

# UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

## MODULE 2: JESUS

<b>TITLE</b>	<b>PAGE</b>
Part 9 – The Silence Broken Introducing the New Testament and Luke’s preparation for Jesus’ birth	2.1
Part 10 – Jesus’ Birth Jesus’ birth and its significance according to Luke and John	2.3
Part 11 – Greater than John John the Baptist’s ministry and Jesus’ baptism and testing	2.5
Part 12 – Jesus’ Mission Jesus’ reasons for His coming into the world and His call to discipleship	2.7
Part 13 – Jesus’ Message Jesus’ teaching and invitation to people to enter the kingdom of God	2.9
Part 14 – Responses to Jesus Jesus’ miracles and claims about Himself and people’s responses	2.11
Part 15 – Holy Week Jesus’ final week leading up to His death and its significance	2.13
Part 16 – He is Risen! Jesus’ resurrection and return to Heaven	2.15





## PART 9 – THE SILENCE BROKEN

- How does the New Testament continue the Old Testament?
- What did people in Israel believe at the time of Jesus' birth?

### God's story continues

The Old Testament describes how God created the universe and made human beings to enjoy it in relationship with him, but how human beings rejected God's rule. In response, God promised to send a rescuer. God made a covenant relationship with Abraham and his descendants, the people of Israel, in three stages:

1. **Abraham** – promises of a great nation, the land of Canaan and blessing for others through him
2. **Moses** – the Law revealing sin and the possibility of forgiveness through sacrifice.
3. **David** – the rescue would come through a king descended from David but greater than him.

Israel was unfaithful to the covenant, so God purified them through exile and return to the land. Prophets foretold a coming conquering king who would restore God's rule, but also a suffering servant of God. Then for 400 years there was silence – no further prophecies from God. The story picks up again with four books (called "Gospels", meaning 'good news', because they record the good news about Jesus) that provide details about the life and words of Jesus. Each has a distinctive emphasis, combining in a rich picture of Jesus:

Book and writer	Opening	Emphasises Jesus as
<b>Matthew</b> – one of Jesus' closest followers	Jesus' genealogy from Abraham through and Magi from the east seeking a new King (2:6).	Israel's true king, descended from David.
<b>Mark</b> – based his record on Simon Peter's record	Isaiah's prophesy about a "messenger" before the Messiah, identified as John the Baptist	The Suffering Servant foretold by the prophets
<b>Luke</b> – a physician who interviewed eyewitnesses	Four stories putting Jesus' birth in the context of history and the Old Testament (see below)	Jesus was a perfect, sinless man
<b>John</b> – one of Jesus' closest followers	An account of Jesus, the pre-existent Word who is also God, becoming human to reveal God	The Son of God living as a human being

### God prepares the way (Luke 1)

Luke 1 contains four stories that demonstrate how Jesus continues the story of the Old Testament:

	Luke 1:5-25	Luke 1:26-38	Luke 1:39-56	Luke 1:57-80
<b>Location</b>	The Jerusalem Temple	Nazareth in Galilee	A home in Judea	A home in Judea
<b>People</b>	Zechariah, an ageing priest	Mary, a teenage girl; Gabriel the angel	Mary and her cousin Elizabeth	Zechariah and Elizabeth
<b>Promise</b>	Zechariah's son, John, will bring many people back to God and prepare the way for the Lord	Mary, though a virgin will have a son, who will also be God's Son and king forever in David's line	God will continue His work in Mary's day just as He did in the past (v46-55).	John will be a great prophet who will prepare the way for the Messiah (v68-79)
<b>Old Testament</b>	A prophet like Elijah was to precede the Messiah - Malachi 4:5-6; Isaiah 40:3-8	Isaiah 7:14 foretold that a virgin would conceive a son	Mary's praises echo those of Samuel's mother and link back to Abraham	Zechariah's praises also link back to Abraham and echo the prophets
<b>Lesson</b>	Zechariah kept the Law, but had no real faith in God. He represents the failure of the Old Covenant.	God will use someone weak to accomplish His purposes. Jesus will be unique – the Son of God.	God can use Mary because of her simple faith and availability. She is blessed because she believes (v45).	John will prepare the way for Jesus, like the sun rising on a darkened world, to reveal God to people who do not know Him.

Two themes that emerge in these four stories dominate the Gospels:

### a) IDENTITY: *Who is Jesus?*

The passage is full of indications that Jesus is the promised Messiah:

- Supernatural events – angels, visions, a dumbstruck man, a virgin conception – indicate that God is doing something new and special (miracles only occur frequently at key moments in the Bible story).
- The angel who appears to Zechariah and Mary is named as Gabriel. The only other place where this angel appears in the Bible is Daniel 8 and 9, where he explains the timing of the future Messiah.
- Zechariah’s son John will be like Elijah (v17) – a reference to the prophecies that a prophet like Elijah would precede the Messiah (Malachi 4:5-6).
- Joseph, Mary’s fiancé, was a descendant of David (v27), as was Mary herself, and Gabriel says Jesus will be given the throne of His ancestor David (v32).

Luke 3:23-38 traces Jesus’ genealogy right back to Adam. As a descendant of Abraham and David, He has the criteria to be the Messiah, the promised rescuer. He is, however, even more than this:

- He will be called the Son of God, a special title indicating a unique relationship (v32,35);
- He has no human Father. The virgin conception of Jesus is a new act of creation by the Holy Spirit (v35). The Spirit who hovered over water in Genesis 1:2) now overshadowed Mary. This is a new beginning for humankind, the creation of a sinless human being. Jesus is like a new Adam.
- John’s reaction as a foetus in the womb is remarkable as are Elizabeth’s words – she calls Mary “the mother of my Lord” (v43). Mary’s baby is greater than Elizabeth’s and brings him joy, but Elizabeth describes Jesus as her lord. This is the first indicator that Jesus is, in fact, God.

### b) MISSION: *What will Jesus do?*

Both Mary (v55) and Zechariah (v73) connect the births of their special sons with God’s covenant promises to Abraham. God’s plan is about to be worked out. Yet there are indicators that God will not do this in the way many Jewish people expected. Living under Roman rule, many first century Jews hoped for a Messiah who would be a powerful conquering king. Mary’s praise, however, suggests a mission based not on power but on overturning the powerful and raising the humble (v52). The fact that a privileged person – a male, elderly priest in Jerusalem lacks faith – whilst a teenage girl from the fringes (Nazareth was despised as an insignificant place) believes is the first example of this subversive mission. God’s way of working from through weakness is also seen often in the Old Testament, especially in Abraham’s dysfunctional family.

Jesus may not be the kind of Messiah people expect, but His mission will be much greater than they expected. Zechariah’s praises tell us Jesus will do more than overcome political oppression. He will liberate people from another kind of slavery by offering forgiveness of their sins (v77). These words also hint that this forgiveness will be available beyond the Jews, echoing Isaiah 9:2, which says the Messiah’s light will shine beyond Israel to other nations. Jesus will bless all peoples as God promised Abraham.

## God’s perfect timing (Luke 2:1-2)

Jesus was born during the reign of Caesar Augustus (the first Roman Emperor) when Quirinius was governor of the province of Syria. This historical context was ideal time for the Christian message to spread widely:

- **Pax Romana** – since Augustus’s accession in 27 BC, there had been peace and stability after many decades of war. This so-called *pax Romana* (Roman peace) lasted until AD 180, permitting safe travel in the Empire.
- **Tolerance of Judaism** – Rome gave an unusual degree of tolerance to the Jews and Jewish communities and synagogues (houses of worship) were found across the empire. These provided a starting point for the Christian message when it arrived in many cities.
- **Greek language** – the legacy of Alexander the Great before the Roman Empire meant one language, Greek, was spoken across the eastern part of Roman Empire. The New Testament was written in Greek.
- **Jews in Palestine** – Jesus could travel and teach freely within the Jewish population who had some degree of freedom under Rome, following the pattern of other travelling teachers. The Temple provided a place where He could speak to many people at the major Jewish festivals (the Romans destroyed it in AD 70).

**SUMMARY: The Old Testament story will continue with the arrival of God’s Messiah and His forerunner**

- Jesus is a unique person – son of Mary and of God – with a unique mission – to bring forgiveness of sins.
- Faith is found in unexpected places. It means, like Mary, trusting God’s words and surrendering to Him.

### **Discuss – questions to help understanding**

1. Based on what you have read so far in the Old Testament, what is your impression of the priests in Israel? Would you expect them to recognise and believe when God was speaking to them?

*Read Luke 1*

2. Why is it important for Luke to emphasise to Theophilus that he has researched carefully the things he is recording in his Gospel (verses 1-4)?
3. How do Mary and Zacharias contrast with one another in their status and in their reaction to Gabriel?
4. What does this chapter say about the role John, son of Elizabeth and Zechariah, will have in God's plan (see verses 13-17 and 76-80)?
5. What is remarkable about the circumstances of the conception of Jesus and what do Gabriel's words indicate about His identity and the purpose for His birth (verses 29-35)?
6. What do Mary and Zacharias' words of praise to God add to our understanding of what Jesus' birth will accomplish (verses 46-55 and 67-75)?
7. In what ways is Mary a wonderful example for us?

### **Apply – questions to help personal application**

- Does it seem strange to you that it is so important for Luke that Jesus continues the story of the Old Testament? Why do you think this matters so much?
- The Gospels are careful to present the events of Jesus' life as historical truth. Do you think it matters whether the things we read about Jesus really happened or not?
- Which of the people in these accounts do you identify most with: Zechariah struggling to believe despite his privilege and knowledge or Mary quietly accepting God's words?
- Would you agree that Christianity, in balance (despite the flaws of Christians), has broadly had a positive impact on human cultures and societies, often benefiting the oppressed as Mary predicted?
- Who do you think Jesus was and why do you think He is so significant? Has studying Luke 1 changed or strengthened your view at all?

### ***Are the Gospels reliable and are they the only evidence for Jesus?***

As explained in the notes for this Part, the four Gospels have different emphases, so their authors record different events and words of Jesus (see Study Aids for this module – ‘Harmony of the Gospels’ – for a table showing how they fit together). John’s Gospel is particularly different because it was written later in response to new issues. The important point about the four Gospels is that they are all recognised as having been written by eye witnesses (in the case of Matthew and John) or on the basis of accounts from eye witnesses (Mark and Luke). They contain many details that show proximity to the events and knowledge of the context and there are many indicators that they were written within the lifetime of people who lives alongside Jesus. You can read more about the reliability of the Bible, including the Gospels, in the Overview to this series.

Some claim that the Church selected the four Gospels in the New Testament to suit itself, rejecting others that did not fit its teachings. This is simply historically inaccurate. The other so-called ‘Gospels’ are not the same kind of writings as the four in the Bible – they tend to be collections of teachings of Jesus without a narrative backbone and without the emphasis on the cross that Matthew, Mark, Luke and John exhibit – and they were written much later by people who did not know Jesus. It is these false ‘Gospels’ that reflect ideas taken from other religions and philosophies rather than the original teachings of Jesus and His apostles.

### ***Can we really take accounts about angels seriously?***

Angels are often depicted in popular culture as cute, child-like beings with wings and haloes. The Bible describes angels being dressed in white, but they are not said to have wings (although other heavenly beings with wings are described). The word ‘angel’ literally means ‘messenger’ and they are spirits who serve God and His people (Hebrews 1:14). Sometimes they are described as powerful heavenly warriors who guard God’s people (Psalm 91:11) and they were also involved in the giving of the Law to Moses (Acts 7:53; Galatians 3:19; Hebrews 2:2). They are at work all the time, usually unseen, but on a few occasions in the Bible, like Luke 1, they become visible and audible to people. The Bible says there are many thousands of angels, but only names two: Michael the archangel has a special role fighting for God’s people against Satan (Daniel 10:13,21; 11:1; 12:1; Jude 1:9; Revelation 12:7) and Gabriel is associated with the coming of Messiah, foretelling it to Daniel (Daniel 8:15-18; 9:21) announcing it to Zechariah and Mary (Luke 1:19,26,28).

Some people become obsessed with angels, trying to discover their names and even beginning to pray to them. This is expressly forbidden in the Bible (Colossians 2:18). On some occasions when people saw angels they were tempted to worship them, but they refuse to accept this (Revelation 22:9). Like all good servants. Angels point to God and not to themselves. Any spirit that does not do this is not an angel of God, but a fallen angel or demon. Amazingly, powerful as angels are, they are inferior to human beings in God’s ultimate plan. We may be lower than angels now, but through Jesus God is lifting human beings to a position higher than the angels (Hebrews 2:5-18). God did not rescue the angels that fell with Satan but saves fallen human beings. Angels longed to understand God’s plan of salvation (1 Peter 1:12) and watch God’s people to learn about His purposes (1 Corinthians 4:9; 11:10). Christians will even judge angels in the future (1 Corinthians 6:3).

