practical and moral issues, and, in the case of Rome, Philippi and Galatia, to correct or warn against legalistic false teaching which negated the cross-work of Jesus Christ, here in Colosse he had to address a situation where heretical teaching was not only negating the cross-work of Christ but also denying his identity. The Colossian heresy, while containing elements of Jewish legalism, taught also that one must aspire to a higher wisdom, a deeper knowledge, beyond Jesus, and progress beyond one's knowledge of Christ to further revelation. So here, as in no other letter, **Paul takes great pains to clearly identify Jesus as the one who fully and finally reveals the Father, and to show how essential an accurate belief in his true identity is for our salvation.**

Having given a brief description of what God has done for us in Christ (1:12-14) Paul then grounds this work of salvation in the person of Christ. He tells us:

[1] Christ is the image of the invisible God (1:15).

As Jesus himself told us, when we see him, we see God. The coming of Jesus means that no one need be ignorant about God ever again. No one need ever again say 'If I could see God I would believe in him.' In Jesus we see God.

[2] He is the firstborn over all creation (1:15).

There are those who stumble over this 'firstborn' concept, considering it to indicate that there was a time when Christ was not, and that therefore he is inferior to the Father and less than God. Such was the Arian controversy in the early church; and such is the contention of some modern day cults. We must understand that 'firstborn' speaks not of priority in terms of *time*, but in terms of *rank and authority*. It is all about position. Paul's statement here teaches us that Jesus Christ stands in the position of authority over all creation. (There are those today who teach that Jesus is the first thing Jehovah created, failing to realise that *firstborn* does not equal *first created*. The two words are quite distinct, the two concepts different. That which is born possesses precisely, and without reduction, the same nature or essence as its parent; that which is created has an entirely different nature or essence from its creator.)

[3] By Jesus Christ all things were created (1:16).

Paul gives us an all-encompassing list of the things created by Christ. He leaves no room for anything to exist that Christ did not create. Anything that the false teachers might suggest as something to aspire to beyond Christ is here placed firmly under the creative hand of Christ. Everything is less than Christ, dependent on him for its very existence. There is nothing beyond Christ. There is nothing bigger or better than Christ.

[4] All things were created for him (1:16).

Not only is everything dependent on Christ for its existence, but its whole purpose resides in Christ. Everything finds its fulfillment, its goal, its reason for being, in Christ. He is the one who puts meaning and significance into everything. Apart from him, everything is meaningless, everything is useless, everything has no purpose.

[5] He is before all things (1:17).

Here Paul teaches the eternity of Christ. In this again the supremacy and the deity of Christ are indicated.

[6] In him all things hold together (1:17).

Jesus Christ is the cohesive principle of the universe. As it says in Hebrews 1:3, 'he sustains all things by his powerful word'. Were he to withdraw his word everything would cease to be. We each exist in our unique molecular structure, with our personalized DNA, only because of the sustaining word of Christ. The grand cosmic laws by which innumerable universes hold together, and the intricate laws of life within, both of which are still barely understood by scientists, all depend on the word of Christ. Everything exists in the form in which it exists because of the sustaining word of Jesus Christ. Only because of this sustaining word can we depend on the stability of anything.

[7] He is the head of the body, the church (1:18).

Here Paul puts Christ in the position of authority and supremacy in the church. Far from Christians needing to reach beyond Christ for further revelation or further fullness, Christ stands at the head of the church. There is nothing above Christ. There is no authority, no power beyond Christ, no source of further inspiration or instruction. Christ is the head.

[8] He is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy (1:18).

In this Paul teaches us two things: (1) Jesus Christ is the beginning, the source or origin of the church. To him the church owes its existence, its life. (2) He is also the first to rise from the dead: the first to triumph over sin and death and Satan, and in this he is the prototype and guarantee of our resurrection. He is the mighty conqueror over this the greatest of our enemies (which Paul teaches further in 2:13ff). Because the church thus owes both its life and its victory over sin and death to Christ, he has supremacy in everything in the church. Whereas the false teachers were pointing the believers past Christ to mystical esoteric knowledge, and past Christ to reliance on their own piety, Paul calls them back to this one-eyed focus on Christ: in the church, as in the greater cosmos, Christ has the supremacy in all things, because the church is dependant on him from start to finish.

