

# WRITINGS OF DON FLEMING - VOLUME 1

by Don Fleming

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*A collection of theological writings, sermons, and essays by Don Fleming (Volume 1), compiled for study and devotional reading.*

98 Chapters

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## 01.01. Book 1The Christian's Faith

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Book 1The Christian's Faith

DON FLEMING BASIC CHRISTIANITY SERIES

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## 01.03. Chapter 1 God

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**Chapter 1 God** The unseen 'something' From earliest times people have recognized that there is more to life than what they see in the material world. Sacred rituals of various kinds were part of the life of primitive bush people and cave-dwellers. In every era of the world's history, people have been religious.

Today, throughout the many nations, races, languages and cultures of the world, most people have a religion of some sort. They show a belief in a spiritual aspect of human life that is independent of any progress that the human race has made in civilization, knowledge and prosperity. Such a belief seems to be part of human nature. This is true even of people who appear to have no religion and no belief in God. Their attitudes and actions indicate that there is within them an awareness of some unseen power that can influence their lives. For example, people often feel the need for some religion in relation to life's great turning points, such as birth, marriage and death. Some people, of course, remain totally opposed to religion whatever its form. Yet even things that have nothing to do with religion show people's concern for that unseen 'something' that influences events and that they cannot control. Such things might include the superstitious fear of the number thirteen, the reading of the astrology section of the newspaper, or even the well-meaning wish for good luck. These all indicate people's acknowledgment that something outside themselves influences the course of events.

Christianity's explanation of all this is that there is a supreme power who is living and intelligent and who is above all things. Christians call him God.

**Seeking after God** The reason people are concerned for more than just the physical aspects of life is that they are more than just physical beings. They have something in their make-up that makes them different from all other animals. They have a spiritual capacity, something that makes them seek after more than the physical world can provide. All human beings are, in a sense, like God; or, as the Bible says, they are made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). They long for a meaning to life, and this longing can be satisfied ultimately only by God.

Unlike other animals, human beings are not content simply to have food, shelter and the opportunity for reproduction. Because they have a capacity to know God, they have a capacity for the unlimited. That is why, throughout human history, people have consistently tried for greater achievement (even if not always with the best motives), whereas animals are content to remain much as they always were. People have within them a spiritual element that causes them to reach forward for something outside themselves.

Paul, one of the early Christian missionaries, referred to this when he was preaching to some Greeks in Athens. He saw that they were very religious, having many gods and many altars. Among their altars was one that they had built in honour of the 'unknown God'. Paul pointed out how this indicated that, since humankind was made in God's image, people would 'look for God and perhaps find him as they felt about for him' (Acts 17:27). Paul then introduced them to the God

whom they were seeking.

Faith that God exists In another place Paul spoke further of things that point clearly to the existence of God. People everywhere, regardless of their degree of civilization, have always known that certain things are wrong – murder, for example – even though no one may have taught them any particular religion or moral code. The law of God is, as it were, written on their hearts (Romans 2:15). The fact that their consciences make them feel guilty shows that they still have an awareness of God's law within them. They still exist in God's image, though, because of wrongdoing or ignorance, they may reflect that image very poorly. Not only does the nature of people point to the existence of a God who is over them, but the natural world points to the existence of a God who made it. Paul summarized this well when he wrote, 'Ever since God created the world, his invisible qualities, both his eternal power and his divine nature, have been clearly seen; they are perceived in the things that God has made' (Romans 1:20).

We look at a work of art, a machine, or a building, and we conclude that somebody must have designed it and somebody must have made it. We may even learn from it something of the character and ability of its designer and maker. Likewise we look at the natural world, where everything fits together in an orderly arrangement, and we conclude that someone must have designed it and brought it into being. We may even learn from it something of his character; for example, that he is a person of wisdom, power and love.

None of these examples is an absolute proof of the existence of God. The Bible nowhere attempts such a proof, because no one can give material proof of the existence of a person who is invisible. The Bible refers to people's sense of right and wrong as evidence of a moral God; it refers to the wonders of the physical universe as evidence of an intelligent and powerful God; but it realizes that ultimately a person acknowledges God by faith. 'Whoever comes to God must have faith that God exists and rewards those who seek him' (Hebrews 11:6).

Rather than try to prove the existence of God by argument, the Bible starts from the assumption that people already have some sense of God. It then urges them to acknowledge him. It gives meaning to life by pointing people to him. The creator at work

Sometimes people are puzzled about the creation of the world, because when they read about it in the Bible and compare the biblical account with the statements of scientists, there seems to be some conflict. Much of the misunderstanding occurs when Bible readers try to make the Bible teach what it was never intended to teach, or when scientists claim proof for things that cannot scientifically be proved. The Bible was never intended to be a scientific textbook. It is not concerned with the kind of investigation that modern science is concerned with. If it had been written in the language of modern science, people in former ages would not have understood it, and people in future ages would find it out of date. The purpose of the Bible's account of creation was not to teach scientific theories. Rather it was to give a short, simple account of the beginning of the world, as an introduction to the story of those who live in the world. It was concerned with God's dealings with the human race that he created. As in everyday speech today, the Bible uses popular rather than technical language. It speaks of the world as ordinary people see it, where the sun is a 'great light' in the sky, and 'rises' and 'sets' over the earth. Such language is pictorial, and is neither concerned with science nor in conflict with science. It is a kind of language that people in any country or era use and understand.

Science may tell us much about God's creation, but its viewpoint is different from the Bible's. The Bible tells us that God is the one who did these things, and scientists offer explanations that suggest how he might have done them. The Bible tells us, for instance, that God sends the rain and God makes the grass grow. When scientists explain how rain falls and how grass grows, they are not in conflict with the Bible. In explaining the 'laws of nature', they are describing the way God normally works in nature. The 'laws of nature' are God's laws.

If, however, scientists try to use scientific data to prove the non-existence of God, they are trying to do something that science is not capable of doing. Science may be able to suggest how something was done, but it is not capable of saying who did it.

Once again we come to the point where things cannot be proved or disproved, either by rational argument or by scientific investigation. 'It is by faith that we understand that the universe was created by God's word' (Hebrews 11:3). Although we accept these things by faith, such faith is neither irrational

nor unscientific. On the contrary, both rational argument and scientific investigation confirm that such faith is reasonable.

## 01.04. Chapter 2 Sin

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Chapter 2 Sin Pulled in opposite directions The creative activity of God reached its grand climax with the arrival of the first man and the first woman. But these two people, and the human race descended from them, were uniquely different from even the highest animals; for they alone were made in God's image.

God created the world morally good and intended the human race to live with him in a happy relationship. But as we look at the world we see that people are not at ease with God. Although something in them causes them to seek after God, something else in them causes them to rebel against him. This rebellion is what the Bible calls sin.

People in general do not like the word 'sin', and often give it restricted or special meanings so that it does not sound offensive. The Bible uses the word to refer to all human rebellion against God, whether in its source or in the wrong acts that flow from that source. The problem of evil In view of the tension people experience between good and evil, a question arises. If God wanted the world to be good, why is evil present in the world? If God is a perfect creator, why are human beings, the highest of his earthly creatures, sinful?

God is not the originator of evil, and he has never had any desire that people be sinful. But because he made them as intelligent and responsible beings with a freedom to make their own decisions, the possibility existed that they might misuse their freedom. God's purpose was not to create robots. He wanted the people he had made to obey him and live in harmony with him, but he wanted them to do this by their own choice. His desire was to live with them in a relationship of mutual love, but people could not love if they were not free. Machines cannot love. The sad fact, today as in the past, is that people have chosen not to obey God, and the evils of sin, conflict and suffering are the result. The fault lies with people, not with God. If an irresponsible driver causes a motor car to crash, we blame the driver, not the inventor or maker of the car.

### Human nature

Because of sin, nothing in the world is as God intended it. Instead of enjoying the life God intended for them, people have conflict on every side. They are in a state of conflict with their environment, with other people, within themselves and with God. They have brought sin not only into the world but also into human nature, so that all people are born with a tendency to sin. No one needs to teach a child to do wrong. Wrongdoing comes to it naturally.

Wrong actions and wrong words are only the outward signs of a deeper problem – a sinful mind, heart and will. Jesus once said, 'From the inside, from a person's heart, come the evil ideas which lead him to do immoral things, to rob, kill, commit adultery, be greedy, and do all sorts of evil things; deceit, indecency, jealousy, slander, pride and folly – all these evil things come from inside a person and make him unclean' (Mark 7:21-23).

Notice that the things Jesus calls evil are not just obvious sins such as robbery and murder. Even bad thoughts, deceit and jealousy, things hidden within where the closest friends may not see them are sin. When we consider the cruelty, corruption and immorality in the world, we may at times feel satisfied with ourselves. But at the same time we deceive ourselves, for we too are imperfect and our standards imperfect. The only perfect one is God, and his standards are perfect. That is why the Bible says that sin is the falling short of God's standards, the breaking of God's law (1 John 3:4).

All are answerable to God

Although the Bible gives people a fuller understanding of God's character and standards, even those who have never read the Bible have a basic knowledge of right and wrong. We have seen how God has placed this knowledge within human nature. He has given people a conscience, which, in spite of sometimes being dull or hardened, is still some sort of guide. People may know what they should do, but not do it. Something within them shows them the way that is right, but they refuse to go that way. They refuse God; they break God's law. Being morally responsible, people are answerable for their actions. If they were no more than very clever animals or skilfully programmed computers, they would not be responsible. Neither animals nor computers are taken to court for breaking the law.

People are answerable for their behaviour; in particular, they are answerable to God, because he is their creator, ruler and judge. And since they have broken his law, they are subject to his punishment. They may do right on some occasions, but that does not excuse them for doing wrong on others. We are accountable to God for all our actions, and the good we do does not cancel out the wrong we do. A person may do good by helping a neighbour in need, but that will not help him escape justice if a police officer catches him driving through a red light.

Sin and death

God warned from the beginning that the penalty for disobeying him was death, and this warning is repeated in various ways throughout the Bible. Paul expressed this pictorially when he said, 'Sin pays its wages – death' (Romans 6:23). But what is meant by death? Clearly, people do not die physically the moment they sin, though physical death is one of the results of sin. Human beings are more than mere physical creatures. If physical death meant no more than bringing earthly life to an end, people would have no need to fear death. If death was as simple as switching off the electricity, there would be no reason to fear it. The reason people fear death is that they know that when they die they are not escaping the consequences of their previous behaviour, but going to face them.

People have always sensed that there is some sort of life after death, and this feeling again results from their existence in the image of God. But how can this personal existence in the afterlife be called 'death'? The answer has to do with the Christian view of human life. God has given people both physical and spiritual capacities, so that they might enjoy life in full harmony with him. Through sin, however, they are cut off from God. We might say that when a thing is cut off from its source of life it is dead. In that sense, sinners are spiritually dead. Their sin has taken them out of a condition where life dominates into one where death dominates. Spiritually they are cut off from God, and physically they are doomed to die.

Whatever separation from God in the afterlife might mean, we know it is a punishment that people instinctively fear. Jesus repeatedly warned that it would mean suffering and despair worse than anything people could at present imagine.

#### God as judge

Immediately we begin to wonder how a God of love could punish so severely. Perhaps that is because guilty people never like the thought of punishment. Love, however, does not mean an absence of punishment, as every parent knows. Neither does love mean that justice can be overlooked. God has no pleasure in punishment, and the message of Christianity is that he has provided a way for people to escape it. At the same time he must maintain a consistency in his character and actions. No one wants a fickle God.

God is holy, perfect in purity and goodness. He loves what is good more than we can know or understand, and therefore he is angry when he sees what is not good. His anger at sin arises from his holiness.

Though angry at sin, God still loves his rebellious creatures. He wants people to come back to him so that he can give them new life, life that they can begin to enjoy now and will enjoy to the full in the hereafter. But as usual, God does not force people. They have the freedom of responsible beings and a whole lifetime of opportunity to turn to him. With death, that opportunity ends. 'Everyone must die once, and after that be judged by God' (Hebrews 9:27).

## 01.05. Chapter 3 Salvation

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Chapter 3 Salvation Why people need salvation From the beginning, people have been aware that sin has its consequences, and they have looked for ways of escaping those consequences. The many religions and philosophies in the world are evidence of that. Men and women want to be saved from the suffering and punishment that evil brings, whether in this life or the next. In other words, they want salvation.

Some will say that education will correct sin, others that better social conditions or a healthier environment will eliminate wrongdoing. There are many countries where citizens have already received the benefits of improved living standards, but they themselves have not changed for the better. In fact, they seem at times to have become worse. Quarrelling, dishonesty, lying, hate and other evils are just as common as they ever were.

Human nature is sinful, and outward improvements will not change that nature. A leopard cannot change its spots. A pig may be washed and dressed in beautiful clothes, but it will go and lie in the mud as before. The problem of human sin is so deep that no reforms can correct it. Not even keeping religious rules or carrying out religious ceremonies will remove the disease of sin from the human heart. In short, the human position is hopeless. People are cut off from God and can do nothing that will bring them back to God. Their sinful nature has caused them to do things that have placed them under God's judgment; but, try as they may, they cannot get rid of that sinful nature.

What people need is someone to help them. They need someone who can save them, because they cannot save themselves. They are like a drowning person who cannot swim. They do not need someone to tell them how to swim, but someone to jump into the water to save them. And that, so to speak, is what God has done.

God's love

Love is so much a characteristic of God that the Bible can say that God is love (1 John 4:16). God wants to help sinners and save them from the penalty of their sin, but he must do so justly. Love that is pure does not ignore wrongdoing, but acts honourably, even in the most unpleasant affairs. God may want to forgive sinners, but he cannot ignore their sin. He cannot treat sin as if it does not matter. Being the supreme judge, God has the right to punish or forgive sin as he sees fit, but being a God of love he will do only what is honourable, just and pure.

Suppose, for example, that a judge has before him a criminal who has been found guilty, and perhaps even confessed to his crime. The judge places a heavy fine on the man, assuring him that if he does not pay he will be sent to jail. The man may tell the judge he has no money to pay the fine, yet plead also that he not be sent to jail. The judge, feeling sorry for the man and declaring himself a loving person, therefore forgives him. He tells the guilty criminal that he need not pay the fine or go to jail. He can go free.

What the judge understands by love is not love at all. It is an irrational emotion that is easily influenced by pity, regardless of what is right and just. It is not strong, but weak. God's love is not like that.

Suppose, however, that the judge has a love that is genuine. He places the same heavy fine on the guilty man and insists that it be paid. He feels sorry for the man, but he knows that genuine love always does what is right, even when it is costly to do so. The judge therefore goes to the man privately and, out of his own personal funds, gives the man the money to pay the fine. The judge has laid down the penalty, but he has also paid the penalty on the man's behalf. This is only an illustration, but it pictures what God has done for guilty sinners.

What God has done Being a God of love, God wants to help guilty sinners. But because he is a God of love, he will do only what is pure and honourable, even though it may be costly to him.

All people have broken God's law and fallen under his judgment. They have been found guilty and the penalty is death. God, however, has given them a way of salvation, a way to be saved from the consequences of their sin. He himself became a human being in the person of Jesus Christ, and lived in this world with all its temptations and difficulties. Through it all he lived the perfect life, never breaking God's law and therefore never falling under God's judgment. Yet he willingly paid sin's penalty on behalf of the guilty. He died in their place so that they might go free. 'When we were still helpless, Christ died for the wicked' (Romans 5:6).

God is the judge and the one who has been sinned against, yet he is also the one who bears the penalty of sin. In his love he forgives sinners, but only at great cost to himself. God is the source and the means of people's salvation.

Normally, people love only those who are attractive to them, but God loves those who are unattractive, even those who have rebelled against him and broken his law. 'God has shown us how much he loves us – it was while we were sinners that Christ died for us' (Romans 5:8). In this God demonstrates what the Bible calls his grace – that characteristic which causes him to give his favour freely to those who do not deserve it.

More than pardon The story of the judge who pays the penalty on behalf of the guilty is only an illustration. It pictures one aspect of God's help for sinners, but it does not picture everything. God does far more for people than can be contained in any single illustration. When Jesus takes the place of sinners, he does so totally. God, in his amazing grace, accepts the repentant sinner as he accepts Jesus. Jesus is in a right relationship with God, and therefore through him the sinner also comes into a right relationship with God. God does more than merely forgive people's sin. He declares that they are now legally in the right, because Jesus Christ is in the right.

'All this is done by God, who through Christ changed us from enemies into his friends.' 'Christ was without sin, but for our sake God made him share our sin in order that in union with him we might share the righteousness of God' (2 Corinthians 5:18; 2 Corinthians 5:21). God declares people righteous (or, as the Bible says, he justifies them) because of what Jesus Christ has done, not because of anything they have done.

New life

Although Jesus' death is central in God's plan of salvation, that death is linked inseparably with his resurrection. Jesus was unique and his death for sin was unique. Ordinary people do not come back to life three days after they have died, for death is one of the consequences of their sin. But Jesus did come back to life. His death was not a consequence of his sin, for he had no sin. He died for the sin of others, and his resurrection showed that neither sin nor death had any power over him. They had not conquered him; he had conquered them.

Jesus' resurrection demonstrated God's supreme power and his complete satisfaction with all Jesus had done. Sin had been dealt with decisively and people now had new hope. This was seen clearly in the changed lives of Jesus' followers. Before his death they were downhearted, fearful and confused, but now they went everywhere preaching the good news of salvation with boldness and certainty. The Christian church was born out of the great historical events of Jesus' death and resurrection, and nothing has been able to stop its progress. The reason for this is that Christianity is motivated by a living power within it. The resurrection of Jesus was not simply the resuscitation of a corpse, but the entrance into a new kind of life, one that death can no longer affect. 'Christ has been raised from death and will never die again – death will no longer rule over him' (Romans 6:9).

Jesus is still alive and always will be. He is no longer physically present in the world (though he has said that one day he will return), but he lives in the lives of his people. Just as repentant sinners are united with Jesus in his death for sin, so they are united with him in his victorious life. The Christians' saviour is not dead, but living. But he will be saviour only to those who want him to be.

## 01.06. Chapter 4 Faith

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Chapter 4 Faith Accepting an offered gift No matter how much we may wish that all people receive the salvation Jesus has achieved, God as usual treats people as responsible beings. They are not robots. They can either accept or reject what God offers them. And what God offers them is a gift. It costs them nothing, though it cost God much, even the life of Jesus Christ.

What people must do is accept the gift that God offers them, and they do this by faith. They cannot buy salvation. There is nothing they can do to earn salvation as a reward. Some of the early Christians were reassured of this with the words, 'It is by God's grace that you have been saved, through faith. It is not the result of your own efforts, but God's gift' (Ephesians 2:8-9).

What faith is

It is important that we understand what the Bible means when it talks about faith, for the word has a variety of meanings in everyday usage. Faith is not blind acceptance of something which people secretly feel may not be true but which they think they ought to believe nevertheless. Nor is it some sort of unexplained inner strength that helps people through difficulties. The chief characteristic of faith is trust, or reliance, and it is always trust in something or someone.

Often the word 'belief' is used instead of the word 'faith'. To believe the Christian teaching means more than simply to understand it or to acknowledge the story of the Bible as true. To believe in God means more than simply to believe he exists. Certainly, people must understand the teaching and accept that God exists, but to 'believe in' God means to put their trust in him, to rely upon him. When travellers buy their airline tickets, they have faith in the airline. They have given it their money in advance because they believe in it; they trust it. They go to the airport on the appointed day, believing an aeroplane will be there to take them to their destination. Likewise to believe in God is to believe his promises and act upon them.

Having arrived at the airport, the travellers further show their faith, this time in the aeroplane. They believe it will fly, and some may even understand how it flies, but they exercise their faith when they walk on to it. They trust it, rely upon it and commit themselves to it, believing it will carry them to their destination. That is what the Bible means by faith. People not only understand facts about God and his salvation for them through Jesus Christ, but they trust in him, rely upon him and commit themselves to him. They trust in what Christ has done for them, not in anything they do themselves. The object of faith

We must not think, however, that faith is in any way a quality within people that God rewards by giving them his salvation. Faith itself does not save. God is the one who saves. Faith is only the means by which sinners receive his salvation. In the illustration it is the aeroplane that has the capability of carrying the travellers to their destination; the travellers can do no more than walk on to it in faith. They have nothing to boast about in doing that, and likewise repentant sinners have nothing to boast about in exercising their faith. The importance lies in the object of their faith, which is Jesus Christ.

Jesus died to pay the penalty for sin, and people are saved from that penalty by trusting in what Jesus has done. They do not achieve salvation by anything they themselves do, but they recognize that Jesus has already achieved it by death.

People must claim the benefits of Jesus' death for themselves individually if they are to be forgiven and brought back to God. No one else can do it for them. When they have taken that step of faith, each individual can then say, as Paul once said, that this salvation is 'through faith in Jesus Christ, who loved me and gave himself for me' (Galatians 2:20). No other way

Some people reject the idea that they must depend on what someone else has done for them. But in ordinary life all have to depend constantly on what they themselves did not do. No one could read this book unless others had first printed it; and they could not have printed it unless others had made the paper; and they could not have made the paper unless there were trees; and so it goes on.

There is another reason why people reject the idea of depending on Jesus for their salvation, and that is the natural pride of the human heart. People find it humbling to admit their helplessness. They find it even more humbling to admit their guilt and ask for forgiveness. But there is nothing else that guilty sinners can do – except bear the punishment.

If people insist that they depend on themselves for salvation, they are only condemning themselves to certain punishment. God does not want this, and that is why he has made a way of salvation available. 'God does not want anyone to be destroyed, but wants all to turn away from their sins' (2 Peter 3:9). But if they refuse to, there is no way of salvation for them. A change of direction

Since faith means trusting in Jesus Christ's death for the forgiveness of sin, faith involves turning away from sin. People cannot cling to their sin and love Jesus at the same time, because their sin caused Jesus to die. People must not only be sorry for their sin, but also be willing to turn from it, to change direction. They must have a complete change of mind, attitude and behaviour. The word for this turn-around is 'repentance'.

Faith and repentance go together. Jesus said, 'Turn away from your sins and believe the good news' (that is, the good news of the salvation he brought) (Mark 1:15). Those who spread this good news likewise urged people to 'turn from their sins to God and believe in the Lord Jesus' (Acts 20:21). Such repentance is more than merely deciding to be a better person. It is turning from sin to Christ. Faith in Christ means complete dependence on him and total commitment to him. Believers in Christ become true followers of Christ, true Christians.

Sooner or later, those who recognize their need of Christ must come to a point where they personally accept the salvation that God offers. The Bible gives no special procedure to follow and no special prayer to recite. No church ceremony or church official is necessary. God knows the attitude of people's hearts, even when words cannot properly express it.

Nevertheless, if people are genuine believers, they should naturally want to talk to God. They will want to acknowledge their sin, ask God's forgiveness, thank Jesus for dying for them, and commit themselves in faith to him as their Saviour and Lord. And they have the assurance of Jesus' promise, 'I will never turn away from anyone who comes to me' (John 6:37).

Those who come to Christ may not experience any immediate great change in their feelings. Salvation, however, does not depend on their feelings; it depends on God's promises. When God works in people's lives, it is not usually by spectacular or unnatural happenings. He does not usually strike people dead when they curse him, or give them heavenly visions when they praise him. But when he comes into people's lives, he works to change those lives, so that there is a constant growth in all the truly good qualities. People are not saved by their good deeds, but once they are saved, their lives will progressively become full of good deeds.

## 01.07. Book 2 The Christian's Bible

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Book 2 The Christian's Bible

DON FLEMING BASIC CHRISTIANITY SERIES

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## 01.09. Chapter 1 What the Bible is

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Chapter 1 What the Bible is Hope for the world The Bible is a book that tells us about God and shows us his plan for the human race. It starts by telling us about his creation of the world and the people for whom he prepared it. These people began life in a state of perfection and lived in harmony with God, but when they rebelled against him the harmony was lost. From that point on, the Bible's story is a record of human-kind's repeated failures and God's constant help.

All wrongdoing is in some way a rebellion against God. It is what the Bible calls sin, and all people are guilty of it. Therefore, they are liable to God's punishment, but God in his love provides a way of escape, or salvation, for them. He makes it possible for them to be saved from the consequences of sin and find true life.

God offers this salvation to all. When people turn from their sin and ask for his mercy, they are assured of his forgiveness. But his forgiveness is not irresponsible; his salvation is not hap-hazard. He has a careful plan that gives meaning to the history of the human race. The Bible shows how that plan developed.

God's plan To begin with, God chose one person (Abraham), and from that person he made a nation (Israel). He gave that nation a land to live in (Palestine, or Canaan) and a code of behaviour to live by (the law of Moses). This law-code was given not to threaten or burden people, but to regulate life for the maximum benefit of everyone. Israel was a privileged nation in being chosen to demonstrate God's standards to the world. At the same time it was, in a sense, a sample of the world's people, and therefore a sort of test case to show how people responded to God's law.

Israel soon showed that people were unable to live up to God's standards. The law-code, though good in itself, showed up human sin, as a light shows up the dirt in a dark and filthy room. But just as the light cannot remove the dirt, so no set of laws could remove sin. People needed more than a set of laws. They needed a saviour, someone to cleanse them from sin and save them from its consequences.

God then showed the chief purpose for which he had chosen Abraham and preserved Israel, namely, to produce a saviour for the fallen human race. God actually entered the human race through one of Abraham's descendants, Jesus Christ. Jesus also lived under God's law, and that law showed him to be sinless. Then, willingly, he died on behalf of the sinful, to bear God's judgment for them. More than that, he rose to new life to give people new hope. Those who turned from their sin and accepted his salvation then took the news of that salvation everywhere.

One book in two parts The part of the Bible that covers the story before the time of Christ is called the Old Testament. It was written originally in the Hebrew language and is a collection of thirty-nine books of varying sizes and styles. Among the books in this collection are historical books, wisdom books, songbooks, prophetic books, law books, and short stories. With the coming of Jesus Christ, a new era dawned. The latter portion of the Bible, which begins with the birth of Jesus, is therefore called the New Testament. It was written originally in the Greek

language and is a collection of twenty-seven books, all written within the first century of the Christian era. Some of the books are historical, but most are letters that leading Christians wrote to churches or individuals, giving instruction concerning Christian belief and practice. In most Bibles today, the books are divided into chapters, and the chapters into verses. These divisions were not part of the original writings, but were put in centuries later by well-meaning Jewish and Christian leaders. The divisions can be a help, because they enable readers to find a particular place more readily; but they can also be a hindrance, because they break up the continuity of the writing. The sixty-six books of the Bible were written over a period of perhaps 1400 years by about forty authors. In spite of this, there is an underlying unity to the Bible. Each of the sixty-six books can be understood by itself, yet each has greater meaning when seen as part of the whole. God's plan of salvation, centred on Jesus Christ, gives unity to the Bible. It is one book. From God through ordinary people

One reason for the Bible's unity is that it is more than just a collection of writings. The entire book comes from God; he is the source of its authority. The writers wrote what God wanted them to write, so that the Bible carries with it the authority of God. It is therefore called the Word of God, or Scripture. The activity of God upon the writers that caused them to write his Word is called inspiration. 'All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching the truth, rebuking error, correcting faults and giving instruction for right living' (2 Timothy 3:16). The word 'inspired' is not able to indicate fully how God used people to write his message, but it is the best word the translators could find. The Greek word was literally 'God-breathed'. God 'breathed out' his truth through the writers. The word means more than that the writers were inspired as a poet or musician might at times be inspired. It means that in some special way the writers were 'under the control of God's Spirit as they spoke the message that came from God' (2 Peter 1:21). This does not mean that God used the writers without their personality or understanding playing a part. God did not use them as a person might use a typewriter. They wrote intelligently out of circumstances that prompted them to write.

Paul, for example, wrote to the church in Corinth partly because he had heard of problems there and partly because the Corinthians had asked his advice on certain matters. Luke wrote an account of the beginnings of Christianity to provide a high-ranking official with a reliable record. In doing so, he gathered his material from secular documents, conversations and other sources, and arranged it into an orderly presentation. Whatever the process may have been, God was working along with the writer so that the completed work was also God's Word.

#### Human and divine

Different books of the Bible are written in different styles, and reflect the different personalities of the authors. Among the authors are lawyers, farmers, historians, doctors, fishermen, preachers, government officials and musicians. With each book, God chose the person whose personality, background and training suited his purposes at the time. He used a downtrodden farmer such as Amos to denounce the oppression and corruption of Israel's upper classes. He used a university-trained person such as Paul to develop and apply Christ's teaching to the early Christian church. The writers of the books of the Bible may not have been aware that their writing would one day be part of the Bible. But their writing was God-directed, whether they knew it or not.

Every part of the Bible is human and divine – not one or the other, but both together. It is God's message in human language for the human race. Each book says what God wanted to say, and at the same time says what the author wanted to say. A variety of teaching methods

Through the Bible, God shows not only what is right but also what is wrong. The Bible therefore records things of which God disapproves. It may even contain statements that sound impressively religious but are wrong. In the book of Job, various orthodox believers in God argued at length with Job about his beliefs, but the book points out at the end that their overall argument was faulty. The person inspired by God was not the debater who spoke the words, but the writer who recorded the words. God inspired the writers to record those things that would make his truth plain. The Bible is not a collection of holy sayings. God does not necessarily teach people by using one-line instructions or simple proverb-like statements. Certainly, some books of the Bible give direct instruction, perhaps through a teacher or perhaps through the lessons of history. Others, however, contain stories without any direct religious teaching, and some, such as Job, teach what is right by exposing what is wrong.

