



DR DESMOND FORD

Jesus only

Abridged and Simplified by Ritchie Way

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Dr Desmond Ford has written many books on the Gospel of Christ. He is the founder of Good News Unlimited, a **trans-denominational** gospel ministry that produces media and resources to spread the gospel rapidly and effectively.



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'They saw no man but Jesus only.' Matthew 17:8

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1

Jesus: The God Man



THE MOST INFLUENTIAL person of history is Jesus Christ. Today, a third of all people on Earth recognises the One who cut history into two—BC and AD.

We should not make the mistake of putting Jesus in the same category as other religious leaders. They are as different as midday from midnight. Search the Qur'an and you will not find the name of Mohammed.

Search the ancient Buddhist writings and the name Buddha does not appear. But read the New Testament and you will find the name of Christ on nearly every page, and often more than once. The great scholar W. Griffith Thomas wrote, 'Christianity is the only religion in the world which rests on the Person of its Founder.'

Consider this: Christ is the only person who ever lived who claimed to be God, and yet was considered sane by the best of his generation. His influence was greater than all others. Socrates taught for forty years, Plato for fifty, and Aristotle for forty, yet their combined impact is small compared with the influence of Christ's three and a half years of teaching. No other teacher kept out of his teachings things that were unimportant, temporary, or false, and no other teacher selected just those matters that were eternal and universal.

What other teacher ever dared to forecast that his teachings would last forever? Jesus declared, 'Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away' (Matthew 24:35), and every day brings fresh proof of the truth of this. Each new generation finds in Jesus' teaching what is new, fresh, and inspiring. As we look across the centuries, we see how his words have passed into laws, into church doctrines, into proverbs, and into words of comfort and support, but they have never passed away.

What human teacher ever dared to claim that his words would last for all eternity?

Christ uttered many other statements showing his complete awareness of what his impact on the world would be. No other teacher has ever done that. Consider the following: '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). If this statement were made by anyone other than Christ, it would be considered to be highly presumptuous. That such a declaration should prove true after twenty centuries would have been impossible if Christ were only an ordinary man.

From this Galilean have come unceasing streams of good for the benefit of mankind. No one else has been so universally beneficial.

If we took from art galleries, from music, literature, history, works of charity, benevolence, and compassion, everything generated by or relating to Christ, what huge gaps there would be!

Jesus said, 'I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself' (John 12:32). This claim shows that the inner life and the unifying factor of Christianity would be a person—not a philosophy—and that person is the carpenter of Nazareth. Usually in institutions and religion, we find at the core a set of beliefs, not a person. How different with Christianity! The heart of Christianity is not a creed, but a person—Jesus Christ.

The memory of the world's great characters creates in us respect and reverence, but not an impassioned love. Consider the impact of Moses, David, Socrates, Plato, and the hundred greatest names of the last two millennia. None match the magnetism of Jesus Christ.

Think also of Christ's assurance that he would have an everlasting Church despite the presence within it of 'bad fish' and 'weeds' (see Matthew 16:18; 13:37-40; and 47-50). And add to that his confidence in his commission to preach the gospel to the entire world, which would energize men and women until the end of the world (see Matthew 28:19–20 and Acts 1:8). Again we stress that in all of literature and history, there are no parallels to such accurate long-range forecasts.

Think now of the claims of this man from Nazareth, who was penniless and, by human standards, powerless. This man claimed the following:

1. That 'all authority in heaven and on earth' had been given to him (Matthew 28:18).
2. That he had complete control over nature (Mark 4:39, 41).
3. That the angels of heaven belonged to him (Matthew 16:27).
4. That people should love him above their own families or their own life (Matthew 10:37, 38; Luke 14:26).
5. That he was the Saviour of all mankind (Luke 19:10).
6. That he could forgive sins (Matthew 9:2).
7. That he would be the final Judge of everyone (Matthew 25:31–46).
8. That he existed before Abraham and that he enjoyed glory with God before the world existed (John 8:58; 17:5). Christ's claims even survived the test of apparent failure. On the Cross, he still behaved as the King of eternity, promising Paradise to the repentant and interceding calmly for his enemies.

It can be said that the most natural explanation for Christ is that he was supernatural, for if he were good, then he must have been God, as he claimed to be, for a good man does not lie about himself (see John 14:8–9). In describing his earthly mission, Jesus said, the Lord 'has anointed me to preach good news to the poor; he has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind and to release the oppressed' (Luke 4:18).

That was his work. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by Satan. There were whole villages where there was not a moan of sickness in any house, for he had passed through them and healed all their sick. Love, mercy, and compassion were revealed in every act of his life. The poorest and humblest were not afraid to approach him. Even little children were attracted to him. They loved to climb upon his knees and gaze into his face.

Jesus was never rude, never needlessly spoke a severe word, and never gave needless pain to a sensitive soul. He did not condemn weak people.

He spoke the truth, but always in love. He denounced hypocrisy, unbelief, and iniquity; but tears were in his voice. His life was one of self-denial and thoughtful care for others.

Every soul was precious in his eyes (*Steps to Christ*, pp.11–12).

Christ is the only person who has ever lived whose life was foreshadowed by the lives of others in the Bible.

1. He is called the second Adam (Romans 5:14; 2 Corinthians 15:45) because like the first Adam, whose side was opened to give life to his bride, so was the side of Jesus opened on the cross so that his bride, the Church, would have eternal life.
2. Jacob dreamed about a stairway that went up from earth to heaven above (Genesis 28:12). Jesus said he was the stairway that re-connected man with God (John 1:51).
3. Joseph's envious brothers sold him into slavery, but God used that betrayal to save Joseph's family
4. (Genesis 45:5). In the same way, Christ was sold to his enemies and betrayed out of envy, but God used him, through that, to save the world. And just as Joseph became lord over his brothers, so Christ became Lord over the world.
5. Moses said the Messiah would be someone like himself (Deuteronomy 18:18). Moses delivering Israel from Egypt was a type of Christ delivering his Church from the bondage of sin and hell.
6. The Hebrew word *Joshua* is the Greek word 'Jesus'. Just as Joshua overcame all the enemies of Israel, and gave his people possession of the earthly Canaan, so Jesus overcame all our enemies and gave us possession of the heavenly Canaan.
7. Samson, who slew more people at his death than in all his life, was a representation of Christ, who achieved a greater victory by his death on the Cross than he did through his life.
8. David represents Christ, for Christ is called David in Hosea 3:5, and it was foretold that Christ would sit upon the throne of David (Isaiah 9:7).

9. Just as Solomon built a glorious physical temple in peace (1 Kings 6:7), so Jesus built the spiritual temple—the Church—in peace and not through the din of battle.
10. Jonah's being three days and nights in the belly of the whale was a sign of Christ's being that length of time in the grave (Matthew 12:40).
11. Just as the Jewish high priest entered the Holy of Holies once a year with the blood of atonement, so Jesus entered God's presence with his own blood to atone for the sins of the whole world (Hebrews chapters 7–10).

In the first chapters of John's Gospel, Christ referred to the types and symbols of himself found in the Old Testament. These include Jacob's ladder, the temple, the bronze serpent, the water from the smitten rock, the manna, and the pillar of light, etc.

Jesus' World: The Place, People, and Time



PALESTINE IS at the south-western end of the 'Fertile Crescent', which links the Euphrates-Tigris valley with the valley of the Nile. It is the land bridge between the continents of Europe and Africa, and Asia and Africa.

Israel's boundaries were the desert, the hills of Trans-Jordan, the Jordan Valley on the east, the 'great and terrible wilderness' on the south, the Mediterranean on the west, and the mountains of Lebanon on the north.

The land is about 225 kilometres long and about 40 kilometres wide in the north and 130 kilometres wide in the south. The wells, springs, rivers, seas, and rainfall made it a fertile land during the time of Christ. It was rich in trees and famous for its fruits. Barley and wheat, grapes and pomegranates were common products.

The tropical Jordan Valley is 208 metres below sea level at the Sea of Galilee and 403 metres below at the Dead Sea, the lowest-lying body of water on Earth. By contrast, Jerusalem, about 24 kilometres from the Dead Sea, and about 56 kilometres from the Mediterranean, has an altitude of 683 metres above sea level and sometimes has snow.

More than 3,000 species of ferns and flowering plants have been listed for Palestine. Because of the differences in altitude, climate, and soil, plants from alpine or desert regions or a Mediterranean climate can flourish there. While for much of the year the stony hillsides are barren and bleak, at springtime the countryside blooms gloriously. Long ago, lions, bears, and hippopotami were common in Palestine. Today 113 different kinds of mammals can be found there, 348 species of birds, 90 reptiles and amphibians, and over 40 kinds of freshwater fish.

Jerusalem stands on a small plateau surrounded by hills. Some have called it 'the city of seven hills'. Its loftiness is referred to in scripture,

and travellers are described as ‘going up’ to Jerusalem. It is actually one of the highest capital cities of the world. It has been destroyed and rebuilt perhaps more than any other city.

Because the rubble of one destruction becomes the foundation for the next, the city in which Christ walked is now about four and a half metres below where pilgrims stroll today.

Nazareth, the village where Christ spent most of his early life, is one of the most beautiful places on earth.

It is situated in the low mountains just north of Megiddo in a secluded cuplike valley halfway between the Sea of Galilee and the Mediterranean coast. One could walk from Nazareth to the Mediterranean in seven hours, to Tiberius on the Sea of Galilee in five hours, and to Jerusalem in three days. Behind the village rises a hill about 152 metres in height.

From this summit, I have seen one of the most wonderful views of the world—the mountains of Galilee, with Hermon towering above them to the north; the ridge of Mount Carmel, the coast of Tyre, and the sparkling waters of the Mediterranean to the west; while to the east, the wooded area of Tabor, and the famous plain of Esdraelon in the south open to view.

No doubt Jesus, as a child, often viewed the scene with its memories of the past and its prophecies of the future.

The People of Palestine

There were four hundred years between the last book of the Old Testament and the first stories of the New Testament. During that time, great changes took place in Palestine. The language of the Jews changed, and new customs, ideas, sects, and institutions came into existence.

Politically there had been massive changes. Following the exile to Babylon, high priests ruled the country, but the Romans came, changing all, and now there was a usurper—Herod the Great—reigning in Jerusalem, a puppet of the mighty Roman Empire. Palestine had been divided into small parts ruled by petty kings.

The Sanhedrin existed as the institution for the government of the Jews, but its power was severely limited by Rome. The temple was the heart of the religious ceremonies, but even more important was the synagogue, which existed everywhere throughout the ancient world

wherever Jews lived. Keep in mind that Jews were 10 per cent of that world with an influence greater than their numbers.

The priests numbered thousands and claimed allegiance from the common people. The people for the most part could not read Hebrew, but the rabbis could. The word *rabbi* means 'my master'. The most prominent religious figures were the Pharisees who were ardent traditionalists and patriots. Many of these fully believed that they were heaven's favourites, and they often despised the common people who they felt were not worthy of salvation.

The Pharisees cherished many traditions of belief and practice that are not found in the Bible. Most of the scribes were Pharisees, and they seemed to delight in imposing upon the people religious burdens that were hard to bear. Their rules about how to observe the Sabbath were particularly difficult. But they had this in their favour: they looked for the coming of the Messiah.

In opposition to the Pharisees were the Sadducees who denied many of the traditions in order to lead comfortable lives. They mingled with non-Jews, often embracing Greek culture, and were sceptical about the resurrection. Far more wealthy than most of the Pharisees and scribes, the Sadducees looked down on most of those not of their class.

All in all, instead of finding a nation devoutly attached to the prophets of old, Christ found a nation saturated by human traditions and prejudices. This was the 'mountain' that he wished to throw into the sea.

The Time

The apostle Paul said Jesus came to the world 'when the time had fully come' (Galatians 4:4). And Mark, in his first chapter, tells us that Christ's words of greeting to the world were, 'The time has come' (Mark 1:15).

There is evidence that before the birth of Christ, teachers over the centuries had foretold the coming of a great Lord who would usher in a new age. Scholars have documented such predictions as those found in the literature of the Roman world before Christianity. One of the most important is found in the words of Plato who predicted the awful fate that would befall one who was uniquely good.

Virgil had written about the coming of a special child, but Plato, his predecessor by centuries, foretold the Messiah's death on the Cross.

Having spoken of a truly righteous and noble man who lived simply, Plato says that such a man would be accused of being the worst of men and ‘shall be scourged, tortured, bound, his eyes burnt out, and at last, after suffering every evil, shall be impaled or crucified’.

The age into which the long-awaited Messiah was born was an age of desperation. The whole Mediterranean world was sinking into a dark pit of indescribable sensuality, despair, and hopelessness, and there appeared to be no way out. There were about 60 million slaves in the Roman Empire, which was a large proportion of the world’s population at that time. And where there is slavery, the lives of others are not valued as they should be, and little compassion is shown for the suffering. Suicide was commonplace, marriage and the family were disintegrating, religion was mere superstition, and philosophy was decadent.

The world was ready for the coming of the Messiah.

The Pax Romana (peace from war), the ease of travel, a worldwide common language (Koine Greek), the stress on individuality that caused men and women to become more concerned regarding their eternal destinies, the widespread dispersion of the Jews, and their sacred scriptures—all these paved the way for the coming of Jesus with his good news.

The Messianic prophecy of Daniel 9:24–27 was a source of encouragement to those looking for the coming of the promised One. It revealed that within about five hundred years after the Jews returned to Jerusalem from their captivity in Babylon, the longed-for Deliverer would appear.

3

Jesus' Baptism to His Last Week



His Birth and Baptism

IN THE STABLE was One for whom the world had no room. He was naked and helpless, much loved but also greatly hated. So it was at Calvary. Although heaven showed its support through a guiding star, King Herod planned his death. At the Cross, heaven again pointed to Jesus' uniqueness through a three-hour eclipse, yet the crucifiers did not repent.

At Bethlehem, wise men brought myrrh to Jesus, and the same spice was brought to cover his body after his death. So it was that Christ's first days gave a miniature picture of his death.

Apart from the fact that Jesus worked as a carpenter, we know very little of the next thirty years of his life.

The Baptism

At his baptism, Jesus laid down his tools of trade and took up the spiritual work of ministry that would last for about three years: the year of obscurity, the year of popularity, and the year of opposition.

After his baptism, the Spirit led Jesus into the desert to be tempted by the devil (Mark 1:12–13). At the end of six weeks of fasting, the devil came to him with three great temptations. The devil did not tempt Jesus to use his lower nature (e.g., to commit adultery), because he did not have a lower nature. Instead the devil tempted him to use his higher nature (to turn stones into fresh crusty bread to satisfy his hunger). But Jesus, who identified with us, refused to use any power he had for his own benefit.

According to John, the first year of Jesus' ministry was spent mainly in Judea. It was there that he called his first disciples, cleansed the temple, and had a night meeting with Nicodemus.

The Book of John

The most deeply spiritual book ever written is the Gospel of John. While the first three Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) were written for the Jews, the Romans, and the Greeks, respectively, John's Gospel was written for the Church. John used the Jewish sanctuary—with its altar of sacrifice, the laver for washing hands and feet, the table of bread, the golden light stand with its seven lamps, the golden altar of incense, the sacred chest containing the Ten Commandments, the gold atonement cover on the sacred chest—as the framework for his Gospel.

John begins his Gospel with John the Baptist pointing to Jesus and declaring, 'Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world' (John 1:29). Jesus was the lamb who would offer himself as a sacrifice for our sin.

John then points to the laver with the words, 'No one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit' (John 3:5). Pointing to the table of bread, John records Jesus as saying, 'I am the bread of life' (John 6:35). Next he highlights Jesus' words that reveal that he is the true lampstand: 'I am the light of the world' (John 8:12).

Just as the incense burnt on the golden altar ascended up over the curtain into God's presence, so the prayers that we offer in the name of Jesus ascend to God (see Revelation 8:3–4). Jesus said, 'I will do whatever you ask in my name. . . . You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it' (John 14:13–14). Chapters 18 and 19 of John's Gospel present Christ as the golden atonement cover on the sacred chest, sprinkled with the blood of his own sacrifice.

Another pattern found in John's Gospel is the emphasis placed upon seven miracles before the Cross. These illustrate the transforming power of the Jesus in our lives. In these miracles, we find transformation from sadness to gladness, from disease to health, from paralysis to abundant energy, from hunger to fullness, from anxiety to tranquillity, from darkness to light, from death to life. In these miracles, we are given a picture of the transformation that takes place in the life of every person who comes to Jesus.