[9] God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him (1:19).

Having already so described the position and power of Christ as to give him equality with the Father, Paul here probes right into the very nature and essence of Christ: in him all God's fullness dwells. Let us take care not to miss the two absolutes in this statement: *all* and *fullness*. If we ask the question: 'How can a mere man triumph over sin, death, and Satan? How come the resurrection?' the answer is here, as it is in Romans 1:4: the man Jesus of Nazareth is also, at the same time, the Christ, the Son of God, as fully God as God the Father. In him *all* the *fullness* of God dwells. Nothing less than God. Nothing short of God. Not only the totality of divine power, the totality of divine attributes, but also the totality of the divine nature and essence, dwells in Christ. This is what is behind the resurrection. This is he who stands as head of the church.

[10] We proclaim him (1:28).

In this brief statement we have the most succinct, yet most comprehensive statement of the gospel proclamation. Jesus Christ was the content of Paul's preaching.

[11] Christ is the mystery of God in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (2:2b, 3).

Here Paul confronts the false teachers head on. They taught that there was knowledge of God beyond Christ, that there were treasures of wisdom to be found, more enlightening and precious than the knowledge of Christ, further mysteries and secrets about God to be unveiled, and that knowing these mysteries would bring them to higher levels of salvation, more intimate union with the divine. Paul says "No!" Christ is God's secret. When you see him the secret is out in the open, the mystery, all mysteries, are unveiled. Everything that there is to be known about God is here laid open before your eyes in Jesus Christ. Here in his own way, Paul affirms what Jesus himself has said: he is the light, he is the truth, in seeing him we see the Father, in knowing him we know the Father. Not in part, not some of the truth about him, but *all*. (Compare 4:3 where Paul speaks of proclaiming 'the mystery of Christ'.) There are many within the church today who are making the same mistake as the false teachers in Colossae: looking beyond and beside Jesus Christ for additional knowledge and revelation of and/or from God. The extent to which they are doing this represents the extent to which they have failed to understand the completeness of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ.

[12] You received Christ Jesus as Lord (2:6).

Paul here reminds the Colossians of their original response to the gospel. Note carefully: he does not say 'you received Christ Jesus as Saviour'; he says 'you received Christ Jesus as *Lord*.' It is common today for the idea of 'receiving Jesus as Lord', or 'making Jesus Lord' to be taught as a subsequent (or even optional) step some time after a supposed initial step of receiving Christ as 'Saviour'. Such a concept was foreign to Paul's mind. To respond to the gospel was to 'receive Christ Jesus as Lord.' Our evangelical traditions have so twisted the gospel to focus on our need of salvation and the way the cross of Christ meets that need, that the Biblical focus of the gospel on the person of Christ has been lost, and in that loss, so also has the Biblical response to the gospel been lost. John has already pointed out to us that it is receiving Jesus, believing in him, believing in his name, that issues in salvation. This receiving, this believing, is receiving him as the one he claimed to be, believing that he is the one he claimed to be. The question the Bible asks is never 'have you received Jesus Christ as Saviour?' but 'do you believe that he is the Lord? Do you receive him on these terms?' In other words, 'do you acknowledge that here in this man, God confronts you, demanding your recognition, demanding your repentance, demanding your trust?' So Paul states 'you received Christ Jesus as Lord.' When they heard the gospel message they said 'Yes! I acknowledge that Jesus Christ is God. I acknowledge that he is my Lord.'

[13] In Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form (2:9).

Not content with what he has written in 1:19 Paul needs to say it again, and more forcefully. Note again the absolutes: *all* and *fullness*. And Paul makes sure that we do not assume he merely means that all the divine qualities live in Christ. There are two Greek words which he could have used; one means 'quality', one means 'essence.' He chose the latter. He tells us here: all that God is in his being, all the essential being of God, lives in Jesus Christ. And lest we think that this indwelling was of a mystical, intangible nature he adds: in bodily form. In the human body of Jesus of Nazareth dwells the fullness, the full essence or being, of God. Here in this man, we are confronted by God.