Authoritative and living No matter how the Scriptures present their teaching, Jesus and his followers regarded them as an authority against which there could be no argument. Repeatedly they referred people to the Scriptures with words such as, 'It is written in the Scriptures' or 'Have you not read in the Scriptures?' The Bible's authority was absolute. It could not be lessened or cancelled. What the Scriptures said, God said.

Christians are likewise aware that as they read the Bible, God speaks to them through it. The Bible is more than just a sacred book from a former era. It is something 'alive and active, sharper than any double-edged sword. It cuts all the way through, to where soul and spirit meet' (Hebrews 4:12). The Bible's work is not merely negative in exposing sin, but is positive in pointing to a better way. It is food for the spiritual life. Only as Christians read it, understand it and put its teachings into practice will they develop into the sorts of people God wants them to be. It is possible to become a Christian through only a small part of the Bible, but to grow as a Christian requires much more. If people want a fuller understanding of the sort of person God is and the kind of life he requires them to live, they will need all God's Word, both Old Testament and New.

## 01.10. Chapter 2 What the Bible contains

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### Chapter 2 What the Bible contains Birth of a nation

Genesis, the first book of the Bible, opens with a brief account of the creation of the world, as an introduction to the story of the people who live in the world. In spite of their repeated failures, God still loved them and initiated a plan for their salvation. He chose Abraham, a man from Mesopotamia, promising to make his descendants into a nation and to give them Canaan as a national homeland. The book of Genesis deals with Abraham's descendants over the next two or three hundred years, and closes with them settling down to a reasonably comfortable life in Egypt. This was the beginning of the nation Israel.

During the next four hundred years the Israelites so increased in numbers that the Egyptian government saw them as a threat and issued a law that made them slaves. The book of Exodus describes how Moses became the Israelites' leader, overthrew Egyptian domination and led his people out to freedom (about 1280 BC). Their goal was Canaan, but they stopped first at Mt Sinai. There, over the next year, they received God's law and organized themselves before moving on. Many of the laws are recorded in the latter part of Exodus and in the next book, Leviticus.

Additional laws, along with details of arrangements for the journey to Canaan, are recorded in the book of Numbers. But the people rebelled against God, and entry into Canaan was delayed forty years as a punishment. During those years the generation of rebels died and a new generation grew up. When the time approached to enter Canaan, Moses repeated, and in some ways expanded, the law for the benefit of this new generation. The book that records this is Deuteronomy. Moses died before Israel entered Canaan, and Joshua became the new leader.

Israel established in Canaan The book of Joshua records Israel's conquest of Canaan and the division of the land among its twelve tribes. Over the generations that followed, Israel became increasingly rebellious against God. The book of Judges shows how the people introduced foreign religious practices and brought God's judgment upon themselves in the form of invasions from neighbouring countries. There was no centrally organized government during this period, but certain people (whom the Israelites called judges) rose to positions of leadership because of their ability to settle disputes and overthrow foreign oppressors. The story of one family that lived during this time is told in the book of Ruth. In an attempt to improve national stability, the people decided to establish a monarchy. Their spiritual leader, Samuel, advised against this, for their troubles had arisen because of their unfaithfulness to God, not because of the system of government. But the people rejected Samuel's advice, with the result that Israel got its first king, Saul (about 1050 BC). Saul was a failure, and the story of events before and during his reign is told in the book of 1 Samuel.

David was Israel's next king, and the story of his reign is recorded in 2 Samuel. In spite of some mistakes, he was a great and powerful king. He established a dynasty through which God promised to produce a king who would be saviour of the world. This promised king was known as

'Messiah' in the Hebrew language (or 'Christ', in the Greek). A divided nation The books of 1 and 2 Kings record the history of the Israelite kingdom after the death of David. Solomon succeeded David, but his extravagant program for the development of the national capital, Jerusalem, created widespread unrest among his people. Soon after his death, the ten northern tribes broke away from the dynasty of David and established their own monarchy. The northern tribes still called themselves Israel, and after some early temporary arrangements established their capital in Samaria. The people of the south remained loyal to the dynasty of David, whose kings continued to reign in Jerusalem. The southern kingdom was called Judah, after its leading tribe.

During the time of the divided kingdom, Israel and Judah fought with each other and with neighbouring countries. Political and social conditions in both kingdoms steadily worsened. Few people trusted God or lived to please him, but from those who did, God chose some to be his messengers to his people. These preachers condemned the people's sin and warned that judgment was certain if they did not turn to God. They were known as prophets, and some of their writings have been grouped together in a separate section of the Old Testament.

Captivity and return As the prophets had warned, both kingdoms were finally destroyed. In 722 BC Assyria conquered the northern kingdom and took its people captive into foreign lands. Assyria, in turn, was conquered by Babylon, who then advanced into the Palestine region. In a series of attacks starting in 605 BC, Babylon gained control of Judah and took its people into captivity, destroying Jerusalem in 587 BC.

There is a parallel account of 1 and 2 Samuel in the book of 1 Chronicles, and a parallel account of 1 and 2 Kings in 2 Chronicles. However, the books of Chronicles differ from the books of Samuel and Kings in their length, style, content and purpose. They were written much later, after Israel and Judah had been taken into captivity. The books helped preserve the national history and family records, so that they might assist people of a later generation when they re-established the nation. When Persia conquered Babylon in 539 BC, the Persian king immediately gave permission for captive peoples to return to their homelands. As a result, the nation Israel was rebuilt, with Jerusalem as its capital. No longer was there a division between north and south. But since most of those who returned to Palestine belonged to the former southern kingdom Judah, the name Jew (short for Judean) was used for Israelites in general, and has been ever since. The books of Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther deal with the period of reconstruction that began with Israel's return to its homeland in 538 BC. The three books cover about one hundred years, and with them the historical section of the Old Testament comes to a close.

#### Wisdom teachers and songwriters

After the historical section of the Old Testament is a group of five books, all of them markedly different from the previous books. The first of these, Job, is what is called a wisdom book. Wisdom teachers were people who examined the common affairs and problems of life with the aim of teaching people how to live rightly. The book of Job consists mainly of a debate between Job and his friends about God's direction of affairs in people's lives. The book of Psalms is a collection of 150 songs and poems that express the writers' feelings during their many and varied experiences. David wrote almost half the psalms, but the authors of many others are unknown.

Proverbs is a collection of wise sayings, most of them from Solomon. Ecclesiastes, another wisdom book, is concerned with the search for life's meaning. The Song of Songs (also called the Song of Solomon) is a collection of love poems recounting the exchanges of love between a young man and a young woman.

Words of the preachers The final section of the Old Testament contains the writings of the prophets. These were the preachers who brought God's message to his people during the periods of the monarchy, the captivity and the later re-establishment of Israel. Each book is named after the person who wrote it.

Isaiah and Jeremiah were probably the two most important prophets. Isaiah brought God's message to the people during the time of the divided kingdom; Jeremiah preached during the forty years leading up to and including the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. The horrors of the final siege of Jerusalem are the subject of the small book of Lamentations.

Ezekiel and Daniel were among those Jerusalemites taken captive to Babylon; but whereas Ezekiel lived in one of the workers' camps, Daniel was taken into the palace and trained to be an administrator. Each served God where he was and brought God's message to those who needed it. The next twelve prophets are sometimes called the Minor Prophets, not because they were junior to, or less important than, the previous four (the so-called Major Prophets), but because their books are shorter. Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah all belong to the period that began with the division of the kingdom and ended with the destruction of Jerusalem. The final three, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi, belong to the period of national re-construction that followed Israel's return to Palestine as recorded in Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther. At the time the Old Testament story closes, Israel, though back in its land, was still under foreign rule, namely, the rule of Persia. When Greece conquered Persia (334-331 BC), Israel fell under the rule of Greece, and in the second century BC regained its independence. But in 63 BC it lost its independence to Rome, and was still under Roman rule when Jesus Christ was born.

Jesus and the early Christians The books Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, known as the four Gospels, are concerned with the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. They do not cover the whole of his life, but mainly his birth and the last three years or so, which concluded with his death and resurrection. Sometimes they tell the same stories, but always the individual writers record events and teachings in a way fitted to their separate purposes and to the needs of those for whom they write.

After the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, his chosen messengers (called apostles), with other enthusiastic Christians, spread the good news of the salvation he had brought. This is recorded in the book of Acts, sometimes called The Acts of the Apostles. The first part of the book is mainly concerned with the work of Peter, John and others in Jerusalem and surrounding areas. The second and larger part of the book is concerned with the work of Paul, who made missionary journeys through Asia Minor and Greece, and finally reached Rome.

Letters to churches and individuals

Most of the remainder of the New Testament consists of letters by some of the leading Christians of the first century AD. These have been arranged in separate sections. First are the letters that Paul wrote to various churches in the course of his missionary activity. The letters are named after

the churches to whom they were written, and are arranged in order of length, with the longest first – Romans 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians.

Then come the letters Paul wrote to individuals. They are named after the people to whom they were written, and again are in order of length – 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus and Philemon. The next group consists of eight letters from five writers. An unknown author wrote a letter (which we call Hebrews) and sent it to Hebrew Christians who were being tempted to give up their belief in Jesus. The other seven are named after their authors. James the brother of Jesus wrote a letter, Peter the apostle wrote two, John the apostle wrote three, and Jude (probably another brother of Jesus) wrote one.

Finally, there is a book called The Revelation. Though also containing letters to churches, it is different in style from all the other books of the New Testament. It is largely a book of visions intended to reassure persecuted Christians that Jesus Christ is still in control and that final victory for his people is certain.

## 01.11. Chapter 3 How the Bible was formed

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### Chapter 3 How the Bible was formed The Old Testament collection

God's control in human affairs is clearly seen in the way the books of the Bible were collected into one volume which was accepted as Scripture. This collection of books is commonly called the canon (a word that originally meant 'rule', 'standard', 'measure' or 'list'). Books accepted as the inspired Word of God are said to be in the canon. Books not accepted as the inspired Word of God, though they may have been written by good men of the biblical era, are not in the canon. They are not acknowledged as the voice of God; they are not Scripture. No person or group decided to form the canon. In Old Testament times a recognized body of sacred writings had been developing. From the time of Moses, people accepted certain writings as the voice of God speaking to them, and as the years passed the collection of authoritative books grew. No one gave the books authority. The books had authority within themselves, and people could do no more than acknowledge this.

There is no record that states exactly when the Old Testament collection reached the full number of thirty-nine books. Clearly, however, the collection was firmly established as the Jewish Bible by the time of Christ. In other words, the Bible that Jesus used was what we call the Old Testament. Other Jewish writings of the pre-Christian era, collectively called the Apocrypha, were well known to orthodox Jews and the early Christians, but neither group accepted them into the canon. The New Testament collection

Since the apostles appointed by Jesus Christ had God-given authority, their teachings and writings carried the same authority as the Old Testament. Jesus had promised them that after his departure, his Spirit within them would enable them to recall, interpret and apply his teachings. Their writings were part of the fulfilment of that promise. From the beginning, Christians accepted as authoritative the letters and books written by the apostles or those who had the apostles' approval. As the writings of the early Christian leaders circulated, they grew into a collection equal to the Old Testament Scriptures. Peter referred to Paul's letters as Scripture, and Paul referred to Luke's Gospel as Scripture (2 Peter 3:15-16; 1 Timothy 5:18). In an age when travel was slow, these writings took time to circulate. Also, if letters were concerned with isolated problems, or were very short or personal, they took longer to become widely known. Other Christian writings also circulated, but they did not win wide acceptance and never became part of the canon. By the middle of the second century, churches in some places had a collection of books similar to our New Testament. In other places there was less certainty, partly because of the activity of false teachers. Church Councils met at various times to discuss the value of certain books, and by the end of the fourth century there was general agreement that the New Testament consists of the twenty-seven books we recognize today. As with the Old Testament, so with the New, no Council created the canon or gave it authority. The authority was within the books themselves. The benefit of the Councils was their formal recognition that Christians everywhere acknowledged the books as God's living and authoritative Word.

Writing and copying So far as we know, the books of the Bible were written originally on scrolls of papyrus, a material made from dried and flattened strips of papyrus reed. Papyrus did not last well, and all the original manuscripts perished long ago. From the beginning, however, people made copies of the original writings, and others continued to make copies down through the centuries. These copies are known as manuscripts.

Mechanical printing was unknown in the ancient world, and people made copies of the Scriptures by hand. Those who did this work were known as scribes, or copyists. Hebrew copyists were so passionate about preserving every letter of Scripture exactly as it was that they made very few errors. New Testament copyists were less conscientious. They sometimes misread or misplaced words, or even adjusted the wording to 'improve' it. But variations in the Greek manuscripts are no great hindrance. Thousands of manuscripts are available, and this enables experts to determine the original wording fairly accurately. The most valuable New Testament manuscripts come from the fourth to sixth centuries AD, though earlier ones exist. The most valuable Old Testament manuscripts come from the ninth to eleventh centuries AD. The reason earlier Hebrew manuscripts did not survive was that the Hebrews, out of reverence for their Scriptures, buried manuscripts honourably once they were too old or worn to use. Other ancient documents, such as the Dead Sea Scrolls (which contain Old Testament manuscripts from the period 130 BC to AD 70) confirm the accuracy of the existing manuscripts. So do early translations.

God, as always, guided affairs to preserve his Word, both in the formation of the canon and in the preservation of the manuscripts. In spite of damage through age, misuse, copyists' errors and government attacks, the Scriptures are still intact, essentially as they were when first written. All the areas of uncertainty are little more than one percent of the whole, and are largely concerned with minor issues. God preserved his Word in such a way that no important teaching is affected.

### Translating the Scriptures

Using all the material available, experts in ancient languages and documents are able to prepare accurate editions of the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament. These books are called texts. Translations are made from these texts, not from the ancient manuscripts themselves. Those manuscripts are carefully preserved in safe places such as museums. When the early English translations of the Bible were made, translators had a more difficult task than translators have today. Good manuscripts were fewer, texts were not as reliable, and knowledge of the ancient languages was less developed. Those who translated the King James Version in 1611 admitted they did not know how to translate certain words and phrases, but they expressed the hope that some day others would produce a better translation. Although they did a remarkable job, some later versions are better representations of the original writing. The Revised Version of 1885, for example, was a careful revision of the King James Version. It, in turn, was revised to produce the Revised Standard Version of 1952, a more wide-ranging revision and a more readable translation. No translation of any book can claim to be the only equivalent of the original, no matter which book or language. There are great differences in the structure and grammar of languages, so that a sentence may be translated several ways, all of them correct. The translators' task is to produce something that is true to the original and understandable to the reader. Modern translations such as the Good News Bible and the New International Version differ from each other in style, but both are good readable translations.

Naturally, some people like one translation, others another. Readers must remember, however, that the test of a translation is not whether they like it, but whether it is accurate.

Even if a translation has deficiencies, people can still hear the voice of God's through it. The Bible is no ordinary book. It is God's message, and it has a unity that consists of more than mere similarity between words. The occasional differences of opinion among translators cannot stop the truth of God from expressing itself through the book as a whole. Readers can get some understanding of God's Word from any version, but those who use several versions will get a better understanding.

## 01.12. Chapter 4 How the Bible speaks

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### Chapter 4 How the Bible speaks The duty of the reader

One assurance that Christians have is that God lives within them and teaches them. Paul once said, 'We have received the Spirit sent by God so that we may know all that God has given us' (1 Corinthians 2:12). This work of the Spirit of God within them does not mean that God's people have no need to read and understand the Bible. If that were so, God need not have preserved the Bible. But God has preserved it, so that the Spirit has something objective, historical and factual to use in teaching his people. God gave the Holy Spirit to his people not to make Bible study unnecessary, but to make it meaningful.

Once readers understand the circumstances in which God's Spirit inspired the original writings, they are in a good position to understand the Spirit's up-to-date application to them. The Bible has a living power within it, and will make its meaning relevant to its readers once the readers understand it. Readers, then, have a duty if they are to benefit from the Bible: they must work to understand what they are reading. And if they ask God's help in this, they can be assured they will receive it. To help Christians understand his Word, God has given teachers, people he has equipped for this work. They may teach by means of their spoken words or their writings, as did teachers in New Testament times. However, Christians must test all that they hear and read, and if they are to do this satisfactorily, they must know how to interpret the Bible. The Bible in its setting

Some people think that the Bible is nothing more than a collection of moral rules and abstract religious ideas. On the contrary, it is a very down-to-earth book containing all sorts of writings, most of them set in the everyday world. God made himself known through things that happened in history. The part of the world where most of those events occurred was the region of Western Asia and Eastern Europe.

Readers of the Bible will be helped by any encyclopaedia, directory, atlas, dictionary or handbook that gives information about the regions and eras covered by the Bible story. They will more readily understand what they read when they have a knowledge of such things as locations of countries and towns, climatic conditions, agricultural practices, local customs and ancient religious rituals.

Another requirement is a knowledge of the historical setting of whatever biblical book they are reading. With most of the Old Testament prophets and New Testament letter writers, readers will understand the books properly only when they know when and where they were written, under what circumstances and for what purposes. In some cases the books themselves announce these details clearly, but in others readers may have to spend some time searching for them.

### Variety yet unity

Within the Bible there are many kinds of literature, and readers must interpret each according to the kind of literature it is. A straightforward story is different from a poem and must be interpreted

differently. The prophet's style of preaching is different from the wisdom teacher's. Israel's Old Testament law books must not be read as if they are the same kind of literature as the New Testament Gospels. Present-day readers must consider all these matters, for if they misunderstand the writer's standpoint, they will misunderstand what he has said.

Occasionally readers of the Bible will meet what is known as an apocalyptic writing. This kind of literature was popular during the centuries immediately before and after the time of Christ. It featured visions involving fearsome beasts and mysterious numbers, and was usually concerned with great conflicts out of which God and his people were victorious. If readers interpret the symbolism of the visions literally, they will misunderstand the writer's meaning. In spite of the variety in its contents, the Bible is one book, a unity. Each book within the Bible, though understood in its own setting, must also be understood as part of the Bible as a whole.

Unity, however, does not mean sameness. One word will not have the same meaning wherever it is used. Different writers may use the same word in different ways. A statement from an Old Testament wisdom book must not be interpreted in the same way as a statement from a New Testament letter. People must be careful when linking statements from various books. They must always consider the original setting and never force the Bible to say what the writer never intended. A full and complete revelation

God's activity in making himself known to the people of the world is called revelation. This revelation is progressive. God did not reveal his total plan for the world all at once at the beginning of human history, but revealed it stage by stage as he prepared people for the fuller revelation through Jesus Christ. That is why readers today must understand each part of the Bible in relation to its own era. The Old Testament, for example, contains things that look strange to today's readers, but that is because the revelation was still developing. The Old Testament was not incorrect, but it was incomplete. The New Testament does not correct the Old, but completes it. Yet it also depends on it, just as God's revelation at every stage depended on what had gone before. Readers will understand the Old Testament better when they see it pointing to the New. They will understand the New Testament better when they are more familiar with the Old. This Bible of sixty-six books is the full written revelation God has given. Its authority is absolute. It will not answer every question that people like to ask, for that is not its purpose. It is not a book of answers to puzzles, but a revelation from God to ordinary men and women, showing them who he is, what he has done and what he requires of them.

Human beings do not and cannot know everything, and the Bible gives them no magical answers or supernatural knowledge. What it does is encourage the life of faith, whereby people know God and live by trusting in his wisdom, power and love.

Although it contains more than the human mind can fully understand, the Bible is not a handbook on every subject. People do not honour it when they try to make it teach farming, geology or medicine. God showed from the beginning that if people want to find out how the physical world functions and how it can benefit them, they must do so 'by hard work and sweat'. God does not usually give such knowledge by revelation.

Learning, then doing

True Christians read the Bible as those who acknowledge its authority and submit to its teachings. They have a respect for it. They are not the Bible's master, using it as they like, but its servants, doing what it says. They come to the Bible not to force it to support their opinions, but to learn from it. They may want the Bible to give them teaching that is relevant to life in today's world, but that is no reason to ignore what it meant in its original setting. Readers should not impatiently force the Bible to teach them a certain number of lessons each day, but let it say whatever it wants to say in its own way and in its own time. By doing this, Christians allow the Word of God to mould their character, as the Bible itself says: 'Let God transform you inwardly by a complete change of your mind' (Romans 12:2). And if attitudes change, behaviour also must change. Christianity has no place for those who know the Bible but do not live by its teachings. Jesus said of his teaching, 'Now that you know this truth, how happy you will be if you put it into practice' (John 13:17).

## 01.13. Book 3 The Christian's God

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Book 3 The Christian's God

DON FLEMING BASIC CHRISTIANITY SERIES

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## 01.15. Chapter 1 A personal God

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Chapter 1 A personal God Getting the right idea As people think about the physical world around them, they may conclude that there is a Creator-God who is intelligent and powerful. As they think about their own awareness of right and wrong, they may conclude that there is a moral God to whom they are answerable. But God has not left people with only this vague or general knowledge of himself. He made himself more fully known through events that took place in history, and that revelation is recorded in the Bible. Through the Bible people most clearly learn what God is like.

Although he is invisible, God is not some impersonal 'force' or abstract 'principle'. He is a personal God; that is, he has personal awareness, knowledge, power, will and feelings. Men and women also have these characteristics, because they are made in God's image. The difference is that in men and women they have been spoiled by sin, whereas in God they exist in perfection.

God's love and anger, for example, show something of the character of the personal God, but they are not the same as the love and anger that people in general display. Human language is inadequate when used of God, because it cannot properly describe a person who exists eternally and has no physical form. To help overcome this inadequacy, the Bible may at times speak of God as if he had human features such as arms, ears and eyes, but it does not expect readers to understand such statements literally.

### Knowing a person

Human beings may not be able to understand everything about God, but that should not stop them from enjoying a relationship with him. Young children have only a limited understanding of the business and social matters that concern their parents, but that does not stop them from enjoying a relationship with them. The parents may use simple language to try to explain such things to their children, in spite of the children's inability to understand them fully. Likewise God graciously tells people about himself through the Bible; but much has to remain untold, because the human mind does not have the capacity to understand it. The Bible therefore does not attempt to give a complete description of God. Also, it prohibits the use of anything in nature or anything of human creation as a physical representation of God. Such things lead only to a wrong understanding of God, and this in turn produces wrong attitudes and behaviour in those who worship him.

What sort of God At the beginning of ancient Israel's existence as God's people, Moses asked for a name of God that would give the people an idea of his character. The name that God gave was 'I am who I am' (sometimes shortened to 'I am'), or 'I will be what I will be' (Exodus 3:14). In giving this mysterious name, God taught his people more about himself. He showed that although he would not satisfy mere curiosity about him, he would never fail them. They could always depend on him to do what he, in his perfect wisdom, knew to be best. He was independent, eternal, unchangeable, always active and always present. He would be to his people whatever he chose to be, and they were to trust him.

Israel's language was Hebrew, and in that language the word translated 'I am' is related to the word 'Yahweh', the name by which Israelites already knew God. God's 'I am' statement was an explanation of what the name 'Yahweh' should have meant to his people. The ancient Israelites developed such a reverence for this name that they never spoke it. They used another word instead, with the result that English-speaking people took some time to find the right pronunciation of the word. It has traditionally been translated 'Jehovah', though many English Bibles avoid the pronunciation problem by using the word LORD (in capital letters). But people are not dependent solely on mysterious names for their understanding of God. The Bible is full of statements and stories that clearly show the sort of person God is.

God is the source of all things, yet he himself has no source. He is without beginning and without end. Nothing can add to him or take away from him. He is under obligation to no one, he needs no one, he depends on no one and he is answerable to no one. Whatever he does, he does because he chooses to, not because he is required to; though he always acts in a way that is consistent with his character of perfect goodness.

#### Responsive to human behaviour

Although God is great beyond the limits of a world of time and space, he is involved in the day-to-day affairs of that world. He is interested in the lives of ordinary men and women. He has given them freedom to make their own decisions, but he maintains his absolute authority and directs human history towards its final destiny.

People rebel against God, but their rebellion does not destroy his authority. God allows evil to happen, though he never allows it to go beyond the limits that he has determined. Even if he uses people's wrongdoing to bring about certain events, the wrongdoers are not excused. They are still responsible for their actions. Peter blamed the rebellious Jerusalem Jews for Jesus' death, saying, 'You killed him by letting sinful people crucify him'. But in the same sentence he says that this was 'in accordance with God's own plan' (Acts 2:23). God is always in ultimate control. The world is in a state of constant change, and God is responsive to its changing circumstances. He may be moved to compassion when he sees suffering, or moved to anger when he sees evil. He may change his treatment of people from blessing to judgment when they defy him, or from judgment to blessing when they turn to him. This does not mean that events take God by surprise so that he has to revise his plans. He always knows the end from the beginning, and he always bases his plans on his perfect knowledge and wisdom.

When, therefore, the Bible says that God does not change, it does not mean that he is a giant robot driven on according to fixed laws. It means that in his character he does not change. His qualities and values do not change. He can neither increase nor decrease in power, knowledge, love, wisdom or justice, because he possesses all these things in perfection. God is consistent in all that he is and all that he does. People can trust him fully, knowing that he will always be true to his perfect character. He will do only what is right.

God as Father When people respond to God's love by receiving the for-giveness and life he offers through Jesus Christ, they find that they come into a special relationship with him. The almighty God is now their Father. In a general sense God is the Father of all humankind, because he is the source of all life, the Father of the universe. But this is not the usual meaning when the Bible

speaks of God as Father. Rather he is Father only to his own people. In the Christian era this means that he is Father especially to those who have turned from their sins to him and accepted the salvation he offers through Jesus. (An even higher sense in which God is Father is as Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, but this will be discussed in the next chapter.) To illustrate that God was their Father, the early Christians used the picture of a common first century practice known as adoption (which was not the same as adoption today). A wealthy man without children would carefully choose someone and make him his son, so that this son could become the next head of the family, receive the family inheritance and carry on the family name. A person was very privileged if someone chose him in this way and gave him the status of a true son. This pictures what God has done for those who have trusted in Jesus Christ. He has made them his sons and daughters, giving them the status and dignity of responsible people who can share his interests.

Another illustration used by the early Christians was that of new birth. People are sinners and therefore are spiritually dead, unable to give themselves spiritual life. God, however, can save them from this hopeless condition by forgiving their sins and giving them the life that he desires for them. The Bible says of those early Christians that their spiritual new birth occurred when they 'received Jesus and believed in him'. They became God's children because God was the one who gave them life. God himself was their Father (John 1:12-13).

## 01.16. Chapter 2 A triune God

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### Chapter 2 A triune God Three-in-one and one-in-three

Although there is only one God, that God is a trinity. The word 'trinity' comes from the word for 'three', but any attempt to define it in relation to God is difficult and dangerous. This is because human language is not capable of explaining the unique-ness of the divine trinity fully or exactly. Within the one personal God there are three personal distinctions, which, for lack of a better word, are called persons – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Each of these persons is fully God, yet there is only one God, not three. He is a triune God – three-in-one and one-in-three. Our understanding of the Trinity is tied in with the Bible's record of God's dealings with the human race. God did not make known his truth to humankind in one great initial revelation, nor did he reveal it in the form of abstract teachings. He revealed it stage by stage and in a way that was related to people's needs. At each stage the truth he made known was relevant to circum-stances in the lives of those who received it. In this way God developed his plan of salvation and brought it to finality in Jesus. In Old Testament times, however, Jesus had not yet come, and therefore there was no immediate need to teach people about the Trinity. The emphasis in Old Testament times was on the oneness of God. Because the Israelites lived among nations who believed there were many gods, they were reminded constantly that there is in fact only one God, and he is a unity. With the fuller knowledge we now have through the New Testament, we may look back and see suggestions of the Trinity in the Old Testament. But our clearer knowledge of the Trinity comes mainly through the life and work of Jesus Christ. This does not mean that the God of the Old Testament was different from the God of the New. It does not mean that a God who was previously 'one' now divided into three. God has always existed as a Trinity. The new element in the New Testament is the revelation of the Trinity, not the Trinity itself.

### Made clear through Jesus

Jesus Christ not only made God known to the human race; he himself became one of the human race. When people saw Jesus, they saw God. Yet there was a mystery, because although God was physically present in the world in the person of Jesus, in another sense God was not physically present in the world. Jesus explained this apparent contradiction by pointing out that he was God the Son, and the one from whom he came was God the Father. The two were distinct, yet they were inseparably united. 'The Father and I are one,' said Jesus (John 10:30).

There is no suggestion that God the Father existed first and God the Son came into existence later. Both are God, and therefore both have existed eternally, but they have existed in this relationship of Father and Son. The Son began his human existence at a certain time in history, but as God he has always existed. Because he is both divine and human, he is the only one who can truly make God known to humankind, and the only one through whom humankind can be brought back to God.

Having become one of the human race, Jesus then gave the additional revelation that there was a third person in the Godhead, the Holy Spirit. As his crucifixion drew near, Jesus explained to his disciples that after his resurrection he would return to his Father. But he told them also that, although he no longer would be physically in the world, he would still be with them. His Spirit would come to dwell in them, and give them the sort of help and teaching that he had given them. They had known God as the Father, they had seen him as the Son, and now they would have him living in them as the Holy Spirit. No change in God

Before he returned to his Father, Jesus told his disciples to go and make more disciples, and to baptize those new disciples 'in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit' (Matthew 28:19). By this statement Jesus showed his disciples that the God they were beginning to understand as 'three-in-one and one-in-three' was the same God as their ancestors worshipped as 'one'. The disciples were Jews, and in Jewish thought the name represented the person. Jesus here spoke of 'the name' (singular), indicating one God, but at the same time he showed that this God existed as three personal distinctions. As a God-fearing Jew, Jesus gave his total allegiance to the one and only true God, and he taught his followers to do likewise. In Old Testament times God's people worshipped him under the name 'Yahweh'; in New Testament times they worshipped him under the name 'Father, Son and Holy Spirit'. The God who is 'one' is also a Trinity.