### ***The two genealogies of Jesus are different. Is that not a contradiction?***

Matthew 1:1-17 and Luke 3:23-38 present two differing lists of Jesus’ ancestors. A comparison of the lists shows they are identical between Abraham and David, but from David David Matthew has only 28 generations, while Luke has 42. Matthew’s list is selective and ordered to name only 14 generations in each of three historical periods. He also includes names of four women. This does not, however, explain the differences between the genealogies, since they pass through different sons of David (Solomon in Matthew and Nathan in Luke) and have different names of the father of Joseph, Mary’s husband (Jacob in Matthew and Heli in Luke). The resolution to the difference is almost certainly that, whereas Matthew’s genealogy is for Joseph, Luke provides the family line of Mary – the reference to Joseph in her place in verse 23 is due to the convention of the time of only including men in family trees and of identifying women legally with their husbands. David was both David’s heir by adoption through Joseph and his blood descendant through Mary.

- Where was Jesus born and what does this tell us about Him?
- Who was Jesus and why did He come into the world?

## Jesus, the human baby (Luke 2:1-52)

### *The birth of Jesus, the descendant of David (2:1-7)*

Joseph, Jesus' adoptive father, was descended from King David. A Roman census requiring people to go to their ancestral home towns caused Joseph to travel with the pregnant Mary to Bethlehem, David's town, where Jesus was born, fulfilling a prophecy about the Messiah's birthplace (Micah 5:2). As He did throughout the Old Testament (see Part 8), God was working through human rulers to accomplish His purposes. Jesus' birth in poverty, laid in a feeding trough, indicates that, although a king, He will be a humble servant.

### *Shepherds visit Jesus, the Saviour for all and Christ the Lord (2:8-20)*

In first century Jewish culture, shepherds had a reputation as untrustworthy outsiders. An angel appeared to a group of shepherds near Bethlehem announcing "good news" for all people because a baby had been born who is the Christ (Greek for 'Messiah') and the Lord (or ruler). As the angel spoke, Heaven's army appeared, not to declare war and judgement, but peace and blessing to human beings. The fact that the message first came to shepherds shows it was indeed for everyone: poor and rich, respectable and unrespectable.

### *At the Temple, people praise Jesus, the light for the nations (2:21-40)*

Mary and Joseph were in the Temple in Jerusalem obeying two Old Testament laws as faithful Jewish parents: mothers had to be purified 40 days after giving birth (Leviticus 12:1-8) and first-born sons were to be presented to God (Exodus 13:2; Numbers 18:15-16). Two people who were longing for the Messiah recognised Jesus' significance and praised God because of Him. One, Simeon, made two prophetic statements:

- Jesus will bring salvation to people from all nations (v29-32)* – Jesus is God's salvation, but as well as being Israel's glory He will shine as a light to all nations.
- His mission includes suffering and rejection (v34-35)* – reactions to Jesus would be mixed, but people's responses would either cause their fall or their lifting up. Jesus' opposition by many would lead to suffering for His mother, Mary, like a sword piercing her heart.

Luke's statement in verse 40 emphasises that Jesus was a human boy who had to develop physically and intellectually like every child, but He also had unusual wisdom, so people could see God's grace was on Him.

### *Teachers are amazed at Jesus, God's Son (2:41-52)*

Even at the age of 12 Jesus showed unusual knowledge and insight. Most significantly, he was already aware of His special relationship with God. Mary describes Joseph as Jesus' father (v48), but Jesus calls the Temple His Father's house (v49). Even as a child Jesus knew His true identity as the Son of God.

### *Summary: Jesus' identity and mission*

Part 9 suggested that two questions dominate the Gospels: **who is Jesus** and **what is His mission?** These accounts of Jesus' early years help us towards an answer. Jesus is David's descendant and God's Son come to bring God's people to human beings by being a Saviour for all kinds of people and from all nations.

## Jesus, God become human (John 1:1-18)

John describes Jesus' birth very differently from Luke, from God's perspective. The opening of his Gospel gives us further insights into who Jesus is (His **identity**) and what He came to do (His **mission**):

### **IDENTITY: the divine Word; MISSION: revealing God**

'The Word' (Greek *Logos*) may seem like an unusual title for Jesus, but it resonated with the world John is writing into. John takes a word – *logos* – that Greek philosophy used *logos* to refer to an impersonal force of intelligence or knowledge behind the universe and redefines it in terms of the Old Testament story of God (the phrase "in the beginning" in verse 1 is a clear echo of Genesis 1:1). Behind the universe and human life is not

some impersonal force or principle, but a personal God we need to know. Our problem is that we are in the dark concerning Him. People have all sorts of religious and philosophical theories about ultimate reality, but only God explains it all. Even today we should recognise that the order we see in the universe and the amazing nature of information and its coding in DNA, the chemical behind life, points to intelligent design!

The word *Logos* emphasises the fact that God speaks, making Himself known. God has always been communicating with mankind: through the nature of the world He **created**; through our **consciences**, which point (albeit unreliably) to right and wrong; and through the **covenants** recorded in the Bible. These tell us a lot about God, but His perfect revelation through a person – the *Logos*. This Word came into the world like a light shining into the darkness (v9); a light that cannot be overcome (v5). God's truth shone into our ignorance. The Word did this by becoming human and made His home among us (v14). He was given a name, which John does not reveal until verse 17: Jesus. Importantly, not only does this Word come from God – He *is* God (v1). John is telling us that Jesus was not only God's promised rescuer (the Messiah); He is God living as a human being. His life did not begin with His birth in Bethlehem or His conception in Nazareth – he existed eternally. For more on what the New Testament says about Jesus being God see the Q&A for this study.

If Jesus was God and reveals God, what does He show us about who God is and what God is like? Verses 14-18 give the answer. John, the writer of these words, heard in person John the Baptist's testimony about Jesus' greatness and pre-existence (v15), but He also lived closely with Jesus for three years, seeing what He did and hearing what He taught. In all of this He saw Jesus' character and, in it, the glory of God (v14). The qualities John saw in Jesus are significant: "He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness." More literally, John says Jesus was full of **grace and truth**. These are the qualities Moses saw in God (Exodus 34:6) and the psalms praise God because of them (Psalm 86:15). It is important to realise what they mean:

- **Grace** – *God is unfailing in His love, although it is undeserved by sinful human beings.*  
God never stops loving human beings and commits to our salvation through a binding covenant commitment. God is full of compassion (concern for people's suffering) and mercy (readiness to forgive). These qualities are perfectly seen in Jesus. He was compassionate towards broken people and called people to come to Him and receive forgiveness. Our culture talks a great deal about love, but not the kind of unconditional love that God showed. No human being has been consistently loving as Jesus was.
- **Truth** – *God is completely faithful to His promises and upholds His holy Standards.*  
When we love people we often overlook their faults, but God does not and cannot do this. His grace is always mixed with holiness – a perfect standard (also called His righteousness). His forgiveness does not mean ignoring sin and is only possible when people admit it. Jesus embodied this faithfulness to God's truth. He condemned religious hypocrites and when He called people to come to Him, He challenged them to leave their sin behind and to live in God's righteousness. In His own life He was perfect and sinless, always living by what is true. No human being has been consistently truthful like Jesus.

The fact that God is both perfectly truthful, but also utterly gracious creates a problem. How can a perfect, holy God accept sinful, fallen human beings? It is through Jesus that this is possible.

### **IDENTITY: creator and life-giver; MISSION: giving new life to those who believe in Him**

Jesus did not only come to show us the righteous standard of God, as the Law given through Moses did. Moses the great Law giver, towers over the Old Testament, but Jesus is greater than Moses (v17). Jesus was not simply alive; He is the life-giver (v4). The Law exposed our sin and held the hope of its forgiveness on the basis of sacrifice, but it could not really deal with the ultimate problem of our hearts. God's covenant with Israel was a gracious blessing, but through Jesus God is giving another gracious blessing that is greater (v16).

We don't simply need knowledge about God, we need a new beginning with God, a new life. As the agent of creation, Jesus gave us our life and He can save our lives (v3). Through Jesus, His only Son, God is making it possible for sinful human beings to become His children (v12). John says many people rejected Jesus (v11), but those who accepted Him and trusted in Him were given a new right, brought into a new relationship with God. This intimate relationship with God is a new kind of life that happens through a new birth (v13). The idea of the new birth into new life will be picked up again in Part 12 where we will study John 3.

**SUMMARY: Jesus was fully human and fully God. He came to make God known and to give new life.**

- Jesus, born to be a Saviour for all kinds of people, knew from childhood that He was God's Son.
- Jesus was God become human, revealing God's character and offering new life to those who believe.





## PART 10 – JESUS' BIRTH DISCUSS AND APPLY

### **Discuss – questions to help understanding**

1. What memories (if any) do you have of childhood nativity plays or what is your general impression about the meaning of Christmas based on what you have seen in the media and in the shops?

*Read Luke 2:1-35*

2. What do you know about the historical figures and places mentioned in verses 1-4 and why was it important for Luke to locate these events historically and geographically?
3. How does the description of these events and the characters involved differ from your preconceptions?
4. What do the circumstances of Jesus' birth and the fact that the first people to be told the news were shepherds say about God's intentions and who Jesus has come for?
5. What do the angel's words to the shepherds say about who Jesus is and why He has come?
6. Why was it important for Mary and Joseph to name the baby Jesus and to take Him to the Temple?
7. What is the significance of Simeon's reaction to seeing Jesus and his words to Mary? What does it say about how Jesus will accomplish God's purposes as Messiah?

### **Apply – questions to help personal application**

- Luke and John together present Jesus as the ultimate revelation of God, God's saviour and Messiah for all, and God in human form. What are the implications for you if these claims are true?
- Which of the people in these accounts do you identify most with: Mary quietly pondering their significance; the shepherds joyfully telling everyone; or Simeon and Anna seeing their hopes fulfilled?
- Do you think that John's account of Jesus as the Logos – the divine order, communication and information behind everything that exists – fits with the nature of the universe as we experience it?
- The Christian claim that the all-powerful creator God became human and lived among us is unique. How does this claim impact you and why do you think it has to be so for the Bible's story to make sense?
- Based on what you already know about Jesus, how do you see grace and truth both displayed in Him and what does this suggest to you about who God is?

### ***Was Jesus really God? Is it not enough to call Him the Son of God?***

The belief that Jesus is God and the practices of praying to Him, baptising in His name alongside the name of the Father and the Spirit, and worshipping Him are stated in the New Testament letters and have been shared by Christians since the beginning of the Church. John 1 clearly teaches that Jesus was God and other passages in John that express this truth are considered in Part 14. Many other verses in the New Testament make the same point: Philippians 2:6-8 says Jesus was “in very nature God” but became human; Colossians 1:15 calls Him the “image of the invisible God”; Hebrews 1:3 says He is “the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of His being”; and 1 John 5:20 calls Him “the true God and eternal life”. In addition, there are many places in the New Testament where Jesus is placed alongside God as the source of blessing and salvation and a recipient of praise and honour.

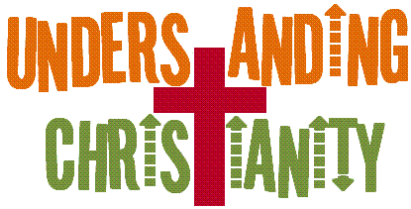
The claim that Jesus *is* God as well as being *with* God (John 1:1) may seem confusing, as may the claim that Jesus was God’s Son and also God. The Bible teaches there is only one true God, but in the New Testament three persons are described as God: the Father; the Son (Jesus); and the Holy Spirit. They have only one purpose and always work together. However, they each relate to us in different ways, and they also have a relationship with one another. So, the Word can be God but also be with God (the Father and the Spirit). This is a difficult idea for us to understand because it is beyond our experience as human beings. God is greater than we are, and it should not surprise us if we cannot fully explain His nature. However, we must accept the Bible’s teaching that the Father, Son (Jesus) and Holy Spirit are equally God. Christians often describe this reality as the “trinity” (meaning “three in unity”), although this word is never used in the Bible. For a fuller discussion of the biblical basis for the deity of Jesus, see the Study Aids for this module.

### ***If Jesus is God’s only Son, how can people who accept Him become God’s children?***

Jesus had a special relationship with God as His Father which was different from the normal way in which Jewish people spoke about God. John chapter 1, describes Jesus as the “One and Only” Son of God (v14). This expresses the unique relationship Jesus had with the Father as the only “begotten” Son of God – the only Son who shares God’s divine nature. The Old Testament occasionally refers to angels as sons of God (Job 1:6, 2:1 and 38:7) and Adam is described as God’s son in Luke 3:38, while the descendants of Seth are probably meant by the reference to sons of God in Genesis 6 verses 2 and 4. Jesus is, however, described differently – as the only begotten son of God. Some Christians believe that this ‘begetting’ (an old English word that has no modern equivalent and usually refers to the conception of a child from its father through sexual intercourse) happened when the embryonic Jesus was formed by God in Mary’s body (which must have included the creation of at least some new genetic material). Others believe that Jesus was eternally begotten by God. They agree, however, that this is a unique kind of relationship with God and that the incarnation marked the coming into the world of the pre-existent, divine person we know as the Son of God (or God the Son).