These seven miracles reveal Jesus' power over every circumstance and condition. He is the God of quality (he turned water to wine), he is the

God of quantity (he fed five thousand men, plus women and children, with five small buns and two tiny fish), he is the God of time (he healed a man who had been ill for thirty-eight years), he is the God of space (while he was in Cana, he healed a boy at Capernaum), he is the God of nature (he calmed a storm on Galilee), he is the God over chance (he healed a man born blind), and he is the God of life and death (he raised Lazarus from the dead). These miracles reveal that all things are under the control of Jesus.

The main point for each of us is that Christ's transforming word is as strong and efficient as his actual presence. Without touching the water in the stone jars at the wedding in Cana, Christ, with a word, turned it into wine. Later, he spoke a word at Cana and healed a boy at Capernaum. And that same word called a dead man from his grave. That word is still available to accomplish a miracle of salvation in the life of even the weakest of believers who calls out to Christ in faith.

James Stalker points out that Jesus' miracles in John's Gospel are called signs. When he healed physical blindness, it was a sign that he is able to heal an even worse condition—spiritual blindness. When he raised those who were physically dead, it was a sign that he is able to raise up those who are spiritually dead. When he cleansed the leper, it was a sign that he is able to remove the leprosy of sin. When he fed the multitude with broken bread, it was a sign that he—the bread of life who would be broken for the sins of the world—would feed us with the bread of life. When he stilled the storm, it was a sign that he is able to bring peace to the troubled conscience.

Many mock the idea of miracles being performed two thousand years ago. C. S. Lewis has written wisely on this topic. He points out that there is nothing in the Gospels like the fairy tale miracles where ridiculous things happen such as beasts turning into men, or trees talking, or ships turning into goddesses, etc. *The miracles of Scripture are what might be expected to happen if God himself visited our world.* Each one carries the signature of a loving and rational God.

The miracles are so interwoven with the history of Jesus that if the miracles were removed, history itself would be destroyed. There is a cause and effect relationship between Jesus' astonishing miracles and the

effect that they had on the people who witnessed them. The miracle of his own resurrection from the dead converted his own brothers and enlivened and energised his disciples to take the good news to the far corners of the then-known world.

First Corinthians 15:46 offers a principle that casts light on the third chapter of John's Gospel: 'The spiritual did not come first, but the natural, and after that the spiritual.' Our natural firstborn nature is not spiritual, and if we are to receive eternal life, God must plant the seed of eternal life in our hearts.

If even Nicodemus, the chief religious teacher in Israel and a man of faultless reputation and outward purity, needed to be born again spiritually, how much more do we?

In the third chapter of John's Gospel, Jesus speaks to a Jew, but in chapter 4, he speaks to a Gentile. In chapter 3, the person he speaks to is a man of great reputation; in chapter 4, it is a woman of poor reputation. In John's third chapter, Nicodemus is told that he must be born again, but the woman is merely offered a gift for the taking. There is a very good reason for this: Nicodemus cherished his self-righteousness, but the woman had a desperate sense of need. Nicodemus had sought out Christ, but Christ seeks out this woman.

The Jewish leader came to Jesus by night, but Jesus' conversation with the woman is at midday.

John chapter 4 has been called the soul winner's manual because it gives the steps from unbelief to faith.

Study the chapter and find the verses that reveal how Jesus got the Samaritan woman's attention, her interest, desire, conviction, and action.

In the same chapter is the story of the miraculous healing of the nobleman's son. After talking with Jesus, the father is so sure that Jesus had healed his son he didn't bother to hurry home. This story tells us how to deal with all our problems. First, don't deny the need, but acknowledge it. Second, take your problem to Jesus. Third, accept his promise that he has made provision for your need and has a thousand ways of solving your problem of which you know nothing. Fourth, go on your way expecting that, in Jesus' time and method, all will be well. It is often the fourth step that is most difficult.

Those who read the first four chapters of John's Gospel will find most of what is known concerning Christ's first year of ministry—a year of relative obscurity. What we do know is that at the close of Jesus' first-year ministry, there fell over Judea and Jerusalem the shadow of the most frightful and awful crime ever committed: the Jews' rejection and crucifixion of their God who had come to them in the flesh.

The Year of Popularity

Following his year in the south, Jesus moved to Galilee in the north of the country. In this relatively unsophisticated region, there would be less prejudice than where the religious hierarchy had its headquarters.

All through this year, he is teaching his disciples. Inasmuch as his work was for all time, and for the whole world, it couldn't be completed by himself alone. That is why he called the Twelve in order that they might continue his work after his return to heaven.

Both at the beginning and end of this year, Christ visited his hometown only to be rejected and threatened with death. His comment was that a prophet has no honour in his own country. But much of the rest of the year, beyond Nazareth was one of rejoicing, healings, teaching, and the adoration by thousands, even tens of thousands in some centres. Those who, like Christ, live in God's will are immortal till their work is done.

The call of the first disciples from their fishing vocation should be compared with the similar story that closes John's Gospel. The account, in Luke chapter 5, symbolises the work of the visible Church with its failures and dangers. Even after Christ's blessing, some fish escape through the breaking nets. It is not so in the second story, which points to the work of the true, invisible Church and the complete salvation and safety of those who are gathered in the gospel net.

Too often, Christ's gospel fishermen toil through the dark hours and catch nothing. Only at the command of Christ was the situation changed in both cases. He is all we need. The event that marked the beginning of the disciples' ministry says the net was cast into the deep, but at the close of their ministry, the net is cast on the right side of the boat. The number of fish caught at the beginning is not known, but a total of 153 fish is caught after Christ's resurrection. That number is composed of 12

squared plus the number for the Trinity squared. The disciples of Christ, working together with the Trinity, reap a harvest for the kingdom, and 12 is the biblical number of the kingdom.

The paralysed man at Capernaum (Matthew 9) and the cripple at Bethesda (John 5) remind us that without Christ we cannot walk as we should. In both cases, the Gospel writers indicate that these men were responsible for their own problems, but that does not put off the great healer. Note that in Luke 5:20, Christ first extends forgiveness for sin. Only the great Judge of all the earth can forgive sins, and that Judge has compassion and mercy for even the worst of sufferers.

After Christ ordains his disciples for ministry, he preaches the ordination sermon—the Sermon on the Mount. This is Jesus’ longest recorded discourse.

It is important to note that here, early in his ministry, on the eve of this sermon, he commands repentance (Matthew 4:17) and then he proceeds to teach what repentance is and what its fruits are. Jesus’ sermon sketches what the Christian’s life should be, leading the listener to cry out, ‘What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?’ (Romans 7:24).

It is not coincidental that this sermon is immediately followed by the healing of a leper, for no honest soul can read the sermon without feeling leprous and desperate for healing. While Matthew chapters 5–8 tell us of the great words of the Saviour, the following chapters tell of his great works. Possibly in the middle of this wonderful year, the Master shows his power over nature and over demons. It is important to note how he also stills the storm in the hearts of his disciples before attending to the outward storm on the lake and the inward storm of the demon-possessed men.

The miracles associated with the crossing of the Sea of Galilee (Matthew 8) are historical, but they are also parables of spiritual events. Into every life, storms and havoc intrude, threatening to undo us. The basics of our knowledge are (1) Life is messy; (2) We are vulnerable; (3) Actions have consequences. Thus, recurring trouble is to be expected. And usually we battle with the storms as though we were on our own, forgetting that there is One who can help us. But if we call upon him, he

will answer wonderfully. Observe the power of the Word of Christ. By it he created heaven and earth, cast out demons, calmed the sea, and raised the dead. His word was always with power, and if we cling to it, trust it, obey it, that same power will work for us, stilling every storm.

Usually the inward storm of fear, doubt, and bewilderment is worse than the outward blast. But here again the Word of Christ is the answer. ‘For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love, and of self-discipline’ (2 Timothy 1:7). ‘Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ’ (Romans 10:17).

Whatever gets our attention gets us. To what do we give our attention—our fears, or his love, grace, and power? See Philippians 4:6–8. Read that passage repeatedly. Memorize it. Live by it. Don’t worry about anything, pray about everything, and be thankful for anything. Then it is possible even in a chaotic world to ‘rejoice in the Lord always’ (Philippians 4:4).

Jesus took his disciples on three preaching tours of Galilee in this year. Probably there were many miracles done for every one recorded. Back at Jerusalem, in Judea, a man who had been blind from birth learned quickly and gladly who Christ was. At first he refers to Jesus as a ‘man’. Later he calls him a ‘prophet’. Finally he acknowledges Jesus as ‘Lord’ and worships him (see John 9).

At the time of the Passover, Christ was in Jerusalem and there he healed the man who had been ill for thirty-eight years (see John 5). The man was a symbol of old Israel, which because of unbelief wandered in the desert for thirty-eight years without strength or nobility. This man was healed on the Sabbath, which created a crisis for Christ.

It is surprising how often we read about Sabbath controversies during this year of popularity. Christ did not accept the traditions that made the Sabbath more important than people, and that made the common people rejoice, but the leaders murderous. He taught that ‘the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath’, and he brought Sabbath rest to those he healed. He claimed to be the Lord of the Sabbath and decked that day with undying freshness, offering us fifty-two spring days every year—fifty-two miniature Edens.

Our Lord reformed both the marriage and Sabbath institutions and referred his listeners back to Eden when commenting on both. He understood that the cultural laws of the Jewish religion would come to an end, but recognized that all principles and institutions from Eden would remain forever. He even risked his mission and life in performing many miracles on the holy day (seven miracles are recorded) to demonstrate that true Sabbath-keeping brought blessing, not injury. Never did he defend any institution soon to pass away. He is silent on the issues of how to observe the religious laws of the Jewish culture and tells the woman at Sychar that these Jewish ways of worship would soon be obsolete (John 4:21). The principles given in the Ten Commandments, however, would remain forever (Matthew 24:20 and Luke 23:56).

The Year of Opposition

Now the pace is increasing, and opposition swells as the leaders become more and more frustrated at Christ's popularity. At first, it seemed as though all Galilee would be converted to him, but the Galilean mind proved to be stony ground, and the early popularity gradually died away to be replaced by suspicion and antagonism. Christ became a fugitive journeying to the most distant and strange places. With him now were not eager thousands but a mere handful.

But his miraculous signs became even more wonderful, such as the feeding of the five thousand. It was a parable of the spread of the gospel. Christ received the food from God and gave it to his disciples, and they gave to the multitudes who shared with each other.

Notice how Christ tested his disciples at this time. He challenged Philip first with the problem of feeding thousands of people with no food, and Philip confessed that he knew no way they could be helped. Andrew looked at the human resources of a few loaves and fishes and echoed the hopelessness of Philip. But the little boy who had brought his lunch looked to Jesus and that solved everything.

How very significant is the fact that when Christ had less resources (five bread rolls and two sardines), he fed more and had more left over (twelve basketfuls). With the four thousand, he had seven bread rolls and a few sardines to begin with, but he fed less, and there were only seven basketfuls of fragments remaining after the meal. What could he have

done with just a crumb? The lesson is spelled out in 1 Corinthians 1:26–31. God chooses the weak, the despised, and the foolish to do the impossible. There is hope for all of us.

The Retreat

Leaving the multitudes in order to prepare his heart and mind for the Cross, Jesus is no longer surrounded by crowds. But a messenger came to him two months before the Crucifixion and said, ‘Lord, the one you love is sick’ (John 11:3). Believers get sick and know pain.

So it was with Job, Hezekiah, and the penitent thief. And at such a time, even more important than our love for Jesus is his love for us. Strangely, Christ waited two days before going to minister to his sick friend.

What comfort that has given millions of faithful sufferers since that time! It is much better to be raised from the grave than from the sickbed. That’s what Lazarus and his sisters came to believe. They were strengthened to face future troubles because Christ had delayed helping them on this occasion.

The Last Week

Now we turn to the most important week of history, the one climaxing in Jesus’ death and resurrection.

The chief message of this week is that a suffering God is at the heart of Christianity. Only Christians worship a God who was wounded for us.

The week actually begins on the Saturday night when there was a feast at Simon’s house to celebrate the resurrection of Lazarus. Jewish days began in the evening, and on this occasion, it was the evening for Judaism, for after this chapter, John records no further ministry from Christ for the unbelieving Jews, except words of judgement. All his encouraging words are for those who have followed him. Whether he answers questions, tells stories, or draws attention by dramatic action, his theme is always the same: The day of reckoning approaches!

There are two feasts in this final week: one at Simon’s house when the repentant prostitute, Mary, anoints her Lord in the presence of her brother, Lazarus, and the twelve disciples; and the Passover celebration on the eve of Jesus’ betrayal.

How wonderfully appropriate is the opening event of this final week! A sinner at great cost breaks an alabaster jar of expensive perfume and anoints her Saviour. That broken jar was a symbol of Jesus' body that would be broken on the Cross—God's extravagant gift to men. As the perfume of Mary's gift filled the house (not just the room), so the perfume of God's love went out from the Cross to fill the whole world.

This chapter, filled with honours done to Christ, balances the close of the preceding chapter where the Jewish leaders summoned the Sanhedrin and condemned Christ as a traitor deserving of death. But now, John chapter 12 pictures Christ as honoured by Mary's gift, by the praise of the common people when he entered Jerusalem on a donkey, by the Greeks wanting to meet him, by God's voice from heaven, and by the consciences of some of the chief rulers.

Mary's selfless act reminds us that serving Jesus from our heart may result in the rebuke of other religious people who think we should be acting differently. On this occasion, Mary overheard Judas say, 'Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor?' Not that Judas cared for the poor, for he was a thief. But Jesus, even though he loved Judas, defended Mary, indicating that what she had done for him was a part of God's plan that they didn't yet understand (John 12:7).

4

Jesus' Triumphal Entry



‘THE NEXT DAY the great crowd that had come for the Feast heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting, Lord!’” (John 12:12–13).

What Jesus did on this occasion was quite different from his usual way of working. Clearly it was his intention to now draw the attention of the crowds to his claims, for the time of his execution was near. But contrary to the expectation of the people, he comes not on a warhorse to drive out the Roman occupiers of Israel, but as the Prince of peace riding on a donkey.

The day reached its climax when Christ cleansed the temple—not of Gentile sinners, but of Jewish sinners—and the anger of the chief priests and rulers boiled over. Matthew reports, ‘They were indignant’ (Matthew 21:15).

A thousand years before, when King David approached Jerusalem amid cheers and songs, the bride for whom he had been willing to surrender his kingdom peered from her window and saw her spouse stripped to the waist, praising and dancing before the Lord. She went out and started yelling at him, ‘You were really great today!’ she said with a sneer. ‘You acted like a dirty old man, dancing around half naked in front of your servants’ slave girls.’

But the king replied, ‘It was before the Lord who made me ruler over his people that I was celebrating. But if I acted in an even more disgusting way these slave girls you spoke of would still honour me.’ Then comes the punchline: ‘And Michal never had any children’ (2 Samuel 6: 20–23).

Why do we quote this ancient history? Because immediately after the angry Jewish leaders rebuked Jesus for his actions, he cursed the barren

fruit tree—a symbol of Israel—and pronounced, ‘May you never bear fruit again’ (Matthew 21:15–19). And for two thousand years, the proposed bride of Christ, Israel, has been spiritually barren. All of this was foretold in the days of David and Michal.

How solemn the warning of these ancient records! It is a good and wise principle to be moderate in all things—in all things except in giving our God his rightful place. One should not be moderate in running from a burning house, or moderate in seeking a lifebelt if the ship is sinking. Our individual lives hang by the thread of grace, and we can cut that thread by giving our enthusiasm to the things of this world rather than to its Creator and Redeemer. God forbid that the things that give us peace should be hidden from our eyes!

Luke records the tears that Jesus shed as he came into view of the Holy City—the city that planned to murder him as soon as possible. As he approached Jerusalem, he wept over it and said, ‘If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God’s coming to you’ (Luke 19:41–44).

Forty years after Jesus made this prediction, the Roman armies destroyed the city of Jerusalem and its temple. Hundreds of thousands of Jews perished in the siege, and the rest were sold into slavery.

The gospel was first preached to the Jews, and they were therefore the first to be judged by God. In this way, they are a warning to all non-Jewish nations where the gospel has been proclaimed, for God will soon judge them also.

Jesus thus revealed the heart of God and the essence of his gospel, which is love for those who are lost. We can trust a weeping Saviour; his tears should banish our fears. Soon after this, his lacerated body, carrying the weight of our sins, was nailed to a cross. This is the only weeping God known to man, the only wounded Deity, the only God to offer himself as a sacrifice for his people.

Upon entering the city, Christ went to its very heart—the temple. He acted in judgement there both at the beginning and the close of his ministry. Jesus entered the temple area and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the benches of those selling doves. “It is written,” he said to them, “My house will be called a house of prayer, but you are making it a den of robbers” (Matthew 21:12–13).