What the early Christians understood The New Testament writers seem to have had no difficulty with Jesus' teaching. They accepted both the Old Testament revelation of the oneness of God and Jesus' revelation of the Trinity. They never tried to define or prove the Trinity, but assumed it always. Since the God they worshipped had given his Son to die for them and given his Spirit to indwell them, the only way they thought of God was as a Trinity. In keeping with the teachings of Jesus, the New Testament writers show that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are fully and equally God. No one is inferior to, or superior to, the other. But in their operations there is a difference. The Son is willingly subject to the Father, as seen in Jesus' obedience to his Father. The Spirit is willingly subject to the Son, as seen in his work of reminding the disciples of the things Jesus taught them.

Nevertheless, there is no suggestion that the work of God is divided among three persons. The unity between Father, Son and Spirit means that all three are active in all the work of God. The New Testament writers may not have understood fully the divine activity within the Trinity, but they knew the character of the God who was at work. He was a triune God and he was changing people's lives through the message they preached.

Why the subject is important The reason Christians try to understand the Trinity is not to satisfy their curiosity or work out a scheme to explain how God exists or operates. The New Testament writers never attempted a theoretical analysis of God, though they constantly sought to understand more of his character and activity. Christians should always want to learn about God, because their new life in Christ depends on God being the sort of person he is.

Only because God is the sort of God he is (a Trinity), is the salvation of men and women possible. The word 'father' has to do with origins, and salvation comes from the Father. But the Father works through the Son. God made himself known to the world through Jesus, who carried out God's work of salvation. The Spirit, through whom God's power works in the world, applies the

benefits of Jesus' work to people's lives.

Paul, a leading teacher in the early church, summarizes this in Titus 3:4-7. Salvation, he points out, originated with God the Father: 'When the kindness and love of God was revealed, he saved us'. He goes on to say that it was 'through Jesus Christ our saviour', through the Son, that God carried out this work. And the benefits of that work are applied to believers 'through the Holy Spirit, who gives us new birth and new life.'

Just as God's salvation comes to people because God is a Trinity, so people can come to God because he is a Trinity. Their approach to God is by the Spirit, through the Son, to the Father (Ephesians 2:18). Even the most basic of all Christian exercises, prayer, is possible only because God is a Trinity. The Holy Spirit within believers helps them to pray, the Father in heaven is the one to whom they pray, and the Son is the heavenly mediator who supports their requests.

## 01.17. Chapter 3 God in human form

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### Chapter 3 God in human form The greatest miracle

Central to Christian faith and practice is the fact that in Jesus Christ the eternal God became a human being. This must surely be the miracle of all miracles. Little wonder, therefore, that the way it came about also involved a miracle – the supernatural work of God within the body of the virgin Mary, so that the child born to her, though having no human father, was fully human.

Jesus was not just an ordinary person whom God adopted as his Son, but also a unique person who was actually God's Son. He himself was God, and as the Son he existed in a relation with the Father that no other creature could share.

Like others, yet different In becoming a human being, the Son of God willingly sacrificed the supreme glory of heaven and took instead a humble place among God's creatures on earth. In doing so, he accepted the limitations of such an existence. This means not that his divinity was in any way reduced, but that he accepted the limitations of living like other people in a world of imperfection and suffering. Yet there was no imperfection in Jesus himself. The human nature common to people in general is infected by sin from birth, but Jesus' human nature was not.

Though a man, Jesus was also God. In him the human and divine natures existed together, without either one lessening the other. They were complete, united and inseparable. He still had divine power and knowledge, and he exercised those rights of forgiveness and judgment that belong to God alone. At the same time he was fully human. He experienced tiredness, hunger and thirst. He showed normal human emotions and reactions such as astonishment, joy, disappointment, pity, sorrow and anger.

There was no element of magic in the way Jesus lived. He never used his divine powers to avoid the inconveniences and difficulties of life. If he wanted to go from one place to another, he travelled the same as others and put up with the weariness of the journey. If he wanted information, he asked questions. He used his super-natural powers only as his Father permitted and always to help others, never to benefit himself.

Jesus experienced the same sorts of troubles and temptations as other people, but he never sinned. He was therefore not under God's judgment and so was able to be the substitute for those who were. Peter, looking back on the life of Jesus, said, 'He committed no sin . . . He himself carried our sins in his body on the cross' (1 Peter 2:22-24).

Jesus Christ the Lord The early Christians were very clear in their understanding that the purpose of Jesus' coming was to die, and the purpose of his death was to save sinners. An early Christian summary of belief was, 'Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners' (1 Timothy 1:15). This fact had been revealed before Jesus' birth, through the name God chose for the child. 'Jesus', though a common Jewish name, had its origins in the Hebrew expression, 'Yahweh saves'. It was therefore a fitting name for the person whom God sent as his saviour for the world. From Old

Testament times the Jews had looked for a great king, one like David, who would lead Israel to national glory. Israelite kings were often referred to as 'the anointed', because they were officially appointed to their position by the ceremony of anointing. Because the Hebrew word for 'anointed' was 'messiah', this longed-for kingly descendant of David was called the Messiah. In New Testament times Greek was the common language, and the Greek word equivalent to 'Messiah' was 'Christ'. The word was later used as a personal name for Jesus.

Jesus was the promised Messiah, but he rarely referred to this aspect of his mission. Most Jews had a wrong understanding of the Messiah and his kingdom, and Jesus did not want to attract the wrong kind of following. People wanted a political leader who would overthrow Roman power and bring in an independent Israelite kingdom of peace and prosperity. Jesus was concerned with releasing people from the power of sin and bringing them into the kingdom of God. There they would come under God's rule and authority of God, exercised through Jesus Christ. The title that the early Christians most commonly used of Jesus was 'Lord'. This indicated the sovereign power of Jesus Christ as God and King. It was also the equivalent of the Hebrew word 'Yahweh', the ancient Israelites' special name for God. The King and his kingdom

Jesus' work of preaching, teaching and helping the needy was connected with the coming of God's kingdom. That kingdom was concerned with God's rule in people's lives, not with political revolution. The miracles of Jesus showed that the power of God's kingdom was working through him to conquer evil and free people from its power. His preaching urged people to enter God's kingdom by turning from their sin and humbly submitting to God's rule. In this way they would receive the kingdom's benefits in forgiveness of sin and new life. Many of Jesus' parables showed that although the kingdom of God had in one sense arrived, in another sense it had not. It had not yet been forced upon the world with irresistible power.

During Jesus' lifetime his disciples found his teaching on the kingdom hard to understand. They did not realize that the king had first to fulfil the role of a servant. Jesus had to do, perfectly and completely, the work that God had given him to do; and that work involved suffering and death.

Only by the sacrifice of himself could Jesus deal with sin conclusively and so release people from its power. His devotion to his task was total, even to death; and for this reason God 'raised him from death and gave him glory' (1 Peter 1:21). The resurrection of Jesus proved that he had finished perfectly the work he had come to do. He was the triumphant Lord, Messiah, King and Saviour. With the resurrection of Jesus, the previously confused disciples became clear-sighted and confident. They knew that the resurrected Jesus was more than just a dead man come back to life. Although he was still a man, his human existence was now beyond the reach of death. It was no longer bound by former limitations. In a way beyond human understanding, Jesus was glorified in his Father's presence. Even when he disappeared from his disciples for the last time, they knew he was still alive and helping them, and one day would return. In raising Jesus to the place of highest honour, God showed him to be King. He also gave the assurance that one day 'all beings in heaven, on earth, and in the world below will fall on their knees and openly proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord' (Php 2:10-11). The day will come when God will impose his rule upon a rebellious world through his King, Jesus, but first he gives people the opportunity to repent. That is why Christians proclaim the good news of his kingdom. The repentant can enter that kingdom now and begin immediately to receive its blessings.

Final victory The New Testament writers are of one mind in asserting that at some time known only to God, Jesus will return. Their assurance is based on the clear promises of Jesus himself.

Although Jesus' return will be spectacular, we must not think of it as something unrelated to the events of his life recorded in the Bible. On the contrary it is the event that will bring to a climax all that Jesus achieved through his life, death and resurrection – the judgment of sin, the conquest of death, the giving of eternal life, the healing of the physical world and the establishment of God's kingdom.

Jesus' coming will bring the present world's history to an end and introduce a new age, the age of the kingdom of God. The Bible does not satisfy our curiosity by giving a timetable of events, but it leaves us in no doubt of certain things that will take place. Among those things will be the resurrection of the dead and final judgment. In the days of his earthly life, Jesus had refused to seek the kingship of the world by violent or political means. But, because he sacrificed himself to save the world, that kingship will now be his. Through him God will rule, for judgment and for blessing. If people have refused to accept the salvation Jesus made available, they will find no way of escaping the penalty of sin. But if they have trusted in Jesus as the bearer of sin's penalty for them, they will face the day of judgment with confidence. This does not mean, however, that they will escape all judgment; for they are still answerable to God for their behaviour as believers.

Therefore, while Christians look forward to meeting Jesus, their expectation of that meeting causes them to be careful the way they live now. Since Jesus will reappear when least expected, they should be ready always.

Arising out of Jesus' return will be a new age, a new world, a whole new kind of existence, where God's people will live with him in the full enjoyment of the life Jesus made possible for them. As the Son, Jesus had been entrusted by the Father with the task of restoring all things to a state of perfect submission to the sovereign God. With the conquest of evil and the restoration of all things to God, the Son's work will be finally fulfilled. God will be everything to everyone.

## 01.18. Chapter 4 God within his people

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### Chapter 4 God within his people More than an impersonal power

After Jesus' resurrection and return to the Father, the early Christians experienced a number of significant changes. One of these was that God's Spirit now indwelt them in a way they had not known previously.

Jesus had promised that his physical departure from the world would not disadvantage God's work. Quite the opposite. Through the Holy Spirit, the same Jesus would now live within his people – not just those who had lived with him in Palestine, but every person in every era and every place who turned to him in faith and repentance. Jesus' presence in the world had previously been limited to first century Palestine, but through the Holy Spirit that presence would now become timeless and worldwide.

Through Jesus, people began to have a new understanding of the Spirit of God. In former times, when people spoke of the Spirit of God they were probably thinking of God's living and active power, not of a specific person within a triune Godhead. They probably had no understanding of the Spirit of God as a person within the Trinity, just as they had no understanding of the Son of God as a person within the Trinity. But when on occasions they saw God's power working through selected people for certain tasks, they rightly saw this as God's Spirit, not as some merely human ability. With the coming of Jesus Christ, things became clearer. Jesus talked about the Spirit and demonstrated the Spirit's power. He lived his daily life by the unceasing work of the Spirit through him. People began to see that the Spirit was more than a power; he was a person. He could teach, hear, comfort and help. Jesus explained that the unique relation between the Father and the Son extended to include the Spirit. There was a unity between Father, Son and Spirit, but at the same time a distinction.

### Jesus' provision for his people

Although the New Testament era may have brought a change in people's understanding of the Spirit, the Spirit himself did not change. He had always been fully God and fully personal. But when God physically entered the world in the person of Jesus Christ, the relation between God and the people of the world could never be the same again.

Those who lived with Jesus could receive God's help and teaching easily: they only had to ask Jesus. Soon, however, Jesus was to leave them. Therefore, to ensure that they continued to receive God's help, Jesus promised them 'another Helper, who will stay with you for ever, namely, the Spirit' (John 14:16-17). A sentence or two later he said, 'You will not be left all alone; I will come back to you' (John 14:18). Jesus would come to his people in the person of the Holy Spirit; or, to put it another way, the Holy Spirit would represent the presence of Jesus to his people. The Spirit would give them the same help as Jesus had given them when he was physically present with them.

Again we see the mystery of the relationships within the Trinity. Although there is a distinction, there is an inseparable unity. On a previous occasion Jesus had said that when people know the Son they know the Father; now he says that when people have the Spirit they have the Son. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus. He bears the stamp of Jesus' character just as Jesus bore the stamp of the Father's character. The disciples who had lived with Jesus Christ in Palestine received the Spirit in unique circumstances. They knew that the gift of the Spirit would come only after Jesus had returned to the Father, and therefore they had to wait till he had physically left the world. But for others there are no such special circumstances. They receive the Spirit when by faith they receive Christ. It is impossible for a person to have one without the other. Life 'in Christ' is life 'in the Spirit'. The Spirit of Jesus at work The early Christians had no doubt that Jesus lived in them and worked through them by the Holy Spirit whom he had given them. This did not make them superhuman, but it did make them more like Jesus in their attitudes and behaviour.

Examples from the New Testament show that the Holy Spirit worked through the early Christians in both spectacular and unspectacular ways. He gave them extraordinary boldness in the face of opposition, yet the quiet ability to organize church affairs smoothly. On some occasions he directed them through inner promptings and visions, on others through reasoned discussion. He taught them through the spontaneous comments of some, and through the carefully prepared arguments of others.

Christians today naturally do not have the same sense of personal acquaintance with Jesus as had those who talked, ate, worked and travelled with him in Palestine. But they are equally certain of Jesus' presence with them through the Spirit. This does not give them a sort of magical power that enables them to do successfully whatever they want to do. Nor does it guarantee them freedom from sorrow, disappointment and hardship. Jesus suffered, and his followers can expect to suffer also, but the Spirit of Jesus within them gives them strength, calmness and even joy through their sufferings. The character the Spirit produces At times the Holy Spirit's presence within Christians seems to make life more difficult for them. This is because of the natural tendency to sin which they, like others, are born with. That tendency is not removed when they become Christians, and will, in fact, create problems when they resist it.

Whether Jesus' followers realize it or not, the Holy Spirit was the one who awakened them to their sin, led them to Jesus and gave them new life. The same Spirit comes to live within them permanently, and this is what causes the conflict. The old sinful human nature (sometimes called 'the flesh') fights against the Spirit, and the Spirit fights against the sinful nature.

Although Jesus' human nature was not infected by sin, he still experienced the normal temptations of human life. Even for him, victory over those temptations required self-discipline and effort. Christians, indwelt by the Spirit, can face the temptations of life with confidence, but they must not expect victory to come easily. The conflict strengthens character. That is not to say that Christians will become stern and grim. On the contrary they will find life more enjoyable than ever, for it will now have more meaning. If the Spirit of Jesus Christ is directing their efforts, the result will be a quality of character that reflects the character of Jesus Christ. When they allow God's Spirit to do this work in their lives, Christians are said to be filled with the Spirit. That is, they allow the Spirit to have full control. This is not a once-for-all experience, nor necessarily a highly emotional experience. Certainly, they will on occasions be more strongly aware of the Spirit's presence or

help, but in general the Spirit's work will be the quiet and steady work of making them more like Jesus. Being like Jesus does not mean that Christians become religious fanatics or submit to laws that make life dull and boring. Jesus did not live like that. He came to free people not only from bondage to sin, but also from bondage to those rules and regulations that people mistakenly think will make them 'holy'. The Spirit of Christ likewise brings life and freedom. He wants people to enjoy life through enjoying those right relationships that God intended from the beginning, whether relationships with other people or with God himself. Not merely private The Spirit's work in the lives of Christ's people is concerned with more than their own personal development. It is concerned also with their responsibility to take the good news of Jesus to an unbelieving world.

Before Jesus died, his followers learnt that part of the Spirit's work was to convince people that Jesus is Lord. When their faith in Jesus' lordship was confirmed through the resurrection, Jesus promised that the Spirit would empower them to witness to this fact everywhere. In a sense people in any era who know Jesus as Lord are his witnesses. Through their witness, the Spirit makes known the truth of Jesus Christ to others. As people believe in Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit introduces them into that vast international community known as the church. The Spirit, besides living in Christians as individuals, lives in the church as a whole. As he helps individual believers in their private prayers, so he helps the church in its public worship. Whether privately or publicly, individually or collectively, Christians are helped by the Spirit when they want to speak to God. Likewise they are helped by the Spirit when they want to hear God speaking to them; for the Spirit enables them to understand the Scriptures. He helps in their individual reading of the Bible and he helps in the teaching given in the church.

People differ from each other in their personalities and abilities, and when the Holy Spirit comes into their lives he does not remove the differences. He may change the character and behaviour of people so that they are more the sorts of people they should be, but he does not remove the variety that exists among them. The church is likened to the human body, where different parts have different purposes, yet there is unity. The Holy Spirit has given abilities to all God's people, and the church functions properly when all the people work together by using their Spirit-given abilities for the common good.

However, the abilities that people display in their church work are not in themselves an indication of the Spirit's control in their lives. A better indication is the development of Christian character. Abilities depend on the particular functions that the Spirit has fitted people for in the church, but character depends on the control that people allow the Spirit in their lives. The Spirit 'transforms us into Christ's likeness'. He produces 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility and self-control' (2 Corinthians 3:18; Galatians 5:22-23).

## 01.19. Book 4 The Christian's Life

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Book 4 The Christian's Life

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## 01.21. Chapter 1 New beginning

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### Chapter 1 New beginning What Christians are

Present-day usage of the word 'Christian' is so broad that it can lead to misunderstanding, particularly in relation to the teaching of the Bible. Strictly speaking, Christians are Christ's people. They are Christians because they personally belong to Christ, not because they have been brought up in families or countries that follow Christian traditions. The Bible most commonly refers to Christians as those who believe. They are believers not in the sense that they hold certain religious beliefs, but in the sense that they believe in, have faith in, and rely on Jesus Christ for their salvation. To have salvation (or to be saved) means to be forgiven their sins, saved from sin's penalty, and given that new and eternal life which is the life of the kingdom of God. This salvation is solely God's work, and he does it lovingly for believers even though they do not deserve it. They receive their salvation by faith, and in so doing are born anew by the work of the Spirit of God.

Besides exercising faith, believers exhibit repentance – a turning away from sin. Faith without repentance is not a faith that will save. There can be no forgiveness for those who will not turn from their sin. There must be a change, a conversion. Believers are now disciples or followers of Jesus, their new master, teacher and Lord. They live to please him, not themselves. In summary, 'when anyone is joined to Christ, he is a new being; the old is gone, the new has come (2 Corinthians 5:17). The Christian is a new person. A basis for confidence A common misunderstanding is that people cannot be certain of their salvation. Yet repeatedly the Bible shows that God wants them to be certain. John is typical of the Bible writers when he says, 'I am writing this to you so that you may know that you have eternal life – you who believe in the Son of God' (1 John 5:13). Jesus emphasized the assurance believers can have, with such statements as 'I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish' (John 10:28). The promises of eternal security come from God himself, and his promises can be trusted.

Believers must remember always that their salvation depends not on anything they have done, but solely on what God has done for them through Christ. Only through Christ's death and resurrection are believers forgiven their sins and given new life. God welcomes them as he welcomes the victorious, risen Christ, and gives them the Holy Spirit as his mark of permanent ownership. Nothing can separate God's people from the love that God has shown to them through Jesus Christ.

Although God wants believers to be sure about their salvation, he does not want them to be cocksure. He does not want them to feel smug and self-satisfied. Perhaps that is why the Bible contains statements that sometimes make Christians feel uneasy. Christianity is more than intellectual belief. If faith does not produce a change in people's behaviour, it is not true faith. If people think their salvation is guaranteed and therefore they can do as they like, they deceive themselves.

Noticeable changes

People may or may not feel different when they first accept Christ, but if they are true believers they will soon become aware that their lives have been changed. They will want to please God, and will feel his rebukes when they are guilty of wrong attitudes or behaviour. Their values will begin to change as increasingly they love what is good and hate what is not.

Knowing that God is now their Father, believers will want to talk to him through prayer and listen to what he says through the Bible. They will also want to meet others in God's family and worship with them. They may find that they have less in common with former friends, while at the same time they develop a love and concern for them (and even for their enemies) that they did not have before. All this is part of the growth that occurs in people's lives when they come into a relationship with the living Christ. Their character changes as it becomes progressively like the character of Christ. Not only will believers themselves be aware of the change within them, but others also will notice the difference. People cannot be followers of Christ secretly. In New Testament times, when people said they believed in Jesus, they were promptly baptized to demonstrate the fact publicly. Baptism does not make people Christians; nevertheless, it is an essential part of their declaration that they are Christians.

Although the Bible speaks of people going into the water to be baptized, it gives no detailed description of the act of baptism. The original meaning of the word 'baptize' was or 'immerse' or 'dip', suggesting that believers were immersed in water. The ceremony was a public witness that they believed in Jesus, repented of their sins and received God's cleansing. It was their ceremonial introduction into Christianity. The New Testament writers used the picture of baptism to teach aspects of Christian truth. Paul in particular developed the meaning of baptism in relation to the practical results of Christ's death, burial and resurrection. He showed that baptism pictured believers' union with Christ in dying to sin and rising with Christ to a new life of victory. Since Christ by his death paid the full penalty of sin for believers, sin can make no further demands on them. They are free from sin's power, and must live confidently in the power of the living Christ within them.

**New and old natures** Being free from sin's power does not mean that when people become Christians they never sin again. Although the Holy Spirit now lives within them, the natural human tendency to do wrong is still there. Certainly, they have been born anew and been given new life, but they still have the old sinful nature they were born with. The Bible calls this old nature 'the flesh'. It still wants to do wrong and so fights against the new nature. Christians therefore live with a constant conflict between these two natures. This is no cause for despair. God has given the Holy Spirit to Christians to make Christ's living presence real to them. Jesus Christ, by his death and resurrection, conquered sin to free people from its power. Believers need no longer be slaves to the old sinful nature; but if they give way to it, it will bring them under its power again and rule them like a cruel tyrant.

Christians may at times wish that by some supernatural act the old sinful nature could be instantly eliminated. Or they may wish that the Holy Spirit within them could work like a magic charm and produce automatic victory over sin. God gives no such easy solutions to the problem of sin in the world. The Holy Spirit does not excuse Christians from self-discipline, but rather helps them develop it. Hard work is necessary in battling sin, and each victory strengthens character.

Having been saved by faith, Christians live by faith. If, in their desire to conquer sin, they make a set of rules for them-selves or others to follow, they may find themselves no longer trusting in Christ, but caught in a new kind of bondage. Christ has set them free from all spiritual bondage, so that in union with him they may live the life of true freedom that Christ lived. This freedom does not mean they are free from obedience to God and his Word. It means they are free to produce the quality of character that legal obedience can never produce. God has given commands and he requires obedience, but it is an obedience based on a relationship, not on laws. God is head of a family where love rules, and he wants his children to obey him because they want to, not because they are forced to.

#### Dealing with sin

Inevitably, Christians will at times fail. They must not think, however, that through their failure they lose their salvation and have to start their Christian lives all over again. On being born anew they become God's children, and nothing can change that relationship. When children do wrong they may make their parents sad, but they do not cease to be their children. When Christians sin they make God sad, but they are still his children. God does not disown them, though he may discipline them. 'The Lord corrects those he loves, and punishes those he accepts as his children' (Hebrews 12:6).

Although wrongdoing cannot break the family relationship between parents and children, it can break the friendship. In a similar way the wrongdoing of Christians spoils their fellowship with God. All Christians sin sometimes, and if they deny this they deceive themselves. But if they are living to please God, they have his assurance of forgiveness for those sins that they themselves may not be aware of. If they are aware of sin, they should deal with it quickly and so maintain good fellowship with God. Again they have a sure promise: 'If we confess our sins to God, he will forgive our sins and purify us from all wrongdoing' (1 John 1:9).

## 01.22. Chapter 2 Prayer

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### Chapter 2 Prayer

**Freedom to pray** When people become God's children, they will naturally want to talk with him. Talking with God is what the Bible calls prayer. It is an act of living fellowship with God, through worshipping him, thanking him, praising him, confessing to him and making requests of him.

Believers can pray anywhere and at any time. They do not need any church building, church official or church book to be able to pray. Nor do they have to learn a special language. They can pray silently or audibly, in any position – standing, sitting, walking, kneeling. Knowing that God is with them everywhere, they will soon develop the habit of speaking with him freely regardless of time or place. They should also develop the habit of making time each day to be alone with God to pray. Even Jesus recognized the need to set aside time specifically for prayer.

Speaking silently to someone unseen may seem strange to those who do not know God, but when people become God's children this strangeness soon disappears. If they begin their regular prayer times by reading the Bible, their prayers will have more freshness and meaning. Prayer will be a response to what they learn from God through the Bible.

### Confidence, with respect

Prayer is more than merely asking God for things. Jesus pointed out some of the chief elements in prayer when he gave his disciples some guidelines in what has become known as the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13). In simple everyday language, the main part of the prayer is as follows: 'Our Father in heaven, may your holy name be honoured, may your kingdom come, may your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today the food we need. Forgive us the wrongs we have done, as we forgive the wrongs that others have done to us. Do not bring us to hard testing, but keep us safe from the Evil One.'

Jesus gave Christians this prayer not to provide them with words to repeat in a ritual, but to show them how to pray. And he shows that when Christians pray, though they may confidently make requests of God, they should also worship him. In fact, the prayer opens with an expression of worship.

Worship is difficult to define, for it is both an attitude in which believers live and an exercise that they carry out. They humble themselves before their Lord as those who serve, honour and adore him in acknowledgment of all that he is as the almighty and glorious God. That is why Christians, while they address God as their Father, address him also as the holy and majestic one who rules over all. Although they have a warm and close relationship with God, they also have a deep respect for him. They come before God with freedom and ease, but they do not take him for granted.

There is no suggestion, however, that Christians have to be solemn and dull in expressing their worship, or that they have to crawl to God to ask his favours. They come to him confidently

because they are Christ's people. Christ has made free access to God possible, and God welcomes Christians into his presence as he welcomed the victorious Christ.

Praise and thanksgiving are inseparable from worship. As believers praise God for all that he is and thank him for all that he has done, they will find that their lives and their prayers are full of joy.

**What to pray about** In telling Christians to pray that God's kingdom will come, Jesus shows that Christians should want people and nations to acknowledge God's authority. Jesus taught often about the kingdom of God, pointing out that it is not a territory over which God reigns, but the rule that he exercises. Christians should pray for this rule in their own lives and in the lives of others, whether in individuals, in nations, or in the world at large. In other words, they should pray for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Jesus' prayer goes on to show that, though prayer is concerned with these timeless and worldwide matters, it is concerned also with the most ordinary and everyday matters, such as the provision of food to eat. No areas of life are too great or too small to pray about. In addition to physical needs there are spiritual needs; therefore, Jesus shows that prayer should include confession of sin. But people can expect forgiveness only if they have first forgiven those who have wronged them. They are to love those who ill-treat them and are to pray for them.

Each day brings fresh difficulties, but Christians have the assurance that they need not fight their battles alone. Jesus encourages them to ask God's help in these matters, so that when they meet troubles and testings, they will not fall into wrong-doing. Through prayer they can learn how to trust in God and not be anxious.

Often a prayer will end with a further expression of praise to God, such as 'for yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory'. It may close with the word 'amen'. In its original language the word 'amen' meant 'certain' or 'true', and was used to confirm the truth of a statement or express agreement with it. When used thoughtfully, 'amen' can express the sincerity of the person who is praying or the agreement of one who is listening. Either way it means, 'Yes, Lord, may it be so'.

**Total dependence on God** By their prayers Christians acknowledge that they have no power to bring about the things they are praying for, but God has. Their prayers are not a way of trying to force God to do what they want; on the contrary, their prayers are an admission of their helplessness and complete dependence on God. By their prayers they are inviting God to work out his answer to the matter they are praying about. The answer to prayer does not depend on the zeal or will-power of the person praying, but on the wisdom and power of God. God does not want people to work up feelings of one sort or another. He wants them simply to trust in him. The merit is not in the prayer itself, but in God who answers the prayer. Christians can pray in the right spirit only when they recognize their helplessness, and trust God to do what they cannot. Faith is the basic requirement of all prayer.

People do not need large amounts of faith in order to pray. They need only enough faith to turn in their helplessness to God. Like prayer, faith has no merit in itself. That is, God does not need people's faith to help him do things. God has complete power within himself. Faith is simply the means by which believers come to him and ask him to exercise that power. No automatic answers

Since faith is the basis of prayer, people cannot use prayer to get their own way; for then they would be arrogantly commanding God instead of humbly submitting to him. They would be wanting their will to be done instead of God's. Christians are assured that God answers their prayers when they pray in Jesus' name. This does not mean that they merely add the words 'in Jesus' name' to their prayers. Rather it means that they pray on the authority Jesus gives them, and ask for things that have Jesus' approval.

There is no formula that guarantees answers to prayer regardless of the way people live. Christians must understand God's Word so that they can live in obedience to his teachings and learn to pray for the right things. Unchristian conduct and unchristian attitudes are among the causes of unanswered prayer. A disciple of Jesus who became a leading teacher in the early church once wrote, 'We receive from God whatever we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him.' 'We are sure that he hears us if we ask him for anything that is according to his will' (1 John 3:22; 1 John 5:14). At times, however, God may choose not to give his people what they ask for, even when they are not guilty of disobedience or selfishness. The reason may be that he has something better for them. Having perfect knowledge, he knows what is best. He may therefore give believers what they would have asked for if they had the full knowledge that God has. These better answers are not always immediately obvious, and therefore patience is a necessary part of true prayer. An understanding Father

Jesus and the New Testament writers repeatedly mention the need for persistence in prayer. This is not because God needs to be persuaded. Christians do not have to beg from a God who is unwilling to give, but they do have to exercise a constant trust in him. Faith is not an occasional exercise that makes a call for supernatural aid and then forgets the matter. Faith involves perseverance. By their constant prayers, Christians express their unwavering faith in their heavenly Father.