By becoming human, Jesus was able to restore the original purpose of humankind as people who know God and live faithfully with Him. Jesus lived this perfect human life and when people place their trust in Him they come to be ‘in Christ’. By sharing eternal life with us, Jesus brings us into the inheritance that is His by right. He makes us God’s children. Sometimes this is described in terms of new birth by the Holy Spirit (as in John 1:13); on other occasions it is described in terms of adoption (Romans 8:15). Those who are in Christ become part of a new human race. Just as Adam led the human race into sin, so Jesus leads to salvation everyone who trusts in Him (see Romans 5:12-21 for the apostle Paul’s comparison of the two).

Jesus’ relationship with God is unique, but He brings us into a relationship that can be modelled on the example of perfect humanity that He demonstrated during His life on earth. Jesus taught His disciples to pray to God as Father (Matthew 6:7-18) and to trust Him as a Father (Matthew 7:9-11). His life of constant awareness of, dependence on and service to the Father should be our example.



## PART 11 – GREATER THAN JOHN

- What was the mission of Zechariah and Elizabeth's son John?
- How did John's mission prepare the way for Jesus?

### John prepares the way (Luke 3:1-20)

Luke takes his usual care to put events in historical context, naming seven rulers of three kinds:

- *Roman Emperor* – Tiberius was the adopted son and successor of Augustus as emperor of Rome. He reigned AD 14-37, so the reference to his 15<sup>th</sup> year dates these events to AD 28 or 29.
- *Local governors* – after Herod the Great (king when Jesus was born) died, his kingdom was split into four, each part ruled by a tetrarch. By this date, Judea (the area in the south of Palestine around Jerusalem) was under direct Roman rule, with Pontius Pilate as governor, while the other three areas were ruled by two of Herod's sons and a man called Lysanias. Herod Antipas ruled over Galilee, the region where Jesus grew up.
- *Annas and Caiaphas* – High Priest(s) of the Jewish people, who oversaw the Temple system and cooperated at some level with the Romans in their rule of Judea. These two men were members of one rich family.

Luke emphasises the importance of John, Jesus' cousin and son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, in two ways:

- a) *John's message came from God* (v2b) – John was a prophet just like those in the Old Testament;
- b) *John fulfilled the prophecies given through Isaiah* (v4-6).

Following God's call and imitating Elijah, John dressed in clothes made from camel skin, ate honey and locusts (Matthew 3:4) and lived in the desert, preaching about God's rule and baptising people in water (he is traditionally known as 'the Baptist'). People came in large numbers to see and hear him. His message was:

1. **God will judge** (v7) – John warned the people to get ready for God's day of judgement. Being a descendant of Abraham was not enough to be spared – they must respond personally to God.
2. **We must repent** (v3,8-14) – John called people to turn from their sins to ask God for forgiveness (v3). Real repentance shows in actions like giving to people in need (v10-11) and honesty in work (v12-14). As a sign of their repentance, John baptised people, immersing them in water.
3. **The Messiah will come soon** (v15-18) – John explained that He was not the Messiah, but said that the Messiah was coming soon and would be much greater than him, baptising not with water, but with:
  - a. *The Holy Spirit* – the Old Testament prophets spoke of a day when God's Spirit, rather than simply anointing kings and leaders, would transform all of God's people. The Messiah will make this happen.
  - b. *Fire* – this is a picture of judgement and John explains, further, that the Messiah will separate people into those who are chaff (to be burnt up) and those who are wheat (to be stored and kept by God).

There are only two options here. People will either be baptised in the Holy Spirit – transformed by Him and saved by God because they repent of their sins – or in fire, facing God's judgement. Responses to G

### John gives way to Jesus

#### *John's identity (John 1:19-28)*

The Jewish leaders wanted to know who John claimed to be (v20) and what authority he had to baptise people (v25). They asked if he was Elijah, or the great prophet foretold in the Old Testament, or the Messiah. John denied that he was any of these three but claimed to fulfil Isaiah's prophecy about a forerunner of the Messiah (v23) and to be preparing the way for someone who was among them in the crowd (v26).

#### *John baptises Jesus (Matthew 3:13-17)*

Jesus came to be baptised by John. John did not want to do it, because he knew Jesus had no sin to repent from. Jesus, however, insisted, wanting to identify with John's message and to set an example (v15). During the baptism, John saw the Holy Spirit settle on Jesus and heard God the Father describe Jesus as His Son who "fully pleased" Him (it seems that only John and Jesus saw and heard this). God was showing John that this was indeed the Messiah, God's sinless Son. Jesus was introducing Himself to the public, beginning His ministry.

### **John points people to follow Jesus (John 1:29-34; 3:22-36)**

After Jesus was baptised (possibly the following day), John told the people that God had revealed to him that Jesus was the Messiah. He described Jesus as greater than himself because He existed long before him (1:30) and called him both the Son of God (1:34) and the “Lamb of God” (1:39). This title is significant as it indicates that Jesus had come to take away people’s sins and hints that He would do this by becoming a sacrifice.

Jesus began to call disciples to follow Him and they began baptising people (3:22). John’s followers were confused and disappointed that Jesus was becoming more popular than John (3:26), but John was not. He had done the work God had given him and must now step aside, becoming less so that Jesus, who came from God, could become greater (3:27-34). John was later arrested by Herod Antipas, whose corruption he had criticised (Luke 3:19-20). Herod had John beheaded (Mark 6:17-29) but not before Jesus had reassured John that He was indeed the Messiah (Luke 7:18-35). Jesus said John was the greatest prophet who ever spoke from God, but that even the least person in the Kingdom of God He had come to restore would be greater than John.

### **Jesus tested and found sinless (Luke 4:1-13)**

After His baptism, Jesus went into the desert for 40 days, where He fasted. At the end of the forty days, when Jesus was very hungry, the Devil spoke to Him. Just as Eve was tempted in three ways by the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, Jesus faced three temptations. As in Eve’s case, the core issue behind these temptations is whether God can be trusted, but, unlike Eve, Jesus responds by quoting God’s word:

<b>Temptation</b>	<b>Root of the temptation</b>	<b>Jesus’ response</b>
Turn a stone into bread	Selfishness – meet your own needs and feed your own desires	Human beings must not live by bread alone, but by obeying God’s will (Deuteronomy 8:3). Jesus’ power to do miracles was not given for selfish use.
Worship Satan and receive power and possessions	Greed – abandon God to enjoy material things	Human beings must worship only God (Deuteronomy 6:13).
Jump from the Temple and God will protect (Satan quotes Psalm 91:11-12)	Pride – God is obliged to serve human beings	Satan has twisted God’s words – human beings must not put God to the test. Our role is to serve Him and not to demand that He serve us.

These three temptations focus on one issue, which is the very centre of sin and which was what convinced Eve to eat the forbidden fruit: the idea that human life can be better, more fulfilled, if we reject God’s rule and make our own decisions for ourselves based on our desires.

Every other human being has fallen on each of these tests. Only Jesus, the sinless Son of God, could resist. This episode proved that Jesus was exactly who Satan had thought He might be, the Son of God. He contrasts with Adam and Eve, who gave in to temptation, and with Israel. The parallel with the nation is clear in Jesus’ choice of Deuteronomy as the source of the scriptures He quotes. When the nation of Israel wandered in the desert and found themselves without food, they abandoned God and grumbled. When Jesus was in the desert without food He submitted to God and gave praise to Him. Jesus has succeeded where Israel failed. He is the beginning of a new human race without Adam’s sin and of a new people of God without Israel’s faithlessness.

The claim that Jesus was sinless is found elsewhere in the New Testament and is essential to His mission as well as proof of His divine identity:

- **Jesus was able to ask His enemies**, “Which of you can truthfully accuse me of sin?” (John 8:46). His sinlessness shows that He was genuinely divine and that His words were true and trustworthy.
- **Close companions of Jesus for three years, John and Peter, never saw any sin in Him**: “there is no sin in Him” (1 John 3:5); “He never sinned, and he never deceived anyone” (1 Peter 2:22)
- **The apostle Paul taught that it was essential to His ability to become a sacrifice for sins**: “God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ” (2 Corinthians 5:21). If He was not sinless, Jesus could not be the perfect sacrifice for sins, but because He was sinless His death can be the one sacrifice for our sins forever. As John the Baptist had said, Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

#### **SUMMARY: John, who called people to repent because of coming judgement, pointed to Jesus as Messiah**

- Jesus is greater than the greatest prophet – He is God’s Son and the sacrificial Lamb who died for sins.
- We will either be baptised in the Holy Spirit – transformed by Him with our sins forgiven – or in fire.



# PART 11 – GREATER THAN JOHN

## DISCUSS AND APPLY

### **Discuss – questions to help understanding**

1. Have you ever heard Christians preaching in a way that you found offensive or off-putting? If so, why was that and do you think your reaction was justified?

*Read Matthew 3*

2. Imagine yourself stumbling upon someone who looked and spoke like John dunking people in the nearest river to your home. Would you be drawn to listen or not?
3. Why do you think John's words were especially strong about the men who were Pharisees and Sadducees?
4. What was the significance of John's baptism – what did he understand his mission to be?
5. What do John's words about Jesus and his reaction to Him say about who Jesus is and what He will accomplish (in particular, what does it mean to baptise with fire and with the Holy Spirit)?
6. Why did Jesus insist that John should baptise Him?
7. What do verses 16-17 indicate about who Jesus is, His relationship to God and the nature of the divine being?

### **Apply – questions to help personal application**

- What is your reaction to way John the Baptist preached and what he said? Do you react against being described as a sinner in danger of God's judgement and being called to change?
- Why do you think it matters so much to God that we repent (acknowledging our sin and seeking His forgiveness)? Does this make sense in your experience of life and relationships?
- Does John's example – a great man who drew crowds but gave way gladly to someone greater – challenge you in any way? Is it a common attitude in your experience and what does that say about human beings?
- Do you find the pointers from the Bible to the sinless nature of Jesus convincing and if they are true what does that say about Him and how do you feel in comparison?
- Making an honest assessment of your life and thoughts, what are the most important things to you (what could Satan tempt you with)? Do you think these might be taking the place God deserves?

# UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

## PART 11 – GREATER THAN JOHN

### QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

#### ***What was the significance of John's odd behaviour?***

John dressed in camel's skin and ate honey and wild locusts. He was also teetotal, since the angel Gabriel told his father he was never to touch alcoholic drinks (Luke 1:15). Some people think this may indicate that he was to live as a Nazirite. The Law of Moses included provision for people to live for a period of time as a Nazirite, taking vows not to eat or drink products of grapes or any form of alcohol and not to cut their hair (Numbers 6:1–21). If John followed these principles he may also have had long hair, which would not have been the norm for Jewish men in his time, although this is speculation.

John's clothing and diet may not have been as odd in his context as in ours, since there were various radical Jewish groups, some of whom may have lived in a similar style in the desert, but it is obviously noteworthy enough to be mentioned. His clothing may have been a deliberate decision in order to identify with Elijah, since some translations of 2 Kings 1:8 say that Elijah wore a coat made from hair, but again this is somewhat speculative. What we can be certain about is that John was a mighty prophet of God and his life was dedicated to preaching repentance and preparing the way for the Messiah. His lifestyle was subservient to this mission.

#### ***You describe baptism as immersion of adults, but is it not something done to babies?***

There are two main approaches to baptism in the Church today. Some churches sprinkle the babies of Christian parents with water and call this baptism. Others immerse adults who have professed faith in Jesus Christ in water, calling that baptism. Most scholars of the New Testament recognise that the baptisms of the New Testament by John and by Jesus' disciples were immersions in water. This is, in fact, the basic meaning of the Greek word translated as 'baptism'.

The practice of infant baptism developed later in the Church and became popular after Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. Some Christians defend through a parallel with the circumcision of infants in the Old Covenant, describing it as a pledge from the parents to raise the child according to Christian principles in the hope of future faith. Others believe it has some spiritual benefit for the child.

Other Christians are unconvinced by either of these arguments and fear that they might give the impression that the child is now a 'Christian'. They seek to practise only what is described in the New Testament and to express the sense of baptism as a personal identification with the death and resurrection of Jesus. They must also remember its significance as a marker of identification with and inclusion in the Church. Most churches that practise believer's baptism do not regard infant sprinkling as true baptism and expect people who have been sprinkled to be baptised by immersion after they come to personal faith. The approach taken in this course reflects the author's conviction that believer's baptism is correct, but it must be understood that genuine and sincere Christians are found on both sides of the debate.

- What was Jesus' mission? Why did He say He had come?
- What did Jesus expect of and promise to His followers?