Good religion is the best thing in the world as surely as bad religion is the worst. Unfortunately, bad religion is more common, and Christ’s action of cleansing the temple points to the constant need to reform the church.

A person cannot become a true Christian by attending church any more than a person can become a vehicle by sleeping in a garage. A true Christian is a person who has God in his or her life. Whenever something, other than Jesus, takes centre place in the life of a person or a Church, religion turns bad and there must be reform.

The old conflict between Christ and Caiaphas is forever being re-enacted. Think of that scene back there where the tall, regal, aged leader Caiaphas could say, ‘It is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.’ This was Judaism with its hundreds of years of sacred history, divinely elected to prepare the world for the coming of the Messiah, but ready to crucify the God they worshipped. Every honest man and woman of that day had to choose between Christ and Caiaphas—between the organization with all its grandeur, its history, and its traditions, and the humble One who was the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

Every church must measure every tradition, every custom, and every practice by the words of the Son of God. The test will always be Jesus, his person and his truth.

You may have noticed that with Christ’s entry into Jerusalem, the whole tone of his ministry alters. His acts and his words now ring with judgement. After he cleansed the temple, his parables and his warnings to apostate Israel become more strident and urgent.

5

Jesus Teaches the Gospel to the Greeks



THE JEWISH leaders—desperate to get Jesus offside with the Jewish people and in trouble with Rome—approached him with a question: Should they pay taxes to Rome or not?

Jesus said to them, ‘Show me a denarius. Whose image and inscription are on it?’ he asked.

‘Caesar’s,’ they replied.

He said to them, ‘Then give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s’ (Luke 20:20–26).

We must never separate what Christ has joined. We are not to trample underfoot the things of God in order to please the state, nor should we fail to fulfil our duties to the state because we are Christians.

After a day of argument with the Jewish leaders, Christ turned the table on them by asking, ‘What do you think about the Messiah? Whose son is he?’ (Matthew 22:42).

This was the one question, which, if rightly answered, could answer all other questions.

They replied, ‘The son of David.’

Christ then put his second question to them: ‘If David calls the Messiah “Lord”, how can he be his son?’

The pre-existent Son of God is David’s son and yet his Lord. ‘No one could say a word in reply, and from that day on, no one dared to ask him any more questions.’

It was futile to continue fighting someone who always won the arguments. One day, Christ’s first question will be reversed: ‘What does Christ think of me?’

The Gospel to the Greeks

At the beginning of his earthly life, wise men came from the east to see Jesus. Now, near the close of his life, wise men came from the west for the same purpose. And Christ gives them in a nutshell all that they need to know: “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am my servant also will be. My Father will honour the one who serves me’ (John 12:23–26)

Death to ourselves is the gateway to life. And this is taught by each one of the trillions of seeds in our world. There is no harvest unless the seed dies.

So the question, ‘How then should we live?’—a favourite one with the Greeks for centuries is answered by Jesus. We, like the Greeks, are looking for a coronation, but first there must be crucifixion. God does not ask us to crucify anything that would be in our best interests to keep, but there are many things that we love that are eventually harmful to us.

Only the principle of the Cross of Jesus can rightly guide our hearts, minds, and wills. When we, like Jesus, consent to crucify our selfishness and sacrifice ourselves for others, we begin to truly live. There is no other way. It is this message that Christians will proclaim with Pentecostal power in the last days of Earth’s history.

At this point, Christ declares, ‘Now is the time for judgement on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself’ (John 12:31–32).

Wonder of wonders: instead of the wicked world going to the Cross for its punishment, the innocent Son of God will go there. The world deserves judgement for its rebellion against what is right, just, and merciful, but Christ will take the sin of all those who put their faith in him and die in their place.

How is it that Christ can speak of Judgement day and Calvary in the same breath? It was because upon the Cross he would be judged and condemned for our sins. This means that all who put their faith in his

sacrifice for them will not be judged on the great day of Judgement because Jesus has already been judged on their behalf. And God doesn't require payment for the same thing twice.

There are two comings of Jesus: At his first coming, 'Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners' (1 Timothy 1:15), and 'he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him' (Hebrews 9:28).

Just as there are two comings, so there are two judgements. At his first coming, Jesus was judged and condemned for all who put their trust in him. At his second coming, all who rejected his atoning sacrifice for them will be judged and condemned for their own sins.

Just as Jesus was cut off from God and life on the Cross (Matthew 27:46), so will unrepentant sinners be cut off from God and life at the second coming of Jesus (2 Thessalonians 1:7–9). But these sinners will never be resurrected to eternal life because their sin is in them. When Jesus died for us, our sin was on him, but not in him. Because sin did not stain his character, God was able to raise him from the dead. Unless we always link the two comings of Jesus in our thinking, we will never be ready for his second coming. To think about Christ's coming to our world as our Judge without knowing him as our Saviour will be absolutely overwhelming. To think of the great Judgement Day without thinking first of Calvary is absolutely fatal.

In John 12:31–33, when Jesus foretold his death on Calvary, he put two transparencies together, one on top of the other. He is saying, 'Now is the judgement of the world—Calvary.' At Calvary where Christ would be lifted up between heaven and earth, he was mankind's Judge, separating everyone into two groups—the saved and the lost—just as he separated the two criminals that were crucified with him. John's Gospel teaches that our time—when the good news of Jesus' sacrifice for us is being proclaimed throughout the world—is the Judgement Day for all who hear it. Those who hear and accept Christ's death on their behalf are judged and set free at that time. Those who hear and reject Christ's death on their behalf are judged and condemned at that time. The Bible says, 'Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed' (John

3:18). This judgement began at the Cross and will finish when Jesus comes again.

Your name comes up in judgement when you hear the good news about Jesus dying in your place to pay the full penalty for your sins. The Bible says, 'Christ died for the ungodly,' and, 'While we were still sinners, Christ died for us' (Romans 5:6, 8).

Your response to Jesus' death for you will determine your destiny. If you accept his sacrifice on your behalf, you will be given immortality when Jesus returns. If you reject his sacrifice on your behalf, you will be denied eternal life on that day. The Judgement that takes place when Jesus returns will not decide your destiny—you decide your own destiny when faced with the Cross. The Judgement that takes place when Jesus comes will bestow on you the destiny that you chose when you decided to accept or reject Jesus as your Lord and Saviour.

6

Jesus' Judgement on Bad Religion



WE COME NOW to the last message that Jesus preached in public. After this, we find him teaching only his own disciples, and only in private.

In Matthew 5, Jesus started his ministry with eight blessings. Here, in Matthew 23, Jesus finishes his public ministry with eight charges.

Jesus' sermon here is all about the things that are common to bad religion. Never forget it—most religion is bad. Unless my religion makes me Christlike, forgiving and tender, patient, and true, it is not the religion of the Bible. If you want to know whether the religion you cherish is the religion of heaven or the religion of hell, this chapter, Matthew 23, will tell you.

Some of us have found Matthew 23 a very encouraging chapter, because it makes it clear that only false religion controls and forces people. Jesus said of the religious leaders of his day: 'They pile heavy burdens on people's shoulders and won't lift a finger to help them' (v. 4). This is Christ's way of saying, 'If you have the real faith—true religion—it won't be a burden; it won't be hard to bear.'

Any religion that consists chiefly of rules and regulations is a Pharisaical religion. True religion gives you wings, not weights. It is as feathers to the bird and sails to the ship. The heart of true religion is about the forgiveness of sins, love and mercy, and the wisdom and the power of our heavenly Father to save and help us. True religion is about faith, hope, and love (1 Corinthians 13:13).

Christ lists, one after another, the things that are wrong with the devil's religion.

The first is religious pride that causes leaders to take upon themselves the glory that belongs only to God (vv.1-12). Such pride leads them to

make rules and teach things that are not found in the Bible. The day will come when such things will be pulled up by the roots (Matthew 15:13).

Second, instead of opening the door to God and eternal life, they shut it, keeping people out of heaven.

Third, they travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when that person joins them, they make him twice as much a son of hell as they are (v. 15). There are many cults that are very anxious to win people to their religion, but Christians are meant to win people to Christ. There is no such thing as salvation by denomination, only salvation by faith in Jesus. The duty of the Church is not to win converts to its views, but to Christ.

Christ's fourth warning is against the massive abuse of oaths and vows of that time. The Pharisees taught people that, in certain circumstances, it was all right to tell lies. Jesus highlights the seriousness and gravity of taking an oath and insisted that people tell the truth at all times (vv. 16–22).

His fifth warning is to those who make much of little and little of much. He pictures the religious teachers as blind guides who strain out a small fly but swallow a camel. They give God a tenth of the spices from their gardens, such as mint, dill, and cumin, yet they neglect the far more important things such as justice, mercy, and faithfulness (vv. 23–24).

The sure mark of false religion is the exaggeration of small issues and the neglect of the central issues of Christ's teaching, such as faith, hope, and love.

Jesus' sixth warning was against a religion that focuses more on external appearances than on the hearts of its members. False religion presents a good public image, but internally, 'there is nothing but greed and selfishness'. Jesus said cups and dishes are truly clean only when their insides are clean, not when just their outsides are clean (vv. 25–26).

The seventh warning was against whitewashed religion that infected people who came in contact with it. He said the morally corrupt leaders were like tombs that had been whitewashed. On the outside, they were beautiful, but inside, they were full of dead men's bones and rotting flesh. 'That's what you are like,' he told them. 'Outside you look good, but

inside you are evil.’ Jesus encouraged them to change their hearts (vv. 27–28).

Jesus’ final warning was to those who built monuments to the prophets, claiming that they themselves would never have joined their ancestors in killing these prophets who had been sent by God. Their ancestors murdered the prophets because the prophets attacked their traditional practices that had become corrupt, just as Jesus was attacking the corrupt practices of the Pharisees and religious teachers.

These hypocrites, who claimed that they would never have murdered the prophets, were the ones responsible for having Jesus executed (vv. 29–35). In verse 36, Jesus declared judgement would fall on the Jewish nation of his day because of all these things. That judgement came when the Roman armies invaded the land, conquered all its cities, and slew or made slaves of all its people in AD 70.

In conclusion, Jesus said with great sadness, ‘Jerusalem, Jerusalem! Your people have killed the prophets and have stoned the messengers who were sent to you. I have often wanted to gather your people, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings. But you wouldn’t let me. And now your temple will be empty of my presence. You will not see me again until you say, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord”’ (vv. 37–39).

This is no mere man talking here. Many times Christ had wanted to protect Jerusalem from trouble, just as a hen shields its chicks with its wings. He is a tender, gentle, humble God. Surely this is the sweetest word of divine pity ever spoken over such a corrupt religion. We may deserve his judgements, but we cannot stop his love. There is always love for us in one heart—his. He is always there to help us if we will seek him.

What a beautiful picture Jesus gives us at the end of Matthew 23. Here is the mother hen. When she recognises danger, she gives a little cluck and all the chicks come running. They snuggle against her breast, deep in her feathers where they are warm and comfortable. That fierce hawk, circling above in the sky, cannot touch them. They have the mother’s wing folded over them. They are perfectly safe, perfectly comfortable, and perfectly happy. It is our privilege to be like them, and we can be if we have a true picture of God.

Jesus' Prophecy about the Last Days



JESUS' PROPHETIC message in Matthew 24 and 25, Luke 21, and Mark 13 is known as the Olivet Sermon because it was given on the Mount of Olives that overlooks the city of Jerusalem. In this message, he tells his people about the end of their world and what they should do at that time. Jesus told the message in such a way that it applied not only to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, but also to events at the end of time. In other words, what would happen to Jerusalem would happen to the religious world in the last days but on a much wider scale.

The Olivet sermon is Christ-centred because the end will come only after the good news about Christ's death in your place and mine has been preached in the whole world (Matthew 24:14). It is the King of kings and Lord of lords who soon is to return in glory who died for us. This gives great significance to all the later chapters!

What is present from beginning to end in Jesus' sermon is the note of warning, the admonition to be right, rather than merely to know or profess the right.

There is also a pattern of coming events: religious intolerance and persecution, increasing confusion on national and international scales, earthquakes, the worldwide proclamation of the gospel, religious apostasy, the great tribulation, the coming of the antichrist, and cosmic signs climaxed by the coming of Christ to gather his people.

For the most part, this address falls neatly into three time divisions: events before the time of trouble, the time of trouble itself, and Christ's deliverance of the elect from the time of trouble. The beginning of the time of trouble will be marked by the coming of the 'the abomination that causes desolation' (Matthew 24:15).

When we link Christ's own experience with his warnings and add details found in the prophecies of 2 Thessalonians 2, Revelation, and other scriptures, it is possible to sketch a broad outline of the future. What follows is only a suggestion and is not intended to contradict our repeated emphasis that the main purpose of prophecy is spiritual rather than intellectual and that prophetic words become fully clear only *after* their fulfilment.

First, both true and false revival will appear on the world's religious scene. The situation will be like that of the Roman world in the first century with all its evil and despair. It will be a time of increasing international tension and the breakdown of the morals of nations. All this will be attended by physical signs in earth, sea, and sky.

Future events will put people into a hothouse environment that will force their spiritual development. Both good and evil will rapidly mature under these conditions. As the gospel is proclaimed to every nation, it will stir up worldwide acceptance by the common people and resistance by the religious leaders. The excitement of Christ's Palm Sunday will be repeated everywhere.

On the counterfeit religious scene, false religions may become more and more dominant. It will be like the first century when pagan religions fought for their existence as the gospel of Jesus attacked all these deeply rooted systems of false belief.

Those who are not established in the truth of scripture will move to the error of their choice. Others, who have been soul-hungry, will hear the voice of the true Shepherd and take hold of his gospel. They will then tell others what they have received.

According to Church history, about six million had taken hold of the gospel by the time of the death of the apostle John, and scripture foretells that multitudes will likewise respond to divine mercy in the last hours of grace. The whole Earth will be lightened with God's glory as anointed people, with their faces lit up, tell people what Jesus has done for them.

As in Christ's day, religious and philosophical groups that had been opposed to each other will ultimately unite in order to influence the world towards a single religious system designed to solve international

problems. Religious leaders will enlist the strong arm of the state to enforce their universal remedy.

Satanic systems of belief will dominate the majority of earth's inhabitants. The veneer will remain respectable, and much of the Law of God will be outwardly upheld. Like Herod who did many right things gladly but who martyred John, so it will be in the religious world. But the abomination that causes desolation—the union of religion and state—will eventually attack the despised few who keep God's commandments and remain faithful to Christ.

Because of hard hearts, the world is left open to a strong, almost overmastering delusion, as Christ's coming is counterfeited in various parts of the world (2 Thessalonians 2:1–12). At that time, God's true people will be revealed by their willingness to die for Christ. They will be sealed by God's Spirit for eternity.

The time of trouble for those who have faith in Jesus becomes a time of trouble for the world as the undiluted wrath of God begins to fall. The whole world will be divided into just two companies. The larger group, by far, reveals the image of its master, Satan. Like him, they are murderous and lying. The smaller company reflects the likeness of Christ. They pray for their persecutors.

The universe beholds good and evil ripened for the harvest. Then appears the sign of the Son of Man in the sky, and all nations shall wail in distress because of him, that is, all except the scattered followers of Christ who rejoice because the hour of their deliverance has come.

It must be remembered that the proclamation of the gospel to the whole world is the only definite sign of the nearness of Jesus' return (Matthew 24:14). Also of great significance at that time is the warning that society is to become like a rotting carcass on the eve of that final offer of grace (Matthew 24:28).

This prophecy presents both the sign of Antichrist, the abomination that causes desolation, and the sign of our returning Lord, the sign of the Son of Man in heaven (Matthew 24:15 and 30).

The 'abomination that causes desolation' is a term for the antichrist union of Church and State. It literally means an idolatrous power, worshipped by unbelievers, that persecutes and desolates. The union of

Church and State in the last days will create an abomination that will desolate God's true people.

Was there an application of 'the abomination of desolation' during Passion Week? Indeed there was. It was fulfilled in Judas, the betrayer who enlisted the Jewish authorities and Roman soldiers to help him locate and betray his Lord.

Is the picture all dark? No! The spread of the gospel is promised and also the Lord's care for his elect (Matthew 24:14, 22, 31).

In addition, the last three stories of the next chapter, Matthew 25, are full of hope for the saints, as well as warning for those who claim to be Christians but who do not have Jesus living in them.

Verse 35 of Matthew 24 is the guarantee that all of this forecast will be fulfilled. It alone is enough to establish that Christ is the Messiah and that his gospel is eternally true.