Prayer is one way that God trains his children in the development of Christian character. Although he lovingly gives them much without their asking, there are many things they will learn only by asking. They will learn some things only through having their requests refused, but even then they can be confident that a wise and loving Father is always working for their good. When Jesus says to his followers, 'Your Father already knows what you need before you ask him', he is not telling them they have no need to pray. On the contrary he is giving them good reason to pray. Christians pray to a Father who understands their needs better than they do themselves (Matthew 6:8).

## 01.23. Chapter 3 Serving God

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Chapter 3 Serving God A privileged relationship When people come into the kingdom of God, they become subjects of their new King, servants of their new Lord. To present-day people, for whom human dignity and freedom are important issues, this may at first sound harsh and unattractive, especially when we remember that servants in the first century were more likely slaves. No illustration can properly picture the relationship between God and his people. The Bible uses many word-pictures, parables and examples to deal with various aspects of the Christian life, but they are all inadequate and they are all independent of each other. In speaking of Christians in their responsibilities to God, the Bible uses such widely differing illustrations as children, servants, friends, ambassadors, soldiers, witnesses, farmers, builders and athletes.

Jesus was well aware that each illustration could help explain one point, but could lead to misunderstanding if applied to another. For example, he frequently used the illustration of servants, and he demanded from his disciples the faithfulness of servants to their master. But in another setting he said, 'I do not call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing. Instead I call you friends' (John 15:15). No picture by itself can tell the full story. Christ's servants are also his friends. Allegiance to him leads to freedom; service for him is a privilege.

However, there is no place for pride in Christian service. Jesus showed this when he, the master, washed his servants' feet. He was the perfect servant of God, and he showed that serving God means also serving one's fellow human beings. God gives honour only to those who have first learnt to serve.

Something all can do As their new life develops, Christians may give evidence that God is preparing them to serve him in specific ways. Such service may lie in the future, but in the meantime they should not sit idle waiting to receive some special message from God. There are some things that all Christians should do, regardless of any special abilities they might have. An obvious way that all Christians can serve God is through prayer. They can do this privately or by joining with like-minded friends. In this service their prayers go beyond their personal needs to the needs of others. They can pray for those who are sad, lonely, suffering, hungry, poor, distressed or persecuted. Likewise they can pray for those who govern nations, administer justice, direct welfare and provide education. In fact, the list of things to pray for is endless. In particular, Christians should be concerned for the spiritual needs of the world, and the Bible gives them many things to pray for. They are to pray that God will send his servants everywhere with the good news of salvation, that he will guide and protect those servants, and that he will make their work fruitful. They are to pray for churches and individuals, that God's people might know him better, be strengthened by his power, have unity among themselves, increase in love, develop wisdom and endure hardship. They are to pray both for those who are known personally to them and for those who are not. The more facts people have, the more intelligently they will pray. Christians should therefore find out all they can about Christian work, and perhaps keep a notebook where they can write down things to pray for. One of the greatest of all Christian workers, Paul, once said to a

group of Christians, 'You help us by means of your prayers for us' (2 Corinthians 1:11).

### Representatives for Christ

People who become united with Christ soon develop attitudes and behaviour that make them different from people in general. But they should not be different in a merely negative sense, as if their chief concern is to disagree with or criticize others. They have a positive responsibility to be a good and wholesome influence in a society that has been corrupted by sin. More than that, they are to bring others to know Christ too, and if they are to do this they must not only live uprightly, but also tell people about the person whom they serve. The Bible speaks of Christians as Christ's ambassadors. As an ambassador represents his country's ruler or government in a foreign land, so Christians represent Christ in the world. Because of this they are, in some ways, different from the people among whom they live. Their standards are those of another kingdom, Christ's. But they must not cut themselves off from the life of the society; otherwise they will not be able to present their master's point of view to the people.

Christians need to maintain a balance, and in this Jesus Christ is their example. He mixed so freely in society that the religious purists criticized him; but he never lowered his standards or changed his beliefs to make life easier for himself.

All Christians can serve Christ by living for him. They are (according to illustrations that Christ himself gave) like a city on a hill, for they cannot be hidden, and like salt on meat, for they help prevent decay and add flavour to society. They are like lamps in a house, for they give light to those who otherwise would be in darkness. They are like witnesses in a courtroom, for they speak openly and forthrightly of what they know and have experienced.

Using what God has given As they read the Bible, Christians soon see that God is the giver of everything they have for the maintenance and enjoyment of life – life itself, the physical environment, time, possessions and natural skills. They recognize that they have no absolute right to these things. They have them on trust from God, and they are answerable to God for the way they use them.

Christians have a responsibility to use their time, money and abilities to help others, and in so doing they serve God. This will often involve sacrifice; in fact, only when it is a sacrifice does it have value in God's sight. There is little merit if people give away only what they themselves do not need. God always looks at hidden motives rather than what the onlookers see. Sometimes people may give money because they genuinely want to help those in need; other times they may give money because it is easier than sacrificing their time and convenience. The motivating force in Christian giving is Jesus Christ, who gave everything to save helpless sinners. Paul referred to the example of Jesus Christ when urging Christians in Greece to contribute money to help poor Christians in Jerusalem. He encouraged each person to think carefully about the matter, and regularly to 'put aside some money in proportion to what he has earned'. But Paul refused to specify the percentage that each person should give. That is for individual Christians to work out before God. God wants them to give, and to give generously, but not under compulsion. 'Each one should give as he has decided, not with regret or out of a sense of duty; for God loves the one who gives gladly' (2 Corinthians 9:7).

Some Christians use the whole of their working time in such tasks as making known the good news of God's salvation, caring for churches, teaching believers and looking after church welfare programs. Christians have a responsibility to support such people financially. By giving in this way, Christians serve God themselves and have a share in the service that others carry out on their behalf.

#### Christians and work

Perhaps the most constant of all Christian service is the one that is common to all Christians at all times, namely, work. This applies not just to earning money, but also to work around the house, study, volunteer welfare work and just about every other kind of worthwhile activity. 'Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as though you were working for the Lord . . . as though you were serving Christ' (Colossians 3:23; Ephesians 6:5-8). From the beginning, God intended people to work, so that as they learnt new skills and exercised their judgment they would mature in body and mind. But when sin entered the world, every- thing was affected. It is not work that is the result of sin, but the pain, drudgery and oppression that come from work in a world dominated by sin. Christians are people who have been restored to God, and consequently they develop a new attitude to work.

Because they are set free from sin, Christians are set free from the drudgery of work, but they are not free from work itself. They still have to work hard and can expect weariness and pain the same as anyone else, but they take a new interest and pride in whatever they do. If their aim is to please Christ, they will find satisfaction in doing all tasks well, even tasks that they normally may not like.

Jesus once said, 'You cannot serve both God and money' (Matthew 6:24). If Christians work only to get income, they are not serving Christ. This is true of those who take no interest in the work they are doing because they think it boring, and of those who are totally immersed in their work because they want status and prosperity. Just as trust in God is no excuse for lazy idleness, so diligence for God is no excuse for selfish ambition. Neither path leads to satisfaction. As always, Christians find true satisfaction as they work and live not for themselves, but for Christ.

## 01.24. Chapter 4 Towards maturity

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Chapter 4 Towards maturity Christ working in his people As Christ promised, those who receive him receive also eternal life. When the Bible speaks of eternal life, its main emphasis is not on everlasting existence in the afterlife, but on the life of the kingdom of God, the life that is part of the nature of God himself. On receiving Christ, people begin this new life now. It is the life that Christians receive when they come into union with Christ, when they acknowledge him as their Lord and Saviour and enter his kingdom. It will be theirs for ever, because even death cannot break their union with Christ.

Christians' enjoyment of this eternal life is at present limited because of the natural imperfections they share with everything else in the present world. But Christ, by the perfect life he lived, gave an indication of the quality of life that God desires people to have and that those in his kingdom can begin working towards now. When Christ comes into the lives of his people, he begins the work of changing them to be like him.

Growth is therefore a chief characteristic of the Christian life. The Bible often speaks of Christians' spiritual growth by means of illustrations relating to physical growth. Because children naturally grow into adults, there is something unnatural about Christians who remain spiritual children. Paul reminds Christians of God's purposes for them when he says that all who have come into union with Christ should 'become mature people, reaching to the very height of Christ's full stature. Then we shall no longer be children' (Ephesians 4:13-14).

### Food that strengthens

Several of the New Testament writers use the illustration of food when speaking of Christian growth. Children begin life by being fed on milk, but they soon move on to solid food. Likewise Christians begin their lives by being given basic teaching, but they soon move on to more advanced teaching. Their spiritual food is the Bible, and they will grow only as they read it, understand it and apply it.

Christians should be diligent in their Bible reading, because through the Bible God makes himself known to them. Without an understanding of the Bible, they will not know what sort of person God is or what he has to say about Christian living. The entire Bible is God's Word, and although some parts may be easier to understand than others, Christians should not hinder their growth by reading only the easier parts. As physical effort develops the body, so mental effort develops the mind. Christians will find that the more they understand the Bible, the greater is their capacity for further growth. An old biblical proverb says, 'Wise people get all the knowledge they can' (Proverbs 10:14), and wise Christians will regularly set aside time to study the Bible. Even when they see no immediate relevance in a particular part of the Bible, they will keep reading. They will not read the Bible as others read the astrology columns of the daily newspaper – looking for words of special guidance about each day's events. Rather they will read it with the aim of building up their knowledge over as wide an area as possible, so that they will be well prepared no matter

what circumstances they meet.

### Deciding what to do

One sign of a developing Christian life is the ability to apply the teachings of the Bible to the common issues of everyday life. The Bible gives moral guidelines, but it does not provide clear-cut answers for all the decisions people must make.

If, for example, people are thinking about what occupation they should follow or where they should live, they cannot expect the Bible to tell them. But neither should they think the Bible has nothing to say on such matters. The Bible contains all sorts of teachings about honesty, consideration for others, morality, self-denial and the like, and these should affect the way Christians think. Sometimes all that is needed is a definite 'No' (for the proposal may be clearly against the Bible's teaching); other times there is no easy answer at all.

Christianity does not provide simple formulas to be used for people's convenience. True, it promises God's help in life's decisions, but only to those who make every effort to live to please God rather than themselves. Such people find that through prayer and the Scriptures their outlook on life changes. They begin to exercise their Christian discernment, and the more they do so the more their confidence grows. This Christian discernment is more than common sense, for common sense can be selfish and does not necessarily consider God's values. Christian discernment is what the Bible calls spiritual wisdom. It is what Paul prayed for when he wrote to one of the early churches: 'true wisdom and perfect judgment, so that you will be able to choose what is best'. Paul went on to describe the result of this developing Christian maturity: 'your lives will be filled with the truly good qualities which only Jesus Christ can produce' (Php 1:9-11).

Becoming like Christ A consistent theme in the New Testament is that the Spirit of God is at work in Christians to make them more like Christ. The pity is that, because the world of Jesus was the world of almost two thousand years ago, people often think of Christianity as something old fashioned. Consequently, they think that to be like Christ means to be out of date and unfitted for the modern world. In speaking about Christians' likeness to Christ, the Bible is concerned mainly with the quality of Christ's character that his people should reproduce. When faced with difficult questions, Christians do not necessarily ask themselves, 'What would Jesus do?' There are many things that Christian husbands, fathers, mothers, scientists, lawyers and soldiers do that we may not imagine Jesus doing, but that in itself does not make those things wrong. Jesus' calling in life was unique, but Christians are to be as faithful to God in their callings as Jesus was in his. They are to show the same attitudes as he showed.

Several times Jesus told his disciples that just as he had been persecuted, so they would be persecuted. His behaviour on such occasions was an example to them of the tolerant and forgiving spirit that he wanted to produce in them. He showed that although obedience to God may lead to hardship, suffering and death, they had to learn to say 'No' to their own wills and 'Yes' to the Father's will, as Jesus did. People naturally do not like to think about suffering, but it is something that God uses to bring his people to full maturity. A balanced life

Maturity comes not only through the way people endure life's sufferings, but also through the way they enjoy life's pleasures. Jesus was not opposed to a full-blooded enjoyment of life, and neither were the Old Testament or New Testament writers. On the contrary, God is the one who

'generously gives us everything for our enjoyment' (1 Timothy 6:17). What Jesus and the Bible writers opposed was a wrong use of the things God has given. When people ignore his commandments, think only of themselves or exploit others, they displease God and in the end ruin themselves.

It is true that on one occasion Jesus told a rich young man to sell all that he had and give the money to the poor, but the reason was that the man's wealth was his god. Jesus did not tell all rich people to sell their possessions. His emphasis was that those who followed him had to be prepared to sacrifice anything if God so required, but he was not opposed to the proper enjoyment of the good things of life. In fact, the religious killjoys of his day constantly criticized him for being too free in the way he lived. The abuse of God's gifts by some people is no reason for Christians to reject those gifts. Christians should be examples of a sensible lifestyle. They should be neither so anti-enjoyment that they misrepresent Christ, nor so ill-disciplined that they mislead others. Neither attitude is a sign of spiritual maturity. A temptation that growing Christians face is to think that with increased knowledge there is less need for self-discipline. A common feeling in society at large is that it is a sign of adulthood not to be easily shocked by behaviour that breaks God's moral law. In other words, to be mature means to see no difference between what is wholesome and what is unwholesome. According to the Bible, it is the opposite that is a sign of maturity: the ability to make a discerning judgment, and then act upon it. The mature Christians, the 'adults', are those 'who through practice are able to distinguish between good and evil' (Hebrews 5:14).

## 01.25. Book 5 The Christian's World

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Book 5 The Christian's World

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## 01.27. Chapter 1 The home

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Chapter 1 The home Living for each other The world of humankind is such that people of all kinds have to exist together, and to some extent depend on each other, to maintain human life. Christians share in this world the same as others, but for them there is a difference. For them there is a living God, and that God is concerned with every area of life. In other words, the Christians' faith in God affects the way they live. Their relationship with God governs all other relationships.

Probably the most basic of all human relationships is that between a man and a woman, because without it human life could not be perpetuated. But the Christian view of this relationship involves more than mere sexual relations for the purpose of producing offspring. Sex is only one part of a total relationship where a man and a woman marry and commit themselves to each other for life. The perfect marriage From the beginning, God's ideal for marriage has been that one man and one woman live together, independent of parents, in a union that is broken only by death. God intends people to have and to enjoy sexual relations, but only as part of this total marriage relationship. He does not approve of sexual relations before marriage or with any person other than one's marriage partner. Not only is marriage more than a sexual union, but it is also more than a cultural custom or legal arrangement. It is an unselfish giving of each to the other in a lasting relationship, to the exclusion of all others. Divorce is therefore not part of God's plan; nor is remarriage, except when the former marriage has ended through the death of either husband or wife.

Another characteristic of marriage as God intended it is equality between the sexes. The man and the woman may fulfil different roles, but there is no difference in status or dignity. The physical, psychological and emotional differences between male and female mean that each partner is equipped to do what the other cannot do. The two complement each other so that between them they form a unit. The exclusively male characteristics of the husband mean that he starts the process that produces children, and perhaps that is why he carries the ultimate responsibility for the family. The exclusively female characteristics of the wife enable her to bear children, and perhaps that is why she carries special responsibility for the children's care. Husband and wife fulfil their roles and exercise their responsibilities in a relationship of freedom, equality, love and mutual respect.

### Christian love

Christians, more than others, should try to live the way God intended people to live. Being part of an imperfect world, they can expect occasional disagreements with their marriage partner, but their new life in Christ should give them an attitude towards marriage that is different from that of other people.

One characteristic of the Christian life is loving self-sacrifice. Christian love means pleasing the other person rather than oneself. All Christians, husbands and wives included, are to love each other, submit to each other and give themselves for the sake of each other. 'Submit yourselves to

one another . . . Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord . . . Husbands, love your wives just as Christ loved the church and gave himself for it' (Ephesians 5:21-25). When Christian husbands and wives live together in this kind of relationship, where each is willing to sacrifice self-interest for the sake of the other, they will find that their life together is enriched.

Since their relationship with God governs all their other relationships, Christians are warned not to marry those who do not share their faith in Christ. However, where one partner of a non-Christian married couple later becomes a Christian, the marriage should be maintained. In such a case, the Christian partner in particular should do everything possible to help the marriage function harmoniously.

Although the Bible condemns sexual relations outside marriage, it encourages a healthy and full-blooded enjoyment of sex within marriage. It recognizes human sexuality as one of God's gifts, and, like all God's gifts, it can be properly used or it can be shamefully abused. Prostitution and homosexual practices are therefore condemned in the Bible as perversions.

Family life In his concern for the continued existence and welfare of the human race, God desires more than simply that men and women should produce children. People do not exist in isolation, but as part of a vast society, and they are fitted for their part in that society by being brought up in families. Stability, love and co-operation in the family will help produce similar characteristics in society as a whole.

God has fashioned human nature in such a way that people naturally accept and exercise authority as part of the ordering of human life. He has, for example, given parents authority over their children, and requires children to obey their parents, simply 'because it is right' (Ephesians 6:1). This does not give parents the liberty to treat their children as they wish, for parents in turn are answerable to God for their behaviour. 'Parents, do not treat your children in a way that provokes them to anger. Instead, bring them up with Christian discipline and instruction' (Ephesians 6:4).

Christian parents cannot avoid their responsibility to instruct their children in Christian belief and behaviour by hoping that the children will learn such things at school or church. They have a duty to teach their children, but they will never be able to do this if they are ill-informed themselves.

Parents must support their teaching by example. They will do more harm than good if they do not practise in the home the ideals they teach their children. Parents must teach and practise the sacrifice of one's own interests for the sake of others, so that the family is a place where people learn how to love others, forgive others, honour others and serve others. As parents and children pray together, talk together, have leisure time together, do work together and examine God's Word together, they will understand each other better and trust each other more. In addition, they will find new confidence in the midst of a world of uncertainty. This training, however, starts not when children begin school, nor when they reach their teens; it starts in infancy and it starts in the home. Whatever children may be educated for at school, the training that equips them for life in general is the responsibility of the home.

Just as parents are not to leave the training of their children to the state, so those children, when they grow to adulthood, are not to leave the care of elderly parents to the state. Christians cannot use government welfare programs as a way of ignoring their family and social responsibilities.

Facing reality In every era and every culture, the breakdown of family life has resulted in widespread social disorder. If people reject what they consider restrictions in matters of marriage, sex, discipline and obedience, the result is not freedom, but chaos. Instead of peace there is conflict; instead of contentment there is tension and dissatisfaction. Trouble is inevitable when people refuse to follow the guidelines that God has laid down. After all, the Creator knows what is best for his creatures.

God's plan for marital and family life is not a mere theoretical ideal. It is both workable and attainable. That does not mean that people are to expect perfection, but it does mean that if they are obedient to God they can expect to find in life the meaning and satisfaction that God intended.

Nevertheless, disorders arise in marriages and families, and at times become so complicated that there is no simple way to correct them. There are no clear-cut solutions to many problems. No matter what is done, some principle or ideal will be broken somewhere. The right course of action may involve choosing the lesser of two evils.

Christians must be people of understanding and discernment as well as people of principle. God's standards do not change, and Christians must be like Jesus in upholding those standards when others want to destroy them. But they must also be like Jesus in giving help and support to those who, having broken God's law, are later repentant. Christian morality and Christian love go together.

## 01.28. Chapter 2 The church

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### Chapter 2 The church A living community

God is concerned for the individual and he deals with people personally. He offers his salvation to all, though it is of benefit only to those who accept it personally. But when people accept it, God does not leave them to live independently as if personal security is all that matters. He builds them into a community of people to whom he has given new life through Jesus Christ. Because all these people are united to Christ, they are also united to one another, no matter what era they belong to or what racial background they come from. This vast international community is called the church. The Bible uses a number of illustrations to show what sort of community the church is. These illustrations emphasize that the church is something living and active, but only because of its union with the living Christ. It is best understood by comparing it not to a political, business or academic organization, but to a family. Christ is the head, and the people in it are brothers and sisters. It is held together not by organizational mechanisms, but by the common life in which all share. Its strength depends not on rules and regulations, but on love.

Families, however, often fall short of the ideal, and so does the church. As long as Christians are part of a world spoiled by sin, they will contribute to the problems of any community they are part of, including the church. There will at times be friction in the church, as there is in any family, though people should be willing to admit mistakes and put right what goes wrong.

### Part of something bigger

People can easily become discouraged because of the imperfections they see in the church, and so try to live as Christians apart from the church. But it is not possible to reject the church and still live the sort of life God wants. The church is not a club of like-minded people, but a community formed by God and formed for a purpose. God has a plan to remove all evil and conflict from the universe, and in the end bring perfection, peace and unity through Jesus Christ. The church is part of that plan.

Ever since the first humans rebelled against him, God has been working in human history, directing it towards its ultimate destiny. In Old Testament times he formed a community of his own people, Israel, which in due course produced the saviour of the world. Some of this old community accepted the saviour, and from them God built a new community, the church, through which he has continued to work. The significance of this new community, in contrast to the old, is that Christ, having died, is now alive and working through it. The church is likened to a living human body, where Christ is the head and Christians make up the rest of the body. All Christians are united with Christ and are, by that fact, united with one another in the church. They are all part of the body, and therefore in a sense part of each other. Christ lives in them as individuals and in the church as a body. He does so through the Holy Spirit, whom he gave as his representative to his people after he left the world and returned to his Father.

All Christians of all nations in all eras make up the universal church. Those who live in any locality are a local expression of that church – a miniature of the timeless, worldwide church. All Christians (to return to the illustration of a human body) are part of the body of Christ, and they function properly as Christians only as they function as part of that body. Through the church they help in developing God's plan for the human race, and at the same time help in developing themselves as people.

**Growth and strength** This concern for development, or growth, is one reason why Christians should be enthusiastic about participating fully in the life of the church. One of the greatest of the early church leaders, Paul, emphasized this by referring again to the illustration of the human body. Just as different parts of the body are designed for different functions, so different people in the church are fitted by the Holy Spirit for different tasks. Each person should make some contribution to the life of the church, and in doing so will benefit both himself and the church.

Some, perhaps only a few in each church, are fitted for roles of teaching and leadership, but their job is not to do everything. On the contrary they have a responsibility 'to prepare all God's people for the work of Christian service'. Then, as people learn through the church how to work for God and live for each other, they will 'become mature people, reaching to the very height of Christ's full stature'. They will 'grow up in every way to Christ, who is the head. Under his control, all the different parts of the body fit together, and the whole body is held together . . . So when each separate part works as it should, the whole body grows and builds itself up through love' (Ephesians 4:11-16).

**Freedom under Christ** The Christian church is remarkable for its ability to function in any age and any culture. This is partly because the Bible, the book from which the church takes its guidance, is not a book of rules and regulations. It does not give instruction concerning all the practical details. If it did, the day-to-day procedures would be so tied to the world of the first century that they would be unsuitable in another age or culture.

Instead, the Bible tells a story. It first describes how churches grew up everywhere as the early Christians spread the good news about Jesus. Then it goes on to record certain letters written to churches that needed instruction along the way.

There was no standard pattern on which the early churches were organized. They met in any ready-made place available, and they functioned by making whatever arrangements were necessary as needs arose. Churches differed in their composition and style, though all held to the same basic beliefs and practices. In all churches, for example, Christians met regularly to worship, pray, sing praises, read the Scriptures and receive instruction in Christian teaching. They also went out to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ so that others too might believe. Not only did the early churches have no set form for local operations, but they had no central organization to control all the churches or hold them together in one body. Each church governed itself through its leaders, though it had fellowship with other churches. The churches were bound together through the common faith that Christians had in Jesus Christ. Christ was the head of the church, the life of the body, and the source of the church's unity and strength.

Since the church is something with life – a body, a family – it is able to adapt. The Spirit of the living Christ lives within it to guide and direct. He enables present-day churches, in whatever

country, to work out the application of timeless principles in their circumstances, as the early churches did in theirs.

**Life in the church** The church's life consists of more than the regular meeting of Christians. Certainly, they will want to spend time together, formally and informally, as a church and in small groups. This is part of the church's life. But the church must be concerned with more than the well-being of those within it. It must be concerned for those who do not yet share its life in Christ. This means that the church should be energetic in making known the message of God's salvation and in helping those who are the victims of sickness, loneliness, injustice, hunger and other misfortunes, whether small or great. It has a responsibility to the people in its locality and to people in distant nations.

However, the church will be effective in reaching out to others only if its own relationship with God is healthy. Prayer, teaching and worship are therefore essential to the church's life. God is the source of the church's power, and the church draws on that power through prayer. He is the guide to the church's conduct, and therefore the Bible must be taught constantly and clearly. He is, above all, the Lord of the church, and therefore he is to be worshipped by his grateful and adoring people. The worship of the church may contain many elements – singing, praying, meditating, reading, preaching. It may express both love and awe; it may combine quiet reflection and joyous outbursts. One person may lead or many may share. No matter what form church services may take, two things are always important: giving glory to God and giving help to his people (Ephesians 3:21; 1 Corinthians 14:26).

#### Fellowship with Christ

Worship, then, is a two-way movement – from God to the people and from the people to God; in other words, communion. This is well expressed in that simple ceremony that Jesus himself introduced, known as the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion. Jesus asked his followers to remember him regularly by the simple act of eating bread and drinking wine together. The bread (symbolizing his body) and the wine (symbolizing his blood) speak of his sacrificial death for his people. But this miniature supper is not a memorial service for a dead person; it is an act of fellowship with a living person. When believers join in this act, besides declaring afresh the fact of Christ's death, they enjoy afresh all that the living Christ is to them. As they share literally in bread and wine, so they share spiritually in Christ. There is living fellowship between forgiven sinners and the one who died for them and now lives in them. In addition to having fellowship with Christ, those who share in his 'supper' have fellowship with one another. In worshipping together in this way, they strengthen the unity within their church. They remind each other of the common life they share, and so are encouraged to exercise the same sacrificial love for each other as Christ exercised for them.

## 01.30. Chapter 4 The wider world

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### Chapter 4 The wider world Restoring what has been damaged

Because of sin, nothing in the world is as it should be. On every hand people suffer from the consequences of sin. Instead of enjoying life as God intended, they are troubled in mind by fear and tension, and troubled in body by sickness and disease. They experience conflict and stress in all their relationships, from personal to international. They are also in conflict with the natural environment, because even the world of nature suffers because of human sin. Above all, they are in conflict with God.

Jesus Christ came to bring healing. He healed people not only in their bodies and minds, but also in their relationships with each other and with God. He even worked healing in the natural environment.

None of Jesus' healing work, however, was universal. He showed that he was the Son of God who came to save, and he made complete salvation possible through his death and resurrection. People have the opportunity to accept that salvation now, so that they can enjoy it in its fullness when Jesus Christ returns at the end of the age.

Christ's final triumph will mean that all the rebellious will be taken away in judgment, and all the effects of sin in the world will at last be reversed. Disease, sickness, suffering, war and death will be removed. People will enjoy perfect peace – within themselves, with others and with God. The world of nature will have the perfect splendour originally intended for it. As they look forward to sharing with Christ in a life that is free from sin, Christians are encouraged to work towards freedom from sin in the present life. This concerns all the damaging effects of sin: not just those in their own lives, but also those in the world at large. A message for all nations In the work of restoring all things to a state of harmony with God, the Christians' first task is to spread the message of God's salvation to a sinful world. This work will start in a person's own family and neighbourhood, but it must not end there. Jesus told his disciples to take his message 'to all nations', 'into all the world' and 'to the ends of the earth'. There is only one God, and there is only one person who can bring sinners back to God, and that is Jesus Christ. 'Salvation is to be found through him alone; in all the world there is no one else whom God has given who can save us' (Acts 4:12). As Christians take the message of Christ into new regions, they baptize those who believe in him, teach them how to be his followers and build them into local churches. These churches then become centres from which the new Christian community expands into the regions round about. The Christian message is for all people; it is not tied to a particular culture, race or language. Christ brings new life and new hope to the entire human race. In fact, he is the human race's only hope.

Throughout the world Christians are busy spreading the message of Christ. Some devote their full working time to the task, while others use their normal occupations to gain access to places where full-time preachers may not be welcome. Christians make efforts to reach people everywhere,

from remote villages to crowded cities. Whether tribal people or students, whether factory workers or politicians, they all need Christ. A better life now

Although Jesus was concerned first of all with releasing people from the bondage of sin and giving them new life, he was concerned also for their physical needs. He fed the hungry, healed the sick, gave sight to the blind and relieved the oppressed. As his followers do likewise, they carry on Christ's work and at the same time show people the kind of world God wants.

Wherever Christianity has spread into an ungodly world, it has had a good effect on society. It has produced greater care for the sick and the poor, greater protection for the underprivileged and the defenceless, and greater respect for justice and honesty. In some countries Christianity has, over generations or even centuries, become the dominating influence. Although this has been a benefit to those countries, it has also resulted in careless social attitudes among many Christians. They have become so accustomed to regarding their country as Christian that they unthinkingly approve of whatever their country does.

If Christians live in a society that gives them a comfortable standard of living, they have special cause to examine all issues carefully. A danger of such a society is that people may have high principles of personal behaviour, yet support a system that ignores those principles. Personally, for example, they may give generous aid to needy people in poor countries, yet at the same time support a trade policy that ensures their own country gets richer while other countries get poorer. They may readily approve of something done in business or government that they would condemn if an individual did it.

Christians must avoid two extremes. One is to be concerned only with personal godliness and to ignore the evil that infects the system. The other is to be so concerned with social reform that personal duties are overlooked. People can easily denounce racism in distant lands while despising socially 'inferior' people who live in their own street. Others condemn governments for lack of social concern, while they themselves ignore needy families and lonely people in their neighbourhood. Many were condemned by Jesus not because of any wrong they had done, but because of the good they had not done – usually to the sick, the poor and the outcasts.