## Jesus' call to discipleship

Jesus' ministry began around AD 29 with His baptism by John and lasted for around three and a half years until His death in AD 33. Each year, like all faithful Jewish men who were able, Jesus travelled from Galilee to Jerusalem for the Passover and the Gospel accounts are often structured around these journeys. The three years of Jesus' public ministry were marked by different responses from the people:

### *Year 1: Beginnings – a call to find rest*

Jesus' ministry opened with a dramatic statement: "The Kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:15). He began to perform miracles and, following a familiar pattern of teachers having followers who learned from their example and teachings, called people to become His disciples. **Matthew 11:27-30** records Jesus' words during this time. He boldly claimed a unique relationship with God as Father and a unique ability to reveal God to other people, then called weary people to come to Him and find the rest they needed. Jesus recognised that many people are weary and heavily burdened by anxiety, guilt and shame. Ultimately, these burdens result from slavery to sin. To such people Jesus promises rest, but this rest comes through becoming His disciple because only He can bring us to His Father. If we want Him to free us, we must take His yoke. A yoke is a bar holding two animals together to pull a plough and in the Old Testament it is a picture of a king's rule. The people were yoked to their king. Jesus was saying that His rest only comes through submission to His rule over our lives. **To know His help and strength we must accept Him as Lord.**

### *Year 2: Popularity – a challenge to take up the cross*

Jesus became very popular. Thousands of people followed Him wherever He went. Many came from His home region of Galilee, but others came from Judea and He even gathered some followers from the region of Samaria, which Jews normally avoided but He visited. During this period, Jesus spent a great deal of time privately with His twelve chosen disciples. The key turning point in His ministry is recorded in **Matthew 16:13-28**, when Jesus asked them who people said He was. Simon Peter responded that He was "the Messiah, the Son of the living God" and Jesus commended him, saying this truth had been revealed by God and promising to build His Church on this foundation (see Part 21). After this recognition by the disciples of who Jesus is, He began to speak about His coming death (v21). Remarkably, Simon Peter who had made a great declaration of faith was rebuked by Jesus for His response to this foretelling of His death. Peter said that Jesus should never suffer in this way, but Jesus said He was speaking human ideas inspired by Satan, not God's perspective. The disciples had grasped who Jesus is (His **IDENTITY**), but they had not yet understood what He had come to do (His **MISSION**). They knew He was the Messiah but could not see what kind of Messiah He would be.

Jesus now began to challenge people who wanted to follow Him to count the cost. He told them they must take up their cross to follow Him, meaning they must die to their own desires to follow His will. He warned that we do not have the power to preserve our own lives and if we pursue the world's riches, we may lose our souls. Only Jesus can guard our souls and give us eternal acceptance with His Father. He spoke of a future day when He would come in glory to judge and explained that the outcome of that judgement depends on how people respond to Him now (He uses the title 'Son of Man' to describe Himself, echoing words from Daniel's vision of God's coming king – Daniel 7:13-14). What would you give in exchange for your soul? What matters more than knowing that you have eternal life? **To have real life we must surrender everything to Jesus.**

### *Year 3: Rejection – a warning not to be left outside*

During this third year, opposition to Jesus grew. Many who had followed Him now abandoned Him because He did not do what they expected the Messiah to do, because they did not understand some of His teaching or because they were not willing to count the cost of discipleship. Jesus continued to predict His death and resurrection and His parables increasingly warned about future judgement and the risk of being left out of God's kingdom. When in to Jerusalem for Passover this year, He was arrested and executed (see Part 15).

## Jesus chooses twelve apostles (Luke 6:12-16)

From His many disciples, Jesus chose twelve to become His 'apostles', meaning authorised representatives. The number twelve is significant, echoing the twelve tribes and indicating that Jesus was forming a renewed Israel – a new people of God – around Himself. These men, none of them highly educated or powerful, illustrate the kind of people Jesus loved and accepted and the subversive nature of His mission:

1. **Simon Peter** – Simon son of Jonah, a fisherman from Bethsaida in Galilee, was renamed 'Peter' by Jesus. He was often spokesman for the twelve, wrote 1 and 2 Peter, and Mark's Gospel draws on his memories.
2. **Andrew** – Peter's brother and also a fisherman, Andrew is best remembered for bringing people to Jesus, including his brother. John 1:35-42 tells how Jesus called Andrew.
3. **James** – son of Zebedee and a fisherman working alongside Peter. Luke 5:10 and Matthew 4:21-22 tell how Jesus called James and his brother John. He nicknamed them Boanerges ('sons of thunder').
4. **John** – wrote five New Testament books: John's Gospel, 1, 2 and 3 John and Revelation. One of the youngest of the disciples and especially close to Jesus, he referred to himself as the disciple Jesus loved.
5. **Philip** – another man from Peter's home town of Bethsaida. John 1:43-51 tells how Jesus called him.
6. **Bartholomew** (possibly the same person who is called Nathanael in John 1:45ff. and John 21:2).
7. **Matthew** (also called Levi son of Alphaeus) – a tax collector, a much-hated profession. Luke 5:27-32 and Matthew 9:9-13 tell us about his calling. Believed to have written Matthew's Gospel.
8. **Thomas** – nicknamed Didymus, meaning 'twin'. Thomas is best known for doubting that Jesus had been raised from the dead until he saw Him (John 20:26-29).
9. **James son of Alphaeus** (possibly a brother of Matthew and called James the younger in Mark 15:40).
10. **Simon the Zealot** – the Zealots were a radical Jewish group who strongly opposed Roman rule.
11. **Judas of James** (either a brother or son of a man named James; probably also known as Thaddeaus).
12. **Judas Iscariot** – this disciple, always placed last in lists of the twelve, betrayed Jesus for thirty pieces of silver. Responsible for looking after the money bag, used to steal from it (John 12:4-6).

## Jesus' mission – why did He come?

John's Gospel records five statements of Jesus about why He came into the world. Four are about His mission to make God's truth known: to do God's will (6:38); to bring truth (18:37); to shine like a light in the darkness (12:46); to separate those who acknowledge God's truth from those who are spiritually blind (9:39). In the fifth, He promises "life in all its fullness" (10:10) to all who believe in Him. **John 3** helps us understand the nature of this life. Nicodemus, a respected Jewish teacher, came to Jesus at night because he recognised that someone who did such miracles must be from God. The mention of this visit being at night indicates the darkness in Nicodemus' mind about who God really is, into which Jesus will shine light. Nicodemus would have been hoping for the Messiah to establish God's kingdom on earth. Jesus said inclusion in God's Kingdom is possible now, but requires a second birth from the Holy Spirit (v5-6). The life that results from being "born again", which is the life of God's kingdom, is eternal – it is both complete and it lasts forever.

Jesus explained that this eternal life under God's rule is possible because He came down from Heaven (v13), but that He must be lifted up in the same way Moses lifted up a snake in the desert (v14). This refers to a time when God judged the unfaithful Israelites through a plague but provided healing for all who looked at a bronze snake on a pole held by Moses (Numbers 21:4-9). Jesus was referring to His lifting up on the cross, which would bring healing for a greater problem: sins. As the Israelites had to look at the snake and trust God to heal them, people must look to Jesus and trust in Him to save them. John comments further (v16-21), explaining that people are condemned before God because of their sins. They must come into the light, allowing their sins to be exposed, and trust in God's Son who did not come to condemn us, but to bring us salvation. We can either ignore Him or come to Him. John's summary of Jesus' mission in verse 16 is probably the most famous verse in the Bible and summarises its message: "For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life."

### **SUMMARY: Jesus called people to follow Him and to believe in Him to receive eternal life**

- Eternal life comes through forgiveness of sins through Jesus' death and new birth by the Holy Spirit.
- Being a Christian means living under God's rule (kingdom) as a disciple (follower) of Jesus, our Lord.



# PART 12 – JESUS' MISSION DISCUSS AND APPLY

## **Discuss – questions to help understanding**

1. What do you think makes for a good life and what do you think happens after death?

*Read John 3:1-21*

2. Why might a man like Nicodemus have come to Jesus at night and might John have any other reason for highlighting this fact (given his use of the imagery of darkness later in the passage)?
3. What was it that drew Nicodemus to come and see Jesus? What did he understand about God's way of working and what, as the conversation unfolds, did he not understand yet?
4. What does this passage tell us about why people need to be born again and how it happens?
5. Verse 14 contains a reference to an event in the Old Testament. Read Numbers 21:4-9. How do these events serve as a useful illustration for Jesus of His mission?
6. Verse 16 is often said to be a summary of the message of the Bible. Reading the verse, do you agree with this assessment?
7. Why did some people reject Jesus (and some still do) when He did not come to condemn people but to bring salvation for people (verses 17-21)?

## **Apply – questions to help personal application**

- Do you ever feel like you are heavily burdened in life and that you would like to find rest somewhere? Do you think taking Jesus' yoke on you (accepting Him as Lord) might be the answer (Matthew 11:29-30)?
- Does Jesus' call to take up our cross and follow Him sound too demanding to you? What would you say to His claim that rejecting Him for something else means losing your soul (Matthew 16:26)?
- Jesus spoke as if having a secure hope for the future beyond death could give us peace in this life and motivate us to become better people. Does that make sense to you?
- What does Jesus' choice of the twelve apostles say about the kind of people He cares for? Could you imagine Him calling you to follow and what would you say in response?
- John 3 claims that we need a new life from the Spirit of God and that this is only possible because of Jesus' death, but warns that people prefer darkness to light. Does this challenge you in any way?

### ***What is an apostle?***

The word 'apostle' is a transliteration of a New Testament Greek word *apostolos*. The word's root meaning is 'sent one' and some people use it or the adjective 'apostolic' to refer to people sent on Christian mission. Others point to apostles' role laying foundations for the Church or guiding its leaders and suggest that people who initiate churches today are doing 'apostolic' work or there can be modern apostles over churches. As with any word, however, the meaning cannot be reliably determined based on etymology alone. Importantly, apostle does not simply mean someone sent with a message, but an authorised representative, something like an ambassador who speaks with the full authority of the country that appoints him, accountable to its rulers.

The New Testament only describes as 'apostles' men who were personally appointed by Jesus to the role and who had known Him, heard His teachings and witnessed His resurrection (see Acts 1:21–26; 1 Corinthians 9:1; 15:7). These people were clearly confined to the first generation of Christians, so it is not helpful to speak of modern apostles or apostolic ministries. The later books of the New Testament indicate that the time of the apostles was passing away and that future generations of Christians must remain faithful to the foundational teachings they had laid down (2 Peter 3:2; Jude 1:17).

### ***Was Jesus' mission entirely about eternal life in Heaven and not about social change?***

Some writers about Jesus describe Him as a social reformer who taught people to love one another and envisioned a society of equality and fairness. This is not wrong, but it misses the ultimate point of Jesus' life and mission. Jesus did teach love for others and He exemplified this in His own life. In this study I have majored on words from John's Gospel which explain Jesus' mission in terms of bringing eternal life to people. In responding to this question, it is important to look also at Luke's Gospel, which has a distinct emphasis.

The praises of Mary before His birth (Luke 1:46-55; see Part 9) describe His mission in terms of overthrowing oppressors and satisfying the poor and hungry. One of Jesus' first messages in public quoted Isaiah 61 to explain His mission "to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the oppressed will be set free, and that the time of the Lord's favour has come (Luke 4:18-19). The important point is that these statements must be interpreted in light of the Old Testament. Jesus was a Jew and the Jewish Messiah. His ministry was almost entirely within Israel and He challenged them (especially the most religious) for their neglect of God's Law, or rather their partial obedience to it. He continued the message of the Old Testament prophets that Israel had not been faithful to God's covenant and Law. This was especially evident in the attention some people paid to details of the Law concerning their own actions without showing compassion to others. Rather than loving their neighbours, some religious Jews condemned them while they took pride in themselves. Jesus exposes this hypocrisy and comes to restore the Old Testament principles of fairness and justice. The reference in Luke 4 to the "time of the Lord's favour" is to Leviticus 25 and the Year of Jubilee, when slaves were to be released and debts cancelled. Israel was meant to be a just society but failed.

Importantly, the Old Testament shows that the reason for Israel's unfaithfulness was deeper than simply ignorance of or inattention to God's Law. The real problem was their stubborn, rebellious hearts. They were sinful and until sin could be dealt with there was no hope of a perfect future when people would obey God's standards. Jesus began to form a new people of God (a renewed Israel) around Himself (the twelve are the start of this). Zechariah's words of praise, that follow Mary's, said Jesus had come to make possible forgiveness of sins (Luke 1:77). At the end of Luke's Gospel (which the passages about Jesus' mission to reform society come from), Jesus tells His disciples their message must be about the forgiveness of sins through repentance (Luke 24:47). This is the message they preach in Luke's sequel, the book of Acts.

Jesus did envision a transformed society, but He knew that this was only possible through the transformation of individual people. We can (and should) change social structures and laws to promote justice, but we cannot solve the problem of the human heart. Only God can do that. The Church is the place where God's transformed society is supposed to be seen because it is a community of people whose lives are being changed by God as they repent of sin and experience God's forgiveness.

- What did Jesus teach? Was it different from other teachers?
- How did Jesus say we can have a good relationship with God?