Matthew 25

Do not forget that the second part of Christ's Olivet sermon is in Matthew 25. The message is the same in all four stories and matches key words of the sermon, such as 'watch' and 'be ready'. The Judgement is near, and there is no avoiding it.

The climax of the first story, in the verses 45–51 of chapter 24, is a question: 'Who then is the faithful and wise servant?' The question suggests that such a person is rare. Jesus had in view the dark days to come, when the clergy of a degenerate Church would be actually guilty of cruelties and excesses such as revealed in the disgraceful conduct of 'that wicked servant'.

The last story in Matthew 24 and the first in Matthew 25 warn that Jesus' coming would not take place when people expected it would, but would be delayed. In the parable of the ten virgins, the bridegroom (Jesus) does not come at 6:00 p.m. when the stars appear, nor at 10:00 p.m., nor at five minutes to midnight.

All ten virgins who are waiting for him fall asleep, but they are not blamed for that. The blame is for those who have not prepared themselves for his delay. Each virgin is represented by her lamp, which only works properly if it has a good supply of oil, which represents the Spirit of God. The five foolish virgins neglected to carry an extra bottle

of oil, thinking that they had ample for their needs. But when the bridegroom didn't turn up as expected, their lamps ran out. Only the five wise virgins, who had extra oil, kept their lamps burning.

Unfortunately for the five foolish virgins, while they were away getting more oil, the bridegroom arrived. He and the five wise virgins went in to the wedding banquet and the door was locked.

Half of the waiting virgins—that is, half of all Christians—will lose out on eternal life when Christ comes because they will not have the Spirit of God (the oil) in their lives (lamps). To which group do you belong?

The parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14–30) reveals that the number of talents that the Lord gives varies from person to person. However, no one will be judged by the number of talents they have, but by the use that they make of them. There are those who want to honour Christ with their talents when he returns and who do their best to improve and increase them. And there are those who think only of themselves and make no effort to improve or increase their talents. There is no place for this second group in God's kingdom.

Let us now look at verses 31–46 about the prophecy of Judgement Day when Christ comes in all his glory accompanied by the angels of heaven. What a day of surprises that will be! There is no description in all literature that is as magnificent and heart-moving as this. J. Monroe-Gibson comments, 'There is not a word that could be changed, not a clause that could be spared, not a thought that could be added with advantage. It bears the marks of perfection, whether we look at it from the point of view of the Speaker's divinity or from the point of view of His humanity' (*Commentary on Matthew*, p. 366).

In this parable of the sheep and goats, Jesus teaches that he will judge people at the Last Day by how much they cared for the unfortunate people in society. On that day, he will say, 'Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me' (Matthew 25:40).

The focus of the first judgement parable at the close of chapter 24 is on the leaders of the Church. But the second and third parables are about the general members of the Church. When Jesus comes back, you will not be judged by your beliefs but your likeness or unlikeness to him in love and tenderness.

The parable of the sheep and goats is the only time Jesus actually calls himself the King. Look at the huge gulf between the two chief words of the King: ‘*Come to me*’—‘*Depart from me.*’ The great issue is, ‘How have you treated Christ?’ The other question, ‘How have you treated Christ’s poor?’ is only there to indicate the answer to the first question.

8 Jesus Washes His Disciples' Feet



IN JOHN 12, we read about Jesus' feet being anointed with perfume and washed with tears. Here, in John 13, Jesus washes the feet of his disciples. This chapter begins with Jesus showing his disciples 'the full extent of his love'.

Even though Jesus knew that his disciples would shamefully abandon him in a few hours' time, he did not give up loving them. Jesus got up from the table, removed his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. He then poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

What Jesus did on this occasion was an acted parable of his ministry. He got up from the festivity of heaven, removed his outer glory, wrapped himself in humanity, and bowed down to wash away the dirt of our daily walk.

To those who refuse to let Christ wash away their sin, he says, 'Unless I wash you, you have no part with me' (John 13:8).

In this service, Jesus gives us an example of how we should serve each other (John 13:15). We have not been appointed to criticise the 'dirt' on our brother's 'feet'; we have been appointed to humbly help him accept the cleansing that Jesus offers.

9

Jesus Introduces the Lord's Supper



OURS IS A WORLD of evil and death. What have the greatest minds in the world done to help us understand or overcome the problems of evil or death? Socrates taught for 40 years, Plato for 50, and Aristotle for 40—a total of 130 years. But their contributions to solving these main problems are next to nothing. Then came Jesus of Nazareth, who taught for just over three years and provided us with the solution to the problems of evil and death. The solution to both these problems is himself!

Here is Mark's record of Jesus' words in chapter 14, verses 22–24: 'While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take it; this is my body.'" Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, and they all drank from it. "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many," he said to them.'

Just think about this for a moment. Here is a Galilean peasant about to be executed like a criminal, and he is cancelling a 1,500-year-old covenant that God had made with his people! If he were nothing more than a man, people would laugh at his audacity. But they don't. They don't say, 'Who does he think he is?' Or, 'Is this man mad?'

Because of who he was, the words of Christ do not require validation. In another place, he invited the world to lay its burdens on him (Matthew 11:28). And in John 15:5, he told his disciples that they couldn't do anything worthwhile without him. If any ordinary man dared to make such claims, he would be laughed at, but not Christ.

Some things are very clear about the Lord's Supper. Jesus obviously saw himself as the real Passover lamb that would atone for the sins of all who put themselves under the protection of its shed blood.

There are bloodless ways of dying, such as strangling and poisoning, but Jesus had to die a bloody death like the Passover lamb. It is through faith in Jesus' blood that we are justified or made righteous. This justification doesn't make us righteous; it declares us to be righteous. Jesus gives this righteousness to us as a free gift in exchange for our sins (2 Corinthians 5:21). Jesus paid the price for our sins so that we would not have to. He died so that we could live.

To get into heaven, we need to be justified by God. The righteousness of justification, which Jesus wants to credit to us as a free gift, is 100 per cent. The righteousness of sanctification, which is the result of our good works, is never 100 per cent. Because we need 100 per cent righteousness to get eternal life, we must accept, by faith, the free gift of God's righteousness from Jesus. Those who put their faith in their own righteousness will miss out because anything less than 100 per cent is a fail mark. It's not a matter of what we have, but who we have.

When Jesus comes into our hearts with his perfect righteousness, he will endeavour to live his life through us, making us more and more righteous every day. This righteousness won't save us, but it shows that we have been saved. We don't have to be good to be saved, but we do have to be saved to be good. The Lord's Supper teaches us that Christ's crucifixion was not a tragedy, rather it was God's way of saving the world. The broken bread pointed to Jesus' body that would be broken for us on the Cross, and the wine pointed to his blood that he would shed for us on the Cross. To accept the bread and wine is to signify our acceptance of the sacrifice of Jesus for us.

10 Jesus Says, ‘Don’t Worry’



JOHN CHAPTERS 14–16 record the last teachings of Christ before he was crucified. Many Christians feel that John 14 is the most encouraging chapter in the Bible. ‘This heart-melting address is like the glorious radiance of the setting sun, surrounded by dark clouds and about to sink into even darker clouds on the horizon— clouds that are pulsing with lightning, thunder and tempest.’

But wonder of wonders, instead of being overwhelmed with fear for himself, Christ begins to prepare his disciples for their coming trial. Twice in this chapter he says, ‘Do not let your hearts be troubled.’

It doesn’t matter how smart, rich, beautiful, and strong one is, life is never smooth for long. C. S. Lewis said, ‘Half the beauty of life is made up of shadows.’ If we believe that shadows are permitted by the love and wisdom of God, and that nightmares never last, then we can survive the problems of life.

Most tragedies come without warning. None of us knows what a day might bring forth; therefore, we should heed Jesus’ advice: ‘Do not let your hearts be troubled.’ We have nothing to fear because he is with us in storm as well as sunshine.

Jesus gives seven reasons why we should not worry:

1. God has a place for us with himself, and Jesus went to prepare that place for us (14:2).
2. Jesus would return to take us to the Father (14:3).
3. The way to the Father is Jesus. No one comes to the Father except through him (14:6).
4. Those who have faith in Jesus will do even greater works than he did. Peter, for example, was used to win three thousand converts at Pentecost (14:12).

5. Jesus would ask the Father to send another Teacher, Comforter, and Encourager to take his place (14:16–18).
6. This new Helper would lead them into all truth—truth that would arise out of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection (14:25).
7. Christ would leave them a legacy of peace. ‘I give you peace, the kind of peace that only I can give. It isn’t like the peace that this world can give. So don’t be worried or afraid’ (14:27 CEV).

Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life (14:6), yet many will be saved who have never heard his name. There are, in Hebrews 11, the names of many who knew nothing about Jesus, but they will be in God’s kingdom because of what Jesus did for them on the Cross. Only because of Calvary is anyone saved. Like people who receive the benefits of electricity without knowing how or where it was generated, there are many who receive the benefits of Christ’s sacrifice without knowing how or where it was provided. One day they will learn about Jesus’ sacrifice for them.

In John 14:15–18, Jesus promises to send ‘another Counsellor’ to be with his followers forever. Jesus was the first Counsellor; the coming Holy Spirit would be the other Counsellor. Through the Holy Spirit, Jesus would come to his people (14:18). This Spirit would be known as both ‘the Spirit of God’ and ‘the Spirit of Christ’ (Romans 8:9).

How can this be so? It is because God is one. Had Jesus stayed in heaven and the Father came to Earth to die for us, we would not have detected any difference. If we have seen Jesus, we have seen the Father (14:8–11). In the same way, if we have the Holy Spirit, we have Jesus. Jesus and the Holy Spirit are like the two faces on a coin: they are completely distinct from each other, but they are one for it is not possible to have one without the other.

When Deuteronomy 6:4 speaks of ‘one’ God, the Hebrew word *echad* (one) is the same as that used in Genesis 2:24 where it says Adam and Eve became ‘one’ flesh. Jesus prayed that his followers would be one as he and the Father were one (John 17:21–22). This oneness is not a numerical oneness, but the oneness that comes from unity in the Spirit (John 17:23).

Compare Matthew 7:11 with Luke 11:13. One verse parallels the other. Matthew says, 'If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!' On the other hand, Luke says, 'If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!' The conclusions of these two verses teach us that having the Holy Spirit is the same as receiving good gifts from God. How rich Christians are!

Jesus told his disciples at the Last Supper that he was going away to prepare a place for them with the Father. Like Joseph who went down to Egypt to fill the granaries to save his family that was threatened with death, so Jesus went away 'for a little while' to provide salvation for his family.

Jesus: The Only Source of Fruit



THE FOURTEENTH chapter of John closes with the words, ‘Come now, let us leave.’ So what we have in the next three chapters was spoken on the way to Gethsemane. As they walked along in the light of the full moon, they could see small fires in the vineyards where the branches, which had been pruned from the vines, were still smouldering.

At this point, Jesus turned to his disciples and said, ‘I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. . . . Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me’ (John 15:1–4).

Some branches bear no fruit at all. These suckers, which make the vine look healthy and flourishing, take the energy of the vine that should go into producing grapes, so the keeper of the vineyard cuts them off because they carry no grapes. Even the branches that do carry grapes need to be pruned so that their energy goes into producing grapes and not into unnecessary wood and leaves.

Pruning is painful, but the result is wonderful. When God wants to prune away things from your life that do not produce fruit for his kingdom, don’t resist him. The best Christians—those who are full of peace and joy—are those who let God prune useless and unnecessary things from their lives.

At the end of the last chapter, we read of Christ’s invitation to rise from the table and walk with him. This chapter is about the resurrection life—the life of the risen Christian. Those who have demonstrated that they have received the crucified Christ by taking the bread and wine, now walk in the power of the Spirit of Jesus. They bear much fruit. There is

no such thing as a true Christian who does not bear fruit. And a Christian can bear no greater fruit than the fruit of love.

Many times in this discourse, Jesus uses the word ‘remain’. Life for a Christian depends upon remaining in Jesus. We must remain in Jesus as the branch remains in the vine, and Jesus must remain in us as the sap of the vine remains in the branch. Cut off from the vine (Jesus), we die spiritually. And the only place for dead branches is the fire. Fruitless branches are good for nothing else.

As long as we are conscious of our need, we abide in the Saviour. But the moment we think we are good enough, wise enough, and strong enough in ourselves—at that moment we are in danger of separating ourselves from the vine.

An apple tree does not work hard to produce apples. And the vine does not work hard to produce grapes. It just happens. If we live connected to Christ so that his life is in us, we will naturally produce much fruit. Why does the Lord say we will be cast into the fire if we don’t bear fruit? It is because the purpose of the vine is to bear fruit, so if we don’t bear the good fruit of love, we have no purpose in Christ’s kingdom. If our hearts are right, our lives will be right.

Eight times in verses 9–13, we read about love. We are not called to produce what is unbearable. The Cross of Jesus is not iron but wood. The fountain of love is to know that we are loved. No one ever loves Christ until he discovers that Christ loves him—just as he is. And if we live connected to Christ, we become like him. We, too, will bring people to him through love. We have only two choices: to be lovers of others, or haters of them.

In verse 7, the Lord says, ‘If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you.’ This verse must be understood in the context of producing fruit for the Lord. If you really want the fruit of love, and continually pray for it, it will be given you. If you really want the fruit of winning souls for Jesus and ask the Lord for it, it will be given you. It is his will that you bear such fruit for him.

The fifteenth chapter of John’s Gospel focuses on the last of Christ’s five commands: ‘come’, ‘learn’, ‘believe’, ‘follow’, and ‘remain’. The Christian who obeys these is the Christian who produces fruit.

12

Jesus' Farewell Message



JESUS' LAST MESSAGE to his disciples was to strengthen them for what seemed an almost impossible task—to take the good news of a crucified and resurrected Messiah to the unbelieving world. How would such a task be possible if Jesus was leaving them?

Jesus begins by telling his disciples that it is necessary that he leave them so that the Holy Spirit could come and take his place. Because Jesus was limited by a human body, it was impossible for him to be with believers all over the world at the same time. But this would be possible for the Holy Spirit because he does not have those limitations.

When Christ was with his disciples, they did not fear their enemies. His presence had been their shield. But now they would have to put their faith in the presence of the unseen Holy Spirit.

Jesus told them that when the Holy Spirit came, he would show people that their basic sin was their refusal to believe in him, that true righteousness is a gift from God, and that there is a future judgement. Sin, righteousness, and judgement are the great realities of life. Sin and its opposite, righteousness, constantly collide and bring judgement. Today is the judgement for yesterday. As surely as one leak can sink a ship, so one cherished sin can destroy a sinner.

When our Lord spoke of sin, he had one particular sin in mind that is worse than all the rest—the wilful rejection of God's love revealed in the sacrifice that Jesus made for each one of us. If we turn our backs on the very best that the universe can offer us, we have sunk about as low as human nature can go. To reject Jesus, we must turn away from his hands that are full of gifts, hands that are offering us the blessings we need to live secure, peaceful, and joy-filled lives. Verse 18 tells us that the Spirit will tell us first about the human disease, sin, then about the only remedy,

righteousness. This remedy that Jesus offers us is free. But it can only be received from the nail-scarred hands of the risen Christ.

We, who were made sinners by Adam's disobedience, have been made righteous by Christ's obedience (Romans 5:19). He credits his perfect obedience to the accounts of all who put their faith in him. While we had no input into what Adam did to us, we also had no input into what Christ did for us. But we are responsible for our choice of whom we will follow. We can follow Adam and remain sinners, or we can follow Jesus and receive his free gift of righteousness.

After sin and righteousness comes judgement (John 16:8–11). If we cling to sin, we shall be judged and condemned to death, for the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23a). But if we receive the gift of God, which is the perfect righteousness of Jesus, we shall receive eternal life (Romans 6:23b). Because Jesus was judged and condemned for our sins, we shall not be. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1).

Judgement day for you comes when you meet Christ and are faced with the choice of either accepting or rejecting his sacrifice for you. To refuse to make a choice is to reject Jesus, for he who is not with Jesus is against him. But he who chooses Jesus 'has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life' (John 5:24).

You can decide the course of your judgement and your destiny right now. The Bible says, 'Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him' (John 3:36).

13 Jesus' Final Prayer



IN JOHN 17, we have the prayer that Jesus prayed as the shadow of his crucifixion fell upon him. The amazing thing about this prayer is that Jesus is looking forward to the Cross as the place where he will be exalted, where the Father will be glorified, and where salvation will be provided for the world.

In this prayer, Jesus is setting himself apart for the sacrifice, during which he is both the officiating priest and the sacrificial lamb. He prays also for his followers, not that they might be rich in material possessions or that they should have great reputations, but that they might be one. ‘They have obeyed your word,’ he said to the Father (verse 6). These fallible erring men were credited with Jesus’ own perfection. So it is with us.