#### Respect for human dignity

One difficulty in any society is that those in a position to bring about change are the least likely to want change. People in places of power and influence are the people who benefit most from the existing order.

Jesus refused to use violence in any form, either to protect what was good or overthrow what was bad. But he refused to be silent when he saw people of power and influence exploiting the weak and the defenceless. As a result those who opposed him most bitterly were the well-to-do, religiously respectable people. It suited them better for the social order to remain unchanged. As always Jesus showed that the root of the problem was human sin. The oppression of the weak by the powerful is one of the evils that resulted when sin entered the human race. It is a denial of the human dignity that all people possess equally, for all are made in God's image. To treat people as unequal because of race, social status or sex is contrary to all that Jesus taught and practised. He wants his followers to do all they can to remove the hostility that sin has created. 'Happy are those who work for peace,' said Jesus; 'God will call them his children' (Matthew 5:9).

## Renewing the earth

Besides exploiting each other, people have exploited the natural world. Although the world belongs to God, he has placed it in the care of those who live in it. They have God's permission to use it, enjoy it and develop it, so that on the one hand they might gain benefit, and on the other nature itself might develop its full splendour. As a result of human sin, however, the natural world has suffered. In some ways it may have become more beautiful, but in others it has been made ugly. Through greed people have exploited the earth without thought for its future, and used its resources to enrich themselves at the expense of others. Though in some cases they have brought widespread benefits through their skills, in others they have selfishly enriched only a few and left lands and people devastated.

Christians recognize that people are merely God's representatives in administering the world he has entrusted to them. They are answerable to God for their treatment of nature and their sharing of its resources. They do not have the unlimited right to devastate the earth for financial profit, or to destroy life for their own pleasure. Christians should encourage a lifestyle that cooperates with God's work in nature by using the earth's limited resources with sympathetic care and without unnecessary waste.

God's plan is that at Christ's return a new era will dawn, when all sin's evil consequences will be removed. God's people will at last be free from all the effects of sin, and the physical creation, which was denied its full splendour because of human sin, will at last be perfected. It will be 'set free from its slavery to decay and share the glorious freedom of the children of God' (Romans 8:21). If God's purpose is to bring the natural world to its full splendour, Christians should be working towards the healing of nature now. God's goal should be theirs – new people, a new community and a new earth.

## 0129. Chapter 3 The society

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### Chapter 3 The society The governing authorities

Although Christians are part of God's community, they are at the same time part of a larger community that is made up of all sorts of people. Whether as part of a village, a region, a town or a nation, they live in a society that is regulated for the benefit of the people as a whole. Their Christian viewpoint will at times create tensions for them in their society, but they have a duty to live positively and to contribute to the common good.

God is the overall ruler of the world, and he desires that all societies be controlled justly and orderly. He is the source of all authority and he has given to governments, as his representatives on earth, the authority to administer society.

Christians are told to 'obey the state authorities, because no authority exists without God's permission, and the existing authorities have been put there by God'. The twofold purpose for which God put them there is to promote the welfare of society (the state is 'God's servant working for your good') and to restrain wrongdoing in society (the state is 'God's servant to carry out God's punishment on those who do evil') (Romans 13:1-5). In another place Christians are told to pray for those who govern them, because God desires people to live in peace and contentment (1 Timothy 2:1-2).

Jesus himself set the example for his followers when, in relation to the payment of taxes, he said, 'Pay the Emperor what belongs to the Emperor, and pay God what belongs to God' (Mark 12:17). The guiding principle Jesus gives his people is that they are to be loyal to God and obedient to the government. But governments are sometimes guilty of action that is against God's laws, and Christians find themselves faced with a conflict between their loyalty to the state and their loyalty to God.

Different circumstances The response of Christians to unchristian actions by the government will depend largely on the kinds of issues they object to. It will depend also on what political rights they have. In some countries Christians are in a similar position to those of New Testament times. Citizens have no rights in deciding who governs them or in challenging government actions. Laws may be not merely unchristian but deliberately anti-Christian. In other countries, by contrast, the citizens are the ones who decide who governs them, and they have the right to challenge the government and influence its decisions. Laws in such countries may even be sympathetic to Christianity.

### Christians and their rights

There is nothing unusual if Christians suffer government opposition because of their faith. Some of the New Testament teaching concerning Christians' obedience to the government was given originally to people whom the government was persecuting. If governments persecute Christians, God will hold them responsible for misusing the authority he has given them. Christians, for their

part, must follow the example of Christ. They must accept such persecution bravely and not try to retaliate. At the same time the early Christians were not indifferent to the standard of justice that the government administered. There were times when they claimed their rights as citizens, in support of the principle of justice that government officials were supposed to maintain. But in matters of their personal religious beliefs, if the ruling authorities tried to force them to do something they believed was disloyal to God, they refused to cooperate and took the consequences. Their response was, 'We must obey God, not men' (Acts 5:29; Acts 5:40).

Jesus taught that although Christians have their rights, they must be willing to sacrifice those rights for the sake of others. Christians are always to think of others before themselves. They are never to use their rights for selfish reasons. Nevertheless, while being prepared to sacrifice their own rights, they must be ready to defend the rights of others. Jesus condemned the oppressors and defended the downtrodden, and so did those who followed him.

#### Influence for good

Christianity's first concern is for the salvation of the individual. Its aim is to bring sinners to know Christ, to make them his disciples and to create within them a Christian character that is consistent with their Christian belief. But Christians do not exist as individuals in isolation. They are part of a society, and in society they have to live for God. Their responsibility is to bring others to Christ, and then to teach them so that they too are disciples who reproduce the character of Christ and pass on the message of his salvation.

Jesus and the early Christians disapproved of the evils of the society in which they lived, but they knew that the reason for those evils was the evil within the human heart. Their way of dealing with the problem was not to change society in the hope that people might improve, but to change people so that through them society might improve.

Christians must not think, however, that since they have improved their personal behaviour, they need do no more. It is easy for Christians, particularly those in countries that have a long history of Christian influence, to accept whatever the government does and never raise any objections. Because of this, Christians in various eras have quietly accepted such social injustices as slavery, the oppression of women and child labour; though it is also true that Christians have often been leaders in introducing reforms to get rid of such evils. In different societies Christians deal with issues in different ways. In New Testament times Christians had no power to elect or influence governments, but that did not stop them from working for a better world. By their conduct and teaching they introduced values of human worth that were so superior to those of society at large that cruel and unjust practices were undermined. In some countries today Christians may be a disadvantaged minority, and such action may be all they can do to relieve social injustice. On the other hand, there are many countries where Christians, like other citizens, have the freedom to speak and act in support of what is right and in opposition to what is wrong. And with that freedom comes the responsibility to use it correctly.

#### Action in a free society

God cares about the well-being of society, and Christians also should care. If they live in societies where governments exist by the consent of the people, they have the opportunity to express their views openly and lawfully. In such societies, policies and laws are formed by the citizens through

those who represent them in government. Christian citizens therefore have a responsibility to use their powers to promote those values of justice, freedom, morality, honesty and compassion that God desires for human society. If Christians pray that God's purposes be carried out on earth as they are in heaven, they should do whatever they can to help fulfil those purposes. This is not to say that the church should form a political party or seek to govern society. That is not the church's job. God has entrusted the government of society to civil authorities, not to the church. When the church has tried to do the state's job, the results have usually been disastrous. But when Christians have weakly given their approval to unjust state actions, the results have again been disastrous.

Christian faith does not make people experts on all subjects. The problems of society – politics, justice, education, finances, employment, health and the like – have to be dealt with by people who have the necessary skills. God never intended the church to be an agency to control these areas; though if Christians had the skills to work in these areas, society would surely benefit.

If Christians live in a democracy, then, regardless of whether they have special skills, they must use their Christian judgment to decide which things to support and which to oppose. They may lawfully try to influence public opinion. At the same time they must bear in mind the basis of the democratic freedom they enjoy, namely, that the government exists by the choice of the majority of people. A minority may firmly believe its view to be the best, but it cannot expect to use the law to force its belief upon the whole society if the majority does not want it.

Whatever social improvements Christians may hope for through better government action, they cannot escape the duty to sacrifice their time and money to help people personally. Christians cannot pass off their responsibilities to the state. Governments can make laws to provide social welfare, but government programs are no substitute for personal help. To practise Christian love will always be costly.

## 02.01. Bible Lands, Then and Now

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Bible Lands,

Then and Now

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## 02.03. Mesopotamia

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Mesopotamia The early stories in the Bible are set in the region commonly called Mesopotamia, the fertile valley of the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers. According to the biblical accounts, this is the region where the Garden of Eden was located and where civilization developed.<sup>1</sup> But Mesopotamia was also the location for early human rebellions, and these in turn brought about God's judgment. In the judgment where God destroyed the people in a great flood, he preserved Noah in an ark that eventually came to rest in the mountainous region of the rivers' headwaters. In another judgment, God destroyed a tower that rebels had built in the plains of lower Mesopotamia.<sup>2</sup>

Among the peoples of lower Mesopotamia were the Akkadians, the Sumerians and a smaller group, the Chaldeans. Ur, chief city of the Chaldeans, was the hometown of Abraham, a man God chose to be his channel of blessing to the world.<sup>3</sup> This would take time, because Abraham had to migrate to a land God would show him, then he had to start a family, and only when this family became a nation would God use it to implement his plan of salvation for people everywhere. The land Abraham came from, ancient Babylonia, is in present-day Iraq. Most Iraqis, being both Muslim and Arab, honour Abraham as a religious figure and as an ancestor. In their religion they follow Islam, a diversion from Christianity started by Muhammad in the seventh century AD; in their ethnicity they hold to a tradition that claims descent from Abraham through Ishmael (in distinction to the Israelite claim of descent from Abraham through Isaac).<sup>4</sup>

Iraq even has a minority who can claim descent from Abraham through Christ. Christians are Abraham's descendants in a spiritual sense, because they are saved on the basis of faith as he was.<sup>5</sup> In Iraq, the Christian minority is larger and has more freedom than in some other Middle Eastern countries.

1. Genesis 2:10-14. For maps of Bible lands see pages 38-39 2. Genesis 8:4; Genesis 10:10; Genesis 11:3-9 3. Genesis 12:1-3. Abraham lived during the 20th and 19th Centuries BC.

4. Genesis 16:15; Genesis 17:20-21 5. Galatians 3:6-7; Galatians 3:28-29

Mount Ararat

## 02.04. Great Babylon, which I have built'

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'Great Babylon, which I have built'

Babel, the site of the tower that early rebels built as a symbol of their advanced civilization, gave its name to the city of Babylon and the kingdom of which it was the capital. The people who built the tower prided themselves that they were socially and technically so advanced that they could achieve anything they wished.<sup>1</sup> Through their collective effort they felt self-sufficient and invincible. They saw themselves as independent of God; indeed, they defied God.

Already, in the earliest times, human beings had shown that as soon as they were aware of new-found abilities, they used those abilities to exalt themselves at the expense of God. Babylon became a symbol of human arrogance and rebellion. This was demonstrated in a vision given to the king of Babylon in the time of Daniel. In the vision, one nation after another set itself up in what it thought was an unconquerable kingdom, but in the end God smashed the lot.<sup>2</sup> The king did not learn the lesson, and a few years later he was still walking around boasting, 'Is not this great Babylon which I have built?' God dealt with him decisively, so that he was reduced from his god-like status to that of an animal.<sup>3</sup> In the closing book of the New Testament, God gave John a vision of the overthrow of Babylon to picture the destruction of human society. An ungodly world might use its collective power to assert itself, oppose Christians and defy God, but in the end God will overthrow it.<sup>4</sup>

Babylon may not exist on today's map, but symbolically it is present everywhere. Its spirit dominates the world and distorts every advance in civilized society, whether in the tower-builders of Genesis, the king of Daniel's day, or the Roman Empire of New Testament times. It challenges Christians to see the reality of their world, to beware of apparent human achievements, and to live according to the values of God's kingdom.

1. Genesis 11:3-9 2. Daniel 2:36-45. The king was Nebuchadnezzar, who reigned 605-562 BC.

3. Daniel 4:30-32 4. Revelation 18:1-24

Museum reconstruction of Ishtar Gate, Babylon

## 02.05. Rise and fall of Assyria

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### Rise and fall of Assyria

After Abraham left Chaldea, the Bible says little about the ancient territory of present-day Iraq till the ninth century BC, when Assyria emerged as the dominant power of the region. The nation took its name from Asshur, son of Shem, son of Noah.<sup>1</sup> Its capital, Nineveh, was on the Tigris River, hundreds of kilometres upstream from today's capital, Baghdad. By the time Assyria began to interfere in Palestine, the Israelite nation had divided into two. Ten tribes to the north and east broke away from the Davidic rule and formed their own kingdom. They still called themselves Israel, and eventually made Samaria their capital. The little that was left of the original kingdom was called Judah, after the dominant tribe. Judah maintained the Davidic dynasty, kept Jerusalem as its capital and remained outwardly loyal to the religion of the Jerusalem temple. The northern kingdom was vulnerable to Assyrian attacks, which explains why the Israelite prophet Jonah did not want to go to Nineveh and preach. He wanted Assyria conquered, not saved. He had to learn that God could be merciful to Assyrians as well as Israelites. And God could use Assyria to punish Israel if he chose.<sup>2</sup> In the end, Assyria conquered the northern kingdom, destroyed Samaria and took the people into foreign captivity (722 BC). It then repopulated the region around Samaria with people brought in from other lands. These migrants intermarried with the leftovers of Israel, to produce a people of mixed blood and mixed religion called Samaritans. They and the Israelites despised each other.<sup>3</sup>

After the destruction of Israel, Assyria carried its aggression south into Judah. It was unable to destroy Judah, and in due course was itself conquered by Babylon. The just penalty on such a cruel master was welcomed everywhere.<sup>4</sup> God may use people to carry out his purposes, but that does not exempt those people from judgment.

1. Genesis 10:1; Genesis 10:11-12; Genesis 10:22 2. Jonah 3:4-5; Jonah 3:10; Jonah 4:11; cf. Isaiah 10:5; Romans 3:29; Romans 9:15 3. 2 Kings 15:29; 2 Kings 17:3-6; 2 Kings 17:24-29; 2 Kings 17:33; John 4:9; John 8:48 4. Nahum 1:1; Nahum 3:1-7; Zephaniah 2:13-15

Syrian Hamah, biblical Hamath, strategic outpost of  
the Assyrian Empire

## 02.06. From favour to hostility

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### From favour to hostility

Broadly speaking, lower Mesopotamia lies within present-day Iraq, and the territory to its east within present-day Iran. In biblical times the major peoples of these two countries were of different races, and that is still so today. Iraqis are Arabs, but Iranians are Aryans ('Iran' means 'Aryan'), people of Indo-European stock. In biblical times Iran was commonly known as Persia, and sometimes as Elam, after an ancient kingdom within its borders. Kingdoms to the north of Elam were Media and Parthia.<sup>1</sup>

Persia's period of greatest power was during the reign of the Emperor Cyrus. Among the many kingdoms Cyrus conquered was Media, whose leaders he absorbed into the civil and military leadership of his expanding empire. His greatest victory was in 539 BC, when he conquered Babylon and became undisputed ruler of the region.<sup>2</sup> The Bible gives a favourable picture of Cyrus, because once he became ruler of Babylon he gave permission for the captive Jews to return to their homeland. He even gave them financial aid to rebuild Jerusalem and its temple.<sup>3</sup> Although the Jews who returned were slow to complete their work, the Persian rulers were, on the whole, patient with them. Subsequent Emperors gave the sort of support Cyrus had given.<sup>4</sup>

Meanwhile, back in Persia, other Jews had risen to prominence in the administration. During the reign of one Emperor, a Jewish woman, Esther, became queen, and her cousin, Mordecai, became the Emperor's chief minister.<sup>5</sup> In Iran today, however, Jews are few in number and so are Christians. Both groups are barely tolerated in what has become an Islamic police state. They live in a climate of fear where they suffer social isolation and official discrimination

1. Genesis 14:1; Isaiah 21:2; Daniel 8:20; Acts 2:9  
2. Isaiah 21:2; Isaiah 21:9; Isaiah 45:1; Jeremiah 51:11  
3. Ezra 1:1-4; Isaiah 44:28  
4. Ezra 5:3-17; Ezra 6:1-12; Ezra 7:11-24; Nehemiah 2:1-10  
5. Esther 1:1-3; Esther 2:17

Watering sheep

## 02.07. God's sovereign control

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God's sovereign control As a result of the conquests by Assyria and Babylon, Israelite people were dispersed through many countries. Those of the former northern kingdom, Israel, were scattered widely and became largely absorbed into the peoples among whom they lived. Those of the former southern kingdom, Judah, were largely located in one region, Babylon, and retained a greater sense of national identity. When Persia gave permission for the captives to return home, most who returned were from Babylon. Being from the former kingdom of Judah, they were known as Judeans, a name that was later shortened to 'Jew'. This name was freely applied to all who now lived back in the ancient homeland, without any reference to their tribe of origin. In time it was used of Israelites in general. In spite of Persia's generosity in helping the captive Jews rebuild their homeland, many decided to remain in the foreign lands where they had grown up. Also, there were other migrations, some forced and some voluntary, with the result that Jews became scattered throughout the lands of West Asia and North Africa. When the first Christians proclaimed the gospel in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost, Jews from many countries were present. Among the regions represented were Mesopotamia, Parthia, Media and Elam.<sup>1</sup>

Persia, by this time, had long since ceased to be a leading power. It had fallen to the Greek conqueror, Alexander the Great, in 331 BC. Kingdoms come and kingdoms go, all according to the sovereign will of God. God had raised up Cyrus for the purpose of overthrowing Babylon and releasing the captive Jews,<sup>3</sup> but that was no guarantee

of unbroken divine favour, whether for the Jews or for Persia. God still controls the destinies of nations, which is both an encouragement to those who are afflicted and a warning to those who take God's favour for granted.

1. Acts 2:9 2. Isaiah 44:28; Isaiah 45:1-5

'Beyond the Euphrates' – vast Persian province that encompassed Judea

## 02.08. From 'Canaan' to 'Palestine'

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From 'Canaan' to 'Palestine' When Abraham left Chaldea for the land God had promised him, he set out along what is known as the Fertile Crescent. This is the rich farming land that stretches from the Persian Gulf north-west along the Mesopotamian valley to northern Syria (Aram), and then curves south to follow the Mediterranean coast to Canaan.<sup>1</sup>

Abraham eventually arrived in Canaan, his first recorded camping place being Shechem, a settlement among the central hills. Much of his time, however, was lived in the southern inland. Sometimes he moved around the good pasturelands of Bethel and Hebron, other times around the oasis settlements of Beersheba and Kadesh-barnea in the drier regions further south.<sup>2</sup> But he also came in contact with the Philistines, who occupied the fertile coastal plain. The native peoples of Canaan belonged to many tribal groups, though in common language they were often called Amorites.<sup>3</sup> The Philistines, however, were different. They were not natives of the region, but had migrated from the Mediterranean island of Crete, earlier known as Caphtor.<sup>4</sup> Further migrations followed, and by the time of the Judges they were a problem for Israel. Their region became known as 'the land of the Philistines', from which came the name 'Palestine', a designation later used for the region that the Bible calls Canaan.

Philistia's main population centres – Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Gath and Ekron – became known as 'the five cities of the Philistines' and were the scene of many conflicts with ancient Israel.<sup>5</sup> Some are still identifiable and are the scenes of conflicts with present-day Israel. A partly autonomous Palestinian region has been marked off within national Israel, with Gaza on the Palestinian side, and Ashkelon and Ashdod on the Israeli side. There are Christians on both sides of the border, but in each case they are a disadvantaged minority.

1. Genesis 11:31 2. Genesis 12:5-8; Genesis 13:3; Genesis 13:18; Genesis 18:1; Genesis 20:1; Genesis 21:33; Genesis 22:19 3. Genesis 15:16; Joshua 24:15; Joshua 24:18.

4. Amos 9:7; cf. Genesis 21:32-34; Deuteronomy 2:23 5. Joshua 13:2-3; Judges 3:3; 1 Samuel 6:4; see also Acts 8:26; Acts 8:40

Beth-shemesh, on the edge of the Philistine plain

## 02.09. Ancestral homeland

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### Ancestral homeland

Hundreds of years after the time of Abraham, his descendants saw the fulfilment of God's promise that Canaan would be their homeland. By this time they were numerous enough to be called a nation, but were held captive in Egypt. Moses, however, led them out of Egypt, and forty years later Joshua led them into Canaan.<sup>1</sup> The territory Joshua conquered spread beyond Canaan. Canaan was the area between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River, and this was occupied by nine and a half Israelite tribes. A large region east of Jordan was occupied by the other two and a half tribes. The people of Israel lived in their land for several hundred years, till they were conquered and taken into foreign captivity.<sup>2</sup> After Persia released the captives, many returned home and rebuilt the nation. In due course the Persian Empire gave way to the Greek, and the Greek to the Roman. In New Testament times Judea was under Roman rule, but when it rebelled, Rome responded by destroying Jerusalem and bringing Israel's national life to an end.<sup>3</sup>

Jews were scattered once more but, as usual, they maintained a distinct identity through their devotion to religious traditions, family relationships and synagogue services. Rome's rule over Palestine changed with the emergence of an Eastern Roman Empire based in Byzantium (Constantinople), but this changed again with the birth of Islam and the subsequent conquest of Jerusalem by Muslim Arabs.<sup>4</sup> Apart from a period of control by Christian Crusaders in the twelfth century, Islamic people, mostly Turkish, ruled Palestine till 1917. This was the year of the Balfour Declaration, which called for the re-establishment of a Jewish national homeland in Palestine. As Jews migrated to their ancestral homeland, conflict arose with the local people, who considered Palestine to be their ancestral homeland. Hostility and violence intensified with the declaration of the modern state of Israel in 1948. The dispute is still unresolved.

1. 1240 BC 2. Israel into Assyria (722 BC), Judah into Babylon (605-587 BC) 3. Destruction of Jerusalem: AD 70; abolition of the nation: AD 135.

4. Islam's official starting point is AD 622.

Mosque over Abraham's traditional burial place, Hebron

## 02.10. 'O Jerusalem, Jerusalem'

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'O Jerusalem, Jerusalem' The land that modern Israel received for its re-established homeland was not equal to what it once had. It received no land east of the Jordan River, and only part of the land west of the Jordan. Parts it did not receive were still under the control of neighbouring nations, though Israel captured these in subsequent wars. Through various negotiations and peace deals, some of this territory has been returned or given part autonomy. The largest of these captured territories stretches from the Jordan River to the central mountains and is commonly referred to as the West Bank. Originally, the boundary of this territory cut through Jerusalem, but the once-divided city is now wholly under Israeli rule. It is an important city for Jews, Christians and Muslims, and consequently is the scene of much tension.

During the thousands of years of Jerusalem's existence, its shape has changed – valleys filled in, hills taken away, boundaries altered, areas destroyed and rebuilt. But the overall picture of an elevated city built on an uneven plateau remains as in biblical times.

One cause of tension between Jews and Muslims is the existence of the Dome of the Rock<sup>1</sup> and its associated mosque on the traditional site of Israel's temple.<sup>2</sup> The site overlooks the Kidron Valley and the Mount of Olives, where, in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus agonized in prayer shortly before his crucifixion.

Jesus met his greatest opposition in Jerusalem. He wept over the city as he reflected on its refusal to accept him and the judgment it was about to bring upon itself.<sup>3</sup> One can imagine him weeping over it today. The modern counterparts of the scribes and Pharisees still promote the sorts of practices he condemned. And the religious descendants of Muhammad sell 'Christian' souvenirs to foreign tourists, only a minority of whom can truly say of Jesus, 'He bore my sins in his body on the cross'.<sup>4</sup>

1. A seventh century structure and Islam's most sacred site outside Arabia.

2. Mt Moriah; 2 Chronicles 3:1; cf. Genesis 22:2 3. Luke 19:41-44; Matthew 23:37-39

4. 1 Peter 2:24

Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem

## 02.11. Regal ambitions

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### Regal ambitions

Jerusalem was the city David established as Israel's capital, but it was not his first capital. For seven years he had reigned in Hebron, a leading city of Judah thirty kilometres south. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob all lived in Hebron at some time and were all buried in a piece of ground Abraham bought for a family burial place.<sup>1</sup> Hebron today, like David's own ancestral town of Bethlehem, is largely populated by Palestinian Arabs.

David saw that if he took the apparently invincible Jerusalem from its enemy occupants, he would unite all Israel behind him and have a capital that gave no cause for tribal jealousies. The commanding hill of the city, Zion, was the enemy's stronghold, but once David's men overthrew it, they soon controlled all Jerusalem. Zion, the city of David, gave its name to the entire city and even to the temple that David planned to build there.<sup>2</sup>

Solomon, David's son and successor, built the temple, but almost four hundred years later the Babylonians destroyed it, along with the rest of Jerusalem (587 BC). Seventy years later the Jews rebuilt the temple, though in more modest style, and it lasted five hundred years. Herod the Great rebuilt it again, this time on a grand scale, and it was still not finished in the time of Jesus.<sup>3</sup>

Two other impressive buildings of Herod were a palace for himself and a governor's headquarters, or praetorium, which he named the fortress of Antonia.<sup>4</sup> The remains of these and other buildings, or the structures later built over them, are still evident today.

Also evident today are some of the channels and pools used to carry and store Jerusalem's water.<sup>5</sup> Not so evident are the sites of Jesus' crucifixion and burial. The important issue, however, is not the identification of the sites, but the acceptance of the facts. Jesus died, was buried, was raised again and is alive for evermore.

1. Genesis 23:17-20; Genesis 25:9; Genesis 50:13 2. 1 Kings 8:1; Psalms 2:6; Psalms 9:11; Psalms 48:12 3. John 2:20. It was finished in AD 64, but destroyed by Rome in AD 70.

4. Matthew 27:27; Luke 23:7 5. 2 Kings 20:20; John 5:2; John 9:7

View of Jerusalem towards the Citadel

## 02.12. Towards a wider world

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### Towards a wider world

Ancient Israel was not a maritime nation, so the lack of a sea port near Jerusalem was of no concern. The nation's leaders seem not to have considered making a port in the shelter of the prominent headland at Mount Carmel, a site chiefly remembered for Elijah's contest with the prophets of Baal.<sup>1</sup> Today, however, Israel's port of Haifa lies along the slopes and at the base of the headland.

South of Mount Carmel, Israel's shores were sandy and shallow, but a small headland at Joppa enabled the building of a modest harbour. Joppa was the port where building materials from Lebanon were unloaded and taken to Jerusalem, and where the fleeing Jonah once boarded a ship.<sup>2</sup> In the early days of the church, it was the place where God gave Peter a vision of the wider world that lay beyond his narrow Jewish world. As a result of the vision, Peter was directed along the coast to Caesarea, where Herod the Great had equipped his newly built city with an artificial harbour.<sup>3</sup>

Joppa today is known as Jaffa, or Yafo, and is a southern suburb of Tel Aviv, which was Israel's largest city till supplanted by an expanded Jerusalem. Unlike Jerusalem, Tel Aviv is mostly Jewish, though minority religions are also represented. Christians are from both Jewish and Arab backgrounds.

Most Jewish Christians in Israel call themselves Messianic Jews. (Messiah comes from a Hebrew word, Christ from its Greek equivalent.) Although Messianic Jews are free to worship within their own communities, they suffer from official discrimination. They are denied legal standing as a religious body and suffer from the strictly orthodox Jews.

Many modern Jews, however, are irreligious and even atheistic, their religion being more a matter of culture and nationalism than faith. But many immigrant Jews, especially from Russia, have believed in the Messiah Jesus and joined the Messianic Jews.

1. 1 Kings 18:19 2. 2 Chronicles 2:16; Ezra 3:7; Jonah 1:3 3. Acts 10:23-24; Acts 18:22; Acts 21:8  
Joppa, part of modern Tel Aviv

## 02.13. Side by side

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Side by side The main physical features of the land of Israel run in roughly north-south parallel strips between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River. Bordering the Mediterranean is a long narrow coastal plain that rises into an area of low foothills. These foothills then rise into the broad central mountains, which is where most of Israel's population lived in biblical times. The other side of these mountains falls away into a deep valley called the Arabah, through which the Jordan River flows. East of Jordan the land rises sharply to open on to an uneven tableland. To the south, the central mountain range becomes gradually flatter till it becomes the broad dry region known as the Negeb. This entire southern part of ancient Canaan, where Abraham once roamed with his flocks and where David once fled from Saul, became the tribal area of Judah, later the southern part of the divided kingdom, and in New Testament times the Roman province of Judea. In the south of Judea was Idumea, an area peopled by ancient Edomites who inter-married with Arabs and Jews. The Herods were Idumeans. To the north the broad central mountains become higher, more fertile and more thickly populated till they open on to the region known as Galilee. Between Galilee in the north and Judah in the south is the central region known as Samaria. In Old Testament times the city of Samaria was capital of the northern kingdom.<sup>1</sup> In New Testament times the province of Samaria was, with Judea, administered by Rome from Caesarea.<sup>2</sup>

Samaria today is a ruin, and Shechem has been replaced by the bustling town of Nablus. In the time of Jesus the local people were Samaritans, but they and the Jews had difficulty getting on with each other.<sup>3</sup> Today the local people are Palestinians, and they and the Jews still have difficulty getting on with each other. Living with ethnic and religious difference requires tolerance, no matter where people live.