## The Law Restored

The teaching of Jesus set a higher standard than any other human teacher. After hearing one of the longest recorded portions of His teaching, often called the **Sermon on the Mount** (Matthew 5-7), people recognised that Jesus taught as if He had authority (Matthew 7:28-29). Unlike the usual teachers of the Law, who merely taught from what had already been written, Jesus claimed authority to say exactly what the Law meant and what God thought. He said He came to fulfil the Old Testament Law (Matthew 5:17-20). Jesus certainly kept the Law perfectly in His own actions, but this statement means more. He had come to bring the Law to its proper conclusion (He would do this through His sacrificial death), but first He had to restore it to its original purpose (the word translated 'fulfil' can also mean 'restore'). Matthew 5:21-48 contains six examples of Him doing this. The Jewish teachers (rabbis) had changed the standard of the Law in three ways:

- Focusing on actions and ignoring the heart* – Jesus taught that heart attitudes are as important as actions. Sin is not just wrong actions, but wrong desires that flow from wrong worship (of self, not God).
- Limiting its requirements to 'religious' activities* – they acted as if God was involved in some parts of life but could be left out of others. Jesus showed that God knows and cares about every aspect of our lives.
- Limiting compassion to people they thought deserved it* – anyone who wasn't good enough (including prostitutes, tax collectors and anyone who wasn't Jewish) did not deserve good deeds from them and in fact was an 'enemy' to be hated. Jesus showed this was wrong through a story about a Samaritan man who showed love to an injured Jewish man (Luke 10:25-37). Provocatively, the man who acted like a neighbour to the injured Jew was someone he would naturally hate – a Samaritan (descended from the people the Assyrians settled in the land). There are no limits to our duty of love to others. Everyone is our neighbour, irrespective of whether we would naturally love them or whether they can repay us.

Jesus restored the Law by exposing the falsehood of these three limitations. His teaching strips away attempts to justify ourselves as better than others or 'good enough' and focuses us on our sin and need of forgiveness.

Jesus summarised His standard for behaviour in a famous statement often called the '**Golden Rule**': "Do for others what you would like them to do for you. This is a summary of all that is taught in the law and the prophets" (**Matthew 7:12**). Notice the full force of what Jesus says. He does not simply ask us to do no harm to others (not doing to them what we would not want them to do to us), but to go beyond this and positively do good for them, even if they have done no good or real harm to us. This call to radical selflessness seems impossible by human standards and is radically different to our usual behaviour. Jesus also warned about the seriousness of sin and the reality of God's judgement in Hell (e.g., Mark 9:42-48). We have a serious problem – Jesus sets us a seemingly impossible standard and tells us we will face judgement if we fall short.

The solution to this problem is that such behaviour is only possible within the context that Jesus sets His ethical teaching within: God's rule. The first words of the 'Sermon on the Mount', Matthew 5:3-10, are a list of promises of blessing to certain people and begins and ends with a promise of the kingdom of Heaven (what other Gospels call the 'kingdom of God'). This kingdom – God's rule in action – turns the values of the world upside down (a theme we have seen often in the Bible), describing as blessed by God exactly the kinds of people the world despises! Jesus says that "God blesses those who are poor and realise their need for Him, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs" (Matthew 5:3). Importantly, God's rule is based on the principle of **forgiveness** (see Matthew 6:12). God calls us to experience His forgiveness and to extend forgiveness to others. To understand how God can forgive us, we need to follow the story of Jesus towards the cross.

## The kingdom of God

Jesus taught a great deal about the Kingdom of God, which means God's rule. In one sense as Genesis 1 showed, everything He created is under God's sovereign rule, but human beings rejected God as king, declaring independence from Him. Jesus showed what God's rule looks like and how people can enter it.

### ***The kingdom of God has arrived (Matthew 4:17)***

Jesus continued John's preaching (Matthew 3:1-2), boldly declaring that the kingdom of God was near and people must repent to get ready. Most Jews would have expected this to mean the overthrow of the Romans and the reestablishment of David's throne. As Jesus continued His ministry, He claimed His miracles, especially casting out demons, were proof that the kingdom had arrived (Matthew 12:28). Yet Jesus refused to become king (John 6:15) and never led an army. Shortly before His death, Jesus affirmed that he was "King of the Jews" (Matthew 27:11) but explained that His kingdom was not from this world, but from God (John 18:36). Instead of being 'lifted up' on a throne in exaltation, He was 'lifted up' on a cross to suffer and die (see the use of this phrase in John 3:14; 8:28; 12:32). The cross was His throne and thorns were His crown.

The kingdom of God arrived with Jesus, but not in its fullness. Jesus spoke of a future time when He would return in glory for all to see (Matthew 16:27; 25:31). Many of His parables about God's kingdom describe a future judgement over which He will preside (Matthew 25). During His first coming His mission was not to establish an earthly kingdom, but to bring God's rule in the lives of people. His miracles affirmed that He was the longed-for **Conquering King**, but He must first fulfil the prophecies about the **Suffering Servant**. For now, God's kingdom is growing slowly and often unseen in people's lives as they accept Him as Lord (Matthew 13).

### ***Entering the kingdom (Matthew 13)***

Jesus taught that we are not automatically part of God's kingdom. He said much about how people enter it:

- *We cannot be good enough on our own* (Matthew 5:20) – we must obey God better than the Pharisees, who were known as strict law keepers. His point is that we must realise we can never fully keep God's Law – we have all sinned and therefore need forgiveness to be part of His kingdom. The good news is that it is those who recognise their poverty of spirit before God who can possess the kingdom (Matthew 5:3).
- *We must do what God says, not just act the part* (Matthew 7:21-23) – Jesus warns that even some people who say they are His followers will not enter the kingdom. We must follow Him truly as Lord to be saved.
- *We must humble ourselves like little children* (Matthew 18:3) – Jesus is not telling us to act immaturely, but to recognise our dependence on God and trust Him as little children depend on and trust their parents.
- *Other things can distract us* (Matthew 19:24) – a rich young man came to Jesus, who told him to sell everything if he wanted to have eternal life, but the man wasn't prepared to because He loved possessions.
- *Sinners can enter the Kingdom if they repent* (Matthew 21:31-32) – Shockingly, Jesus said tax collectors and prostitutes were entering the kingdom before the chief priests. These 'sinners' had heard John the Baptist and repented from their sins, but the chief priests were proud and did not recognise their own sin and need to repent. Anyone can enter the kingdom, but only through repentance and faith.

## **Jesus demanded a response**

At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus challenged His hearers about how they would respond (Matthew 7:13-27). He had just presented His manifesto for His Kingdom and now they had to decide whether to acknowledge His rule. Jesus used three pictures to describe the choice before them:

- a) *Narrow and wide gates* (v13-14) – to reject it, as many do, leads to destruction, to accept it leads to life;
- b) *Good and bad trees* (v15-23) – false teachings lead to sinful actions, but Jesus' words lead to healthy fruit;
- c) *Wise and foolish builders* (v24-27) – only Jesus' words provide a firm and lasting foundation for life.

One of the best-known parables (Matthew 13:1-23) describes four different responses people make to the message about the Kingdom of God using the image of four kinds of soil onto which seed is sown:

- **The path** – people whose hearts are hard do not understand the message and Satan snatches it away;
- **Rocky soil** – some initially receive the message gladly, but turn away when it becomes difficult to obey;
- **Thorny ground** – some receive the message at first, but are later distracted by other concerns;
- **Good ground** – people who really receive the message, producing the fruit of a changed life serving God.

People still respond in these four ways today whenever God's word and the message about Jesus are taught.

#### **SUMMARY: Jesus' teaching was unique and demanded a response, calling us to enter God's kingdom**

- God's rule commands us to love everyone and leaves us with no excuse for our own sin.
- To enter God's kingdom we must respond to Jesus' teaching in humility, repentance and trust in Him.



## PART 13 – JESUS' MESSAGE DISCUSS AND APPLY

### **Discuss – questions to help understanding**

1. Many people if asked what Jesus taught would answer with one word: “Love”. Based on your knowledge of Jesus’ teaching would you agree with this or not?

*Read Matthew 5:43-6:34*

2. Matthew 5:43 combines a command from Leviticus 19:18 to love one’s neighbour with a command to hate one’s enemies that is not found in the Old Testament. How did the Law become distorted in this way?
3. How does love of our enemies (those who think ill of us and do wrong to us) reflect the likeness of God?
4. What kind of relationship with God does Jesus encourage His followers to have and why is He so opposed to religious hypocrisy?
5. What priorities for Christians does the ‘Lord’s Prayer’ (Matthew 6:9-13) teach us?
6. What does Jesus teach us in 6:19-34 about priorities for His followers? What would it mean to seek God’s kingdom first, to build up treasures in Heaven and to serve God, not money?
7. What, according to Jesus, is the key to a worry-free life?

### **Apply – questions to help personal application**

- Do you recognise in your own attitudes the three limitations religious teachers had put on God’s standard of right and wrong: neglecting the heart; separating religion from normal life; and judging others?
- Do you think Jesus’ standard in His Golden Rule – do to others as you would have them do to you – is desirable and possible? Do you think you could live consistently this way?
- Jesus set a very high standard for behaviour and warned that the consequences for sin are serious. Do you believe you deserve God’s judgement and that you need His forgiveness?
- Why is it so important to realise that the kind of behaviour Jesus commanded for His followers can only be possible when we live in a relationship with God as King and Father?
- Which kind of soil in Jesus’ parable of the soils (Matthew 13:1-23) do you think you are? Has God’s truth found a place in your life and is it growing there to bear lasting fruit?

# UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

## PART 13 – JESUS' MESSAGE

### QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

#### ***What are parables and why did Jesus use them?***

Jesus often taught using parables (stories about everyday life that teach spiritual truths – see *Module 2 Study Aids* for a table of Jesus' parables). Some parables are easier to understand than others. In fact, some parables were designed to make it difficult for people to understand. In **Matthew 13:10**, Jesus' disciples asked Him why He always used parables. Jesus explained that some people were open to His teaching – they would keep thinking and seeking understanding from God until they got the message of the parable. Other people were not really listening, and they would never get the message. Jesus only wanted to reveal the truth about His Kingdom to people who were really serious about seeking God. The parables acted like a filter, separating out those who were seeking God from those who were not. Parables are a great way to subvert expectations – they often have a twist in the tale – and to challenge people to respond as they imagine themselves in the story and identify with one of the characters. They can also serve as illustrations of spiritual truths drawing on familiar imagery. Parables are an extension of wisdom teaching found in Old Testament books like Proverbs.

Not all of Jesus' teaching to the crowds was in the form of parables. The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), for example, is mostly direct and clear only occasionally using imagery. Importantly, when He was alone with His disciples He spoke plainly to them and often explained the meaning of His parables (Mark 4:34). In doing so, He was preparing them to be teachers in the Church after His departure. A lengthy example of such private teaching is found in John 14-16. One example of Jesus' explanation of a parable is recorded in Mark 4:13-20, where He explains the meaning of the different soil types in His parable of the sower.

#### ***Was Jesus' teaching really unique?***

It has sometimes been pointed out that the 'Golden Rule' associated with Jesus is also found in the teachings of various other philosophers and religious leaders who lived before Jesus. Along with this, it is claimed that all religions are basically the same, teaching people to love others. Such claims are wrong for several reasons.

Firstly, the similarities between Christian ethics and other teachings should not surprise Christians, since we believe that God's standard of right and wrong is written on human hearts (Romans 2:15), so that people have some knowledge of right and wrong. The similarity of basic ethical standards across the world's cultures is, Christians argue, evidence for God's existence.

Secondly, it is simply not true that all religions teach love and they certainly do not universally teach love for enemies, even if they do expect love for co-religionists. The version of the Golden Rule found in earlier teachings is negative – 'do not do to others what you would not have them do to you' – forbidden harmful actions towards others. Jesus, however, goes much further in commanding good actions towards all. His call for His followers to love their enemies is radical and reflects the character of God, who loves all people (Matthew 5:43-48). There is no known record of anyone teaching this before Jesus and it is this radical call that really sets Jesus (and Christian ethics) apart from alternatives. It exposes our corrupt hearts and calls us to a standard that we only see lived out in Jesus Himself.

Thirdly, such claims assume that the heart of religion is ethics, but the central claims of Christianity are not about how people should live, but how they can be made right with God through Jesus Christ. Jesus did not teach people that they could live good enough lives to satisfy God or earn acceptance with Him, but that they needed to depend on His mercy and receive His forgiveness. Unlike other founders of major religions, who appeared with new teachings and rejected what went before (Buddha rejected Hinduism; Muhammad rejected both Arab polytheism and Jewish and Christian claims about God's revelation), Jesus claimed to continue the story of the Old Testament. His teaching makes sense within a specific context and must be understood against the backdrop of the Old Testament. Only God could cure the problem of sin and Jesus was God's Saviour for sinful people. Other religions may place the emphasis on ethics, but Christianity is about a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. The correct behaviour, meeting Jesus' exceptional ethical standard, flows from this relationship as a response to God's grace. Jesus' core message was not that we need to become better people by trying harder, but that we need to come to Him for forgiveness and guidance.