This forceful and comprehensive treatment of the person of Jesus Christ, in which Paul repeatedly identifies him as God, has a specific purpose. In reducing Jesus Christ the false teachers had reduced the effectiveness of the cross of Christ, and as consequence of both of these reductions minimized both salvation and assurance of salvation. The Colossian Christians were reeling under the impact of this, striving to advance to the superior knowledge supposedly there beyond Christ, bound to a great set of rules and regulations which must be kept in order to be complete, submitting to all sorts of extreme actions, in order to reach the spiritual goals set by the false teachers. With their eyes off Christ they looked to themselves and saw there only incompleteness, only inadequacy, only lack and failure. To this depressed, introspective, insecure church, Paul says: get your eyes back on Jesus. Remember who he is. Your salvation does not rest in yourselves: it rests in him. You received him as Lord, so keep on living *in him*, get your roots down into *him*, be built up *in him*, and strengthened *in him* (2:6). Your life, your stability, your strength - they are all *in him*. Not only this, but because all the fullness of God lives in him, you are complete *in him* (2:10). You do not attain your spiritual goals, you do not reach fullness or perfection, in yourself, in anything you do. You are complete *in Christ*. All that God asks of you, all that God expects of you, all that God intends you to be: it is all *in Christ*.

No more do the Colossians need to search beyond for *more*. Everything is in Christ. All of God, all the knowledge and wisdom of God, and all of their own completeness, is in Christ. Are our ears open to what Paul is saying here? Have we recognized here in Colossae symptoms of our own reduced Christianity? Do we not see here some of the same pernicious suggestions that have entered into our churches, taking our eyes off Christ, putting our eyes onto ourselves and our own spirituality, enticing us on to something beyond Christ, something additional to Christ?

The Colossian Christians had one advantage over us: they had at least originally received Jesus Christ as Lord. They had that to be recalled to. But have we? Have we ever actually received the Biblical Jesus? Do we have any memory of knowing him as he is described here in this letter? Or has he merely been someone loosely identified as 'Saviour' or even more loosely as 'Jesus', whom we have 'received' or 'asked into our hearts' (whatever each of these means) because we wanted to avoid ending up in hell?

The letter of Paul to the Colossians stands as a challenge to each one of us. Is the Jesus Paul here describes *our* Jesus? Or are we following a lesser Jesus, as impotent as the Jesus of the Colossian heresy? Are we living with confidence in the presence of God, knowing we are complete in the true Jesus, or are we wallowing in insecurity and uncertainty in God's presence, slaves to legalistic add-ons to an inadequate notion of salvation, because our Jesus is not the Jesus of Scripture?

The first letter to the Thessalonians

The choice the Thessalonians made when they decided to believe Paul's message was no easy choice. It involved not only ridicule and persecution but a total reorientation of their lives. It involved a casting out of their previously held concepts of god and the taking on board of a whole new understanding. But they made this choice. It is reported of them that they 'turned to God

from idols to serve the living and true God' (1:9). Their 'faith in God became known everywhere' (1:8). This description of their response is significant. Such was the content of Paul's gospel proclamation that it gave the Thessalonians a whole new understanding of who God is. So powerful was his proclamation of the gospel that it caused the Thessalonians to reject all that they had previously believed about "god" and to embrace the concept of "god" outlined in that gospel. Paul's gospel, which twice in this letter he calls 'the gospel of God' (2:8,9), identified the true God. How? By proclaiming Jesus Christ (see Acts 17:1-3,7). This proclamation of Jesus Christ so clearly and forcefully identified the true God that the Thessalonians turned their backs on their idols and believed in the God revealed in the gospel.

Here again the first and primary statement of the gospel is a statement about the true identity of Jesus Christ. The statement about the cross-work, essential though it surely is, does not identify God, and can only confer its benefits when the first statement is received. The first statement of the gospel wherein the true God is identified by the proclamation of Jesus Christ, is what calls a person to repentance and faith. With this repentance and faith the Thessalonians responded.

The second letter to the Thessalonians

In Paul's thanksgiving and prayer (1:3-12) there are two statements that only make sense if we understand that the first and primary statement of the gospel is the identification of God in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ.