When God looks at us, he sees us wrapped in the robe of righteousness that our Saviour has placed around us.

Christ prays that the Father will look after and keep all who put their faith in him. We can’t keep ourselves, but God’s hand on our shoulder is that of a loving brother. He will never let us go. We can never be lost while we cling to Jesus and seek to be like him.

Several times in this prayer, Jesus prays for unity among his followers (verses 11, 22–23). But unity is not uniformity. Unity does not mean we have to agree with the fallible followers of Jesus. But it does mean that we should learn to disagree with them without being disagreeable. There may be great differences in teachings and religious culture among Christians, but because we are all saved by the sacrifice of Jesus, we are all brothers and sisters with one heavenly Father.

Many churches have done great harm by requiring their members to believe exactly as the leaders prescribe. Such churches are like a factory

that turns out shoes of the same kind. Opinions can be wrong, but love is never wrong, so we must understand the difference between unity of opinion and unity of heart. It is the unity of heart that Jesus prays for.

As the Lord comes to the close of his prayer, he says, ‘Righteous Father . . . I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself might be in them.’

It is the desire of Jesus to have heaven on earth—reflected in the words and actions of his followers.

14

Jesus in Gethsemane



A GREAT KING in sadness is leaving Jerusalem. He crosses the brook Kedron with a small band of friends, then, with tears in his eyes, starts climbing the Mount of Olives. Behind him, he leaves his beloved nation that has turned against him. One of his own, who betrayed him, is there in that city.

This story can be found in 2 Samuel 15–18. It is about King David who had been betrayed by Absalom. A thousand years later, the ‘Son of David’, King Jesus, betrayed by Judas Iscariot, leaves Jerusalem with his disciples, crosses the Kedron, and starts climbing the Mount of Olives.

Upon reaching the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus ‘took Peter, James, and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death,” he said to them’ (Mark 14:33–34).

Why is this Man so distressed? It is because he has offered to take upon himself the sin of the whole world and pay its penalty, which is eternal separation from God his Father. The Bible says, ‘God made him who had no sin to be sin for us’ (2 Corinthians 5:21).

No greater decision has ever been made, or ever will be made, than the decision that Jesus made in Gethsemane. In Gethsemane, Jesus confirmed his decision to take our place and die for us so we could live forever. He would go the Cross where he would suffer the second death in our place—a death that would be total and complete, with no hope of life beyond. No wonder it was such a difficult decision to make; no wonder he was so distressed.

God hates sin because of the harm it does to people, families, and nations, so he has made plans to destroy it. But sin doesn’t exist outside of people. You can’t get two kilos of sin, or four litres of iniquity. Sin is

the evil that is in the hearts of people; it is rebellion against God's Law and is manifested in murder, adultery, stealing, and lying, etc.

Because sin exists only in people, God can destroy it only in people. There are two ways that he can do this. He can either transfer our sin to himself and then be destroyed with it in our place, or he can destroy sin by destroying us. Because he is a loving God, he chose to be destroyed in our place. He would pay the full price for our sin upon the Cross. 'God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us' (Romans 5:8).

Some people, however, love their sin so much they will not let go of it; they will not give it to Jesus so he can pay their penalty for them. In the Final Judgement, they will have to pay the penalty for their own sin. Either Jesus dies for our sin, or we die for it. There is no other choice.

If we are destroyed in the Final Judgement, it will only be because we have turned our backs on God's free gift of life through Jesus; it will only be because we have loved our sin more than we have loved Jesus. The greatest sin of all is to reject Jesus who faced the second death of eternal separation from God in our place.

It was in the Garden of Gethsemane that Jesus had to choose whether he would die the second death for our sins or leave us to pay that penalty ourselves. The Creator of the universe, who had lived for eternity, was so torn by that choice that he sweated blood. And God had to send an angel to strengthen him (Luke 22:41–44).

When we are in agony, God intends that we should come to him in prayer as Jesus did. There in the garden, he addressed his Father by a name that the Jews never used of the Ruler of the universe—*Abba*, which means 'Daddy' (Mark 14:36). Our God is a loving Father and feels our hurts. He remembers that we are made only of dust. 'Just as a father pities his children, so the Lord pities those who respect him.' We can never know peace in the middle of trouble until we know God as 'Daddy'.

In Matthew 26:39, we read, 'Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed.' However deep we may be in trouble, always remember that Jesus went further. However tragic our agony, let us remember he experienced something much worse. His feet have pressed

down every thorn that threatens us. When the Bible says Jesus was ‘overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death’ (Matthew 26:38), let us remember that he knew he was about to suffer the agonies of the lost and be separated from God forever.

This is the mystery that solves all other mysteries. Once we understand the meaning of the infinite pain of the God-man, we have the key to our salvation. Once we understand the reason for his darkness, our own darkness is banished.

While Gethsemane and Calvary make up the worst thing the universe has ever seen (man murdering his Creator), they also make up the best thing the universe has ever seen (the Creator freely giving his life for man so that we could live forever in a world free of sin).

Gethsemane and Calvary tell us that pain does not mean we are alone. Jesus’ cry from the Cross, ‘My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?’ assures us that we can feel abandoned when we are not. When Jesus died, he took upon himself all God’s abandonment of us, which means that God now has only love for us.

Have you noticed that the curses pronounced upon Adam for his sin in Eden all fell upon Jesus? When Adam sinned, he was told, ‘By the sweat of your brow you shall labour, and the ground will produce thorns and thistles.’ In Gethsemane, Jesus sweats blood, and before he is crucified, a crown of thorns is thrust onto his head.

When Adam sinned, he became naked of the presence of God’s Spirit in his life. When Jesus was crucified, he was nailed up on the Cross totally naked. When Adam sinned, he was cast out of God’s presence. When Christ took our sins upon his shoulders, he too was rejected by God.

Let us return to Gethsemane. Jesus is praying, ‘My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will’ (v. 39). The cup containing the sins of the world has been passed to Jesus to drink and he must choose to either drink it or reject it. If he rejects it, each one of us will have to drink the toxic contents of our own cup. Either Jesus drinks our cup for us, or we will have to drink it ourselves. Finally he prays, ‘My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken

away unless I drink it, may your will be done' (Matthew 26:42). Jesus chose to drink our cup for us.

The agony in the garden prepared Jesus for the agony of the Cross. Gethsemane was the place of decision; Calvary was the place of action. Both Jesus and Judas made their ultimate decisions in the garden. Jesus decided for us; Judas decided against Christ. Mankind was ruined in a garden, but the decision for man's redemption was also made in a garden.

As Christ prays in Gethsemane, Roman soldiers and temple officials arrive to arrest him (John 18:2–3). They are led there by Judas, 'the son of perdition' (John 17:12). As they approach, Jesus steps forward and asks, 'Who is it you want?'

'Jesus of Nazareth,' they replied.

When Jesus replied, 'I am he,' the soldiers staggered backwards and fell to the ground. Jesus demonstrated his power over his enemies to show them that he was in total control and that whatever they would do to him would be done only with his permission.

Those who came to Gethsemane to arrest Jesus were led there by Judas, one of Jesus' twelve disciples. Judas, a very talented disciple, was responsible for looking after the group's money. Unfortunately, he often stole money from the bag for himself. Judas never fully submitted to Jesus, and when Jesus rebuked him for his covetousness, he decided to get revenge by betraying Jesus to the Jewish authorities (John 12:3–7; Mark 14:6–10). This points to the last great tribulation. The main body of Christianity will, like Israel in Jesus' day, be divided into the religious hierarchy and their followers, and the faithful few who are completely devoted to Jesus. A chosen one, like Judas, 'the son of perdition' (John 17:12; 2 Thessalonians 2:3), will betray the faithful. Just as Jews and Gentiles worked together to get rid of Christ, so Church and State will unite to get rid of the faithful followers of Jesus (Revelation 13:15).

To be betrayed by a friend is unthinkable. But to be betrayed by a friend's kiss! A kiss is a token of loyalty and love. So it will be at the end of time. Antichrist will pledge loyalty to Christ's followers, but only in order to destroy them.

Biographies are favourites for many reasons. One reason is that the sorrows, the trials, the triumphs, the disappointments reflect our own

sorrows, trials, and disappointments. The fall of Judas should remind us that we have betrayed Jesus many times, and often for much less than thirty pieces of silver. Perhaps if we gave our sins the right label, we might turn from them.

‘What are you doing, Judas?’

‘I’ve come to betray you, Lord.’

‘What are you doing, Julie?’

‘I’m lying, Lord.’

‘What are you doing, Jack?’

‘I’m stealing, Lord.’

‘What are you doing, Mark?’

‘I’m committing adultery, Lord.’

If we were frank about our sins, we would see in Judas not only our badness, but also our power to resist God himself. This power is called freedom. God made us to be free, but freedom is an enormous responsibility! People who are free can do either great good or great evil.

God is a gentleman; he never puts pressure on us to follow him. Remember the rich young ruler? (Mark 10:17–23). He went away from Christ feeling sorry, and Christ let him go. He did not run after him and take him by the elbow saying, ‘Look, let me talk some sense into you.’ That is scary. It means I must be on the alert all the time in case I abuse that freedom.

Look at the soldiers who were thrown to the ground by Christ’s declaration of divinity. Did they learn from that? Apparently not! Nor did they learn from the miracle of healing Malchus’s ear (Luke 22:49–51).

They continued in their evil. And so have you and I—often.

We read that these men bound Christ’s hands. We have also been guilty of doing just that. If life is too busy for us to spend time with Christ, we bind his hands. If we ourselves have no time for our children and expect to save them, we bind his hands. Unless we live love, that is what we are doing. We are like the soldiers who bound his hands.

After Jesus was captured, he was taken to the home of the high priest to be interrogated. All the disciples, fearing that they would also be captured, fled. After a while, John and Peter rallied and followed at a

distance. At the high priest's house, they were admitted to the inner courtyard.

Peter entered the courtyard, which was a large open quadrangle paved with stone, surrounded on four sides by a two-storey building. It was a cold night and a brazier was burning in the centre. Peter moved to the fire to get warm. The girl who had been on duty at the gate noticed Peter as she passed by. She looked closely at him and said, 'You were with that Nazarene, Jesus.'

The devil is very clever. He never attacks as we expect. Had Peter been brought before Caiaphas because of his faith in Jesus, he would have died rather than deny his Lord. On this occasion, however, his questioner was just a young woman. She was like an annoying fly and Peter tried to silence her with a denial. But that denial was the thin edge of the wedge, and the devil would hammer it deeper yet to separate Peter from Jesus.

Peter, to escape further attention, moved away from the fire to the entranceway. When the servant girl saw him there, she said to those standing around, 'This fellow is one of them.' Having rejected Jesus once, it would be humiliating for him to now admit that he was Jesus' disciple, so he denied it a second time. The Levites there, rejoicing in the capture of Jesus, looked at Peter and said, 'We can tell by your accent that you are a Galilean, so you must be one of them.' This time Peter swears an oath that he doesn't know Jesus.

Just then the rooster crows a second time. Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken to him: 'Before the rooster crows twice, you will disown me three times.' At that very moment, Jesus is hustled out of an upper room and turns to look at Peter. It is a look of disappointment, a look of love, and a look of forgiveness. That look does more for Peter than the crowing of the rooster—it breaks his heart. Weeping bitterly, he rushes blindly from the house (Mark 14:66–72). Out there, alone with God, Peter was born again.

Earlier the Lord had said to him, 'Peter, when you are converted, strengthen your brothers.' So the Lord had seen it all in advance and had forgiven and restored him in advance. What love!

This is not the kind of story Christians would invent. It has the ring of truth. Only a few events are recorded in all four Gospels and this is one of them. Peter's denial of his relationship with Jesus has to be very important for John to mention it, when he knew that the other three Gospel writers had already told it.

Every clause in this description is dramatic. Little phrases can have tremendous significance. Why did Peter turn around and follow Jesus to the high priest's house? He did so because of pride. He had earlier boasted that the other disciples might forsake Jesus, but he never would (Mark 14:29–31). How could he face the others if he ran away?

That story is our story, because you and I are Peter. Christ's cause is on trial now just as it was on trial then in the high priest's residence. This is not something just out of the past. This is today! Christ's cause is on trial now, and we can deny Jesus just as Peter did. We can pretend that we are not followers of Jesus, but we must always remember that every wrong word or act is an acorn from which grows an oak tree. Every wrong act multiplies itself.

A great chain is no stronger than its weakest link. Just as one hole can sink a ship, so one sin can take down a sinner. The only safe place is to live close to Jesus. Tradition tells us that, in later years, whenever Peter took an early morning meeting and a rooster crowed, he would stop preaching. When he began again, there was such a gentleness, such a tenderness about him, that everyone in the congregation melted with him.

Jesus restored the fallen Peter and used him to proclaim the good news about his death and resurrection to the Gentile world at Pentecost. Peter became a mighty preacher for the Lord, until he, like Jesus, was crucified for his faith.

There are two basic types of treachery against the kingdom of heaven. The first is pretending you're a follower of Christ when you're not; the second is the opposite, pretending you're not a follower of Christ when you are. Judas was the first type of traitor, and Peter the second. Judas planned to betray Jesus, but Peter stumbled. Judas had no commitment to Jesus, but Peter did.

Peter believed that he could defend Jesus with his sword, but his 'enemy' ducked, and instead of cutting off his head, he just chopped off

an ear. Whenever the Church seeks to defend or advance the kingdom of God with the sword, it misses the mark. To be fair to Peter, the reason why his sword didn't take another man's life was because no one ever died in the presence of the living Jesus. He broke up every funeral he ever attended, and he was the first of the three crucified men to die.

But Christ is able to undo our mistakes. He is able to bring life out of death, victory out of defeat, and success out of failure. When in a crisis, don't rush around chopping people's ears off. If you do that, you could be frustrating God's plan. Jesus commanded Peter, 'Put your sword away! Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?' (John 18:11). Jesus doesn't need our intervention; he needs our loyalty to him and his plans.

We see our Lord offering himself in Gethsemane, voluntarily going forward to be arrested, permitting his hands to be bound, and we hear him whispering from the Cross, 'I did not save myself, so that I could save you. I did not turn my face from shame and spitting so that your face might shine like the sun. I carried a cross so that, one day, you could carry a sceptre. I wore a crown of thorns so that you might have a crown of glory. I hung in agony so that you might sit in triumph. I went into the depths so that you might rise to the heights.'

If the love of Jesus does not change us for the better, our hearts are beyond redemption.

We must not presume that Christ was captured and crucified by the Roman soldiers, the temple guards, Judas, Caiaphas, and Annas. Or even by Pontius Pilate. No, it was the Law that took Christ, and it was the Judgement and justice of God that came looking for him, for he was the One appointed to be the substitute for sinners.

Everything that happened to Christ is what should happen to the sinner. We deserve to be bound, to be spat upon, to be flogged, and to be crucified. But because Jesus took my death, I have everlasting life if I put my faith in him. Because he took my shame, I have glory. Because he took my guilt, I have his righteousness.

15

Jesus on Trial



WHEN ANNAS asked Jesus about his teachings, Jesus replied that he had always spoken openly in the synagogues and temple, where all the Jews met; he had said nothing in secret. His witnesses were the people, so Annas should ask them.

Every word spoken in secrecy is infected with doubt and sin. By contrast, our Lord was like the sunshine. And everything a follower of Jesus does should be as transparent as the sunshine.

When one of the officers smacked Jesus across the face for the way he answered Annas, Jesus responded with, ‘If I said something wrong, tell me what it was. But if I spoke the truth, why did you hit me?’ Jesus was no pushover. To be a Christian is not to be a doormat. It is to stand like a rock for what is right. Sadly we see that this ecclesiastical court set a pattern for later ones. In the two thousand years since, those religious organizations that rejected the gospel truth persecuted those who accepted it. Because the truth of the gospel challenged ‘the traditions of men’ that conflicted with the gospel, the gospel was suppressed so that the man-made traditions could remain.

Jesus was then taken to Caiaphas, the high priest who was in charge of the whole religious system. This man of great authority oozed pride. Up to twenty thousand priests served him, and all Israel respected him as the voice of God. Why did he have his job? It was his duty to preserve traditional religion—at any cost. But when the traditions of men conflict with the commandments of God, good people are polarised. In Matthew 23, Jesus attacked Caiaphas and his corrupt system for their unjust claims, their traditions, their finances, their missionary approaches, and their spirituality. It was a head-on confrontation. Now either the apostate institution must die—or Christ must. Caiaphas had the answer to that.