- What was the significance of the miracles Jesus performed?
- How did people who met Jesus respond to His claims?

## Jesus, the I AM

John's Gospel records seven sayings of Jesus starting "I am ...", an echo of the title God told Moses to use to describe Him (Exodus 3:14). Jesus is identifying Himself as the God of Israel, the eternal and all-sufficient One:

1. "I am **the bread of life**. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry again. Whoever believes in me will never be thirsty" (6:35). God provided bread (manna) and water in the desert in Moses' time, temporarily meeting Israel's needs, but Jesus is the bread who fulfils our deepest needs permanently.
2. "I am **the light of the world**. If you follow me, you won't have to walk in darkness, because you will have the light that leads to life" (8:12). As we have seen before, Jesus reveals God's truth in a dark world.
3. "I am **the gate for the sheep**. [...] Those who come in through me will be saved. They will come and go freely and will find good pastures. [...] My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life" (10:7-10). Jesus is the path for the sheep who have strayed from God to return to Him and find provision.
4. "I am **the good shepherd**. The good shepherd sacrifices his life for the sheep" (10:11). Jesus is the Good Shepherd just as David described God as His shepherd in Psalm 23. He gives His life for His sheep.
5. "I am **the resurrection and the life**. Anyone who believes in me will live, even after dying. Everyone who lives in me and believes in me will never ever die" (11:25-26). Not only does Jesus die for His people; He gives them real and lasting life. The future hope of resurrection after death depends on Him.
6. "I am **the way, the truth, and the life**. No one can come to the Father except through me" (14:6). Jesus is the way to God, the truth about God and the source of life. He is the only way to God.
7. "I am **the vine**; you are the branches. Those who remain in me ... produce much fruit" (15:5). Israel was described as God's vine (Jeremiah 2:21), but Jesus says He is now the true vine, in contrast to unfaithful Israel, and that inclusion among God's people depends on connection with Him.

Jesus claimed that He **alone** can bring us to God, give us eternal life, keep us secure and meet our deepest needs. The force of His claims is clear in an interaction with some Jews recorded in **John 8:31-58**. They believed they were accepted by God as descendants of Abraham, but Jesus said their true father was neither Abraham, nor God (v41), but Satan (v44), since they had not recognised who Jesus really was. They accused Him of being possessed by an evil spirit, but He replied that anyone who obeys His teaching will never die (v51). The people asked if He thought He was greater than Abraham (v53) and Jesus responded: "Before Abraham was born I am" (v58), again using the divine name from Exodus as He claimed to have existed before Abraham, who lived 2000 years earlier. The Jews recognised this as a claim to be God and wanted to kill Him!

## The miracles of Jesus

Jesus's life began with a miracle (the virgin conception) and was followed by a miracle (His resurrection). He performed many miracles, which the Gospels call 'signs' since they pointed to **the nature of God's kingdom and Jesus' authority as king** over the physical universe and those things that are not God's perfect plan for it:

1. **Nature** – changing water into wine (John 2:1-11); feeding over 5000 people with one boy's lunch (John 6:1-15); controlling the weather (Mark 4:35-41); walking on water (Matthew 14:22-36; John 6:16-21).
2. **Disease** – Jesus healed all kinds of diseases, including: fevers (Mark 1:29-34); infections like leprosy (Luke 5:12-16); paralysis and muscle wasting (Luke 5:17-26; John 5:1-15); congenital blindness (John 9:1-41). These healings were (with only one exception) instantaneous and complete, restoring health and strength.
3. **Evil spirits** – Jesus frequently cast out evil spirits that had terrorised people, causing mental distress.
4. **Death** – Jesus brought at least three dead people back to life (Luke 7:11-17; Luke 8:40-56; John 11:1-44).
5. **Sin** – Luke 5:17-26 records that Jesus told a paralysed man his sins were forgiven because of his faith (v20). Shocked, the religious teachers said, "*Who but God can forgive sins!*" Jesus then healed the man to prove His authority to forgive sins. He can cure not only sin's effects (disease and death) but sin itself.

## Responses to Jesus

- **Demons** – on several occasions when Jesus cast out evil spirits, they acknowledged Him to be the Son of God who had power to punish them (e.g., Mark 5:7; Luke 8:28).
- **Jesus' family** – Jesus' mother, Mary, was the first to believe the good news that her Son was the Messiah and she followed Him. Jesus had at least four half-brothers, named James, Joseph, Simon and Judas (Matthew 13:55). During His ministry they did not, at least initially, believe in Him (John 7:1-9). After His death and resurrection, however, at least two of these brothers became Christians and leaders in the Church, writing letters in the New Testament named after them (James and Jude).
- **The disciples** – the twelve, along with a group of women who helped provide for His needs, were the closest people to Jesus during His life on earth. They took some time to realise who Jesus really was, largely because they had the same expectations about what the Messiah should be like as most other people. Simon was the first to acknowledge Jesus as God's Messiah and Son, marking a turning point in the Gospels after which Jesus began to speak openly about His coming death (see more about His journey of faith in Part 17). The only one of the Twelve who did not remain a follower of Jesus was Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus for money, but he was actually a thief all along, loving money more than he loved Jesus. Judas regretted this decision afterwards and, tragically, committed suicide. The remaining eleven all continued to believe in Jesus and became apostles, laying the foundations for the Church.
- **The religious leaders** – the Jewish religious leaders belonged to several groups with quite different beliefs and aims, including the Pharisees and Sadducees (see the Study Aids for this module for more details). Much of Jesus' recorded teaching was in response to questions from members of these varied religious groups. Some religious leaders, like Nicodemus (Part 12) and Joseph of Arimathea (Part 15), became disciples of Jesus, but He was unpopular with many of them for several reasons:
  - His compassion towards people they considered 'sinners' (e.g., prostitutes and tax collectors);
  - His declaration that the religious leaders were also sinners in need of God's forgiveness;
  - His rejection of rules the Pharisees had added to the Old Testament Law;
  - His claim to be God, which they saw as blasphemous and punishable by death;
  - His threat to the power and income of the Sadducees when He purified the Temple (Part 15).

For these different reasons, groups who were not usually allies joined together to oppose Jesus and plotted to have Him executed.

- **The crowd** – During the second year of His ministry, thousands of people followed Jesus, but the following year many of them turned away from Him. People followed Jesus for various reasons, but many thought He would heal all their illnesses or make them very powerful in the kingdom they expected Him to establish. When they realised Jesus would not become king (John 4:14-15) and when He began to talk about His coming death (John 12:20-36), many rejected Him, just as the parable of the soils predicted (Part 13). These people were happy to embrace the prophecies about God's **Conquering King** and they hoped for personal gain as a result, but they did not want Jesus to be the **Suffering Servant** or to sacrifice their own comfort and status to follow Him. John 12:37 concludes that most people did not believe in Jesus despite the miraculous signs they saw. Responses to Jesus do not depend on the quality of the evidence God has given, but on whether our hearts are willing to acknowledge our sin and submit to Him as Lord.

Christian author C.S. Lewis spelled out the options when faced with Jesus' claim to be God:

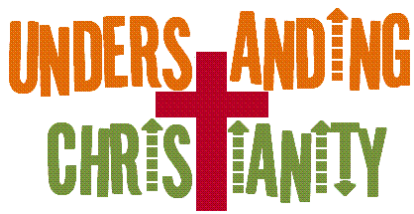
- a) **LIAR (bad)** – some said He was demon possessed, but He put people's lives together and gave them hope;
- b) **LUNATIC (mad)** – some said He was insane (John 10:20), no mad man could speak and think so clearly;
- c) **LORD (God)** – He claimed to be God and His teaching and actions back this claim up.

We can reject Jesus' claim, but we cannot ignore it. If Jesus really was the Son of God come to establish God's kingdom among us and if He is the only Way to know the creator God, the consequences for us are immense. He did not offer us the option of following some of His teachings or of accepting Him as 'just a good teacher'. It is either Jesus **OR** something else, but we cannot have Jesus **AND** something else.

### **SUMMARY: Jesus claimed to be God and supported the claim through powerful miracles**

- He said He was the I AM, the life giver and way to God, and claimed the authority to forgive sins.
- People who met Jesus could not ignore Him – they either rejected Him or gave up all to follow Him.





## PART 14 – RESPONSES TO JESUS

### DISCUSS AND APPLY

#### **Discuss – questions to help understanding**

1. What is your impression of the claims Jesus made about Himself and the ways people responded to Him?

*Read John 8:12-59*

2. Several times in this passage Jesus uses the phrase 'I AM' in relation to Himself. What is the significance of this in light of the Old Testament (look at Exodus 3:13-15 if you need a reminder)?
3. What is the meaning of the claim Jesus makes about Himself in verse 12?
4. Why do the Pharisees reject Jesus' claim and how does His response intensify the impact of His claims even further (verses 13-20)?
5. Why did Jesus say it was so important that people recognised who He was and believed in Him (verses 21-30)? What is at stake?
6. Why were Jesus' words so shocking to the Jews that they wanted to kill Him (verses 31-59)?
7. What does this passage say about the nature of sin and Jesus' mission in relation to it (see verses 21-23, 34-36 and 46)?

#### **Apply – questions to help personal application**

- Do you find it hard to believe that Jesus' miracles really happened? What is similar or different between them and fairy tales that tell about miracles? How should you respond to someone with such power?
- Having heard what Jesus claimed, do you think you have had too small an opinion of who He is? Is it valid to think highly of Him (as most people do) without accepting that He was God living as a human being?
- Do you think Jesus' claims about Himself are credible? What supporting evidence is there in His life and the wider story of the Bible? Does anyone else compare with this?
- Which of the groups of people who responded in different ways to Jesus do you identify with most? Has your response to Him changed since you began studying this course?
- Jesus had great power, yet He did not use it selfishly, instead serving others and going to the cross. Why did He take this path and what does it say about God?

# UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

## PART 14 – RESPONSES TO JESUS QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

### ***Why did Jesus not simply say plainly that He was God?***

To appreciate Jesus' claim to be God we must understand the Old Testament background. The Law of Moses very clearly teaches that there is only one God and to identify or worship someone or something as God other than the creator is a serious sin that was to be punished by death within the nation of Israel. To believe that God had become human involved a major mental shift for first century Jews. It is hinted at in a few Old Testament passages – such as Job's confidence that his redeemer would stand on the earth (Job 19:25) or in Psalm 110:1, where David describes the Messiah as his Lord – but no one reading the Old Testament without knowing about Jesus would have expected the incarnation. There is no doubt that Jesus claimed to be God and the response of the Jewish leaders who wanted to stone him shows that they got His point, but His claims were less direct than we might expect for a number of reasons.

Firstly, Jesus' normal pattern when teaching the crowds was not to speak directly but using parables. The truths of His identity would only be revealed to those who were seeking God. Secondly, Jesus allowed His disciples to discover His identity gradually. In the early stages of His ministry He did not allow them to speak openly about the things they saw, until Peter's confession of His identity as the Messiah and God's Son. Even after that realisation, it took time for the apostles to realise the full significance of Jesus' actions and claims. Jesus was a patient teacher and He did not reveal so much to them that they might be driven away. Thirdly, it was only after His death and resurrection that the claims of Jesus could make sense and that they could be taken seriously. God's raising of Jesus from the dead was the great vindication of all His claims about Himself. The clearest declaration of Jesus' divine identity in the Gospels comes after the resurrection from the lips of Thomas (Part 16). Jesus accepts and commends his statement, but it is important that people come to see its truth for themselves.

### ***Is Lewis's trilemma not flawed? Might Jesus not have been sincerely mistaken?***

The options presented by C.S. Lewis do not include a fourth possibility, that Jesus was sincerely mistaken in His belief that He was God. That option cannot be taken seriously, however, as the miracles of Jesus and especially His resurrection indicate that God approved of Him. To believe Jesus was mistaken is to reject His claim to have been sinless and to have spoken only what His Father gave Him to say, and if we reject that then we are left with no Jesus at all. The Gospels confront us with a man who sincerely believed He was the God of Israel and His life displays all the attributes we might expect to see if that claim were true.

- How did a person like Jesus come to be executed?
- Why did Jesus have to die?

## One week in Jerusalem

Jerusalem was the centre of power in the region both for Rome and for the religious leaders who opposed Jesus, making it a dangerous place for Him. In the third year of His ministry, despite growing opposition to His ministry, Jesus made His usual journey to Jerusalem for the Passover feast. In fact, He “resolutely set out for Jerusalem” (John 9:51). The Gospels remind us that He was aware that He must be arrested and executed. This was the reason for His coming into the world. Jesus arrived at Jerusalem on a Sunday, and the following Friday He was executed. We can date these events based on references in the Gospels:

- The day of the crucifixion was the day before the Sabbath, that is a Friday (Matthew 27:62; John 19:31).
- It was also the Day of Preparation for the Passover (John 18:28; 19:14) – this is the Jewish date 14<sup>th</sup> Nisan.