[1] 'He will punish those who do not know God ... ' (1:8). Contrary to current evangelical emphasis that we escape punishment by receiving God's gift of salvation wrought for us by the death of Jesus, **Paul's statement here indicates that we escape punishment by knowing God** . How do we know God? By seeing him in the face of his Son. How do we do this? By hearing and believing the first statement of the gospel, that Jesus of Nazareth is God incarnate.

[2] 'He will punish those who ... do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus' (1:8). What is the command of the gospel that we have to obey? That which Paul gave to the Philippian jailer: Believe in the Lord Jesus! (Acts 16:31) That which Paul defined for the Romans: Confess with your mouth that Jesus Christ is Lord and believe that God raised him from the dead! (Romans 10:9) That which Jesus himself stated: The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent. (John 6:29). The gospel of our Lord Jesus calls us, yes, commands us, to recognize here in this man the Lord of glory, the Almighty God. **It commands us to cast aside our notion of god, and in this act of repentance to accept as our God, Jesus Christ** . It commands us to believe *in him*, and to *honour him* as God. It is this call to this radical belief, this radical repentance, that we must obey. Those who do not obey this gospel challenge are already condemned, as Jesus stated in John 3:18, because they have not believed in the name of God's only Son.

The two sections of this verse make an instructive equation: not knowing God = not obeying the Gospel of our Lord Jesus. Stated positively: knowing God = obeying the Gospel of our Lord Jesus.

The letters to Timothy

In each of these letters Paul makes a summary statement of the gospel:

[1] 'Beyond all question, the mystery of godliness is great:

He appeared in a body,
was vindicated by the Spirit,
was seen by angels,
was preached among the nations,
was believed on in the world,
was taken up in glory.' (1 Timothy 3:16)

[2] 'Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel for which I am suffering.' (2 Timothy 2:8,9).

In both of these we see Jesus Christ identified as both human and divine. This is the mystery. This is the gospel: that God has come to us, dwelt among us, revealed himself to us, taking away the dark blindness of our ignorance about him, showing us precisely who he is, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the descendent of David. For this gospel, which once Paul, denying the deity of Christ (1 Timothy 1:13), sought to destroy, he now suffers, and is prepared to suffer anything (2 Timothy 2:8-10). Paul considers his previous denial of Jesus Christ to be blasphemy (1:13), and, even though in his pre-conversion state he had considered himself zealous for the honour of God, he now describes that state as one of 'ignorance and unbelief' (1:13).

In addition Paul describes himself and his co-workers as having 'put our faith in the living God' (1 Timothy 4:10), and Christians as those who confess 'the name of the Lord.' (2 Timothy 2:19).

Summary:

In summary, Paul in his letters has much to say about the salvation obtained by the death of Jesus Christ for those who believe in him. This cannot be denied. Yet this salvation, in which we are assured of our on-going relationship with God, in which we stand in the presence of God with confidence and joy, is not the primary focus of our faith. Nor is the death of Christ on the cross, by which our salvation is obtained, ever stated by Paul to be the primary focus of our faith. Once, in Romans 3:25, Paul mentions 'faith in his blood'; and indisputably it is the blood (= death) of Jesus that enables those who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ to stand in the presence of God with absolute trust and assurance. But trust in the complete and finished work of Christ exists for Paul only in those who are believers in Christ Jesus the Lord. Faith for Paul, is always faith in Jesus Christ, the Lord. Without this faith the death of Christ does nothing for us, and salvation is not ours. Paul knows of no division in which we can first believe in Jesus as Saviour, accepting as ours the benefits of his cross, and at some subsequent meeting with Jesus, let him be, or make him, our Lord. The Jesus of Paul's teaching is always Lord, and it is this Jesus on whom the Christian confession focuses. To receive the Paul's Jesus is to receive him as the Lord. In turning to him we are turning to the living God.

Other New Testament Answers

WHO IS JESUS?

© Copyright Rosemary Bardsley 2002

STUDY EIGHT: ANSWERS FROM PAUL, JAMES, PETER, JOHN AND JUDE.