He said, in effect, ‘You are fools if you don’t realise that it is better to sacrifice one man than to sacrifice Judaism’ (John 11:49–50).

But Christ turns the tables on them. He tells them that the time will come when he will be their Judge. In other words, whatever they do should be done with one eye on that future event.

Jesus was brought before seven trials: first before Annas, then before Caiaphas, followed by the Sanhedrin evening trial, then, very early next morning, the Sanhedrin morning trial, then a trial before Pilate, then before Herod, then back to Pilate. The Jews brought seven charges against Jesus: that he threatened to destroy the temple, that he was a criminal, that he was perverting the nation, that he said it was wrong to pay taxes to Rome, that he stirred up the people, that he claimed to be king, and that he claimed to be the Son of God.

In addition, seven people testified of Jesus’ innocence. And his chief trial before Pontius Pilate had seven sections in which Jesus was alternatively in or out of Pilate’s presence. John’s Gospel reveals that Pilate asked Jesus seven questions, and the four Gospels reveal that Pilate said, seven times, that he found no fault in Christ. Jesus suffered seven unjust punishments: they struck him in the face, they punched him, the guards gave him a ritual beating, they flogged him, they spat on him, they struck him on the head several times with a staff, and they crucified him. The crucified Jesus had seven wounds, and his crucifixion period lasted seven hours: six hours on the cross, and the seventh being his time of rest when he was taken down. On the Cross, Jesus speaks seven times, and there are seven statements made to Jesus while he hung on the Cross.

These series of sevens are no coincidence. The Hebrew word *sheba* can be translated either ‘seven’ or ‘covenant’ (see Genesis 21:27–31). God made a covenant that he would save us from our sins, and that if we accepted his salvation, we would become his people. On the Cross, Jesus shed his blood for our salvation. He was ‘the blood of the covenant’, which would be poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins (Matthew 26:28). Whenever we drink this ‘blood’, we show that we accept Jesus as our Saviour. All the concealed sevens that are referred to above are God’s signature to this covenant promise—that Jesus is the one who will fulfil God’s part of the covenant to save us.

16

Jesus versus Caiaphas



THE MEETING between Jesus and Caiaphas was the most momentous spiritual meeting the world has ever seen. Christ, the Son of God, versus Caiaphas, the head of religion. God's religion had been in the world for over a millennium, but now it had gone to seed. It had become formal and was encrusted with the barnacles of tradition. Christ accused it of being a hollow sham, a desolate temple from which God had departed (Matthew 23:38).

The priests, instead of shepherding the people, were fleecing them. Caiaphas, angry because of Jesus' accusations, decides to rid himself of this thorn in his flesh. Jesus must die. There was one serious problem, however, the Jews had no authority to execute anyone. That right belonged only to the Romans, the occupying power.

The problem was the Jews did not have a credible case to put before the Roman procurator, Pontius Pilate. They couldn't find any witnesses who agreed. It looked as though the case against Christ was going to disintegrate. And here was Christ standing there as though he was judging them. At that point, the high priest lost his temper and demanded, 'Tell us! Are you indeed the Son of God?' In reply, Jesus tells them that he will come to them in the future as their Judge; he will come to set right all wrong.

Never be afraid to stand with the minority who love and serve Jesus. Don't be afraid of the masses that claim you are wrong. If you stand with Jesus, and if Jesus stands with you, you can say, 'The time will come when the tables will be turned, when the first shall be last and the last first.'

It was just a short time later that the earth shook under the feet of Caiaphas and his supporters, bursting open tombs and casting out their

corpses (Matthew 27:50–53). The sun hid its light and the veil in the temple tore in two, opening the way to the presence of God. All this pointed to the time when Jesus would return to our world as Judge. On that day, the tombs will again be opened (John 5:28–29).

On that day, the sun will turn black like sackcloth made of goat hair (Revelation 6:12), and God will reveal himself to all (Revelation 6:16–17).

Jesus is coming in judgement. He is coming to judge individuals, religious bodies, corporations, societies, nations, and the whole world. There is only one way to escape the condemnation of that judgement and that is to surrender our sins to him who died for them on the Cross. Those who do that will look forward to his coming with great joy (2 Timothy 4:8; 1 John 2:28). Those who don't do that will be full of fear at his coming (Revelation 1:7; 6:12–17). They will be consumed by their sins.

Caiaphas decided that if he was going to save the Church, Christ had to die.

But Christ came to save the Church. On whose side would we have stood had we been there that day? Would we have stood with Caiaphas in order to protect the Church and its corruption and traditional teachings? Or would we have stood with Christ and God's Word?

We have to choose continually between Christ and the Church, between what is popular and what is true, between what is wrong and what is right. Dr. Arthur Beitz said, "There is no need to crucify Christ in order to save the institution. Unless Christ lives, the institution is already dead!"

Our destiny depends on what we do with Jesus. What are we doing with Jesus called the Christ? In every choice, we choose Caiaphas or Christ; we choose hell or we choose heaven. Whenever Christ confronts us with his truth and claims, we are choosing our ultimate destiny.

Judas chose to stand with Caiaphas, but later came to the conclusion that his rejection of Jesus was a bad choice. He returned the money that he had received for betraying Jesus to the chief priests and elders and confessed that he had betrayed innocent blood (Matthew 27:3–5).

There are many Judases in the Church today, people who receive income from religious organisations but who betray Jesus and his gospel.

Instead of standing by faith with Christ who has promised to provide for their needs (Matthew 6:25–34), they stand with those who provide them with financial security in this world.

The choice is ours: faith in Jesus or silver in the hand.

Those who choose silver in the hand over faith in Jesus' care for them will one day regret being so faithless and short-sighted and will, like Judas, confess their error, but it will be too late. It is not their sins that will destroy them but their failure to stand with Jesus.

Sin looks wonderfully attractive before we yield to it, but the moment we sin, its glory departs. Before we sin, the act of sin seems small and the reward very great, but afterwards, these things change places. The reward now seems very small and the sin looms up like a mountain. The devil entices us with empty promises, and afterwards, our weight of guilt is enough to drive us to despair. Sin never gives what it promises; its bait has a wicked hook in it.

Consider the reaction of the priests to the remorse of Judas: 'What is that to us?' they sneered. 'That's your responsibility' (Matthew 27:4). Like Cain who murdered his brother, they did not accept the responsibility of being their brother's keeper. We can easily tell whether we belong to Christ or Satan by how we treat our brother.

If we help carry the burdens of our brothers and sisters, we belong to Jesus. If we care only for ourselves and not for our brothers and sisters in need, we belong to Satan.

There is One who really does care for us. He invites, 'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest' (Matthew 11:28).

Jesus versus Pilate



WE HAVE LOOKED at Jesus being judged by the religious authorities. We will now look at him being judged by the political authorities.

The chief leaders of Israel hurry Jesus into the presence of Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Palestine. Pilate had come up from his residence in the seaside city of Caesarea Maritima. He didn't often come up to Jerusalem because it was too dull a place for him. He preferred a society that was more showy and exciting.

When he did come, he stayed in Herod's palace. That is where Christ was taken. But the Jews will not enter the home of a non-Jew prior to a festival for fear of being 'defiled', because such a defilement would prevent them from observing the Passover. With Jesus in tow, they arrived at the great estate with its many parks, a beautiful wide carriage way, and little lakes surrounded by attractive trees.

After crossing the forecourt, they advised one of the soldiers at the door that they had come to see Pilate and to hand the prisoner, Jesus, over to them. But they would not enter themselves.

These Jewish leaders did not understand that by handing Jesus over to unbelievers, they, as a nation, were rejecting their Messiah and were offering him to the Gentiles.

So Pilate is gotten out of bed at six o'clock in the morning, and he is not at all happy about that. For Pilate, contact with the Jews was one of the less-desirable aspects of his work. He hated the Jews, and the Jews hated him.

Pilate came out to meet the Jewish delegation that had brought Jesus and asked, 'What charges are you bringing against this man?'

They evade his question by answering, 'If he were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you.'

Pilate, becoming suspicious about their intentions, replied, ‘Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law.’

‘But we have no right to execute anyone,’ the Jews replied.

The Jews executed people by stoning them to death. Jesus, however, had predicted that he would die by crucifixion (Luke 24:6–8), a punishment that would allow him to endure the extinguishing of his spirit, which is the price he would pay for our sins.

Pilate asked his soldiers to bring him the prisoner. When Jesus was standing before him, he asked, ‘Are you king of the Jews?’ (John 18:33). Pilate well knew the desire of the Jews to be free of Rome with their own king ruling over them, and that worried him.

Jesus admits that he is guilty of the charge, but in such a way that he is innocent. How can that be? Because his kingdom is not of this world. If it were of this world, his servants would fight. Christ’s kingdom is a spiritual kingdom in the hearts of people, a kingdom that would one day have citizens from every nation on Earth. Yes, Jesus was King of kings and Lord of lords.

Pilate soon came to understand that the Jews had delivered Jesus to him, not because Jesus had done anything wrong, but because they envied him (Mark 15:10). Again and again Pilate wanted to set Jesus free. Luke 23:20 states that he was willing to do so. John 19:12 says he wanted to release him. Acts 3:13 records that he was determined to free him.

Pilate told the Jews to judge Jesus themselves. When these attempts failed, he sent Jesus to Herod. When Herod sent him back, Pilate offered the Jews the terrorist Barabbas in exchange for Christ, but even that failed.

Pilate had the authority to release Jesus, but the cost of doing so was more than he was willing to pay. The Jews told him quite clearly that if he didn’t execute Jesus, they would report him to Rome. Pilate, who already had a questionable record, knew that if they did that, he would lose his position as governor. It therefore came down to either him or Jesus. One of them would go down, but Pilate determined that it wouldn’t be him. So he gave the order to crucify Jesus.

18

Jesus or Barabbas



ALL THE TRIALS of Jesus were unjust. Each of the judges was also the prosecutor, and no witnesses were allowed for the defence of Jesus. The trials at which the decision was made to have Christ executed took place at night, which was illegal. Usually in trials where Pilate was the judge, the accused was permitted to face the accuser, but this did not happen with Jesus.

After Pilate had climbed out of bed to see why the Jewish priests had come to his residence at such an early hour, his wife had a disturbing dream. She wrote a note and sent it by messenger to Pilate. Pilate was sitting on the judge's seat when the note was handed to him. He opened it and read, 'Don't have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him.'

Only rarely would a wife send a copy of her dream to her husband at work, especially if that husband was a governor and judge. Obviously this dream stood out from all others. She was compelled, by the nature and force of the dream, to try and stop her husband from condemning an innocent man. God was using every means possible to persuade Pilate against making the biggest mistake in his career.

When Pilate asked Jesus, 'Don't you realise that I have power to free you or crucify you?' Jesus replied, 'You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above' (John 19:11).

Jesus' reply is a precious jewel that can bring us peace in every difficulty. God watches over us as surely as he watched over Jesus. He is aware of every hair that falls from our heads (Matthew 10:29–31). Nothing will happen to us without his permission. We must learn to say about every trouble, every trial, every frustration, 'You would have no power over me if it were not given you from above.'

Pilate then reluctantly produced his ace card. Three insurgents, guilty of murder, had been captured and were awaiting crucifixion on death row (Mark 15:7; Luke 23:19). Their leader was a man called Barabbas, a name that means ‘son of his father’. It was the custom at a Jewish festival for the Romans to release a prisoner that the people wanted freed. Pilate had four prisoners for them to choose from. He knew that the leaders wanted Jesus crucified, but he was banking on the popular support of the people to choose Jesus.

“Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews,” asked Pilate, knowing it was out of envy that the chief priests had handed Jesus over to him. But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have Pilate release Barabbas instead.

“What shall I do then, with the one you call the king of the Jews?” Pilate asked them.

“Crucify him!” they shouted.

“Why? What crime has he committed?” asked Pilate.

But they shouted all the louder, “Crucify him!”

Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged and handed him over to be crucified’ (Mark 15:9–15).

The choices made there were choices made because people yielded to human pressure rather than to truth and righteousness. The crowd yielded to the chief priests, and Pilate yielded to the crowd. No one yielded to God.

We too are guilty of yielding to human authorities rather than to Jesus when pushed into a corner. The nature of our character is revealed when we are forced to do something wrong to save ourselves. The choice we make in that situation is the choice that reveals who we really are.

In nothing do we see more clearly the weakness of our human nature and its depravity than in the cry that goes up, ‘Not this man but Barabbas!’ Think what it means. Think what it tells about our own hearts. In every decision, we are making this choice. In the words we choose to speak, we stand for either the devil or for Christ. In the things we do, the ambitions we cherish, we choose either Barabbas or Christ. There are no fence sitters, no neutrals. ‘The one who is not with me,’ said Jesus, ‘is against me.’

Picture Barabbas lying in prison waiting for the executioner when he hears the bolt being withdrawn and the iron door to his cell creaks open.

But instead of an executioner, there is a man with a smiling face, saying, 'You're free.' Barabbas retorts, 'Don't joke with me. You're talking rubbish.' He is then told, 'Jesus of Nazareth is going to die on the Cross instead of you. So get out of here! You're free!'

Here is the heart of the gospel. You and I are Barabbas—children of our earthly father. We are condemned to die because we have turned our backs on our heavenly Father. But an innocent One has chosen to take our place and die for us. He will suffer, he will agonise, he will endure that we might be set free. Christ goes to the Cross naked so that we might be clothed in his spotless robe of righteousness. Christ wears a crown of thorns that we might have a crown of glory. His body was bruised and pierced that ours might be glorified.

Suppose Barabbas had refused to believe the message that he was now free. Suppose he insisted on going to his death anyway. Can you imagine anything as foolish as that? But this foolishness is seen everywhere.

Millions in the world refuse to believe that Jesus died in their place. Millions reject their freedom and insist on going to their own 'crucifixion', which will have eternal results. They will not believe the good news. They cannot believe in a God who could love like that.

Or suppose Barabbas had said, 'When I have reformed and become a better citizen, then I will accept this pardon.' His jailers would have retorted, 'Don't be crazy. You've got to be free before you can become a useful member of society.'

To become a good person so that you can have union with Christ is a false gospel. The real gospel is inviting Christ into your life by faith, so that you will have the motivation and power to become a good person.

As the soldiers were leading Jesus out to the place where he would be executed, 'they seized Simon from Cyrene . . . and put the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus' (Luke 23:26). God's hand was in this also. Simon was a Gentile from North Africa, the first to take up the Cross and follow Jesus. His sons, Alexander and Rufus, became followers of Jesus and were well-known in the early Church (Mark 15:21; Romans 16:13). Jesus died, not just for the Jews, but also for the sins of 'the whole world' (1 John 2:2).

19

Jesus on the Cross



THE TWO TERRORISTS who had been captured with Barabbas were led out to Calvary with Jesus. When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified Jesus, along with the terrorists—one on his right and the other on his left. Jesus prayed for those who crucified him: ‘Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing’ (Luke 23:32–34).

Through Jesus we have come to the Holy of Holies (Hebrews 4:16). The Cross of Calvary is God’s greatest revelation of truth. It reveals to us the true nature of the God we worship—a God who is not only righteous and holy, but who is also prepared to fully sacrifice himself for us. No other god ever sacrificed himself for his people. Instead, other gods demanded sacrifices from their people. Our God gave himself as a sacrifice for us so that we could be totally free of condemnation.

The Cross was the true altar on which the Lamb of God was slain for the sins of the world. His blood was shed there for your sins so that you would be set free from the law’s condemnation (John 3:18; Romans 8:1).

The Cross was also the place where God’s judgement was executed upon sin, as was signified by the darkness, the thundering, the earthquake, and the opening of the graves of the righteous (Matthew 27:50–53).

Just as Jesus’ Cross divided the two men who were crucified with him into the saved and the lost, so it divides the whole world into the saved and the lost. One day all of us will be lined up behind one of these men or the other according to how we respond to Jesus. Like these two men, we are all deserving of death.

The only difference is that some of us are penitent.

At Calvary, love and hate meet. The Creator is determined to sacrifice himself for his creatures, and the creatures are determined to murder

their Creator. But the moment Jesus' blood spurts forth as the nails are driven into his hands and feet, he pleads, 'Father, forgive them ...'

We were there that day. We swung the hammer, and we drove in the nails. It was our sinfulness that put Jesus on the Cross. It was for our sins that he was nailed up there so we could be forgiven.

Calvary was hell—physical and spiritual hell. It was the only thing man had ever created, and Christ had committed himself to its depths in order to destroy it from within for all who put their faith in him. Either Jesus takes our place in hell, or we go there ourselves. There is no other choice.