The 14<sup>th</sup> day of Nisan only fell on a Friday twice between AD 28 and 34: 7<sup>th</sup> April 30 and 3<sup>rd</sup> April 33. Since the ministry of John the Baptist began in 28-29 AD (Part 11), **3<sup>rd</sup> April 33** is the likely date of Jesus’ crucifixion. This final week in Jerusalem is traditionally called ‘Holy Week’ and some days have been given special names.

### ***Palm Sunday – Jesus enters Jerusalem*** [Matthew 21:1-11; Mark 11:1-11; Luke 19:29-44; John 12:12-19]

Arriving in Jerusalem, Jesus was surrounded by a crowd of His followers, mainly from Galilee. He asked His disciples to get Him a donkey to ride into the city, fulfilling a prophecy that the Messiah would enter Jerusalem riding on a donkey (Zechariah 9:9). Jesus’ followers rejoiced as they believed Jesus would now become king in Jerusalem, restoring God’s Kingdom on earth. They waved palm branches in the air and shouted praises to God. Jesus, however, spoke once more about the need for Him to die to enter His glory, like a grain of wheat that must die to become fruitful, and called people to follow Him (John 12:23-26).

### ***Monday – Jesus cleanses the Temple*** [Matthew 21:12-20; Mark 11:12-21; Luke 19:45-46]

On Monday we see something unusual – Jesus becoming angry and overturning tables of moneylenders in the Temple. Jesus’ anger was because these people were misusing the Temple. It was supposed to be a place where people from all nations could worship God, but these men were using it to profit through business and in the process blocking the only area that was available for non-Jews to pray! This action threatened the Sadducees. As High Priests they controlled the Temple and made money from the business conducted there. Jesus’ action was right, but it also provoked them to act on their plans to arrange His execution.

### ***Tuesday / Wednesday – Jesus’ enemies’ plot*** [Matthew 21:23-26:5; Mark 11:27-14:2; Luke 20:1-22:6]

Jesus taught in Jerusalem, mainly about the future. He faced some challenges about His authority and criticised hypocritical religious leaders (Luke 20:1--19). His enemies plotted to arrest Jesus were afraid of causing a riot among His Galilean followers. Then Judas Iscariot presented them with an opportunity, agreeing to hand Jesus over to them in exchange for a payment of thirty pieces of silver.

### ***Maundy Thursday – Jesus arrested*** [Matthew 26:17-56; Mark 14:12-52; Luke 22:7-51; John 12:1-18:13]

Jesus celebrated Passover with the twelve. Before the meal He dramatically washed their feet, a job a servant should do (John 13:1-17). This showed His love for them and set an example of servanthood for them to follow. After the meal, He took some bread and broke it, saying it represented His body given for them, and a cup of wine to represent God’s **New Covenant** sealed by the blood He would pour out. Jesus said they should re-enact this taking of bread and wine to remember Him and Christians continue to do so (Part 20).

After this ‘Last Supper’, Jesus shared some teaching alone with the remaining eleven apostles, recorded in John 14-16. He explained that He must leave them soon but would prepare a place for them in God’s house, one day returning to take them to live there with Him. He also promised to send the Holy Spirit to live with them as their teacher and comforter after He had left them. Lastly, He prayed a wonderful prayer for His disciples and all those who would believe in Him through their message (John 17).

The disciples and Jesus left the city and crossed a valley to a garden, where Jesus began to pray. It was now the middle of the night, and, although Jesus asked them to pray with Him, the disciples fell asleep. Jesus was in great pain because He knew what lay ahead of Him. While He was there, a group of soldiers from the High Priest's guard arrived. Judas identified Jesus by kissing Him on the cheek, and the soldiers arrested Him. Simon Peter tried to defend Jesus with a sword, but Jesus told him to put it away. Confused, the disciples fled.

**Good Friday – Jesus Dies** [Matthew 26:57-27:66; Mark 14:53-15:47; Luke 22:54-23:53; John 18:13-42]

Jesus was taken for trial before the High Priest. He was beaten by soldiers and accused of blasphemy by false witnesses. Unable to execute Jesus themselves, the Jewish leaders sent Him to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor. He believed Jesus was innocent of any crime and tried to pass the case to Herod Antipas, ruler of Galilee. Herod, however, returned Jesus to Pilate, who had Him beaten in the hope that this would be enough to please the priests and their supporters. A crowd called out for Jesus to be executed, so Pilate, afraid the Jews might riot if he did not agree, condemned Jesus to be crucified. Jesus was led out of the city to a hill where He was nailed to a cross. The disciples were confused and dismayed, losing all hope. Simon Peter even denied that he knew Jesus. Jesus cried out to God from the cross and told a thief who died beside Him that he would be with him that day in Paradise, then He died a painful and shameful death, alone and rejected.

## The significance of the cross

The Bible describes death as the result of sin. Before sin came into the world there was no death, but after Adam sinned, death came into the world. It is the wages sin pays (Romans 6:23). Jesus was universally acknowledged to be sinless (Part 10), so why did He need to die? The answer is found in the Old Testament prophecies about God's **Suffering Servant**. Isaiah 53:10-12 tells us the Messiah had to suffer at God's hand as an "offering for sin" and in doing so "make it possible for many to be counted righteous, for he will bear all their sins." The Messiah would not die for His own sins – He is God's righteous Servant – but bearing the sins of others (as a sacrifice) so they could be counted righteous (echoing Genesis 15:6, which says that God counted Abraham as righteous through faith). Amazingly, God will rescue us from sin at great cost to Himself. The cross shows the extent of God's love as Jesus faces utter humiliation and experiences our pain.

Jesus was aware of the reasons for His death. Unlike all other human beings, who are under death's control, Jesus claimed to have control over when He would die (John 10:17-18). He said His death would:

- Offer His life as a ransom for many, that is a price to set them free (Matthew 10:28; Mark 10:45);
- Bring eternal life to those who believe (John 3:14-15);
- Forge the new covenant with God's people (Luke 22:20);
- Defeat the "prince of this world", meaning Satan (John 12:31).

Jesus took our sins on Himself and died in our place, taking the punishment that we deserved for our sins, and so made it possible for us to be declared "not guilty" (righteous) by God and to have eternal life. The letters of the New Testament explain it in these same terms that Jesus used (Romans 3:21-26; Hebrews 10:1-18; 1 Peter 3:18). The timing of Jesus death at Passover also reminds us that it fulfilled the meaning of sacrifice. As John the Baptist had said when He introduced Jesus, the Lamb of God was taking away the sins of the world. The Old Testament sacrifices were pictures of the one sacrifice Jesus would make for the sins of all people. They could never really pay the price for our sins, but Jesus, the only sinless human being, became the perfect sacrifice really paid for our sins. This is how God can forgive us for our sins but remain holy. Sin is forgiven not by ignoring it but because Jesus has already paid for it. We must admit it and seek forgiveness to be saved.

The message of the Bible – the good news about Jesus (the gospel) – can be summarised in five simple points:

1. **God rules** – He loves us and created us to know Him, to love Him and obey Him as our King;
2. **We rebelled** – we rejected God's rule and stand condemned in our sin, deserving death and judgement;
3. **God rescues** – Jesus the Messiah, promised descendant of Eve, Abraham and David, died for our sins.
4. **We respond** – we must repentance (admitting our sin) and trust in Jesus to be Lord over our lives;
5. **God restores** – God accepts those who believe in Jesus as His children and gives them full, eternal life.

**SUMMARY: Jesus was betrayed and died outside Jerusalem as a sacrifice for sins**

- From a human perspective, Jesus was betrayed, rejected, falsely accused, denied and crucified.
- From a divine perspective, Jesus fulfilled prophecy and died to save people from sin and defeat Satan.

# UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

## PART 15 – HOLY WEEK

### DISCUSS AND APPLY

#### **Discuss – questions to help understanding**

1. What experiences have you had of services or other Christian activities around Easter? How do they relate to the events of the life of Jesus?

*Read John 18:28-19:37*

2. Why did Pilate collude in the crucifixion of Jesus? What personal and political forces were at play and what does this reveal about human nature, especially of people with power and influence?
3. What do the words of the Jewish leaders in this passage say about why they wanted rid of Jesus and to what extent do you think they were speaking the whole truth?
4. What do Jesus' words to Pilate reveal about His identity and mission?
5. What is the significance of the words Jesus spoke from the cross (19:25-30)?
6. Why does John go to such lengths to record the evidence that Jesus had really died (19:31-37)?
7. Who was responsible for Jesus' death? What degree of blame do you think the crowd, the soldiers, Pilate and the chief priests had? What does 19:11 suggest about who was really in control?

#### **Apply – questions to help personal application**

- What do the events of the week leading up to Jesus' crucifixion (entering Jerusalem, cleansing the Temple, the last supper etc.) say about His priorities and sense of His mission? How do they impact you?
- Does the account of the cleansing of the Temple strike you as unusual by contrast with Jesus' normal behaviour? Why did the Temple's purity and the inclusion of all people within it mean so much to Him?
- Jesus intentionally chose to go towards His crucifixion and He did not resist death. Does the thought that He chose death to rescue you mean anything to you?
- Why do you think Jesus had to die and what is your understanding of why Christians make the cross so central to their faith? Do you agree that this death had special significance and that He died for you?
- Do you agree with the five-point summary of the gospel message at the end of this study's notes? If not, at what point do you stick and how can you explore your questions further?

# UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

## PART 15 – HOLY WEEK

### QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

#### ***What was the significance of Jesus riding the donkey into Jerusalem?***

The Gospel writers tell us explicitly that Jesus' decision to ride into the city of Jerusalem on the back of a donkey (which He arranged for His disciples to borrow) was a fulfilment of a prophecy recorded in Zechariah 9:9. This was a clear statement from Jesus of His identity as Israel's king. The choice of a donkey was significant according to the wider context of Zechariah 9. The king riding on the donkey was undoubtedly victorious, but he was also humble, not flaunting his power. The donkey represented his intention to remove the weapons of war, including the warhorse, and to bring lasting peace.

#### ***What is the significance of the words of Jesus on the cross?***

The Gospels together record seven sayings spoken by Jesus from the cross which are full of significance:

1. Jesus asked His Father to forgive those who crucified them who were acting in ignorance because they did not know who He was (Luke 23:34). The grace of God and His willingness to forgive is seen.
2. Jesus assured the thief who recognised His kingship that He would join Him in paradise (Luke 23:43). In death, as in life, Jesus was concerned with the salvation of others. This dying man, ironically, sees what the religious leaders and the Roman soldiers could not see – that Jesus was truly God's king.
3. Jesus arranges for John to look after His mother as if she were his mother (John 19:26-27). In doing so, He fulfils the fifth of the ten commandments.
4. Jesus quotes Psalm 22:1 in a cry to God asking why He had forsaken Him (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34). This statement shows both His awareness that His death was fulfilling prophecy and also His experience of rejection by His Father as He took our sins upon Himself (nowhere else does Jesus ever refer to the Father as 'God').
5. Jesus expressed His thirst (John 19:28), showing His true human suffering and also fulfilling prophecy.
6. Jesus declared in a loud exclamation: "It is finished" (John 19:30). This was not a gasp of defeat (my life is finished), but a declaration of victory (my work is completed).
7. Jesus commends His spirit to His Father as He dies (Luke 23:46). The return to addressing God as Father is notable – the rift caused by His bearing of sin is now healed as His work is done.

#### ***Why did Pilate agree to Jesus' crucifixion?***

Pilate is one of the most tragic figures in human history. He knew that Jesus was innocent, and his wife warned Him not to cause harm to the man she had dreamed about the previous night. The problem was that the chief priests were buying for Jesus' blood and they had whipped a crowd from Jerusalem into a frenzy to support their call for Him to be crucified. Pilate could see the truth, but he was clouded by his political interests. Tragically He asked Jesus, who had come to testify to the truth, what truth is. He authorised Jesus' execution to avert the risk of a Jewish insurrection, which could cost him his job. He washed his hands afterwards, to symbolise his desire to be free of responsibility. Pilate is like many people who can see the truth about Jesus but reject Him because of personal concerns and then try to plead innocence.

#### ***What is the significance of the special events surrounding Jesus' death?***

The Gospels record some unusual phenomena around the time of Jesus' death which point to its significance:

- *Darkness* – there was darkness for three hours according to Matthew, Mark and Luke. Jesus' died at Passover, which is always a full moon, meaning this could not have been an eclipse. In Scripture, darkness symbolises sin. In this darkness, people were doing their worst to God's sinless Son and He was taking their sin upon themselves, bearing God's wrath against sin.
- *Temple Curtain Torn* – the curtain in the Temple separated the most holy place, where the ark of the covenant (God's throne) was kept, from the holy place. Only the High Priest could pass through it and that only on the Day of Atonement. When Jesus died it was torn from the top down (Matthew 27:51). The meaning is clear: because of Jesus' death, sin was removed and access to God was open to people.