The letter to the Hebrews

The writer of this letter, whom we will assume is Paul, spends nine and a half chapters affirming the superiority of Jesus Christ. He grounds this superiority in the fact that Jesus is the Son of God. His opening statement pulsates with the glory of Jesus Christ:

- In these last days God has spoken to us by his Son (1:2).
- God has appointed his Son heir of all things (1:2).
- God made the universe through his Son (1:2).
- The Son is the radiance of God's glory (1:3).
- The Son is the exact representation of God's being (1:3).
- The Son sustains all things by his powerful word (1:3).
- The Son provided purification for sins (1:3).
- The Son sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven (1:3).

This should have been enough to confirm the identity of Jesus Christ, but such is the foolishness and blindness of the human heart, so prone to reduce the person of Christ, and to make of him someone less than God, the writer then proceeds to show that, as the Son of God, Jesus Christ is superior to the angels. In this he makes the following affirmations:

- The Son became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs (1:4).
- God told the Son that he was his Father (1:5).
- God said of the Son 'Let all God's angels worship him.' (1:6).
- God said to the Son 'Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever ...' (1:8).
- God also said to the Son 'In the beginning, O Lord, you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands ...' (1:10).
- God said to the Son 'Sit at my right hand ...' (1:13).
- God has not subjected the world to come to the angels (1:13; 2:5).

In all of this the Son is superior to the angels, for God has never said these things to any of the angels. The writer points out that way back in the prophetic Psalms God moved the Psalm writer to address the Son as 'O God' and 'O Lord', and to ascribe to him eternal sovereignty and creative power.

Having thus established the superiority of the Son over the angels the Hebrews writer affirms in addition:

[1] Christ is superior to Moses because he is 'faithful as a son over God's house' (3:6);

[2] He is superior to the High Priests because,

- He 'has gone through the heavens' and is 'Jesus the son of God' (4:14).
- He is a priest *forever* (5:6; 6:20; 7:3,17,21,24,25).
- He has become a high priest on the basis of the power of an indestructible life (7:16).
- He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven (8:1).
- He offers a superior sacrifice, his own blood (9:11- 28).
- He entered into heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence (9:24).
- He has done this once and for all (9:25-28; 10:12).

The writer's purpose is to draw the Hebrews back to the gospel focus on Jesus Christ. That they stood in need of this is clear from chapters 2:1-4; 3:7-19; 4:1-16; 6:1-12; 10:19-39; 11:1-40; 12:1-28 & 13:7-15, where the writer gives solemn warnings against departing from faith in Christ, and strong encouragement to persevere. The superiority of Jesus Christ, the superiority of

the salvation he offers us, and the enormity of turning our backs on him once we have known him, rests, in the first instance, on *who he is*. The force of the entire argument of the letter to the Hebrews is stated in its opening sentence: ... God ... in these last days ... has spoken to us by his Son.

That word which was recorded by Jeremiah, here in the Son comes to fulfillment: 'No longer will a man teach his neighbour, or a man his brother, saying, "Know the Lord," because they will all know me, from the least to the greatest' (Hebrews 8:11; Jeremiah 31:34a). Here, in the Son, we know God.

The letter of James

James' letter is very practical. He does not address the *content* of faith, but the *evidence* of faith. To James the only valid faith is that faith which is accompanied by works of obedience. We will be looking at the role of obedience in another study series, so here it is sufficient to say: James makes it clear that those who claim to be 'believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ' (2:1) believe not only his promises but also his commands. In other words: my claim to believe in Jesus Christ is invalidated if I do not obey Jesus Christ. If I *really* believe in him, if I really believe that he is who he claimed to be, then I will demonstrate by the way I live that he has the right to tell me what to do. If, having supposedly believed in Jesus, I continue to live contrary to his commands, then it is quite evident that I neither understand nor believe, in the true sense of the word, who he is, and my claim to faith is not valid. (Read 2:14-26.)

Peter's letters

[1] Peter identifies Jesus as God:

- He is 'our God and Saviour Jesus Christ' (2Peter 1:1).
- He is 'the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls' (1Peter 2:25) and 'the Chief Shepherd' (1Peter 5:4).
- ' ? through him you believe in God' (1Peter 1:21).
- We are to 'set apart Christ as Lord' in our hearts (1Peter 3:15).
- Peter speaks of Christ's 'divine power' and his 'glory and goodness' (2Peter 1:3).
- He speaks also of 'the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ' (2Peter 1:11) thus indicating that Jesus Christ is both eternal and king, properties belonging to God.
- He calls Jesus 'the sovereign Lord' (2Peter 2:1).
- He reminds his readers of the glory of Christ which he witnessed on the mount of Transfiguration, and the voice of God which identified Jesus as his Son (2Peter 1:16-18).
- Jesus Christ 'has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand - with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.' (1Peter 3:22).