Christ on the Cross is the reason God can forgive sin. It is at Calvary that we learn what true religion is all about. It is about unbelievable love, it is about forgiveness, it is about righteousness, it is about hope in our deepest darkness, and it is about joy eventually triumphing over sorrow.

Someone wrote that the Cross was the Sermon on the Mount lived, the Ten Commandments revealed, and 1 Corinthians 13 demonstrated. There we see the fruit of the Spirit at its best and ripest.

On the Cross, Jesus took the sting of death. When a bee stings someone, it kills itself because it loses part of its body and can sting no more. When death stung Christ, it destroyed itself. That is why Paul wrote, 'O death where is your sting, O grave where is your victory?' (1 Corinthians 15:55). Jesus took the sting of death for us so that we might live eternally.

The Gospel records tell us that the three crosses were erected near a road. The people who passed by wagged their heads at Jesus. They jeered at the rejected King. And so it still is. Many on their journey, who happen to pass by the crucified Jesus, jeer and mock him. There were a few who stopped and who saw the glory through the disguise of blood, sweat, and flies. They confessed, with the centurion, 'Surely, this is the Son of God.'

And so it is today: while the majority will mock, and while Christianity and its followers will never be popular, there will always be some who will see the glory through the gloom.

It was at the time of the Passover that our Lord died. For fifteen centuries, the Jewish nation had foretold the date of their Messiah's death, which would be on the fourteenth day of the first month, when sacrifices

for every family were slain at 3:00 p.m. On that very month, very day, and very hour, Christ, ‘our Passover Lamb’, was sacrificed for us on the Cross (1 Corinthians 5:7). Just as the slain lamb at the first Passover set the children of Israel free from their slavery in Egypt and put them on the road to Canaan, so Jesus’ death at the last Passover set us free from our bondage to Satan and put us on the road to the heavenly Canaan.

Christ’s passive acceptance of the Cross teaches us that where we cannot change things for the better, we must trust in God who can and who will, in his own good time, turn our crown of thorns into a diadem of glory.

Our Lord was stripped naked before he was nailed to the Cross. There was no loincloth. Suspended in the air, as one rejected by heaven and earth, it is made clear that he owns nothing, that he has no right to anything. Imagine that, the owner of the universe stripped naked! He gave up everything that we might inherit everything.

Crucifixion was not death—it was the prolonged, agonising process of dying. All of life is a crucifixion that lasts until we die. We must learn how to handle it by looking at the One who was there in our place.

The very shape of the Cross suggests the length, the breadth, the depth, and the height of God’s love. It points to heaven where our Lord came from, but is rooted in the earth that he came to redeem. The outstretched arms are an invitation to all men, even his crucifiers, to come to him. Men may reject an angry god, but how can they reject the suffering One who was prepared to die for them?

Jesus' Seven Sayings from the Cross



WHILE JESUS hung from the Cross, he uttered seven sayings. These seven sayings describe the seven main duties of Christ's followers.

Any deathbed words are precious. How much more so when they are the dying words of Jesus Christ, God's Son? Here they are:

First, the word of forgiveness for his enemies: 'Father, forgive them, for they don't understand what they are doing' (Luke 23:34).

Second, the word of salvation to a repentant criminal executed with him: 'I promise that you will be with me in paradise today' (Luke 23:43).

Third, the word of support for his mother: 'This man is now your son.' Then he said to John, 'She is now your mother' (John 19:26–27).

Fourth, the word of anguish to God: 'My God, my God, why have you deserted me?' (Matthew 27:46).

Fifth, the word of suffering to the spectators: 'I am thirsty!' (John 19:28).

Sixth, the word of victory to his people: 'Everything is done!' (John 19:30).

Seventh, the word of committal to his Father: 'Father, I put myself in your hands!' (Luke 23:46).

1. The first word from the Cross is very significant. It is 'Father'. We can put up with the hard things of life if we know a loving Father is caring for us. We can endure almost anything if there is a good reason for it. A child will tolerate the most distasteful medicine if it is a parent's hand that gives it. But to be alone, unloved, and suffering without meaning weakens and destroys.

Jesus' seven sayings were addressed to friends and enemies standing near the Cross. As usual with the sevens of scripture, they are divided

into sets of three and four, with the first set dedicated entirely to the needs of others. Following these, a mysterious darkness blanketed the area for three hours, during which Christ was silent. At the end of this time, Christ cried out, 'My God, my God, why have you deserted me?' (Matthew 27:46). Then, one after the other in quick succession came the last three sayings.

The Roman soldiers and the casual passers-by expected a stream of curses from the three crucified men.

According to Seneca, a Roman statesman and philosopher, those who were crucified cursed the day they were born, their mothers, their executioners, and often spat on those below them. On occasions, the tongues of the crucified ones were cut out to stop their blasphemies and cursing. Instead Jesus prayed for those who crucified him, asking God to forgive them.

We do not begin to live until we shut the door on the past through forgiveness. And no one lives properly until they have experienced forgiveness themselves. Fortunately, it's not hard to know when we have received forgiveness ourselves. Just as you can't give money to someone else until you have received it yourself, so you cannot give forgiveness to anyone else until you have received it yourself. If you are unable to forgive someone who has sinned against you, it is because you haven't received forgiveness yourself. And if you aren't forgiven, then you aren't saved (Matthew 6:14–15). Forgiveness is a bridge that we must all pass over to enter the kingdom of God.

Every relationship in life calls for forgiveness. There are no perfect wives, perfect husbands, or perfect children. There are no perfect employers or perfect employees. And there are no perfect friends or neighbours. For this reason, forgiveness must be the very essence of our relationships with others. It must be as natural as breathing.

2. Let us now consider the word of salvation. If it was possible for Jesus to give eternal life to the penitent insurgent on the Cross—a man who had nothing good to recommend him to God—need any of us worry about whether God will accept us? But don't leave your repentance until the eleventh hour because you could die at ten-thirty.

The most encouraging thing that happened to Jesus on the Cross was that one of the insurgents who had been cursing became silent with bewilderment as he observed Jesus' attitude. The way Jesus reacted to his crucifixion was totally different to the way he and his companion were reacting. Then he recalled the stories he had heard about Jesus and realised they were true. At that point, he hated himself and the life he had lived.

How he wished that he could be like Jesus who healed people instead of killing them. Turning to his companion who was insulting Jesus, he asked, 'Don't you fear God? Aren't you getting the same punishment as this man? We got what was coming to us, but he didn't do anything wrong' (Luke 23:40–41).

By these words, the penitent one revealed, at this point, that he was wiser than Annas, Caiaphas, the Sanhedrin, Pilate, and Herod. From his high court, he reversed their verdict on Jesus. Then turning his head to the Lord, he prayed, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom!'

Notice the difference between the penitent thief and his companion. He did not ask for life in this world.

He did not ask to be taken down from the cross. For the first time in his life, he had his priorities right.

Why did the Jews kill Jesus? Because they wanted a Messiah who would give them a worldly kingdom. Jesus, however, only offered them God! Are we not just as foolish with our desires? We want worldly things until we are smothered in them, and God is squeezed out.

This penitent criminal is a pattern of salvation for all of us. He was saved by faith in Jesus and not by works (see Ephesians 2:8–9). Notice how quickly the Lord responds: 'I promise that you will be with me in paradise today.' The very day the penitent criminal put his faith in Jesus, he was registered as a citizen of Christ's kingdom. Christ himself declared his destiny.

What a marvellous man this insurgent was. But there was an even more marvellous man beside him. Christ promised eternal life to a man who, just a few minutes before, had been cursing him. There is grace at its best, at its highest and deepest, at its surest. It means that none of us

need despair, whatever our past, whatever our weakness or badness. We have a Saviour. If you are a big sinner, you have an even bigger Saviour.

Consider also that no matter what trials you are going through, the Lord Jesus has been through worse.

The repentant felon would only die the first death; Jesus who was crucified beside him was about to die the second death—the death that offered him no future beyond the grave.

3. The third word of our Lord on the Cross was his word of affection for his mother. He sees her standing there looking as though she was experiencing the pains of crucifixion herself. She remembers that at his birth she had been warned that a sword would pierce her heart. How true! She is unaware, at that point, that her Son is engaged in his Father's business. Even so, he does not neglect his duty to his family. He asks John to care for his mother just as a son should.

4. In the fourth word from the Cross—'My God, my God, why have you deserted me?'—we find the reason for Christ's death. The records of time and eternity do not contain a sentence that is more full of anguish. It is not death that is the ultimate penalty for sin—it is separation from God. When God, who is the source of life, hope, joy and peace, abandons someone, all life, hope, joy, and peace depart with him. And that is hell. Apart from God, there is no future at all, only a black hole of total extinction.

Christ, who bore the sin of the world, had to experience this separation. God intended to annihilate sin forever, and so Christ who carried our sin was being annihilated with it. Either Christ is destroyed with our sin, or we will be. There is no alternative.

Jesus was rejected so that we will be accepted. God separated himself from Jesus so that he might become one with us. Jesus was left all alone so that we might become members of the family of God. Jesus was annihilated so that we could live forever. That is the sacrifice that our Lord made for us. He gave up everything so that we might inherit everything.

5. Next came the word of suffering. 'I thirst.' No complaints about his discomfort and pain came from Christ's lips. He did not utter a single word of self-pity. He just made a statement of fact: 'I thirst.' A soldier

soaked a sponge in some non-intoxicating sour ration wine and held it up to Christ's lips. This wine that he drank typified the wine of our sins (Matthew 26:39). Jesus swallowed it all, knowing that by doing so, there would be no way back.

6. Next came Jesus' sixth saying at the sixth hour on the Cross, on the sixth day of the week. He shouted victoriously, 'It is finished!' (John 19:30). In the original language, it is just one word. But what a library there is in that one word. That same word for a debtor meant that his debt was paid in full. That same word for a prisoner meant that his sentence was completed. And so it is with us: our debt to God is paid in full and our sentence of death has been completed. 'Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus' (Romans 8:1).

At the same moment that Jesus uttered these words, 'the curtain of the temple was torn in two from the top to the bottom', showing that Jesus, by his death, had removed the barrier that kept man from God so that we could now boldly enter the presence of the Lord (Matthew 27:51; Hebrews 10:19–22). He was excluded from God's presence so that we could enter in.

7. Christ's last word is to his Father: 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit' (Luke 23:46). Like Job who refused to let go of his faith in God despite his perplexing sufferings, Jesus committed himself to his Father even though there appeared to be no escape from destruction for him.

As our Lord uttered his last words, their sound was mingled with the cries of thousands of Passover lambs in the outer court of the temple on the opposite hill. But our faith is not in the blood of lambs, but in the blood of 'Christ, our Passover lamb' (1 Corinthians 5:7) who was sacrificed for us.

We are very familiar with the Seven Sayings *from* the Cross, but there were also Seven Sayings *to* the Cross. These seven sayings to the Cross came from passers-by (Matthew 27:39–40); the insurgent on the left (Luke 23:39); the insurgent on the right (Luke 23:40–42); the chief priests, teachers of the law and the elders (Matthew 27:41–43), some people standing near the Cross (Mark 15:35); the soldiers (Luke 23:36–37); and the centurion (Mark 15:39).

We discover from two of these sayings that the new Tree of Life was already bearing fruit: the penitent insurgent who was a murderer, and the centurion—two men who represented the two extremes of the spectrum of the redeemed. But for most of the beholders, the Cross was a waste. It remains that way even today.

An unknown author wrote, 'Jesus began his ministry by being hungry, yet he is the Bread of Life. Jesus ended his ministry by being thirsty, yet he is the living water. Jesus was weary, yet he is our rest. Jesus paid tribute, yet he is the King. Jesus was accused of having demons, yet he cast out demons. Jesus wept, but he wipes away our tears. Jesus was sold for thirty pieces of silver, but he redeemed the world. Jesus was brought as a lamb to the slaughter, but he is the Good Shepherd. Jesus died, yet by his death he destroyed the power of death.'

21

Faces around the Cross



LET US START with the two men who were crucified with Jesus. They were both terrorists. Jesus, who was crucified between them, had sin on him but not in him. The man on his right is a man who had sin in him but not on him because he had been forgiven. The man on the Saviour's left had sin both on him and in him. Because he had not asked for forgiveness, his guilt remained on him.

What does this mean for us today? Think about the man who was saved. He was our Lord's last close friend. He had the courage to admit that he was wrong. He even reversed the verdict of the chief priests and rabbis when he said of Jesus, 'This man has done nothing wrong.' This repentant sinner represents all repentant sinners. We still have sin in us (even though we hate it), but it is now not on us because we have given it to Jesus who became sin for us (2 Corinthians 5:21). We have been forgiven and our guilt has been removed.

Look now at the other terrorist who did not give up his sins to Jesus. He was just as near to Jesus as his companion, but he would not acknowledge the evil in his heart; he would not accept that he was spiritually sick. Only those who accept they are sick will go to a doctor; only those who acknowledge they are sinners will seek a Saviour.

Is salvation hard or easy? It is not only difficult, it's impossible unless you want to be a better person. There are multitudes, both religious and irreligious, who trust themselves more than they trust Jesus. Like the unrepentant terrorist on Jesus' left, they shall die in their sins.

Look now at the soldiers around the Cross. Matthew 27:35 says, 'When they had crucified him, they divided up his clothes by casting lots. And sitting down they kept watch over him there.' Here are men sitting, gambling, and watching. They were watching but they did not see who

they were really looking at. A cat can look at a king, but a cat never sees a king. And so with these soldiers who saw Jesus as just another rebel receiving the ultimate punishment for his deeds.

The soldiers who crucified Jesus represent the whole human race. Jesus didn't die for his own sins because he didn't have any; he died for the sins of the world. But the careless world, like the soldiers, doesn't see the Son of God on the Cross dying for their sins. Because they are spiritually blind they see just another despised person hanging there. What a terrible waste! Jesus died to set them free from their sins, but they love their sins more than they love Jesus.

One of the faces at the Cross was the centurion's face. He was there because he was in charge of the crucifixion squad. He noticed the kind of person that Jesus was and heard every word he spoke. The three hours of supernatural darkness and the great earthquake that shook the ground violently the very moment Jesus died signified to him that Jesus was no ordinary person. "The centurion seeing what had happened praised God and said, "Surely this was a righteous man"" (Luke 23:47). This man who was responsible for the execution of Jesus confessed his faith in the Saviour. What a wonderful gospel; it can change even the hearts of those who crucify the Lord; it can transform enemies into friends.

"The chief priests, the teachers of the law, and the elders' were also there at the Cross. "They mocked him and said to those passing by, "He saved others, but he can't save himself"" (Matthew 27:41-42). What they said was true. If Jesus had saved himself, he could not have saved others. He had to die for the sins of the world.

These religious leaders, like many religious leaders today who put their faith in their traditions and institutions rather than in Jesus, were opposed to Jesus. They called out, so everyone could hear, 'He's the King of Israel! Let him come down now from the Cross, and we will believe him. He trusts in God, let God rescue him' (Matthew 27:42-43). Their promises, however, were completely hollow, for when Jesus did escape from death, and God did rescue him from the grave, they still did not believe him. Who would want to be in the shoes of those hypocrites on the Day of Judgement?

Others at the Cross were ‘all those who knew him, including the women who had followed him from Galilee’. They stood at a distance watching these things (Luke 23:49). As the end drew near for Jesus, a few of them came and stood nearby to comfort him (John 19:25–26). They did not understand why Jesus was allowing these terrible things to happen to him. He had overcome every other challenge in his life; why was he yielding to this one? Why didn’t he reveal his power and come down from the cross?

Many times in life we ask the same question: why doesn’t God do something? Why is he allowing this great evil? There is a reason. We just have to trust that God will act in his own time.

And when he does act, it will be seen that his timing was the best. So have faith in God, especially when travelling through the valley of the shadow of death.

Lessons from the Cross



The Inscription

ABOVE CHRIST'S head was 'the written notice of the charge against him: "THE KING OF THE JEWS"' (Mark 15:26). It was written in Aramaic, Latin, and Greek (John 19:20) so that everyone who passed by could read it. That notice, which was a little Bible for the whole world, told the truth about Jesus.

If Jesus had not died for us on the Cross, he would have had no kingdom on Earth. It was his death that paid the price for our sins so that we could leave Satan's temporal kingdom and enter his eternal kingdom (Colossians 1:13–14). By his death, he opened the door for us to return to the land of life from the land of death (Matthew 27:50–51; Hebrews 10:19–22). Only those redeemed by the blood of the Lamb can enter there (Revelation 7:14–15); only the forgiven can become citizens of heaven (Revelation 5:9–10).