- What do Christians believe happened after Jesus' death?
- Does it make any sense to believe in the resurrection of Jesus?

## The burial of Jesus

The bodies of crucified people were usually left on the cross to rot, with the remains eventually buried in a communal grave, but Joseph from Arimathea, a member of the Jewish leadership who was a secret follower of Jesus, asked Pilate for permission to remove Jesus' body from the cross (Matthew 27:57-60). Pilate agreed after checking with his soldiers that Jesus was definitely dead (Mark 15:44-45). This investigation proves that Jesus really was dead, but so does the account in John 19:31-37. Crucifixion could take a very long time and to speed up death, the Roman soldiers would often break the victim's legs, making it much harder for them to breathe. In Jesus' case they did not need to do this because He was already dead. To be certain, however, they pierced Jesus' side with a spear. The resulting mixture of blood and clear fluid flowing from His side indicates that the heart and the pericardial sac surrounding it had been pierced, confirming death.

Joseph, helped by Nicodemus, who had visited Jesus by night and became a secret disciple, buried the body in his own tomb which was cut out of a rock (John 19:38-42). This fulfilled a prophecy that the Suffering Servant would be buried with the rich (Isaiah 53:9). The tomb was secured in three ways:

1. **A large stone over the doorway** (Matthew 27:60) – this would need several men to roll it open;
2. **A seal on the stone** (Matthew 27:66) – breaking this would have carried a punishment;
3. **A guard** (Matthew 27:62-66) – soldiers positioned to prevent a theft of the body would have been punished severely if they failed in their mission.

## The resurrection of Jesus

### *The events*

Not only did Jesus predict His death; He also told His disciples at least five times that He would rise to life again on the third day (Matthew 16:21; 17:9; 17:22-23; 20:18-19; 26:32). The disciples did not understand at the time, and when He died they hid away, afraid they might be next. Events on the Sunday changed everything. To understand what happened, we must compare the four Gospel accounts:

- **The women go to the tomb** [Matthew 28:1-15; Mark 16:1-8; Luke 24:1-11; John 20:1-9]  
Very early on the Sunday morning (around dawn) at least six female followers of Jesus went to the tomb, hoping to put spices on His body. When they reached the tomb they found the stone already rolled away and they went inside where they saw an angel who told them that Jesus had risen from the dead. An angel had rolled the stone open and sat down on it, causing the guards to faint. The women felt fear mixed with joy and ran to tell the disciples without telling anyone else on the way. As they were going, Jesus suddenly appeared to them. They recognised Him and worshipped Him. The guards, meanwhile, went to the Jewish leaders, who bribed them and told them to spread a rumour that the disciples had stolen Jesus' body.
- **Peter and John ran to the tomb, Jesus appeared to Mary** [Luke 24:12; John 20:3-18]  
When they received the news from the women, Peter and John ran to the tomb. John arrived first, but hesitated while Peter went inside. He saw the strips of linen Jesus had been buried in and went off alone. Sometime shortly after this, Jesus appeared personally to Peter. Mary Magdalene, one of the women who was especially devoted to Jesus, returned to the tomb following Peter and John and stayed after they left. She saw a man in the garden and at not recognise that it was Jesus until He spoke her name.
- **Two disciples meet Jesus on the Road to Emmaus** [Luke 24:13-35]  
Two disciples left Jerusalem on the Sunday to travel to the village of Emmaus. While they were walking on the road, they met a stranger who appeared not to have heard about what had happened in Jerusalem. Not recognising that it was Jesus, they spoke to Him about Jesus' death and in response He explained how the Old Testament pointed to the fact that the Messiah had to suffer. They recognised Jesus when He broke bread to give to them and ran back to the city to tell the eleven, who had heard already from the women and Peter.

- **The Apostles meet Jesus** [Luke 24:36-49; John 20:19-31]

Jesus appeared to ten of the eleven together on the Sunday evening, but Thomas was not there. When the other disciples told him they had seen Jesus he did not believe. One week later, Jesus again appeared to them, this time with Thomas present. Thomas now believed and made an amazing statement, calling Jesus "My Lord and my God". Jesus commended Him for realising this, accepting His worship. Jesus appeared to the apostles many times over a forty-day period before He ascended to heaven (Acts 1:3).

### ***The evidence***

The resurrection of Jesus is an amazing claim, but it has excellent evidence that stands up under investigation:

- **The empty tomb** – the resurrection could easily have been disproved if Jesus' enemies produced His body, but they could not because it was missing. The terrified disciples could not have stolen it from the guarded tomb. There really was an empty tomb.
- **Claimed from the start** – the resurrection was believed and proclaimed by Christians from the very beginning forming the central proof for them that Jesus was Lord (e.g., Acts 2:24; 1 Corinthians 15:3-8).
- **Many witnesses** – Jesus appeared to over 500 people at one time, many of them still alive at the time when the apostle Paul wrote (1 Corinthians 15:6). The apostles and others saw Him eating and were able to touch Him, proving it was no hallucination and His body was real. The first witnesses were women – an unlikely choice if the story was invented as women were not trusted as witnesses in courts at that time.
- **Transformed people** – the disciples, who hid fearfully when Jesus died, became bold witnesses after they claimed to have seen Him alive. Within around 30 years many of them were arrested and even executed for their claims, showing how strongly they believed that Jesus really was alive (who would die for a lie?) Sceptics and opponents of the gospel were also transformed by it, most notably Paul (Part 19). The gospel spread rapidly and continues to spread today as people testify to having encountered the risen Jesus.

### ***The significance***

The resurrection is central to Christian faith and has massive implications:

- **PAST** – it proves that everything Jesus taught was true. He is the Son of God, and we must listen to Him. It proves that He paid the full price for sins and that the power of death is defeated.
- **PRESENT** – it means Jesus is alive today, so we can have a personal living relationship with God through Him. Christians do not have a dead leader, but One who is alive forever.
- **FUTURE** – it assures us that all Christians who die will be raised to life in the future. We have hope for eternal life because Jesus is the "resurrection and the life" (John 11:25).

If Jesus is alive, the Kingdom of God really is here now, and we must turn from our sin and trust in Him!

## **Jesus commissions His apostles and leaves earth**

Some time after His resurrection, Jesus appeared to the apostles on a mountain in Galilee (Matthew 28:16-20). He commissioned them to make disciples for Him from every nation on earth by baptising them and teaching them to obey His teachings. He also made three special claims about Himself:

- **All authority has been given to Him** (v18);
- **His name is included with the Father and the Spirit in baptism**, indicating His divine identity (v19);
- **He will always be with His disciples**, referring to the promised Holy Spirit (v20)

Only Luke tells us about the final occasion when Jesus met the apostles near Jerusalem 40 days after He had died (Luke 24:50-53; Acts 1:3-11). Jesus told them to wait in Jerusalem for the Holy Spirit to come and empower them to witness for Him. Then He was lifted up into the sky and disappeared from sight. Angels told the disciples He would return one day just as He had left. The New Testament teaches that Jesus ascended to Heaven and took His proper position at God's right hand (the place of greatest honour and power) where He prays for His people and awaits the future day when He will return in glory.

### **SUMMARY: Jesus was buried and rose again from the dead on the third day to live forever**

- The resurrection of Jesus has always been preached by Christians and has an excellent evidential basis.
- The risen Jesus prays for and will return for His people, but for now He sends them on a mission of hope.



# PART 16 – HE IS RISEN! DISCUSS AND APPLY

## **Discuss – questions to help understanding**

1. If Jesus rose from the dead, what are the implications for Christians and for everyone else?

*Read Luke 24*

2. What were the initial responses of the women to discovering the empty tomb and of the apostles to their report (verses 1-12)? Does it surprise you that Luke should record this?
3. What two reasons are given in this passage for why Jesus' followers should have expected His resurrection? See the angel's words in verses 6-7 and Jesus' words in verses 25-26.
4. Why is it significant that it was when Jesus broke bread for the pair in Emmaus that He became known to them? What is this a reminder of (see Luke 22:19)?
5. What things in this chapter indicate that the risen Jesus had a genuine physical body? Why did Jesus emphasise this to the disciples?
6. Why was it so important for Jesus to explain to the two on the road to Emmaus and later to the other disciples in Jerusalem in the that He had fulfilled the Old Testament story?
7. What did Jesus commission His disciples to do and what would they need to be able to fulfil this task?

## **Apply – questions to help personal application**

- Do you think the apostles would have spread the message about Jesus, being willing to die for it, if they had not believed He had risen from the dead?
- Would the Christian message and the teaching of Jesus be meaningful if Jesus did not rise from the dead? What difference does the resurrection make?
- Do you struggle, like so many of the disciples when the first heard about the empty tomb, to believe that Jesus rose from the dead? Why is this challenging for you?
- The Gospel accounts say that the normal pattern of Christian faith is to believe in Jesus through the message of the first witnesses (the apostles). Do you think their message can be trusted?
- Thinking about the future and the reality of death, what hope do you have? What difference does the resurrection of Jesus, with the promise it holds of forgiveness for sins and eternal life, make to you?

# UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

## PART 16 – HE IS RISEN!

### QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

#### ***Was Jesus really resurrected in a body or did people just have visions of Him?***

The accounts in the Gospels emphasise the physical nature of the resurrection. Jesus broke bread with the two He met on the way to Emmaus (Luke 24:30) and invited Thomas to put His hands into the holes in His hands and side (John 20:27). On another occasion when the disciples thought He was only an apparition, He said, “Touch me and make sure that I am not a ghost, because ghosts don’t have bodies, as you see that I do?” (Luke 24:39) and proceeded to eat some broiled fish to demonstrate His physical nature.

The disciples’ scepticism was understandable – they had seen Jesus die and now He had appeared suddenly among them in a locked room. There certainly appear to have been differences in Jesus’ resurrection compared with regular human bodies and the apostle Paul indicates in 1 Corinthians 15:35-58 that the resurrection bodies Christians will live forever in will be like Jesus’ resurrection body and, therefore, free from disease, decay and death. In that same chapter, Paul recounts the people to whom Jesus appeared after His resurrection (v4-9) and then explains that the resurrection is absolutely essential to the Christian faith because if Jesus is not risen there can be no hope for those Christians who had already died (v12-34).

#### ***What does it mean when the Bible says Jesus is at ‘God’s right hand’?***

In the culture of the Bible, the right hand was associated with honour, probably because it is the dominant and stronger hand for most people. When Jacob blessed the sons of Joseph, the one on whom his right hand was set was recognised as receiving the greater blessing (Genesis 48:13-14). In a feast, the position to the right of the ruler was the place of honour, reserved for the most important guest.

In Psalm 110:1, David writes: “The Lord said to my Lord, ‘Sit in the place of honour at my right hand until I humble your enemies, making them a footstool under your feet.’” This psalm describes God increasing the kingdom of the Messiah who David describes as his Lord (an indication of the divine identity of the Messiah). This prophecy was quoted by Jesus and applied to Himself when He prophesied about His future return in glory during His trial before the Jewish religious leaders (Matthew 26:64; Mark 14:62; Luke 22:69). Jesus was claiming to be David’s Lord, the Messiah, and the One who deserves the place of highest honour beside God. In these verses He also used the phrase ‘I AM’ (see Part 14) of Himself and the title ‘Son of Man’, which comes from Daniel 7:13, another prophecy about the Messiah receiving authority over God’s kingdom.

In their preaching in Acts, the apostles claimed that God had exalted Jesus, whom the people had rejected, to His right hand (Acts 2:33; 5:31) and the first martyr, Stephen, saw this reality as He was stoned to death (Acts 7:55-56). The apostle Paul claimed that Jesus now occupies this place of highest authority (Ephesians 1:20; Colossians 3:1) and that He sits beside God pleading for us (Romans 8:34). The writer of Hebrews explains that this position was occupied by Jesus after He cleansed us from sins (1:3) and that it proves the sufficiency of the sacrifice He offered (10:12). The High Priest, bringing a sacrifice for the nation on the Day of Atonement, would never have sat in the presence of God’s throne in the Most Holy Place, but Jesus has the right to sit in this position. Jesus sits down beside God until the day when He must return to bring His people to Himself.

#### ***What commission did Jesus give to His apostles?***

Four accounts in the Gospels and Acts record words the risen Jesus spoke to the apostles about their mission:

- **Matthew 28:18-20** – they must **make disciples** from every ethnic group by teaching them to obey Jesus’ teachings (a process that must include words and example) and baptising them in the triune name.
- **Luke 24:44-49** – in His authority, they must **proclaim** to all nations **the message** about His fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy and God’s offer of forgiveness of sins through Him for all who repent.
- **John 20:21-23** – enabled by the Spirit, they are to **go in the same way Jesus came** from the Father (as a servant who testified to the truth and demonstrated love to others), extending forgiveness for sins.
- **Acts 1:8** – in the power the Holy Spirit gives they will speak as **witnesses** to what they had seen in Jesus’ life, death and resurrection, starting in Jerusalem and spreading to the ends of the earth.