In all of this Peter speaks with the firm understanding that Jesus Christ is the Son of God in whom resides the eternity, the sovereignty and the glory of God, and to whom is due that same praise and honour as is due to God the Father.

[2] Peter affirms the significance of the resurrection, which, as we have seen in Paul's letters, is proof of the deity of Christ, and an essential element in Christian belief:

- Our 'new birth into a living hope' is 'through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead' (1Peter 1:3).
- We are saved 'by the resurrection of Jesus Christ' (1Peter 3:21).

We must not overlook this great significance of the resurrection. If Jesus is not raised then he is not God; if he is not God, then not only are the claims he made of himself invalid, but his supposed substitutionary death for us on the cross is also invalid. The cross-work of Christ, by which we are saved, stands or falls on the accuracy of his claims to be God, and these in turn stand or fall on the resurrection. At a simple level we might rightly understand the significance of the resurrection to be the guarantee of our resurrection; but it is far deeper than this: the whole of the Gospel is at stake here, both its first statement wherein we are taught that Jesus is God, and its second statement which speaks of our salvation through the cross-work of Jesus.

John's letters

The first letter of John is one of the most powerful pieces of writing in the New Testament. It takes up the truth that sounded right through John's Gospel and hammers it home again and again: the truth that Jesus is the Son of God, equal in all respects to the Father, and that this understanding of Jesus is the central factor in our relationship with God.

[1] As in his Gospel, so here, John commences with an unequivocal identification of Jesus as God:

- He is 'from the beginning' (1:1).

- He is 'the Word of life' (1:1).
- He is 'the eternal life which was with the Father' (1:2).
- He is God's 'Son, Jesus Christ' (1:4).

This eternal, divine Son came to this earth as a visible, tangible person:

- ' ? which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched' (1:1), and who
- ' ? has appeared to us' (1:2).

[2] John affirms that Jesus brings the knowledge of God:

- 'This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light: in him there is no darkness at all' (1:5).

We are reminded here of Jesus' word: 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life' (John 8:12).

Of those who are believers in Christ John states:

- 'You have known him who is from the beginning' (2:13,14).
- 'You have known the Father' (2:13).
- 'The word of God lives in you' (2:14).
- 'You know the truth' (2:20).
- 'The Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true' (5:20).

By knowing Jesus Christ we know God.

[3] John spells out in no uncertain terms the significance of genuine belief in Jesus Christ, the Son of God:

- 2:22,23: The man who denies that Jesus is the Christ, (that is, the Son of God),
 - is a liar.
 - is the antichrist.
 - denies the Father and the Son
 - does not have the Father.
- 2:23: Whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also.
- 2:24,25: If we hold on to this genuine belief we 'remain in the Son and in the Father' and we have eternal life.
- 3:23: 'To believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ,' is the command of God.
- 4:2,3: 'every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God.' John then again identifies as 'the antichrist' those who refuse to acknowledge Jesus.
- 4:9: 'God sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.'
- 4:15: 'If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God.'
- 5:1: 'Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God'.
- 5:5: 'Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.'
- 5:10-13: We have here several points of belief:
 - believing in the Son of God (10)
 - believing God (10)
 - believing the testimony God has given about his Son (10).

We have then the content of God's testimony about his Son (11):

- God has given us eternal life.
- This life is in his Son.

Then we have a statement of the implications (12):

- He who has the Son has life.
- He who does not have the Son of God does not have life.

And a conclusion:

'I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life'(13).

Believing in the Son of God, believing in his name, is, stated in a different way: 'having the Son', and 'having eternal life'. There is no eternal life apart from a genuine belief that Jesus is the Son of God. We cannot *have* him if our understanding of him is contrary to God's testimony about him. If we think we have Jesus, but it is a lesser Jesus than the Jesus of the Gospel revelation, then we do not have him at all, and we do not have eternal life. Receiving a Jesus who is less than the Son of God, is of no use at all. This is the teaching of 1 John 5:10-13.