1. 1 Kings 16:23-24; 1 Kings 16:29; 1 Kings 20:1; 1 Kings 20:43 2. Acts 12:19; Acts 23:33; Acts 25:1 3. Luke 9:51-55; John 4:4-9

Ruins of biblical Samaria

## 02.14. Hope out of Galilee

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### Hope out of Galilee

After Israel's original settlement of Canaan, the extent of the land from north to south was designated 'from Dan to Beersheba'. Dan was chief city of Israel's northernmost tribe, which, along with the tribes of Naphtali, Issachar, Zebulun and Asher, constituted the region known as Galilee. The Old Testament rarely uses the name Galilee, preferring to refer to places and events according to the tribes or towns concerned.<sup>1</sup>

Much of this northern region was fertile and hilly, though it was separated from the mountains to the south by the Plain of Esdraelon and its associated Valley of Jezreel. Guarding this strategic area was the town of Megiddo, which stood at the point where the main north-south and east-west highways crossed. King Solomon made the town into an administrative centre and fortified it as a military stronghold. It was the scene of many battles, and in the symbolism of Revelation becomes the scene of the last great battle.<sup>2</sup>

Galilee is chiefly remembered as the place where Jesus grew up and carried out much of his public ministry. His hometown of Nazareth, which was ridiculed by other Jews of his time,<sup>3</sup> is today the largest town of the Galilean hills. And the Galilean Jews, who were despised by other Jews of Jesus' time because of Galilee's mixed population,<sup>4</sup> are today better off than some other Jews; for Galilee is entirely within Israel proper, whereas the Palestinian areas are only 'occupied' by Israel. Neither shame nor privilege lasts indefinitely.

Though brought up in Nazareth, Jesus conducted much of his ministry in the area around the Sea of Galilee. Capernaum, the north-shore fishing village that became his Galilean base, now has little to show except some ruins. The chief lakeside town today is Tiberias, on the western shore, a region that features only occasionally in the Gospel narratives.<sup>5</sup> 1. 1 Samuel 3:20; Joshua 20:7; Isaiah 9:1

2. 1 Kings 4:12; 1 Kings 9:15; 2 Kings 9:27; 2 Kings 23:29; Revelation 16:16. 'Armageddon means 'hill of Megiddo'

3. John 1:46; cf. Acts 24:5 4. Matthew 4:15; John 7:52 5. Matthew 4:13; John 6:1; John 6:17; John 6:23

Solomon's stables, Megiddo

## 02.15. Small river, deep valley

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### Small river, deep valley

If Dan marked Israel's far north in former times, Caesarea Philippi was its northernmost town in the time of Jesus. Nearby was Mount Hermon, the probable location of Jesus' transfiguration.<sup>1</sup> In this region lies the source of the Jordan River, which flows south through the Sea of Galilee and ends in the Dead Sea. The Sea of Galilee, also known as the Sea (or Lake) of Chinnereth, Gennesaret, or Tiberias, is about 200 metres below sea level. The Jordan River, after flowing out of the lake, continues to drop as it winds its way south through a deep valley. At the point where it enters the Dead Sea, it is 400 metres below sea level. Although much of the valley near the Sea of Galilee is good for farming, it gradually becomes less fertile towards the south, till it is almost useless at the point where the Jordan enters the Dead Sea. This southern region is probably the place where John preached and where Jesus entered his time of temptation in the wilderness.<sup>2</sup> In biblical times the Jordan, though only a small river, was a good barrier against invasion. Thick jungle grew along its edge, from where steep banks rose up to the floor of the main valley. The river could be crossed only at places where natural fords existed. One of these was near the valley town of Jericho, from where a road climbed steeply to Jerusalem and the central mountains.<sup>3</sup> Along this road, near Jerusalem, were the villages of Bethany and Bethphage.<sup>4</sup> The Dead Sea, also known as the Salt Sea, contains such large amounts of salt and other chemicals that no fish can live in it. No vegetation grows around its shores, except at places where fresh water streams enter on the eastern side or freshwater springs exist on the western side. It is believed that Sodom and Gomorrah were located near the southern end of the Dead Sea.<sup>5</sup> The sea now covers whatever may have remained of the ancient cities.

1. Matthew 16:13; Matthew 17:1-2

2. Mark 1:4-13 3. Joshua 2:1; Joshua 2:7; Judges 3:28; Judges 7:24; Judges 12:5; Jeremiah 12:5; Jeremiah 49:19; Luke 10:30 4. Matthew 26:6-13; Mark 11:1-11; John 11:1; John 12:1 5. Genesis 19:24-28

### Salty shores of the Dead Sea

## 02.16. Balm in Gilead?

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Balm in Gilead? When the people of Israel first entered Canaan, two and a half tribes appealed to Moses, and later Joshua, to allow them to settle in the good pasturelands east of Jordan rather than in Canaan itself. Israel had already conquered the Amorite kings who previously occupied this area, so the two and a half tribes were allowed to leave their families there while the men went across the river to help conquer Canaan. They then returned and settled down to build a homeland.<sup>1</sup> This eastern territory was a broad tableland, broken by deep valleys through which streams flowed into the Jordan River and the Dead Sea. It stretched from Bashan in the north to the Arnon River in the south, but was a source of repeated conflict with the original owners, Ammon (to the north) and Moab (to the south).<sup>2</sup>

Just beyond the area occupied by Israel was Ammon's chief city, Rabbah, also called Rabbath-Ammon. It is today known as Amman and is capital of the present-day nation of Jordan.<sup>3</sup> Though Jordan is an Islamic nation, it pursues a policy of religious freedom for all. The law forbids discrimination, but also forbids proselytism.

One region within the eastern part of Old Testament Israel was known as Gilead, a name that was sometimes used of an entire tribe or even of Israel's entire eastern territory. The name also became associated with healing. Middle Eastern people have always been well known for their skill in producing oils, perfumes and medicines from plants, and Gilead became famous for a balm believed to have healing properties.<sup>4</sup>

Though Gilead was a good place to live, it was exposed to attack. It had no natural boundaries to the north and east and was often attacked by hostile neighbours. Its tribes were among the first to go into foreign captivity.<sup>5</sup>

1. Numbers 21:13; Numbers 21:21-26; Numbers 21:31-35; Numbers 32:1-5; Numbers 8:1-26; Numbers 9:1-23; Numbers 10:1-36; Numbers 11:1-35; Numbers 12:1-16 2. These nations, descendants of Lot, were related to Israel; Genesis 19:36-38 3. Deuteronomy 3:11; 2 Samuel 11:1; 2 Samuel 12:26-31 4. Jeremiah 8:22; Jeremiah 46:11 5. 2 Kings 15:29

Amman, capital of Jordan

## 02.17. Views across Jordan

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### Views across Jordan

Under the Roman administration of New Testament times, much of Israel's former eastern territory fell within the districts of Decapolis and Perea. The inhabitants were mainly non-Jewish, which is reflected in an incident that occurred at Gadara, a place where the tableland drops suddenly into the Sea of Galilee. Jesus' healing of two demon-possessed men brought him into conflict with local farmers when their pigs became possessed by the exorcized demons, rushed down the embankment, fell into the water and drowned.<sup>1</sup>

Perea, further south, was a mainly Jewish area, and for this reason Jews travelling from Judea to Galilee often preferred to detour across the Jordan and through Perea rather than travel through Samaria. They commonly referred to Perea as 'beyond Jordan'. John the Baptist preached there, and Jesus visited both Perea and Decapolis on several occasions. People from both regions became his followers.<sup>2</sup>

Bordering ancient Ammon to the south was its brother nation Moab, whose capital was Heshbon. The boundary between the two shifted from time to time, as did the boundary between Moab and Edom, the nation to its south. The reason for the shifting of these national boundaries was conquest by enemies, such as the Amorites and, subsequently, the Israelites. One natural boundary that featured in these conflicts was the Arnon River, which flows through a deep gorge into the Dead Sea.<sup>3</sup> The territory of Moab, like that of Ammon to its north and Edom to its south, is now part of the nation

of Jordan. The tableland of Moab was the final camping place of the migrating Israelites in the time of Moses. Here, from the top of Mount Nebo, in the hilly region of Abarim, Moses looked across the Dead Sea and the Jordan River to the land of Canaan. He died before the Israelites crossed the river and he was buried nearby.<sup>4</sup>

1. Matthew 8:28-34. Jews do not keep pigs.

2. Matthew 4:25; Matthew 19:1-2; Mark 7:31; John 1:28; John 3:26; John 10:40 3. Numbers 21:13; Numbers 21:24 Deuteronomy 3:12; Deuteronomy 3:16 4. Deuteronomy 32:49-50; Deuteronomy 34:1-6

Descent into Wadi el Mujib, the biblical Arnon River

## 02.18. The cost of pride

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### The cost of pride

Edom was descended from Esau, Israel from Jacob, which means that Edom and Israel were brother nations. Edom occupied the land between the southern tip of the Dead Sea and the northern tip of the Gulf of Aqaba, the north-eastern arm of the Red Sea. In the west the land spread towards the dry southern part of Israel known as the Arabah, and in the east towards the desert of Arabia. In between was a mountainous region where most people lived. The chief cities were Sela, Bozrah and Teman, and the chief mountain Mt Seir. An important road known as the King's Highway ran north from the Red Sea through Edom, Moab and Ammon to Syria. The Israelites under Moses asked Edom for permission to use this road on their journey to Canaan, but Edom refused, forcing the Israelites to make a long detour.<sup>1</sup> Edom developed a reputation for arrogance, in particular towards Israel, and ill-feeling between the two countries expressed itself repeatedly over the following centuries.

There were two main reasons for Edom's arrogance. One was the wisdom teachers for which it was famous, the other the strong defence system it had built throughout its rugged mountains. It believed no one could outwit or overthrow it; but defiance of God finally brought about its overthrow.<sup>2</sup>

Among the conquerors of Edom were the Arab tribal people, the Nabateans, who, in the third century BC, built the amazing rock city of Petra to replace the Edomites' Sela.<sup>3</sup> In New Testament times the Nabatean kingdom extended over the western part of Arabia and north to Damascus, the capital of Syria. It was during this time of Nabatean rule that the newly converted Paul escaped from Damascus in a basket. The 'Arabia' where he spent some of his earliest days as a Christian is more likely to refer to the Nabatean kingdom than to present-day Saudi Arabia.

1. Numbers 20:14-21 2. Jeremiah 49:7; Jeremiah 49:20; Jeremiah 49:22; Amos 1:11-12; Obadiah 1:1-4; Obadiah 1:8-9; cf. 2 Chronicles 25:11-12 3. Petra is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew Sela and means 'rock'.

4. Acts 9:22-25; 2 Corinthians 11:32-33; Galatians 1:17

The mountains of Edom near Petra, Jordan

## 02.19. Upheaval in Arabia

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### Upheaval in Arabia

Only rarely does the Bible mention Arabia by name. It usually refers to the peoples of the region by the family or tribal groups to which they belonged, such as Dedan, Kedar, Sheba and the like.<sup>1</sup> Many of the peoples were descended from Noah, Abraham and Esau.<sup>2</sup> The present-day country that encompasses these ancient tribal lands, Saudi Arabia, is home to Islam's two most sacred locations, Mecca and Medina. Mecca was the home of Muhammad, the founder of Islam.<sup>3</sup> Muhammad grew up with a strong interest in religion, but was disillusioned with the corrupt idolatry around him. When almost forty, he began to have visions which he interpreted as divine revelations. Some early ideas came from Judaism and Christianity, but later he added Buddhist, Zoroastrian, Arab and Hindu elements. He was swept along by the belief that there was only one God, and that he, Muhammad, was God's last and greatest prophet. When the citizens of Mecca showed no great enthusiasm for his ideas, Muhammad tried to win them by preaching care for the family, love for children and peace to people everywhere. He had little success. After twelve years, he could tolerate the ridicule and opposition no longer, and fled to Medina (AD 622). This flight, known as the Hijrah, is the starting point for the Islamic calendar. This flight to Medina marked a radical change in Muhammad's views. He turned from pacifism to violence, plundering the camel caravans and gaining support from Arab tribes by sharing the profits with them. He strengthened the alliances by marrying prominent tribal women. In 630, he returned in triumph to Mecca, purified the city, banished idols, and rededicated the city's ancient Arab shrine, the Kabah. By the time he died, all Arabia belonged to Islam. It was now more than merely a religion. Islam had become, and remains, a religious ideology with social and political objectives. Today Saudi Arabia is the world's most dangerous country for Christians.

1. Isaiah 21:13-17; Isaiah 60:6; Jeremiah 25:23-24; Ezekiel 27:20-22 2. Genesis 10:1-32; Genesis 25:1-6; Genesis 36:1-43

3. Islam takes its name from an Arabic word meaning 'submission'; that is, submission to God (Allah). 'Muslim' comes from the same root.

Mosque, sign of Islam's presence

## 02.20. Power, control and self-interest

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Power, control and self-interest At the western end of the deserts of Arabia is the Red Sea, the north of which separates into two arms that semi-enclose the Sinai Peninsula. The easterly of these two arms, the Gulf of Aqaba, is bounded by Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Israel and Egypt. The shore controlled by Jordan and Israel is only a small area around the top of the gulf, but it gives both countries access to the Red Sea. The boundary cuts between two ports, Aqaba on the Jordanian side and Elat on the Israeli side. In biblical times Elat (Elath, or Eloth) was linked with Ezion-geber, the two names often being used interchangeably. It was of strategic importance because of the trade routes that passed through it – sea routes that went south and east, and land routes that went north and west.<sup>1</sup>

Solomon of Israel formed a commercial alliance with Hiram of Lebanon, so that goods from the Mediterranean were received at Hiram's port of Tyre, taken overland to Solomon's port of Ezion-geber, and shipped east on a fleet of ships that Hiram helped Solomon establish. The ships went as far east as Ophir, believed to be in the region of India, and enriched both kings by bringing back large quantities of valuable and exotic goods.<sup>2</sup> This short-cut from the Mediterranean Sea to the Indian Ocean anticipated the short-cut provided 2800 years later when the Suez Canal was built, though it used the other arm of the Red Sea, the Gulf of Suez, to connect with the Mediterranean. Because of its strategic importance, the canal became the subject of international conflicts, in much the same way as Ezion-geber was a cause of conflicts between Judah and Edom. Being a prize of war, Ezion-geber changed backwards and forwards between Judah and Edom, depending on which nation was stronger.<sup>3</sup> 1. Deuteronomy 2:8; 1 Kings 9:26 2. 1 Kings 9:26-28; 1 Kings 10:11; 1 Kings 10:22; cf. 1 Kings 22:48 3. 2 Kings 14:22; 2 Kings 16:6

Aqaba on the Red Sea

## 02.21. Land of bondage

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### Land of bondage

Egypt features in the story of Israel from the time of the nation's original ancestor, Abraham. Later, his descendants migrated there, and over several hundred years they increased from a large family to a small nation. The Egyptians, fearful of the Israelites, forced them into slavery, till God raised up Moses to lead them to freedom<sup>1</sup> and set them on their way to a new homeland in Canaan. Israelites, by means of the Passover festival, have from Bible times remembered Egypt as a place of bondage out of which God redeemed them.<sup>2</sup> The life of Egypt has always been dependent on the Nile River, which flows 5,600 kilometres from inland Africa and enters the Mediterranean Sea through a large delta. Apart from the land either side of the river and in the delta, Egypt is largely desert. Delta cities such as Memphis and Rameses served as capitals of Egypt at different times. Memphis was on roughly the same site as modern Cairo. Rameses was built by the Israelites, whose allotted region of Goshen was within the delta. But the most magnificent of Egypt's capitals was Thebes, about 500 kilometres upstream.<sup>3</sup>

Ruling from these cities were god-like kings who carried the title 'Pharaoh'. Believing that when they died they passed from the world of humans to the world of the gods, they prepared for such a future by building themselves elaborate tombs. Among these were the pyramids, some of which already existed in the time of Moses. That was an era when Egypt enjoyed five hundred years of power and magnificence. By the time Israel was settled in Canaan with a strong monarchy, Egypt was no longer the power it once was. During the time of Israel's divided kingdom, both north and south were at times tempted to rely upon Egypt for help, but they were always disappointed. God's prophets had one message: trust in God, not in political deals or military power.<sup>4</sup>

1. 1280 BC 2. Exodus 12:1-32; Deuteronomy 16:1-3; Luke 22:1; Luke 22:15 3. Genesis 47:27; Exodus 1:11; Exodus 8:22; Isaiah 19:13; Jeremiah 46:25; Nahum 3:8 4. 2 Kings 17:4-6; 2 Kings 18:21; 2 Kings 18:24; Isaiah 30:1-3; Isaiah 30:15-16; Isaiah 31:1-5

Pyramid of Cheops close-up

## 02.22. Out of Africa

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Out of Africa The bridge between Africa and Asia is the barren Sinai Peninsula. This is where God gave Israel his law to prepare the people for life in Canaan. But they paid little attention, and as a result spent forty wasted years in the Sinai wilderness – the price of self-will.

Although Sinai today is part of Egypt, in biblical times it was occupied by various tribal groups. One of these was the Amalekites, a tribe of wild desert nomads who were infamous for their practice of raiding the defenceless. Israel's attempts to destroy them, while not completely successful, at least helped towards their eventual disappearance as a distinct group.<sup>1</sup>

Another group outside the borders of Egypt were the people of Cush. The name refers to the people of countries along the Nile to Egypt's south, namely, the northern parts of the countries that we today know as Sudan and Ethiopia. Sometimes the name is used as a general term for all the dark-skinned peoples of Africa.<sup>2</sup> Cush represented the southernmost region that people in Palestine knew about – the end of the earth, so to speak.<sup>3</sup>

West of Egypt was the African tribal people referred to in the Bible as Put. They occupied the land today called Libya, possibly along with another group, the Lubim.<sup>4</sup>

During the six centuries from the period of Babylonian rule to the time of the New Testament, Egypt and these surrounding peoples fell under foreign domination – Persian, Greek and Roman. But also during that time, Jewish communities in those countries established synagogues, where they and local non-Jewish people worshipped. Simon, the North African who carried Jesus' cross, was from a town in present-day Libya. The official that Philip evangelized was from Ethiopia. These, like many others, believed in God, but they only became Christians when they believed in Christ.<sup>5</sup> 1. Exodus 17:8-14; Judges 6:3; Judges 6:33; 1 Samuel 15:18-19; 1 Samuel 30:1 2. Isaiah 18:1-2; Jeremiah 13:23; Ezekiel 29:10 3. Isaiah 11:11; Zephaniah 3:10 4. 2 Chronicles 12:3; 2 Chronicles 16:8; Jeremiah 46:9; Ezekiel 30:5; Nahum 3:9 5. Mark 15:21; Acts 8:27-39; Acts 11:20; Acts 13:1 Khan al-Khalili, Cairo's oldest bazaar

## 02.23. New directions

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### New directions

After its defeat by Babylon at the Battle of Carchemish in 605 BC, Egypt never regained its former power.<sup>1</sup> Subsequently, it was defeated by Persia but, not wanting to be subservient, repeatedly rebelled. Finally, its last native ruler was removed. With Alexander the Great's conquest in 332 BC, Egypt came under Greek rule. Alexander built a grand city as a Mediterranean port for Egypt and named it after himself, Alexandria. It was the greatest Greek city of the time, the capital of Egypt during the Greek and Roman periods, and a busy centre of commercial and manufacturing activity. The population of Alexandria was a mixture of Greek, Egyptian, Jewish and Roman. The city became a centre of learning, not just for Greek philosophers but also for Jewish Bible scholars, seventy of whom prepared the first Greek translation of the Old Testament. This is known as the Septuagint and was widely used in New Testament times along with the Hebrew Scriptures. A feature of the Alexandrian scholars was that they were eloquent speakers whose interpretations were detailed, earnest, and well stocked with Old Testament references to the Messiah.<sup>2</sup>

Most Jewish scholars, however, did not know that the Messiah was Jesus, and that as a baby he had lived for a time with his parents in Egypt.<sup>3</sup> The Jewish scholars in Palestine, among whom were some from Alexandria,<sup>4</sup> were even less enlightened. In the end they killed Jesus and, soon after, his outspoken follower, Stephen. When the Emperor Constantine christianized the empire in AD 313, Egypt became a nominally Christian country. But in AD 641, after the rise of Muhammad, it fell under Muslim rule. It has remained Muslim ever since.

1. 2 Kings 24:7; Jeremiah 46:2 2. Acts 18:24-28 3. Matthew 2:13-15; Matthew 2:19-21

4. Acts 6:9

Alexandria

## 02.24. Israel's northern neighbours

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### Israel's northern neighbours

Immediately to the north of Israel was a territory consisting of a flat fertile coastal region that rose into well-timbered mountains. The coastal region was known as Phoenicia and the mountain range as Lebanon, the latter being the name for the present-day nation that covers most of both areas. The cedar tree, for which Lebanon has always been famous, has become a national symbol.<sup>1</sup> In biblical times, the coastal boundary between Israel and Phoenicia was not clearly defined. Apart from occasional conflicts, Israelite tribes lived peaceably with their northern neighbours. On Israel's side of the border, just north of the headland at Mt Carmel, was the port of Acco, later renamed Ptolemais.<sup>2</sup> Further north, in Phoenicia, were the important ports of Tyre and Sidon, between which was the town of Zarephath.<sup>3</sup> Further north again, past Lebanon's present-day capital of Beirut, was the town of Gebal, later renamed Byblos.<sup>4</sup>

During the ninth century BC, Phoenicia was the source of a serious threat to Israel's religious survival. Jezebel, a Phoenician princess, married the Israelite king and tried to make Phoenician Baalism the national religion of Israel. The ministry of the prophets Elijah and Elisha was specifically concerned with preserving the faithful and judging the guilty during this time.<sup>5</sup> The mixture of religion and politics created troubles not only in biblical times but also through the eras that followed. Lebanon was christianized by the Romans, islamized by the Arabs, invaded by the Crusaders, and trampled on by any who sought supremacy in the region. Repeated destruction and rebuilding give it the appearance of being chaotic and fragmented, but it is determined to survive. It is the only Arab country not officially Muslim. About one third of the population calls itself Christian.

1. 1 Kings 4:33; 1 Kings 5:6; 2 Kings 19:23; Acts 11:19 2. Judges 1:31; Acts 21:7 3. 1 Kings 5:1; 1 Kings 5:6; 1 Kings 17:9; Ezra 3:7 4. Joshua 13:5; Ezekiel 27:9 5. 1 Kings 16:30-33; 1 Kings 19:15-18

Sea wall at Acco

## 02.25. Cities by the sea

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### Cities by the sea

Phoenicia was one of the great maritime nations of the ancient world. Its merchant ships, beautifully made and sailed by skilled seamen, carried a great variety of goods and brought it much wealth.<sup>1</sup>

Wealth brought with it two main problems. One was that Phoenicia became arrogant. It saw itself as all-powerful, a god among the nations who could use its economic strength to do whatever it wished.<sup>2</sup> Its oppression of weaker neighbours was not through military might but through commercial power. The second problem was that Phoenicia's wealth made it a target for other greedy nations, who wanted to break through its defences and capture its wealth for themselves. As often happens, God used the fruits of wrongdoing to punish wrongdoing. He used the greed of other nations, first the Babylonians and then the Greeks, to punish the arrogance of Phoenicia.<sup>3</sup> As the years passed, the Phoenician cities recovered from the devastation and by New Testament times were well populated again. They were, however, now part of the Roman Empire and under the rule of Rome-appointed governors. Jesus visited the region on at least one occasion, and people from the region visited Galilee to hear him preach and seek his healing.<sup>4</sup> A few years later, when fierce persecution drove the early Christians from Jerusalem, many of them fled to Tyre, Sidon and other cities of Phoenicia and planted churches there. They supported Paul's international mission, and Paul visited them whenever possible.<sup>5</sup> 1. Ezekiel 27:1-9; Ezekiel 27:12-25 2. Isaiah 23:1-18; Ezekiel 28:1-23

3. Jeremiah 27:3-6; Ezekiel 26:2-14. The Babylonian attack, under Nebuchadnezzar, was in 587 BC; the Greek attack, under Alexander the Great, in 333 BC.

4. Mark 7:24-26; Luke 6:17; Acts 12:20 5. Acts 11:19; Acts 15:3; Acts 21:2-6; Acts 27:3

Mediterranean coast at Tyre

## 02.26. The power of language

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The power of language The modern nation known as the Syrian Arab Republic covers much the same region as ancient Syria, though its boundaries have shifted over the years. The present capital, Damascus, is one of the world's oldest cities and has existed since the dawn of history. In early biblical times the land was known as Aram and its people as Arameans. Abraham spent some time there, mainly in Haran, on his way to Canaan, and many of his clan settled there. His son Isaac and grandson Jacob both married women from this clan, and Jacob lived in Aram long enough to become known as an Aramean.<sup>1</sup>

Aram does not feature again in the biblical story till the time of the divided Israelite kingdom, when the Bible usually calls it Syria (though some versions retain Aram). By this time the Aramaic language had spread so widely that it was the most commonly used language of south-west Asia. Ancient Syria had many conflicts with Israel, but its lasting influence was not through its military power but through its language.

Written Aramaic used letters that were similar to Hebrew letters, and isolated sections of the Old Testament are written in Aramaic instead of the usual Hebrew.<sup>2</sup> In the Persian Empire, Aramaic was the official language.<sup>3</sup> When Alexander the Great conquered Persia, the Greek language spread throughout his empire and became the official language. But in south-west Asia, Aramaic was still widely used, in spite of the increasing use of Greek. Aramaic was the language Jesus and his disciples usually spoke, though they also used Greek, the language in which the New Testament is written. In some cases the actual words Jesus spoke, 'talitha cumi', 'ephphatha', and 'eloi, eloi, lama, sabachthani',<sup>4</sup> are transliterated as well as translated. The hearers apparently felt that no translation could fully capture the feeling with which they were spoken.

1. Genesis 12:1-5; Genesis 25:20; Genesis 28:1-5; Genesis 29:4-5; Genesis 31:20; Deuteronomy 26:5

2. Ezra 4:8-24; Ezra 5:1-17; Ezra 6:1-18; Ezra 7:12-26; Jeremiah 10:11; Daniel 2:4-49; Daniel 3:1-30; Daniel 4:1-37; Daniel 5:1-31; Daniel 6:1-28; Daniel 7:1-28 3. Ezra 4:7. The period of Persian rule over Israel was 539-333 BC.

4. Mark 5:41; Mark 7:34; Mark 15:34

Hebrew scroll

## 02.27. One empire after another

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### One empire after another

During the period when Old Testament Israel was divided, Syria was a bitter enemy of the northern kingdom. It attacked often, seized conquered territory and treated its victims so cruelly that God's prophets assured it of a terrible punishment.<sup>1</sup> The judgment fell when Assyria conquered it in 732 BC.

Syria had no independent national existence for the next four hundred years, being merely a land within the successive empires of Assyria, Babylon, Persia and Greece. But during the Greek period it regained status when, after Alexander's death, the empire split into a number of sectors, one of which was centred on Syria and ruled by a Greek dynasty called the Seleucids. About 300 BC, the founder of this dynasty built the city of Antioch as his administrative capital and Seleucia as its Mediterranean port. A dynasty of thirteen kings, most of them with the name Antiochus or Seleucus, reigned over Syria for more than two hundred years. The most notorious of them was Antiochus IV Epiphanes, whose hatred of Israel overflowed when he invaded Jerusalem, slaughtered the Jews, abolished their law, burnt their Scriptures, and offered unclean animals on a Greek altar in their temple. To Jews, this was the supreme atrocity, 'the abomination of desolation'.<sup>2</sup> The Jewish resistance, led by a group known as the Maccabees, fought for more than three years till, in 165 BC, they overthrew the enemy and re-dedicated the temple.<sup>3</sup> The Jews continued the war till they won full political independence in 143 BC. But the Jews soon became hopelessly divided, while the Seleucids to the north consistently lost more of the extensive territory they once ruled. In 64 BC the Seleucids were conquered by Rome, and Syria became a province of the emerging Roman Empire. The next year Israel lost its independence when it also fell to Rome.

1. 1 Kings 20:1; 2 Kings 6:24; 2 Kings 10:32; 2 Kings 13:22; Amos 1:3-4

2. Daniel 11:31 3. Jews celebrate the event annually in the Feast of Dedication; John 10:22  
Antioch's city wall at Seleucia, where it extended to enclose the port

## 02.28. Syrian Christians

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### Syrian Christians

Christianity came to Syria through the efforts of Greek-speaking Jewish Christians who were driven out of Jerusalem after the killing of Stephen.<sup>1</sup> Paul was converted in Syria, and although he had to flee when Jewish extremists tried to kill him, he later returned for a period and then moved north to his hometown region of Cilicia.<sup>2</sup>

Years later Paul returned to Syria and played an important part in the growth of the newly planted church in Antioch. This church, started through the work of Christian migrants from Cyprus and North Africa, had a vision to spread the gospel to other countries. It became the base for Paul's international missionary travels.<sup>3</sup>

Over the following centuries, Antioch became an important centre in the development of church organization and theological beliefs. In the fifth century an Antioch church leader named Nestorius rose to prominence when, having moved to Constantinople, he became involved in a serious doctrinal dispute. Some considered him a heretic, but others saw him as a victim of church politics. Loyal followers formed what became known as the Nestorian church. It was based in Persia and had much evangelistic zeal.

Nestorian missionaries spread through the regions of present-day Iran, Iraq and Syria, and some went as far as India. There they linked up with a well-established church that traced its origins back to the arrival of the apostle Thomas in South India in AD 52. Other factors strengthened Syrian influence and to this day there is a prominent Syrian Church in South India. It takes different forms in Catholic, Orthodox and other traditions.

Syrian influence survives in other places also. Across the Middle East there are descendants of early Nestorian churches who call themselves Assyrian Christians. In Syria itself Christians amount to five percent of the population and are well respected. Although it is a secular state that recognizes Islam as the religion of the majority, Syria upholds religious freedom for minorities.