The only one who could sit on the throne of eternal life was the One who could endure the throne of eternal death—the Cross. Because Jesus endured the Cross for us, he was crowned king. After his resurrection from the dead, he said to his disciples, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me' (Matthew 28:18; see Philippians 2:9–10), No one can have higher authority than that. Yes, Jesus is king of every true believer.

The Crown of Thorns

The soldiers put a purple robe on Jesus, then twisted together a crown of thorns and placed it on his head. They called out to him, 'Hail, king of the Jews!' Again and again they struck him on the head with a staff and spat on him. Falling on their knees, they paid mock homage to him (Mark 15:16–19).

Jesus endured our humiliation and mockery so that we might receive the honour and respect that was due to him.

The thorns that trouble us cannot trouble us for eternity because Jesus took the eternity out of our troubles. But as long as we are in this world, we will have thorns to contend with. There is no crown without thorns, no family without problems, and no human heart without sorrow. Even the apostle Paul was plagued by a thorn that troubled him. Three times he prayed that the Lord would remove his thorn, but each time the Lord said, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness’ (2 Corinthians 12:7–10). Whatever your thorn is, bear it with grace for Jesus’ sake, remembering that the day will soon come when the thorns that came into our world with sin (Genesis 3:18) shall be banished forever with the sin that sprouted them.

The Darkness

‘From the sixth hour [midday] until the ninth hour [3:00 p.m.], darkness came over all the land. About the ninth hour, Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?*” —which means, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”’ (Matthew 27:45–46).

At midday, when the sun was shining its brightest, deep darkness came over the land. The God who dwells in unapproachable light (1 Timothy 6:16) was withdrawing from Jesus. The eternal relationship between Father and Son was being severed. Light was yielding to darkness, peace to fear, hope to despair, security to insecurity, life to death. As soon as this plague of darkness was over, the Passover angel came to take the life of the God’s firstborn Son. He gave his life for us so that we might live.

There was darkness over the whole land of Egypt before the firstborn died (Exodus 10–11), but there was light in the dwellings of the Israelites who were protected by the blood of the Passover lamb. Wherever, today, there is faith in the Lamb of God, there is light.

When Jesus cried out, ‘My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?’ his words were a bright light illuminating the scene. He, the righteous One, was forsaken so that we, the unrighteous, might be accepted.

His death is the gospel light that banishes darkness. If we don’t share that gospel light, but hide it under a bowl, there will be nothing but hopelessness, emptiness, and death (Matthew 5:14-16).

His Garment

When the soldiers crucified Jesus, they took his clothes, dividing them into four shares, one for each of them, with the undergarment remaining. This garment was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom. “Let’s not tear it,” they said to one another. “Let’s decide by lot who will get it.” This happened that the scripture might be fulfilled which said, “They divided my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing.” So this is what the soldiers did’ (John 19:23–24).

Jesus was stripped naked. He had done that thirty-three years before when he stripped himself of his heavenly glory and was born here on Earth as a naked human child. Just twenty-four hours before he was crucified, Jesus acted this out when he removed his outer garment and wrapped a towel around his waist in order to wash his disciples’ feet.

Jesus’ inner garment, which was seamless, was a priestly garment. This robe went to the soldiers who crucified Jesus. And that is what still happens today.

We are the crucifiers, and Christ’s robe of righteousness is made available to us. When we put our faith in Jesus, our sins are covered by his righteousness. Isaiah wrote, ‘I will delight greatly in the Lord; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness’ (Isaiah 61:10).

The Torn Veil

The earthquake that marked the death of Jesus tore, from top to bottom, the heavy curtain that separated the Holy Place of the temple from the Most Holy Place where the presence of God was manifest (Matthew 27:51). That same earthquake also broke open the tombs of many faithful believers. These people were raised to life, and after Jesus was resurrected from the dead, they went into the holy city and appeared to many people (Matthew 27:52–53).

It was Jesus’ death that opened the way back to God—the way that had been sealed shut since Adam was cast out of Eden (Genesis 3:22–24). The Bible says, ‘Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body . . . let us draw near to God’ (Hebrews 10:19–20).

The curtain between God and us represented our sins that kept us from God, but when Jesus took our sins upon himself, the curtain then represented his body. When the body of Jesus was torn on the Cross, that curtain was also torn. When his death did away with our sins, the barrier between God and us was done away with. His death opened the way back to God.

Spiritually, we who were dead in sin were raised to life when Jesus died for us. And at his resurrection from the dead, we entered the Holy City to live in the presence of God, Jesus, and the heavenly angels (Hebrews 12:22–24).

The Blood and Water

If any prisoner escaped from a Roman soldier, that soldier was executed (see Acts 12:18–19). That was the law. If there was a risk that crucified prisoners might escape when they were taken down from their crosses, they were killed (see Acts 27:42). To guarantee that Jesus was properly dead, a Roman soldier drove his spear into Jesus' heart, 'bringing a sudden flow of blood and water' (John 19:34). These soldiers were professional killers. They knew what wounds were survivable and what wounds weren't. Jesus' wound was unsurvivable.

Jesus' blood represented our justification; it is the blood of Jesus that makes us right with God (1 John 1:7). The water, on the other hand, represents our sanctification by the Spirit of Jesus living in us; he cleanses us by washing us with the water of his word (Ephesians 5:25).

Justification is the work of a moment. The instant we put our faith in Jesus, we are made right with God (Romans 3:21–24, 28). That very instant, we receive the gift of eternal life (John 5:24). Also, at that same moment, the righteousness of God is credited to our accounts (2 Corinthians 5:21). Like the lost son who had lived a sinful life, but repented and returned home, so the Lord accepts us repentant sinners back into his family and puts his own pure robe on our shoulders (Luke 15:11–24). We don't have to earn our place in God's family; it is given to us as a free gift.

All who are justified are given 100 per cent righteousness (2 Corinthians 5:21). But that righteousness is not inside us; it is in Jesus. If we have Jesus, we have God's free gift of perfect righteousness.

Sanctification—what the Spirit of God does in us—is never 100 per cent. And it never will be 100 per cent until we are given new spiritual bodies in the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:42–44). Because our sanctification in this life will always fall short of what is required for eternal life, we cannot put our faith in what we ourselves do. The faith that gives us eternal life is faith that is in Jesus and his free gift of 100 per cent righteousness.

The gospel teaches that Christ was treated as a sinner, which he wasn't, while we are treated as righteous, which we aren't. He was punished for sins he did not commit, and we are made right with God by a righteousness that we did not earn. There is nothing so encouraging as justification, which means that I have been made right with God. It tells me that the blood of Jesus has covered all my sins—past, present, and future. As long as I cling to Jesus by faith, I have eternal life. Even when I stumble and fall, if I get up and take hold of the hand of the Man of Galilee, I am forgiven and made right with God.

When I accept Jesus by faith, he comes into my life with his gift of salvation. If I have Jesus, I have eternal life (1 John 5:11–12). And the life that he lives within me, after I have been saved, is called sanctification (Philippians 2:13).

However, I am only saved by what he did for me on the Cross two thousand years ago and not by what he is doing within me today.

What he did for me on the Cross is 100 per cent; what he is doing within me is never 100 per cent in this life because of the damage that sin has done to our minds.

Jesus Rests in the Grave



ONE OF THE main days of Easter, observed by the Christian Church for the first five hundred years, was Great Sabbath, the day that Jesus rested in the tomb. This day celebrated the rest that Jesus won for us by his death on the Cross. The author of Hebrews wrote, 'We who have believed enter that rest' (Hebrews 4:3).

The Hebrews who were rescued from slavery in Egypt believed that they would enter into rest when they got to the Promised Land. But Canaan did not give them the unbroken rest they expected. That promised rest was still future. 'If Joshua had given them rest [Joshua 23:1], God would not have spoken later about another day. There remains, then, a Sabbath rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his' (Hebrews 4:8–10).

The true rest from all our troubles is found only in Jesus. If we accept that Jesus died on the Cross for all our sins, the heavy load of guilt falls from our shoulders and rolls down the hill into his grave where it is buried forever. At that point, we experience true rest.

When the Lord had finished his work of creation, he said, 'It is good; it is finished,' and he rested on the Sabbath day (Genesis 2:1–3). And Adam and Eve rested with him. There was nothing they could do to improve his creation; there was nothing they could add to it. All they could do was praise the Lord for it and rest and enjoy it.

When our Lord had finished his work of redemption, he said, 'It is good; it is finished,' and he rested on the Sabbath day (Luke 23:50–56). And all who have been redeemed enter into rest with him. There is nothing we can do to improve the redemption provided by Jesus; there is

nothing we can add to it. All we can do is praise the Lord for it and enter into his rest and enjoy it.

Just as the Sabbath was a day of rest and not of work, so we who put our trust in Jesus rest in his finished work. There is nothing that we can do to earn salvation because Jesus has done it all for us. All we can do is rest in his finished work. That is the true rest. And we celebrate that rest every week when we come aside from our labour to spend time with the Lord.

24

Jesus' Empty Tomb



THE WHOLE Earth is a grave that entombs billions of people. The world is a vast cemetery where we do a little business, indulge a little pleasure, and then lie down beside the dead. Life is but a procession to our own funeral. Man has conquered many things, but death is not one of them.

There have been many great religious leaders in the world, but all of them have surrendered to death.

Only one has risen from the dead, and that is Jesus Christ. When our Lord rose from the dead, he turned the tables on sin and death. The song of the redeemed is now, 'O death, where now is your sting? O grave, where now is your victory?'

The apostle Paul wrote, 'For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep.

Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also' (1 Corinthians 15:3–8).

When Paul wrote this letter to the Church in Corinth about twenty-five years after Jesus' death and resurrection, there were still hundreds of people alive who had seen the risen Christ. Of no other person who has ever lived and died can that be said. Even if one reads this account with a vodka in one hand and a cigar in the other, it is still very impressive.

Death has been conquered! And Jesus, who rose from the dead on the third day, says to all who follow him, 'Because I live, you also will live' (John 14:19). He also said, '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' (Revelation 1:18). When Jesus returns in the clouds of heaven, he will unlock the graves of all who have faith in him and set them free (1 Thessalonians 4:16–18).

All through scripture, we are given brief glimpses of the resurrection of Jesus. In Genesis 22 is the story of Isaac, who for three days was under the sentence of death, but was rescued from that death as in a resurrection (see Hebrews 11:19).

Also in Genesis is the story of Joseph who, like Jesus, was falsely accused and condemned with two others, one of whom was saved and the other lost. Joseph was then raised up from his pit and given a seat next to the great king. From that place, he offered salvation to his people.

Jonah too had a 'resurrection' experience. His sacrifice appeased God's anger, and he was returned to life on the third day.

Daniel also had a resurrection experience. Out of envy, he was put into a pit of hungry lions and the door was sealed over him (Daniel 6). But the seal was broken and he came forth alive.

The tomb that Jesus was placed in was sealed and guarded, just like the gate of Eden that led from death back to life (Matthew 27:62–66). But on the third day 'there was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they became like dead men' (Matthew 28:2–4).

Jesus, by his death and resurrection, opened the way back to God and life for us. That is why—after he rose from the dead—those who were raised to life by his death went into the holy city (Matthew 27:53). It is the death and resurrection of Jesus that gives us an eternal home with God.

Underneath Rome, there are about a one thousand kilometres of catacomb passages about fifteen metres beneath the ground. They had been excavated to provide building blocks for the city. It was in these tunnels that the Christians buried their dead. The Romans cremated their dead, but the Christians chose burial as a symbol of their faith in the coming resurrection at the last day. In each of the forty-two cemeteries

under Rome, there was usually a great chapel at the end of sixty metres of corridors, and there persecuted Christians met in secret and sang praises to God.

At the end of each meeting, those gathered shouted together, 'He is risen!'

25

Jesus in Galilee



IMMEDIATELY after his resurrection, Jesus met with his disciples in the upper room in Jerusalem and commissioned them to take the gospel into all the world. But before they could offer salvation to others, they needed to understand it themselves, so Jesus said to them, “Peace be with you!” After he said this, he showed them his hands and side’ (John 20:20).

Our first peace comes to us when we see the wounds of Jesus and understand that he was crucified and slain for our sins. ‘While we were still sinners, Christ died for us’ (Romans 5:8). Peace comes to those who know that Jesus has paid the full penalty for their sins. They have peace in their hearts because they are no longer under God’s condemnation.

‘Again Jesus said, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you”’ (John 20:21).

The first peace that Jesus offers you is a deep peace. This second peace takes you even deeper, because it is hard to enjoy the first peace of salvation while your friends and relatives are missing out on it. The first peace is salvation for you; this second peace comes when you offer salvation to others. Jesus is here commissioning you to go to others to share his salvation with them.

‘But,’ you protest, ‘I don’t have the ability to share the gospel with others. I wouldn’t know what to say.’

Jesus knows that, so he provides you with divine power for your mission. He breathes on you and says, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’ (John 20:22).

Pray that the Spirit of God himself will fill you and help you bring salvation to others. When you win souls for Jesus, great peace and happiness will fill you to overflowing.

Jesus goes on to say, 'If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven' (John 20:23).

Jesus is here saying that if you share the good news about his dying on the Cross for people's sins, with the people in your circle of influence, and they accept it, they will be forgiven. On the other hand, if you don't take the gospel of God's forgiveness to people in your circle of influence, they may never hear it from anyone else, in which case they will never be forgiven. The responsibility is yours. Go in the strength that the Lord gives you and bring people into his flock.

Jesus remained on Earth with his disciples for six weeks after his resurrection. Most of that time was spent in Galilee where he had spent the majority of his time ministering to others. Jesus stayed on Earth long enough to ensure that the fact of his resurrection was well established.

But first Jesus needed to meet with his eleven disciples to repair some broken relationships. Peter, the disciple that Jesus had chosen to be the main evangelist of the group, had failed Jesus badly. Three times he denied that he knew Jesus and even swore an oath to that effect. Straight afterwards, Peter repented of what he had done and wept bitterly. While waiting in Galilee for Jesus, Peter, together with John, James, Thomas, Nathanael, and two other disciples, went night-fishing on the lake but caught nothing (John 21).

Early next morning, someone on the shore called out, asking if they had any fish. 'No,' they called back.

The man on the shore called, 'Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some.' The fishermen looked at each other blankly, shrugged their shoulders, and cast their net over the starboard side of the boat. They had nothing to lose. To their amazement, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish in it.

John pointed to the man on the shore and said to Peter, 'It is the Lord!' As soon as Peter heard that, he jumped into the lake and swam ashore. Even though he had badly let down the Saviour, he had known Jesus long enough to know that he wouldn't be angry with him. When Peter stumbled ashore, Jesus invited him to come and have breakfast with him.

After they had eaten and Peter's blood sugar had been restored, Jesus asked him three times if he still loved him. Peter had denied Jesus three

times; now it was his opportunity to become restored to fellowship with the Lord by three affirmations of his love for Jesus. After the first affirmation, Jesus said to Peter, ‘Feed my lambs’; after the second, he said, ‘Take care of my sheep’; and after the third, ‘Feed my sheep.’ Peter had been re-commissioned and was again one of the Twelve.

After the disciples had pulled the net ashore, they counted the fish. There were 153. At that time, there were 153 known kinds of fish in the world, so that harvest from the lake represented all the different kinds of people in the world that the Church would catch in its kingdom net (Matthew 13:47).

There are times in life when you will come to shore with nothing to show for all your hard work. But there, waiting for you, is a stranger. He tells you what you should do, and when you follow his instructions, you will meet with incredible success. You will then come to the sudden realisation that that stranger is Jesus. He will invite you to come and eat with him. He knows that you have been working hard and are tired and cold. After you have rested and eaten, he reveals that he wants you to follow him. You are not to concern yourself with his plans for other people; your mission is to follow him.

The secret to a fulfilled and successful life is to follow Jesus. It may cost you dearly—as it did Peter (John 21:18–19; 2 Peter 1:13–15)—but the price you pay will be small compared to your eternal reward.

Jesus only

'They saw no man but Jesus only.—Matthew 17:8'

THIS book is Christ-centred, Cross-centred, and gospel-centred. It focuses on the fulfilment of a promise that God made well over three thousand years ago. God promised that one day he would dwell with us and walk with us, and he would be our God and we would be his people. That promise was fulfilled in Jesus, who was 'God with us'. Jesus came to show us what God is like. He took our sins upon himself, and on the Cross he was judged and condemned for them so that we could be free of condemnation. That's what God is like.

Here in **Jesus Only**, there are gospel gems that you won't find anywhere else—gems that will inspire you to praise God for his great love and wisdom.

Dr Desmond Ford has written many books on the Gospel of Christ. He is the founder of Good News Unlimited, a transdenominational gospel ministry that produces media and resources to spread the gospel rapidly and effectively.



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