It is clear from the above ten references that John gives ultimate significance to genuine belief in Jesus Christ as the Son of God. All that is dear to us as Christians hangs on it. True recognition of Christ's identity determines *our* identity. Apart from the genuine confession that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, we are not saved, we do not have eternal life, we are not 'in God', we are the antichrist, we make God a liar, we are not 'from God', we are liars, we do not 'have the Father', neither God nor Jesus lives in us, we are not born of God, and we don't overcome the world (nor have we overcome the evil one - see 2:13,14 & 5:18).

When we understand how significant John makes the genuine belief in Jesus, the Son of God, it is all the more surprising that the church has let this central belief fall out of focus. How can the church promise regeneration, eternal life and union with God on the basis of accepting the cross-work of Jesus, when the Scripture so clearly focuses saving faith on his *name* and his *person*? Let us take good note that denial of the divine sonship of Jesus Christ identifies one as 'antichrist'. May the church take care that its slackness in affirming the deity of Christ and the significance of this deity does not involve it corporately, or its members individually, in blasphemy by default.

[4] John's second letter is brief. Its sole purpose seems to be to encourage its readers to hold firmly to their belief that Jesus Christ is both man and God.

John identifies Jesus as 'Jesus Christ, the Father's Son' (3). He describes as 'deceivers' and 'the antichrist' those who deny that Jesus Christ came in the flesh (7), and states that those who do not continue in the teaching of Christ do not 'have God' (9).

[5] In 1 John 5:20, as we have seen above, John stated that 'the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true.'

He then goes on to say 'and we are in him who is true - even in his Son Jesus Christ.' But, in case we let it slip from our minds, John sees it necessary to remind us one last time just *who* Jesus is. He did not stop with those words 'his Son Jesus Christ', though that should have been sufficient after all he has written; he makes a significant, powerful addition: ' ... **his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life** .' Could he make it any clearer? No.

[6] John then adds his final exhortation. The pathos of it lies in its necessity, then and now. He states:

'Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.' (5:21)

To those who have seen God in the face of his Son, John says 'keep yourselves from idols.' Because God has thus made himself known in the man Jesus who lived and walked among us, **to have a lesser concept of God, and to see and know God as anything different from what we see and know in Jesus Christ is, as far as John is concerned, idolatry** . Jesus Christ is 'the true God'.

Two questions here confront me:

1. Is Jesus Christ my God?
2. And, Is my God Jesus Christ?

If I cannot answer "yes" to both of these John's opinion is that I do not know the true God. I am an idolater, worshipping a god of my own fabrication, in which there is no truth, in which there is no life.

Jude's letter

In this letter, written because of false teachers who were denying 'Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord' (4), Jude encourages his readers to 'contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints' (3), and to 'build yourselves up in your most holy faith ... ' (20), warning them of the terrible end awaiting those who do not believe.

The book of Revelation

On the book of Revelation many have made shipwreck, and not without cause. Even here in this present study difficulties confront us, for we often find that descriptions of God, the Father, are also used as descriptions of the Son; that it is sometimes hard to determine whether it is Father or Son who is being honoured and praised; that both Father and Son are rendered the same or similar praise. But perhaps this is not a difficulty at all, but a confirmation of the basic teaching of these studies.

It is also a temptation as we look at Revelation to deviate into material not relevant to our topic, for there is much here that is deeply interesting and challenging; but only those verses immediately focused on our topic will be discussed.

[1] In John's Gospel Jesus Christ claimed to be 'the truth' (John 14:6) and 'the light' (John 8:12), and is described by John as 'the Word' in whom is light, and in whom the glory of the Father is revealed (John 1:1-18); Jesus also claimed that whoever has seen him has seen the Father (John 14:6-9). This accurate revelation of the Father by the Son is confirmed in Revelation:

- He is 'the faithful witness' (1:5).
- He is 'holy and true' (3:7).
- He is 'the Amen, the faithful and true witness' (3:14).
- His name is 'Faithful and True' (19:11).
- His name is 'the Word of God' (19:13).
- He, together with the Father, are the light in the eternal city (21:23; 22:4,5).