1. Acts 8:1; Acts 9:1-2; Acts 9:10; Acts 11:19-21 2. Acts 9:1-30; Galatians 1:13-21 3. Acts 11:19-26; Acts 13:1-4; Acts 14:26; Acts 15:30-41; Acts 18:18-22

Waterfront at Seleucia

## 02.29. Across the mountains

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### Across the mountains

Turkey is a large country that stretches west across Asia Minor into Europe, and east almost to the Caucasus Mountains. Besides being the native land of the Turks, it is home to about half the world's Kurds, the largest ethnic group anywhere that does not have its own homeland. The other half of the Kurds live mainly in the countries that border Turkey to the south – Syria, Iraq and Iran. This rugged mountainous region, where the Kurds have lived for more than four thousand years, is loosely referred to as Kurdistan.

Kurds, who are thought to be related to the Medes,<sup>1</sup> have retained their identity in spite of being absorbed into the many empires that spread across their territory. The same is true of Armenians, who now have their own independent nation on Turkey's eastern border. Whereas Kurds are mostly Muslim, Armenians are mostly Christian, with a tradition that traces their church back to apostolic times. The mountains of Ararat, resting place of Noah's ark, are in Armenia.<sup>2</sup>

About half way across Turkey, where the rugged eastern mountains give way to a high uneven plateau, are the Taurus Mountains. In ancient times the only way through these mountains to Syria was through a pass known as the Cilician Gates. This was the route followed by Alexander the Great on his way to Issus in northern Syria,<sup>3</sup> where his victory over Persia in 333 BC marked the end of the Persian Empire.

Paul the apostle also used this route, though in the opposite direction. At the beginning of both his second and third missionary journeys, he came from Antioch through the regions of Syria and Cilicia and then moved up to the central plateau. His hometown of Tarsus, on the Mediterranean coastal plain, was the chief city of Cilicia and a famed centre of learning.<sup>4</sup> 1. Isaiah 13:17; Daniel 5:30-31; Daniel 6:8 2. Genesis 8:4; 2 Kings 19:37 3. At that time Issus, like Antioch and Seleucia, was part of Syria. Today they are all part of Turkey.

4. Acts 15:41; Acts 18:22-23; Acts 21:39

Taurus Mountains, Turkey

## 02.30. Evangelism in Turkey

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Evangelism in Turkey The early missionary activity of Paul, Barnabas, Silas and Timothy in Turkey was in the southern part of the region known in Roman times as Galatia. Paul usually travelled along the highways that the Romans built to connect the main cities, his aim being to plant churches in the chief population centres. With strong churches in these centres, the gospel soon spread to the surrounding countryside. The main cities of Galatia where Paul began churches were Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe.<sup>1</sup>

Another region where Paul did some of his early evangelism in Turkey was along the Mediterranean coast to the south, around the towns of Perga and Attalia.<sup>2</sup> These towns gave access to important shipping routes.

Perhaps the most strategic city Paul wanted to reach was Ephesus, on the west coast, but before he was able to do this, God directed him north to Troas, from where he sailed to Greece. On his way back he called briefly at Ephesus, and later spent three years there.<sup>3</sup> For much of Paul's three years in Ephesus, he taught a group of enthusiastic Christians in a lecture hall borrowed from a local school teacher. These Christians then took the gospel to surrounding areas so that the whole province was evangelized.<sup>4</sup> In his writings, Paul talks about churches in Colossae, Laodicea and Hierapolis,<sup>5</sup> places he himself seems not to have visited. Most likely, these churches were planted during this time of outreach from Ephesus. The coast on which Ephesus was located bordered the Aegean Sea and marked the western extremity of the vast continent of Asia. This was where Asia ended, but to the Greeks, coming across the Aegean from the other side, it was where Asia began. They called the area Asia, and the Romans used the same name when they made the area a province within Asia Minor.

1. Acts 13:14; Acts 13:49; Acts 14:1; Acts 14:6; Acts 14:21-23; Galatians 1:2; Galatians 4:13-15 2. Acts 13:13; Acts 14:25-26 3. Acts 16:6-10; Acts 18:19-21; Acts 19:1; Acts 20:31

4. Acts 19:8-10 5. Colossians 2:1; Colossians 4:13; Colossians 4:16

Ephesus

## 02.31. People of influence

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### People of influence

Although biblical references to Asia Minor are usually associated with Paul's missionary journeys, there are occasional references in the Old Testament. The names mentioned often belonged originally to individuals and were used later of peoples descended from them or the places where they lived. Among such places were Gomer, Magog, Tubal, Meshech and Togarmah.<sup>1</sup> Asia Minor was also the original land of the West Asian people known as the Hittites.<sup>2</sup>

Jews from Asia Minor were in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost, and may have been among the first Christian converts.<sup>3</sup> There is a tradition that Peter and Mark preached in some parts of Asia Minor while Paul preached in others. The Bible preserves a letter Peter wrote to Christians in certain provinces, among them Bithynia and Pontus beside the Black Sea and Cappadocia in the central plateau.<sup>4</sup>

Towards the end of the first century, John sent letters to churches in seven towns of another province, Asia. John was a prisoner on an island off the west coast, but the messenger who carried the letters, after landing at Ephesus, probably delivered the letters one by one as he moved from that church around the other six – Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea.<sup>5</sup>

Some of the seven towns are now only ruins, but some are alive with activity. Laodicea, for example, is a hill of scattered rubble, but Smyrna, present-day Izmir, is Turkey's third largest city. Ephesus, with extensive ruins, is the place whose associations with the New Testament can be most readily identified.

Ephesus remained an important centre through the early centuries of the church, and in AD 431 was the location for one of the four great church councils of that period. The other three<sup>6</sup> were also held in Turkey, either in Constantinople or nearby.

1. Genesis 10:2-5; Ezekiel 27:13-14; Ezekiel 38:2; Ezekiel 38:6 2. Genesis 26:34

3. Acts 2:9-10

4. 1 Peter 1:1 5. Revelation 1:4; Revelation 1:9-11 6. Nicaea (325), Constantinople (381), and Chalcedon (451)

Thyatira, modern Akhisar, Turkey

## 02.32. The great divide

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### The great divide

Turkey's west coast has many ports that provide access to the Aegean islands and the European mainland. Paul sailed to or from many of these, among them Miletus and Ephesus in the south, Assos and Troas in the north. The sea route from Troas to Macedonia seems to have been his preferred crossing-place into Europe.<sup>1</sup> For overland travel, however, the preferred route for most people was across the Bosphorus. This is a narrow passage of water at the top of the Aegean Sea through which all shipping from the Mediterranean to the Black Sea must pass. To its west is Europe and to its east is Asia.

Some years after Constantine declared the Roman Empire Christian,<sup>2</sup> he built a new capital beside the Bosphorus so that he could better control his eastern territories. This city, built on the site of old Byzantium, was his 'New Rome', but it was better known as Constantinople. Today it is called Istanbul, and is part of the small but strategic part of Europe that belongs to Turkey.

Until the time of Constantine, the bishop of Rome had been the most powerful church figure, but now he had to compete with the bishop of Constantinople. In time a clear division emerged, one church known as Roman Catholic and based in the west, the other known as Eastern Orthodox and based in Constantinople. Their differences were reinforced by the division of the empire into Roman and Byzantine.<sup>3</sup> The Byzantine rulers survived the Islamic aggression of the seventh century, but conflict continued for many centuries. Then, in 1453, the Muslims conquered Constantinople and made it the capital of a new Turkish Empire. Among the notable church buildings turned into mosques was the magnificent Saint Sophia. It is now a non-religious national monument. Turkey today is still Islamic, though officially it is a secular state that tolerates minority religions.

1. Acts 16:11; Acts 20:6; Acts 20:13-15

2. In AD 313 3. The Roman Empire fell in AD 476, but the Roman Church survived.

Istanbul on the Bosphorus

## 02.33. Civilization and the cross

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### Civilization and the cross

Jesus has always been a long way ahead of his followers in having a breadth of vision that is wider than the narrow views of nationalism. This was demonstrated when, not long before his crucifixion, some Greeks came to see him.<sup>1</sup> Jesus welcomed them as a sign that his current mission was about to be fulfilled (in his death and resurrection) and a new mission was about to begin (in the evangelization of the Gentiles).

Among the early Christians, the person who came closest to sharing Jesus' expansive view of the world was Paul. Yet even he needed divine intervention to convince him to take the radical step of leaving Asia and going into Europe. God directed him to Greece and, without hesitation, Paul went.<sup>2</sup>

Greece was not always the political entity we know today. In Old Testament times part of it was the land of Javan; in New Testament times it covered several states, the most important of which were Macedonia in the north and Achaia in the south.<sup>3</sup> Macedonia was the home of Alexander the Great, who in the fourth century BC established an empire that changed the world. People had never before enjoyed a life where education, entertainment, sport and social welfare were so widely available. By New Testament times, Rome was the imperial ruler, but Greek culture and language were still dominant. Greek was spoken everywhere, which made international evangelism easier and provided a language for the New Testament that most people understood. But the human tendency to self-interest can distort or misuse even the most helpful things. Many who accepted the Greek culture regarded themselves as civilized and all others as barbarians. Even Christians were guilty of this, and had to be reminded of what the gospel is and what it demands. At the heart of Christianity is a cross.<sup>4</sup>

1. John 12:20-26

2. Acts 16:6-10

3. Isaiah 66:19; Ezekiel 27:13; Acts 16:12; Acts 19:21. Biblical Macedonia is not the same as present-day Macedonia, a nation whose major race is Slavic.

4. 1 Corinthians 1:17-25; cf. Romans 1:14

Ruins from 4th Century BC at Delphi, Greece

## 02.34. From vibrant outreach to dead orthodoxy

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From vibrant outreach to dead orthodoxy On Paul's first visit to Greece, and possibly his subsequent visits, he landed at the port of Neapolis (modern Kavala) and visited nearby Philippi, site of the first church he planted in Europe.<sup>1</sup> Any trip from Philippi west would use the Egnatian Way, a Roman highway that joined Neapolis on one side of Greece with the Adriatic Sea on the other. Along this route was Thessalonica,<sup>2</sup> modern Greece's second largest city.

Paul planted a vigorous, outreaching church in Thessalonica, and another in Berea, which was off the Egnatian Way and on the route south to Athens.<sup>3</sup> Athens was a magnificent city and a famed centre of learning and philosophy. But if Paul had hopes of establishing a strong church there, he was disappointed. The church that became prominent in Achaia was not Athens but Corinth, though in time it became for Paul a source of heartache.<sup>4</sup>

Today Greece has many ancient landmarks to remind people of its glorious past, but the church in general does not reflect the robust Christianity of apostolic times. The Orthodox Church, while enjoying a status of privilege with the government, is more an upholder of Greek culture than a guardian of the gospel. Most people belong to the Greek Orthodox Church, but fewer than two percent attend church regularly. There is widespread resistance to the proclamation of the gospel. At some stage during his travels, Paul went to Illyricum, a region that stretches north from Greece along the Adriatic coast through Albania and into the countries of Former Yugoslavia. The southern part of this region was known in Roman times as Dalmatia.<sup>5</sup> Today the religion of most people throughout ancient Illyricum is either Orthodox, Catholic or Muslim.

1. Acts 16:11-12; Php 4:1; Php 4:15-16 2. Acts 17:1; 1 Thessalonians 1:5-9 3. Acts 17:10-12 4. Acts 17:15-16; Acts 18:1 5. Romans 15:19; 2 Timothy 4:10

Athens: view from the Roman Forum to an Orthodox church

## 02.35. Islands

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### Islands

Israel has never been known for its seafaring, and the islands of the Mediterranean do not feature often in the biblical story. Crete, however, was an indirect source of influence in Israel's affairs, because it was the original land of the Philistines.<sup>1</sup> In New Testament times, Paul visited the island and left Titus there to deal with difficulties in the churches.<sup>2</sup> The island today is part of the nation of Greece.

Cyprus was once known as Kittim, and its people were renowned sea traders.<sup>3</sup> In New Testament times the island had a large population of Jews, some of whom, on becoming Christians, broke loose from their more traditional brothers and embarked upon a radical mission to the Gentiles. Barnabas, a Jewish Cypriot, went with Paul, and later Mark, on evangelistic missions to Cyprus.<sup>4</sup> In Cyprus today local evangelicals are few. But the country is an important base for many Christian ministries to the Middle East. Politically, it struggles to establish its independence, the land being partitioned between a majority population that is Greek and Orthodox and a minority population that is Turkish and Muslim. The islands Lesbos (location of Mitylene), Chios, Samos, Patmos, Cos and Rhodes, which appear in the biblical record, are all part of present-day Greece. They are, however, on the opposite side of the Aegean Sea and are close to the coast of Turkey.<sup>5</sup>

Malta and Sicily, two islands close to the mainland of Italy, feature briefly in the account of Paul's journey to Rome.<sup>6</sup> Malta is today an independent nation, but Sicily is part of Italy. Both islands are almost entirely Catholic.

1. See page 8 2. Acts 27:7-21; Titus 1:5 3. Genesis 10:2-5; Numbers 24:24; Isaiah 23:1; Isaiah 23:12; Ezekiel 27:6 4. Acts 4:36; Acts 11:19-20; Acts 13:2-6; Acts 15:39 5. Acts 20:14-15; Acts 21:1; Revelation 1:9; see also Ezekiel 27:15 6. Acts 28:1; Acts 28:12-13. Syracuse is on Sicily.

St Paul's Bay, Malta

## 02.36. Looking west

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### Looking west

Rome's Empire completely encircled the Mediterranean Sea. From its centre in Italy, it spread west over France and Spain, east over Greece and Asia Minor, south over Syria and Palestine into Egypt, and then west again along the north African coast. Paul had an ambition not just to reach the heart of the empire in Rome, but to keep moving west till he reached Spain.<sup>1</sup>

Tarshish is believed to have been in Spain, near Gibraltar. It was rich in minerals and was one of the great traders of the ancient world. It became famous for the large ships it built to carry its goods far and wide, and in time such ships were called by its name. A 'ship of Tarshish' was the common name for any large ocean-going cargo ship, especially an ore-carrier. The name did not indicate where the ship was built or where it was sailing.<sup>2</sup>

Other large ships were those which, in Greek and Roman times, were associated with Alexandria. These mostly carried grain from Egypt to Greece and Rome, and on occasions provided Paul with transport.<sup>3</sup> It was on one of these ships that Paul first arrived in Italy. He and his party came ashore at Puteoli,<sup>4</sup> which is adjacent to Naples and near Vesuvius, the volcano that destroyed Pompeii in AD 79.

Though a prisoner, Paul was allowed a degree of freedom till his case came before the Emperor. A number of Roman Christians therefore went south to meet him and walk with him on the last sixty or so kilometres to Rome. This route took them along the impressive Appian Way<sup>5</sup> and past huge underground burial areas that Jewish migrants had carved out of the soft limestone. These burial places, known as catacombs, were used also by the early Christians as burial places.

1. Acts 19:21; Romans 15:24; Romans 15:28 2. 1 Kings 22:48; Ezekiel 27:12; Ezekiel 27:25; Jonah 1:3 3. Acts 27:6; Acts 28:11

4. Acts 28:13 5. Acts 28:14-15

### The Appian Way

## 02.37. Rome and beyond

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Rome and beyond The church was already established in Rome when Paul arrived. The Bible does not record how it began, but Christians would have been among the many travellers or migrants who came to Rome, and these no doubt spread the gospel.<sup>1</sup> Paul had a vision to see Christianity so strongly established in Rome that it would spread across the entire empire and beyond. In Paul's day, however, the official religion of the state was Emperor-worship. Christianity was an unlicensed religion and subject to official discrimination. Paul could never have imagined that within three hundred years the church would be so powerful that it would, in effect, take over the state. If he had lived to see the outcome of this, he would not have been pleased with what he saw. The apostle who preached Christ's message of commitment would never be pleased with mere nominalism. The man who preached freedom and tolerance among Christ's people would be angry to see legalism and bigotry become all-powerful. The relics and buildings that survive in Rome are monuments to all sorts of things – the heroism of early Christians, the hedonism of Rome's citizens, the supremacy of the Roman Empire, the cruelty of its Emperors, the creativity of its artists, the power of a state church. Modern Italy may preserve the impressive achievements of former eras, but it displays little of the spirit of those who guided and taught the original church in Rome.

Well-founded traditions declare that Paul and Peter were the victims of anti-Christian persecution and were executed in Rome.<sup>2</sup> But they are only two among thousands who suffered under imperial Rome and gave their lives in the cause of Christ. Around the world today, whether in places sympathetic to Christians or those violently opposed, Christians are still required to count the cost of following Jesus. But it is always the way to fuller life.<sup>3</sup>

1. Acts 2:10; Acts 18:2; Romans 1:13; Romans 16:3-16 2. 2 Timothy 4:6; cf. John 21:18-19 3. Matthew 16:24-25; John 3:16; John 17:3 Arch of Titus, Rome, completed AD

## 02.38. Map1

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Map1

## 02.39. Map2

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Map2

## 03.01. Following Jesus

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Following Jesus

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### 03.03. Beginning in Bethlehem

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Beginning in Bethlehem At the centre of Christian faith is the fact that in Jesus Christ the eternal God became a human being. Once we grasp this miracle, we shall not be surprised that the way it came about also involved a miracle – the supernatural work of God in the body of the virgin Mary, so that the child born to her, though having no human father, was fully human.<sup>1</sup>

Mary and her husband Joseph came from Nazareth in Galilee, the northern part of Palestine, but because of a census requirement, they had to move temporarily to their ancestral town of Bethlehem, which was in Judea, the southern part of Palestine. But the town was so over-crowded that the only accommodation Joseph and Mary could find was the stable of an inn. There, in a dirty, smelly animal shelter, Jesus was born.<sup>2</sup> No matter how disheartened Mary and Joseph may have felt about their circumstances, they were no doubt cheered when some shepherds arrived to greet the birth of the baby. They had received a revelation that this new-born child was the promised Saviour, Christ the Lord.<sup>3</sup> As for the people nearby – the guests sleeping, eating or revelling in the comfort of the inn – none seemed to realize what had happened. The eternal God had just arrived on the planet and they had not the slightest idea. In spite of having Scriptures that spoke of the Saviour's coming, people had no way of foreseeing exactly how it would happen; and when it did happen, few recognized it.<sup>4</sup> But that is not surprising. God has often worked through the humblest of people and the most unlikely of circumstances. He still does. Followers of Jesus may at times share his obscurity, but they also share his sense of fulfilment of God's purposes. God chooses what appears as nothing special to shame what the world sees as something great.<sup>5</sup>

1. Matthew 1:18-25 2. Luke 2:1-7. For map see page 38.

3. Luke 2:8-18 4. Also among the few were Simeon and Anna; Luke 2:22-38 5. 1 Corinthians 1:27-29

Street near Church of the Nativity, Bethlehem

## 03.04. South to Egypt, north to Nazareth

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### South to Egypt, north to Nazareth

It seems that Joseph and Mary stayed with their baby in Judea for some time. Within six weeks of Jesus' birth, they carried out several ceremonies required by the law of Moses, and for some of these they made the 10 km journey to the temple in Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup> Back in Bethlehem, travellers who came for the census began to leave, and the family of Jesus was able to live in a building referred to as 'the house'.<sup>2</sup>

There the baby Jesus was visited by men from the east known as magi (people who studied the stars). These men worked out that a new king had been born in Judea, and they eventually found him in Bethlehem. But the governor of Judea, Herod the Great, a part-Jew whom Rome had appointed 'king', was disturbed at the prospect of a rival king emerging. Herod learnt from the magi the time of this king's birth, and from the Jewish scholars the town of his birth. Pretending he would go and pay homage, he asked the magi for more precise details, but when they were told not to report their findings, they kept clear of him and escaped home.<sup>3</sup>

Herod then planned to kill all Jewish boys in the Bethlehem area who were under two years of age, thinking this would get rid of the potential rival. God therefore directed Joseph and Mary to take the baby Jesus to Egypt for safety.<sup>4</sup>

Jesus, like his ancestors back in the time of Moses, ran around as a toddler on the soil of Africa. But when Herod died, Joseph and Mary decided to return to Palestine. It was not safe, however, to stay in Judea, because Herod's son Archelaus was now king, and he was as cruel and unjust as his father. The family therefore went north to settle once more in their home town of Nazareth. As the years passed, Jesus developed in mind, body and spirit. For the first time, a child was growing up in the way God intended.<sup>5</sup> 1. Luke 2:21-24; Leviticus 12:1-8

2. Matthew 2:11 3. Matthew 2:1-12 4. Matthew 2:13-16 5. Matthew 2:19-23; Luke 2:39-40

Nazareth

## 03.05. Twelve years old

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Twelve years old The family of Joseph and Mary grew steadily, and by the time Jesus was twelve years old he no doubt had several younger brothers and sisters.<sup>1</sup> It must have taken some effort for the family to travel to Jerusalem each year for the Passover festival, but, as God-fearing believers, the parents accepted this as one of their responsibilities.<sup>2</sup> Inconvenience is no excuse for failure to do what God requires. By twelve years of age, Jewish boys were being prepared for adult religious life, so while his family was in Jerusalem, Jesus took the opportunity to learn all he could. In the Jewish system, teacher and pupil took turns asking and answering questions. These usually concerned details of the law, but Jesus' teachers noticed that he was different. His questions and answers showed that he was more concerned with knowing God's mind than with discussing trivial procedures. He showed intelligence and perception, but without any trace of arrogance or conceit. The teachers were impressed.

Jesus' parents, however, were not in the mood to feel impressed. His time with the teachers had caused them trouble in looking for him. Even at this age, Jesus knew that he existed in a unique relationship with his heavenly Father, and his earthly parents had to be aware of this. As an obedient son he submitted to them, but his words gave them a lot to think about as they returned home. Not only did Jesus study the law, but back in Nazareth he learnt a practical trade, carpentry. His divinity did not exempt him from the processes of learning and growing. He 'increased in wisdom and stature'. At each stage of life, whether child, teenager or full-grown adult, he was the sort of person one might expect at that stage – but always perfect. The perfect child grew into the perfect teenager, and in due course into the perfect adult. He developed maturity through experience, and obedience through self-denial. And all the time he 'grew in favour'. He earned the respect and affection of the local villagers, and the approval and pleasure of his heavenly Father.<sup>3</sup>

1. Matthew 13:55-56

2. Luke 2:41-51

3. Luke 2:52

Ceremonies at the Western Wall of Herod's temple

## 03.06. Jordan River -baptism and temptation

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### Jordan River -baptism and temptation

John the Baptist knew Jesus, probably from childhood, for their mothers were related.<sup>1</sup> John preached a message of repentance to prepare people to accept the coming Messiah, but he did not at first realize that the Messiah was Jesus. He knew Jesus had a personal goodness that exempted him from the need for baptism, but when Jesus insisted that John baptize him, John did so. Only then, as Jesus came out of the water and the Spirit descended visibly upon him, was John assured that this one was the Messiah.<sup>2</sup> The reason Jesus was baptized was not that he had sins to repent of, but that he wanted to declare, in an act of solidarity with all the faithful, that he was on the side of God and his righteousness. People were baptized to declare their obedience, and Jesus wanted to declare his readiness to carry out all God's purposes. In response, the Father demonstrated his full satisfaction, giving Jesus specific spiritual power for the work that lay ahead of him. No sooner had Jesus been equipped for his messianic work than Satan tempted him to use his messianic powers in the wrong way.<sup>3</sup> For example, he could work a miracle to satisfy his hunger; but Jesus knew that, although food is necessary to maintain life, obedience to God is more important. Behaviour should be determined by God's will, not by human expediency.

Another suggestion was that Jesus could convince people he was the Son of God by jumping from the top of the temple and calling upon God to save him. But Jesus would not rely upon spectacular miracles, whether to save himself or convince others. His path would lead not to self-acclaim or popularity, but to a cross.

Finally, Jesus could be assured of worldwide power if he accepted Satan's methods of conquest. But Jesus did not come into the world so that people might be forced into his kingdom. He wants them to come because they choose to. He wants them to submit willingly to him, the one who willingly laid down his life for them.

1. Luke 1:36 2. Matthew 3:1-6; Matthew 3:11-17; John 1:29-34 3. Matthew 4:1-10

Region near the Jordan's entrance to the Dead Sea

### 03.07. Sea of Galilee -first disciples

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Sea of Galilee -first disciples The first disciples of the Lord Jesus were previously disciples of John the Baptist. Once John was assured that Jesus was the one for whom he had prepared the way, he unhesitatingly pointed his followers towards Jesus. Some of John's followers wanted to remain loyal to him, but John himself knew that his work had achieved its goal. He wanted only to fade from the scene so that all attention might now be focused on Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup>

One of the first two disciples John the Baptist directed to Jesus was Andrew. The other, though not named in the story, was most likely John the Gospel writer, since John never mentions his own name in the book where this incident is recorded. When Andrew brought his brother Simon to Jesus, Jesus immediately saw characteristics in Simon that caused him to give him the name 'Rock' (in Aramaic, 'Cephas'; in Greek, 'Peter').<sup>2</sup> This incident apparently took place in the Jordan Valley, where John the Baptist was preaching, The party then moved north to Galilee and came to the region around the lake where the three disciples came from. The group soon grew in number, possibly with the addition of John's brother James, and certainly with the addition of Philip and Nathanael.<sup>3</sup> A great moment in history had arrived. The disciples realized that, after many centuries of expectation, the Messiah promised in the Scriptures and announced by John the Baptist was actually among them. He had lived in the region for thirty years but only now did he embark upon the public ministry for which he had prepared himself. If those few early disciples had any doubts about the uniqueness of this person to whom they had attached themselves, those doubts vanished when they saw his miracle of turning water into wine at a wedding feast. This one was indeed the Messiah, the Son of God and the king of Israel.<sup>4</sup> 1. John 1:32-36; cf. John 3:25-30

2. John 1:40-42 3. John 1:43-45. Nathanael apparently had another name, Bartholemew.

4. John 2:11; cf. John 1:41; cf. John 1:49

Jordan River near its entrance to the Sea of Galilee

## 03.08. Early work in Judea

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### Early work in Judea

Jesus began his ministry in Galilee, the northern part of Palestine, and the lakeside town of Capernaum soon became his base.<sup>1</sup> But now that the Feast of Passover was approaching, Jesus decided to travel south to Jerusalem, where people from all over the country were gathering for the festival. When Jesus visited the temple, it looked more like a market than a house of prayer. The courtyard was crowded with all kinds of traders, so that people could buy animals or change money for use in the temple festivities. The commercial activity so angered Jesus that, regardless of the risks to his own safety, he vigorously drove out the traders. The disciples had not expected such an explosion from their new-found master, and saw with some apprehension that such zeal would inevitably land him in severe trouble.<sup>2</sup> The Jewish leaders were caught unawares, and challenged Jesus to produce some authority for acting as he did. They suggested he perform a miracle, but Jesus refused. He would give all the evidence they wanted in due course, particularly through the miracle of the resurrection, but he would not perform miracles on demand.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, Jesus did perform miracles while in Jerusalem, and some people said they believed. But Jesus did not trust people to be loyal followers if their 'faith' was simply enthusiasm for miracles.<sup>4</sup> One man, however, seemed to seek the truth. This was Nicodemus, a prominent Pharisee, reputable teacher and member of the Sanhedrin, or Jewish Council. He had special status in the Jewish community, but not in the sight of God. He, like anyone else, could only enter God's kingdom if he was 'born again'. He needed inner cleansing and renewal – that complete change of heart that comes only as the Spirit of God brings spiritual rebirth within.<sup>5</sup>

1. Matthew 4:13; Matthew 9:1; Mark 2:1; Mark 9:33; John 2:12; John 6:24. Another lakeside town, Bethsaida, was close by; Mark 6:43-45; John 6:13; John 6:17.

2. John 2:13-17

3. John 2:18-22

4. John 2:23-25

5. John 3:1-15

Bar Mitzvah ceremony, Western Wall

## 03.09. Through Samaria to Galilee

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### Through Samaria to Galilee

Jesus' activity in Jerusalem had stirred people up and crowds began to follow him. So many were being baptized as his disciples that the religious leaders became concerned. They did not like this person among them and were jealous of the enthusiasm he was generating – and jealousy can produce unpredictable, even violent, behaviour. Though Jesus had recently shown he was not afraid of danger, he now decided it was better to leave Jerusalem and return north.<sup>1</sup>

Because of the traditional hostility between Jews and Samaritans, many Jews, when travelling between Judea and Galilee, avoided the direct route through Samaria and detoured along the east bank of the Jordan. But Jesus took the route through Samaria, and on the way saw many Samaritans respond to him. The opening came through a conversation with a woman near Shechem. She became convinced that here was a unique person, one who had divine knowledge and who could satisfy a human being's deepest spiritual needs. With much excitement, she told the villagers of her discovery, and soon it seemed they all wanted to meet Jesus.<sup>2</sup> As he saw the villagers hurrying across the fields towards him, Jesus used the incident to teach his disciples the important lesson that one sows, but another reaps. The disciples were about to reap a harvest of fresh believers, even though they themselves had not sown the seed. This was a foretaste of a greater harvest they would reap, much of it from the seed sown by others, whether Old Testament preachers, John the Baptist, or Jesus himself.<sup>3</sup>

Only God, however, can create the produce that his workers reap, and he does this in response to faith in the hearers. The disciples saw this in the case of the Samaritans, and they saw it again a few days later when Jesus arrived back in Galilee. There, in response to the faith of a distressed government official, he healed the man's son.