[2] In John's Gospel Jesus stated 'before Abraham was born, I am' (John 8:58). This eternity of Christ is confirmed in Revelation:

- 'I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One' (1:17,18).
- 'I am the First and the Last' (2:8).
- 'I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End' (22:13).

We could read here also 1:8 'the Lord God' says 'I am the Alpha and the Omega, who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty'. It would appear that these are the words of God the Father, although the red-letter issues of the Bible infer they are spoken by the Son. Either way they affirm the eternity of the Son, as these same titles are given to the Son in the above verses.

[3] In John's Gospel Jesus claimed to be 'the resurrection' (John 11:25), and we have seen in Paul's letters how significant the resurrection is. Repeatedly Revelation affirms the resurrection of Jesus Christ:

- He is 'the firstborn from the dead' (1:5).
- He states 'I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades' (1:18).
- He is 'the First and the Last, who died and came to life again' (2:8).

A further significance of Christ's resurrection is that in and through his resurrection we see his triumph over sin and death and Satan:

- He says 'I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne' (3:21).
- 5:5 states: 'the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed.'

[4] In John's Gospel Jesus stated that the 'Father ... has entrusted all judgment to the Son' and 'has given him authority to judge ... ' (John 5:22,27). The authority of Christ is strongly taught in Revelation:

- He is 'the ruler of the kings of the earth' (1:5).
- He says 'I have received authority from my Father' (2:27).
- 'What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open' (3:7).
- He is 'the ruler of God's creation' (3:14).
- Those who have rejected him are fearful of 'the wrath of the Lamb' (6:16).
- 12:10 refers to 'the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ'.

This authority is further described in Revelation to describe Christ as Lord, as King, and as seated on the throne:

- In 3:21 Christ refers to 'my throne'.
- He is 'the Lamb at the centre of the throne' (7:17).
- 'The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever' (11:15).
- He is 'Lord of lords and King of kings' (17:14).
- 'On his head are many crowns' (19:12).
- He will rule the nations with an iron sceptre (19:15).

- His name is 'King of kings Lord of lords' (19:16).
- He reigns (20:4,6).
- He, the Lamb, shares God's throne (22:1,3).

[5] In John's Gospel Jesus stated that it is the Father's will that all should honour the Son in the same way as they honour the Father, and that those who do not honour the Son do not honour the Father (John 5:23). As we read Revelation the honour given to Jesus is the same as the honour given to the Father:

- 'To him (Jesus) be glory and power for ever' (1:6)
- 'Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise.' (5:12, compare the praise given the Father, in 4:11)
- 'To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honour and glory and power, for ever and ever! And the four living creatures said, "Amen," and the elders fell down and worshipped ' (5:13,14)
- 'Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.' (7:10)
- 'Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honour and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever.' (7:12)

In this book of Revelation the faithful believer is termed 'he who overcomes' (2:7,11,17,26; 3:5,12,21; 21:7). To those who 'overcome' Jesus Christ here makes similar promises to those elsewhere promised to believers. So why here in Revelation are believers called those who 'overcome'? Why this inference of struggle? Why this suggestion that there might be those who don't 'overcome', those who give up?

Could it be that the primary focus of the Gospel, that the man Jesus of Nazareth is God incarnate, is so different, so radical, so exclusive and isolating, that the cost of holding to *this* Jesus is too great? Could it be that the confession that Jesus Christ is Lord is too demanding? Could it be that the human heart prefers a god of its own fabrication, rather than the God identified in Jesus Christ?

Could it be that *our* modern day churches also stand in need of this promise that is at the same time a warning 'to him who overcomes I will'? Could it be that we have stumbled over the true identity of Jesus Christ, and, instead of being the 'chief cornerstone' on which our church is built, he has become for us a 'rock of offence' (see 1 Peter 2:6-8), because we have not dared to proclaim him as he really is?

The book of Revelation puts before us the conquering Jesus, Lord of lords, King of kings; it challenges us to join with the living creatures round the throne, to join with the four and twenty elders, to join with the thousands upon thousands of angels, and with every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and with them to give to the Lamb, the Son of God, Jesus Christ, the same praise and honour and glory as we give to God the Father.

Even so may it be, Lord Jesus.