1. John 4:1-3

2. John 4:4-30 3. John 4:35-38; cf. 1 Corinthians 3:6 4. John 4:42; John 4:46-54

Road up to Shechem (modern Nablus) and Samaria

## 03.10. The synagogue at Nazareth

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The synagogue at Nazareth As long as human societies have existed, people of note have often received recognition everywhere except in the localities where they are best known. Or as the proverb says, a prophet is honoured everywhere except in his own town. Jesus experienced this when he returned to his home town of Nazareth and preached in the synagogue. The people could not believe that this one, who they knew only as the carpenter's son, could preach so well.<sup>1</sup> But Jesus was not concerned with impressing people. On the contrary, he challenged people by reading Scriptures that he boldly applied to himself as the Saviour-Messiah.<sup>2</sup> He knew the people would demand that he perform miracles to support his claim, but he refused to do so. Rejection by his hometown people was but a foretaste of the wider rejection he would suffer from the nation as a whole.<sup>3</sup> The professed worshippers of God are not always as open-hearted as they should be. Instead of being glad when God's mercy is extended to those who do not share their religious heritage, social status, or racial origins, they become resentful, jealous, and at times violent. Jesus gave two illustrations to show how, in Israel's history, God's messengers were sometimes more appreciated by foreigners than by Israelites. In the first illustration, Elijah was unpopular in Israel but welcomed in Lebanon. In the second, Elisha was rejected by Israelites but sought by a Syrian.<sup>4</sup>

Though brief and simple, the two illustrations were enough to stir up that nationalistic prejudice that inhabits most human beings. The congregation of normally well-behaved worshippers now tried to kill him. People would not tolerate such unorthodoxy, especially if Jesus was suggesting that God would accept Lebanese and Syrians ahead of them.<sup>5</sup> 1. Luke 4:16; Luke 4:22; Luke 4:24

2. Luke 4:17-21 3. Luke 4:23; cf. John 1:9-11

4. Luke 4:25-27

5. Luke 4:28-30

Interior of a synagogue

## 03.11. -Early work in Galilee

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Early work in Galilee From the hills of Nazareth, Jesus moved to the fishing villages along the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Fishermen from two families had already accepted him as the Messiah, but Jesus now called them to go further. He wanted them to leave their usual occupations and move around with him as part of a select group of helpers he was assembling. The fishermen were Andrew and Peter from one family, and James and John from the other.<sup>1</sup> This was a period of much public activity, and crowds followed Jesus wherever he went. His healing ministry dealt not only with common ailments, but also with incurable diseases like leprosy, uncontrollable disorders like paralysis and epilepsy, and oppressions inflicted by evil spirits.<sup>2</sup> These healings were indications that in Jesus Christ the kingdom of God had come. That kingdom was neither political nor territorial, but spiritual. It represented the rule or dominion of God, and its power was at work.<sup>3</sup>

All this activity made heavy demands on Jesus, and therefore he made sure not to allow it to overwhelm him. For many people, work becomes a god because they do not know how to cease from it. But Jesus arose early in the morning, before the crowds began pressing him, so that he could get away from his lodgings and find a quiet place to pray alone. Peter thought he was losing opportunities for ministry, but Jesus knew that in the midst of much work, it was important to have daily times of prayer and quietness.<sup>4</sup>

Such times, free from distraction, are essential for the exercise and nurture of those higher functions of the human spirit. They help maintain a healthy spiritual life through communion with God, and this results in more useful service to others. Amid the turmoil and activity of life, they strengthen that inner peace, tranquillity and stability that Jesus wants all his followers to have.<sup>5</sup>

1. Mark 1:16-20 2. Matthew 4:24-25; Mark 1:21-34; Mark 1:40-45; Luke 5:17-26 3. Matthew 4:23; Matthew 6:10; Matthew 12:28 4. Mark 1:35-37; cf. Matthew 14:13; Matthew 14:23 5. John 14:27; Php 4:7; Colossians 3:15

He went away to a quiet place and prayed

## 03.12. Choosing the twelve

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Choosing the twelve The demands upon Jesus increased heavily as he moved around Galilee. In one town after another, crowds came to hear him preach and to ask his help in all kinds of ways. The work was more than one person could physically handle, and although he alone was the Saviour-Messiah, there was much work he could delegate to trusted helpers. The Jewish religious leaders had neglected the people's needs, but Jesus felt a compassion that drove him to help people wherever he could. He likened Galilee to a vast field ready for harvest, but he needed workers to help him reap.<sup>1</sup> To this end, Jesus asked his group of close followers to pray for workers. He was about to appoint a special group of twelve to whom he could pass on some of his messianic authority, and no doubt some of these friends were likely candidates. Nevertheless, the night before the appointment, he spent the entire night in prayer, so that he might be assured of doing his Father's will. Because he was going to send these twelve men out in service, he called them 'sent ones' (or, in the Greek of the New Testament, 'apostles').<sup>2</sup>

Before sending the twelve out, however, Jesus wanted them to spend further time with him, so that they might be spiritually equipped for the task ahead. Like Jesus, they were to preach the good news of the kingdom and urge people to enter that kingdom through repentance and faith. Also, because of the authority Jesus passed on to them, they were to heal those whom Satan had afflicted with diseases and unclean spirits.<sup>3</sup> The era of the Messiah had arrived. It may not have been in the form that the Jews expected, but that is not surprising. The fulfilment of God's promises is rarely in the form people expect. Twelve tribes had formed the basis of the old people of God, but twelve apostles would form the basis of the new.

1. Matthew 9:35-38 2. Matthew 10:1-4; Mark 3:13-15; Luke 6:12-13 3. Matthew 10:1; Mark 3:14-15

Galilee, looking towards the Golan Heights

## 03.13. Sermon on the Mount

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Sermon on the Mount When people accept Jesus as the promised Saviour, they enter his kingdom and come under his rule. But his kingdom is not governed by a system of laws such as those that formerly operated in Israel. In Christ's kingdom, behaviour is modelled on the character of the king himself, Jesus Christ. He wants his character to be reproduced in his followers. The collection of Jesus' teachings called the Sermon on the Mount deals with the attitudes and behaviour of those who have placed themselves under the lordship of Christ. It is not a plan to reform society by rewriting a nation's legislation, but a set of teachings to show the followers of Jesus the sort of life he requires of them.

Critics might complain that the Sermon on the Mount has not changed the world, but the reason is that the world has not accepted it. It cannot be judged a failure if it has not even been accepted. On the other hand, where it has been accepted, namely, in the lives of Jesus' followers, it has transformed those lives. Once people come into union with Jesus Christ, they become 'new people'. Jesus begins to transform them, and they find that his teachings are practical and his purposes attainable.<sup>1</sup>

Laws can control outward actions, but Jesus wants to control the heart. Laws might discourage wrong behaviour, but Jesus wants to remove wrong attitudes. When he controls the heart, right behaviour follows.<sup>2</sup> This does not mean that Jesus was opposed to the law of Moses. The law was given for a purpose, but that purpose was not to provide a way of acceptance with God. The righteousness God demands cannot be achieved by keeping rules and regulations. It comes from God's grace in response to repentance and faith, and is developed through submission to Jesus.<sup>3</sup>

1. Matthew 5:48; Matthew 6:33; Matthew 7:24; cf. 2 Corinthians 5:17 2. Matthew 5:21-22; Matthew 5:27-28; Matthew 5:33-39; Matthew 5:43-48 3. Matthew 5:20; Romans 1:17; Romans 3:21-22; Romans 3:28

Sea of Galilee from Mount of the Beatitudes

## 03.14. In Jerusalem again

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In Jerusalem again When Jesus made a brief trip to Jerusalem for a religious festival, one place he visited was the Pool of Bethesda, where many blind and crippled people hoped for miraculous healing. One man wanted Jesus to help him, not for healing (for he did not know who Jesus was), but for assistance into the pool.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus must have known that this man's troubles were in some way connected with his own wrongdoing, so he not only healed the man but also urged him to repent of his sin. The man, however, showed neither gratitude nor repentance. On the contrary, he reported Jesus to hostile Jewish leaders who were looking for him.<sup>2</sup>

These Jewish leaders argued that Jesus, in healing people on the Sabbath, was doing work and therefore breaking the Jewish law. Jesus replied that his Father also worked on the Sabbath – for example, in providing constant care for all his creatures – but this angered the Jews even more.<sup>3</sup> This incident and the teaching that flowed from it remind us of important issues relating to life and death. Jesus showed his followers that they should always have loving care for those who suffer. But they might also have opportunity to speak of those deeper issues of life that people fail to see when personal circumstances cloud their vision.

Yet even in the face of death, people can have certainty. Those who receive Jesus as the God-sent Saviour find that they have passed from death to life. Consequently, the prospect of physical death holds no terror, because it cannot extinguish the eternal life God has put within them. Although they will stand before Christ in the final judgment, there will be no condemnation for those who have received the eternal life he made available.<sup>4</sup> 1. John 5:1-7; John 5:13

2. John 5:8-15

3. John 5:16-18

4. John 5:19-24

Pool of Bethesda

## 03.15. Back in Galilee

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### Back in Galilee

Upon returning north, Jesus was again in Capernaum when he met an officer of the Roman army who asked him to heal a critically ill servant. The man knew that if he, an army officer, could exercise imperial authority to command his soldiers, Jesus could surely exercise divine authority to heal the servant. He merely needed to issue a command and the servant would be healed.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus was impressed with the simple confidence of the Roman officer. A foreigner had more faith than the Jews.<sup>2</sup> In fact, the Jews of Capernaum (and Bethsaida and Chorazin, other Jewish towns in the part of Galilee where Jesus did much of his work) were heading for a terrible judgment. Predominantly non-Jewish towns such as Tyre, Sidon and Sodom may have been morally worse than the predominantly Jewish towns, but the judgment on them would not be as severe, because they had not been blessed with the extensive ministry of Jesus among them.<sup>3</sup> The lesson is that people in a position of privilege will be judged more severely if they reject the opportunities given them. Whether in mercy or judgment, God often acts in ways that complacently religious people do not expect.

Even those who were in many ways closest to Jesus, such as his mother, brothers and sisters, were at times slow to understand what he was doing and saying. He did not conform to their ideas of the Messiah, and they thought he was suffering from some form of religious extremism. Conservatively religious people today would be equally surprised if they realized the sort of radical life Jesus has called them to. It is a life that puts his interests before personal well-being, family relationships, community prosperity and national self-interest, but it is the only life of true discipleship.<sup>4</sup>

1. Luke 7:1-8

2. Luke 7:9-10 3. Matthew 11:20-24 4. Mark 3:20-21; Mark 3:31-35; cf. Luke 14:26-27

Synagogue ruins, Capernaum

## 03.16. Outreach in the north

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### Outreach in the north

About this time there was a marked increase in Jesus' use of parables. Not all parables were as easy to interpret as we sometimes imagine, and Jesus used them to make people think. He confronted people with the claims of his kingdom, and forced them to decide one way or the other whether they would enter it. His parables helped separate those who genuinely believed from those who were merely curious.<sup>1</sup>

Along with this element of confrontation came an element of urgency. Jesus believed that the twelve had been with him long enough and the time had now come to send them out by themselves, so that the message of the kingdom could spread more rapidly. He passed on to them some of his special messianic powers so that, besides preaching the good news of the kingdom, they could perform acts of merciful healing as he did.<sup>2</sup>

There would not be time to reach the whole world during Jesus' lifetime, so the twelve were to concentrate on Israel. After Jesus' death and resurrection, they could use Israel as a base from which to evangelize the countries beyond.<sup>3</sup> For the present, however, the twelve were to move swiftly and cover as much territory as possible. They were to take with them only the bare essentials and were not to waste time with people who refused to listen. Above all, they were to proclaim fearlessly whatever Jesus had taught them.. This could land them in trouble, but they were to trust the Spirit of God to guide them, no matter what circumstances they faced.<sup>4</sup>

Although Jesus left his disciples in no doubt concerning the dangers ahead, he assured them help would come from unexpected sources. And God would reward those who cared for his messengers.<sup>5</sup>

1. Matthew 13:10-16. See separate book in this series, Parables and Pictures.  
2. Luke 9:1-2; see page 12  
3. Matthew 10:5-8; Matthew 28:18-19; Acts 1:8  
4. Matthew 10:9-33  
5. Matthew 10:40-42

Modern Safed, in the northern hills

## 03.17. Around the Sea of Galilee

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Around the Sea of Galilee When the twelve returned from their first period of work around Galilee, Jesus tried to have some time alone with them. They had found that working for the Messiah's kingdom placed such demands on them that they barely had time to eat. Jesus also needed a break, but the sight of people in need always moved him to pity. And the crowds who wanted his help were numbered in thousands.<sup>1</sup>

Although the needs of these people were mainly spiritual, Jesus did not ignore their physical needs. When he miraculously fed a huge crowd with five loaves and two fish, many wanted to make him king immediately. This might have pleased some of Jesus' followers, but for him it was a possible temptation. He therefore went up into the hills behind the lake to be alone and pray, while his disciples got into a boat and began rowing across to Bethsaida.<sup>2</sup>

Before the disciples could reach Bethsaida, a storm blew up that might have sunk their boat had not Jesus suddenly intervened. They did not think to call for his help, in spite of the power they had seen when he fed the great crowd. Others, by contrast, expected Jesus to supply them with whatever they wanted. They followed him not because they felt a spiritual need, but because they believed he had magical powers that could keep them well fed.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus did not persevere indefinitely with those whose interests were entirely selfish. He urged them to think about spiritual and eternal issues, not just things that were physical and temporal. His words, 'I am the bread of life', are as necessary for us as they were for the people of his day.<sup>4</sup> Unless people eat of this 'bread' they cannot be saved, cannot be in Christ's kingdom, and cannot have eternal life.

Many, when they heard Jesus say this, turned back from following him. But not the true followers. Such people know that life is more than bread, and it is found in Jesus Christ alone.<sup>5</sup> 1. Mark 6:30-34; Mark 6:44 2. Mark 6:45-46; John 6:15-17 3. Mark 6:47-52; John 6:18-26

4. John 6:35-51 5. John 6:66-68; cf. Matthew 4:4

Sea of Galilee, Capernaum

## 03.18. Tyre, Sidon, and the Decapolis

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Tyre, Sidon, and the Decapolis From the region around the Sea of Galilee, Jesus and his disciples moved north-west, out of Palestine and into the region of Lebanon. They were hoping to get some peace and quiet away from the crowds of Galilee, but this was not to be. Jesus' fame had spread beyond the borders of Palestine, and soon the local people were coming to him for healing. Jesus was impressed with the attitude of one local woman in particular, whose faith was in marked contrast to the unbelief of many Israelites.<sup>1</sup>

After the time in Lebanon, Jesus and his disciples returned to the region around the Sea of Galilee, and from there moved south into the Decapolis. This also was a largely Gentile area, and it seems that for a time Jesus' ministry was mainly among Gentiles. Crowds came to him and he ministered to them as he had to Israelites. Many Gentiles became believers in the God of Israel, whereas Israelites were increasingly rejecting the one their God had sent to them.<sup>2</sup>

Once more Jesus showed concern for the crowds of people around him when he saw they had barely eaten for three days. On a previous occasion he miraculously fed a crowd that was largely Jewish, but here in the Decapolis the crowd was largely Gentile.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps that was why the disciples doubted whether he would use his messianic power to feed them. Jesus made no distinction, and by his generosity of spirit gave his disciples a valuable lesson. But the disciples were slow to learn. In spite of seeing his two miraculous provisions of food for others, they became worried when they themselves had no food. Jesus corrected their unbelief, and then used the occasion to point out something they had not yet grasped, namely, that the threat to the Messiah's kingdom was not from the Gentile powers but from the Jewish nation itself. Unbelief, hypocrisy and wrong teaching were leading the nation to disaster.<sup>4</sup> 1. Mark 7:24; Matthew 15:21-28 2. Mark 7:31; Matthew 15:29-31 3. Matthew 15:32-39; cf. John 6:1-15 4. Matthew 16:5-12; Luke 12:1

Ruins of Bethshean, a city of the Decapolis

### 03.19. On a northern mountain

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On a northern mountain The Mount of Transfiguration is believed to be Mount Hermon, in Israel's far north. This identification is possibly correct, because just before his transfiguration, Jesus was nearby in Caesarea Philippi, the northernmost Israelite town of his recorded travels. This was the place where he asked his disciples who they believed him to be, and Peter, speaking no doubt on behalf of the group, replied that he was the promised Messiah, the Son of God.<sup>1</sup> A few days later, Jesus and his disciples went up 'a high mountain', which again suggests Mount Hermon, the highest mountain in all Israel. The remarkable event known as the Transfiguration<sup>2</sup> was seen by only three disciples, and seems to have been a revelation of the glory that Jesus laid aside when he came into the world. It now reappeared briefly through a human body and gave a glimpse of the glory he would have after he finished the work he came to do. That work could not be completed, however, till Jesus had given his life in sacrifice on the cross. This confirmed what he had told his disciples only a few days earlier – the Messiah had to die before he could enter his glory.<sup>3</sup> In spite of Peter's well-meaning but misguided attempt to prevent such a death, Jesus knew there was no way he could avoid the cross.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, Jesus made it clear, both to the twelve and to all believers since, that any who want to be his followers must be prepared for a similar end. Those who want to keep their lives for themselves will lose life in the only sense that matters; those who choose the way of self-denial for the sake of Christ will find life in its fullest sense.<sup>5</sup>

Jesus would enter his eternal glory only by way of death – and so it is with us. The only things of eternal worth are those we sacrifice for the sake of Jesus Christ. Those we keep for ourselves will perish with us.

1. Matthew 16:13-20. Caesarea Philippi later became known as Banyas.

2. Matthew 17:1-13 3. Luke 9:30-31; cf. Matthew 16:21 4. Matthew 16:21-23 5. Matthew 16:24-26

Cave at Banyas, where a spring is one source of the Jordan River

## 03.20. Outreach southwards

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### Outreach southwards

After further work in Galilee, Jesus headed south. He knew that his mission would finish in Jerusalem, but first he had much work to do in Samaria and in regions east of Jordan and elsewhere. Among the twelve, some were not yet ready for this. For example, they resented the Samaritans' animosity to Jews and would rather see them killed than converted. Jesus' rebuke shows that such bigotry should never be found among his followers.<sup>1</sup> This was not the only attitude that needed to change if people were to be true followers of Jesus. Jesus gave lessons to three would-be disciples to show that following him means putting up with hardship, placing his interests before all others, and sticking with him to the end, even if the journey becomes difficult.<sup>2</sup> With each passing day, the time available to Jesus to complete his ministry diminished. There was still much to do, because he wanted to spread the message of his kingdom as widely as possible across the region. Therefore, just as he had sent the twelve into the northern areas, so now he sent a much larger number, seventy, into the southern areas.<sup>3</sup> His instructions to the seventy were similar to those he gave the twelve.

Some time later, probably several months, the seventy returned. They were excited at the success they saw in exercising the powers Jesus entrusted to them. Jesus saw this as the triumph of his kingdom over Satan's – 'I saw Satan falling like lightning from heaven'<sup>4</sup> – and therefore as an assurance of ultimate victory.

Amid the excitement, however, Jesus issued a caution. Those who serve him must remember that their greatest cause for praise is not what they have done for God, but what he has done for them.<sup>5</sup> They know their weaknesses, and are humbly grateful that a gracious God has given them his salvation.

1. Luke 9:51-56

2. Luke 9:57-62

3. Luke 10:1-16 4. Luke 10:17-19

5. Luke 17:20

Roman ruins, Samaria

## 03.21. Hospitality in Bethany

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### Hospitality in Bethany

Apart from the constant stress of his work and the unceasing demands of the pressing crowds, Jesus had to put up with repeated dullness and pettiness among those closest to him. At various times they showed misunderstanding of plain statements, inability at straightforward tasks, competition among themselves and jealousy of other preachers.<sup>1</sup> And now, to add to all that, tension must have been building within Jesus' heart as he saw the violent climax to his work approaching. To get away for a while for some quiet refreshment of spirit, Jesus visited the home of his friends, Mary, Martha and Lazarus, who lived in the village of Bethany, just outside Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup> Martha, wanting to provide the best possible hospitality, busied herself preparing a large meal, but she became annoyed when Mary, instead of helping, sat and listened to Jesus talk.

Jesus, however, had not come because he wanted a lavish meal. All he wanted was some fellowship with his friends, and Mary understood this. People are still making the same mistake as Martha, and in doing so are missing out on the blessings of giving and receiving hospitality. What people want is friendship, not a banquet. Being in each other's homes means that we get to know each other, and though this can be uplifting, it exposes us as we really are. Jesus did not have his own home, but for more than three years he lived closely with a group of men (and women<sup>3</sup>) who observed him constantly, day and night. They saw him when he was popular and when he was hated. Whether he was tired, hungry, frustrated, abused, disappointed or distressed, they saw it all. These were the people who knew Jesus best, and their unqualified testimony was that, in both behaviour and character, he was without fault. 'He did no sin . . . In him there was no sin.'<sup>4</sup> 1. Mark 8:31-32; Mark 9:18-19; Mark 9:33-34; Mark 9:38-40 2. Luke 10:38-42

3. Luke 8:1-3 4. 1 Peter 2:22; 1 Peter 3:18; 1 John 3:5

### Church at Bethany

## 03.22. To Jerusalem for a festival

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To Jerusalem for a festival At some stage during Jesus' ministry he spent time in Jerusalem for certain Jewish feasts (or festivals). One of these was the week-long Feast of Tabernacles, sometimes called the Festival of Shelters.<sup>1</sup> The name came from the temporary shelters Jews lived in during the festival, in memory of their ancestors' years in the wilderness.

Jesus was with his brothers in Galilee at the time, and was no doubt disappointed at their continued refusal to believe in him. He would not go to the feast to promote himself (which was what his brothers suggested), though later in the week he made a quiet and unannounced entry. It was difficult, however, for him to remain unnoticed, because he was a controversial figure. Some thought he was a good man, but others wanted to kill him.<sup>2</sup> When Jesus began to teach in the temple, the controversy increased. As often happened, Jewish legalists criticized him for doing his healing works on the Sabbath, and Jesus responded by accusing them of hypocrisy. Far from trying to appease them, he stirred them up further by asserting that he had come from heaven, and one day would return. Not only would his opponents then be rid of him, but they could be assured of never seeing him again, because there was no way that unbelievers like them could ever reach heaven.<sup>3</sup>

Eternal life was available, however, to all who recognized their spiritual need and came to Jesus in true faith.<sup>4</sup> The response to this was mixed. Some believed, some were confused, and some were opposed. Even the Jewish Council, the Sanhedrin, was divided. The leaders tried unsuccessfully to arrest him, but one member, Nicodemus, knew Jesus better and asked that at least he be given a fair hearing.<sup>5</sup> Nicodemus' pleading failed. It was now clear that the Jewish leaders were not interested in finding out the truth about Jesus. They just wanted him out of the way, preferably dead.

1. John 7:2; Leviticus 23:33-43; Deuteronomy 16:13-15

2. John 7:1-13 3. John 7:19-23; John 7:28-30; John 7:33-34

4. John 7:37-39

5. John 7:40-51

Temporary shelter, Feast of Tabernacles

## 03.23. In the Jerusalem temple

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### In the Jerusalem temple

Now that Jesus had, with the help of the twelve and the seventy, covered most of the provincial regions, he concentrated his work in Jerusalem and nearby regions. He had always met his fiercest opposition in Jerusalem, and he knew the final months of his work would be tough. This was a time of constant argument with the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem, especially when Jesus went and taught in their stronghold, the temple.<sup>1</sup> When Jesus said he was the light of the world, the Jews accused him of bearing witness to himself and therefore of breaking the law. When he offered them eternal life, they accused him of claiming to be greater than Abraham. When he said he existed before Abraham, they accused him of blasphemy. When he healed a blind man, they accused him of breaking Sabbath rules.<sup>2</sup>

Two months had now passed since the Feast of Tabernacles, and people were becoming agitated. Another festival had come round and, as Jesus was walking in the temple, people confronted him. His teaching had been forthright, and though many were upset, others believed. A clear division emerged as people decided whether to follow Jesus or oppose him.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus had given plenty of evidence, through his activity of the past three years, that he was the God-sent Messiah, but he had not yet said the words many wanted to hear, 'I am the Messiah'. Some wanted to hear these words so that they could be 'safe' in believing, but others wanted to hear them so that they could be safe in making accusations. Jesus still refused to satisfy them. They had all the evidence they needed, and those who accepted it in faith were his true people. Their eternal security was guaranteed by Jesus and his heavenly Father, because the two were inseparably united. As usual, some believed and others just got angry.<sup>4</sup> 1. John 8:20; John 10:21; John 11:56 2. John 8:12-13; John 8:51-53; John 8:56-59; John 9:13-16 3. John 9:16; John 9:38; John 10:19-22 4. John 10:22-31; John 10:37-39

Jerusalem today – from theological debate to tourism

## 03.24. Back to the Jordan Valley

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Back to the Jordan Valley The recent dispute in the temple had threatened such violence that Jesus decided to leave Jerusalem for a while. He went across the Jordan into Perea, where John the Baptist had preached.<sup>1</sup> The welcome Jesus received there was in marked contrast to the hostility of Jerusalem.

Jesus did not remain in Perea. He seems to have moved around the Jordan Valley, bringing his message of life and hope to people on both sides of the river. These were a mixture of Jews and Gentiles, but to all he made it clear that they should believe in him without delay, because they would not have the opportunity to hear from him again. Soon he would return to Jerusalem for the last time. People should stop debating theoretical questions about who would or would not be saved, and instead make sure of their own salvation. For on the judgment day, many who assume they are in God's kingdom will find themselves left outside.<sup>2</sup>

One reason why crowds continued to follow Jesus was that many still misunderstood the kingdom he proclaimed. They thought of a political structure, even though Jesus had promised no such thing. What he saw ahead was the sacrifice of his own life, and he warned his followers that they were to be prepared for the same end.<sup>3</sup> To follow Jesus means to love him more than anything else. It means to be loyal even to death. On the other hand, the kingdom of God is not something threatening or grim. It is open even to children. In fact, people must, in a sense, enter it as children.<sup>4</sup> This does not mean that they are to be childish or naïve, but that they are to come in a spirit of complete dependence. Christ's kingdom has no place for those who hold high opinions of themselves, or who think they can gain eternal life through their own wisdom, effort or good works.

1. John 10:40-42 2. Luke 13:22-30 3. Luke 14:25-27 4. Luke 18:15-17

'Let the children come to me'

## 03.25. Through Jericho

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Through Jericho As Jesus prepared to leave the Jordan Valley and begin the ascent to Jerusalem, he told his disciples that this would lead to the climax of his life's work. He would be arrested and condemned by the Jewish leaders and handed over to the Romans for execution. But on the third day he would rise victoriously from death.<sup>1</sup>

Incredibly, the disciples seem not to have understood what Jesus said. They were too concerned about a dispute that arose when two of the group tried to secure the top positions in the kingdom. In spite of the years spent with Jesus, they still did not understand the sort of kingdom he brought. Nor did they understand the severe tests of loyalty they would face when persecution came. Jesus' kingdom is not like the political structures of this world where ambitious people compete for power. It is a kingdom based on the example of the King himself, who served others and gave himself for them.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus must have been deeply disappointed with the disciples as he came to Jericho, the last Jordan Valley town before the road begins its climb to Jerusalem. He healed several beggars as he passed through,<sup>3</sup> though only after he made the men declare their faith openly. Plenty of people were ready to call Jesus by his messianic title Son of David if they thought it would help extract his blessing. The men's open confession also strengthened their faith.

Another person in Jericho who became a believer was Zacchaeus, a Jew who was despised by other Jews because he collected taxes for the Roman government that ruled them.<sup>4</sup> Onlookers were surprised when Jesus went to his house, but Jesus had the satisfaction of seeing Zacchaeus repent of his wrongdoing. Zacchaeus promised not only to make full restitution to those he had cheated, but also to give generously to those he had not cheated. Respectable citizens disapproved of Jesus' associating with such a disreputable person, but that was the sort of person Jesus came to save.

1. Matthew 20:17-19 2. Matthew 20:20-28 3. Matthew 20:29-34; Mark 10:46

From old Jericho towards the Mount of Temptation

## 03.26. In Bethany again

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### In Bethany again

During his time in the Jordan Valley, Jesus heard that his friend Lazarus of Bethany was seriously ill. Jesus knew that Lazarus was in fact dead, and therefore he did not hurry to Bethany immediately. He would go in due course, in spite of the efforts of his disciples to stop him because of the trouble they saw ahead. Jesus would raise Lazarus to life, and thereby strengthen the faith of the disciples and of Lazarus' sisters.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus saw death as an enemy, a weapon of Satan. He was grieved at the sorrow it brought his friends, and he showed his power over it by raising Lazarus to life. His power over death, however, goes much further. All who are spiritually dead because of sin can have eternal life through him, so that the life of the kingdom of God is theirs for ever.<sup>2</sup> In the normal course of events, physical death comes to all, but it cannot destroy the eternal life that Jesus gives. The miracle of Lazarus' resurrection set in motion the sequence of events that led to Jesus' crucifixion. As Jesus' fame spread, the Sanhedrin feared the people might accept him as leader of a messianic uprising, and bring upon the nation a crushing Roman intervention. The simple solution was to kill Jesus and save the nation.<sup>3</sup>

Passover was approaching, and as people arrived in Jerusalem for the festival, the atmosphere grew tense. Jesus and the disciples escaped attention for a while by retreating to a quiet village, but when they returned to the house of Mary, Martha and Lazarus, news spread and a crowd gathered.<sup>4</sup>

Some of these people were merely curious, but others were genuine believers. The Jewish leaders were right in thinking that the raising of Lazarus would attract a following for Jesus.<sup>5</sup> They therefore became more determined to kill him – and to kill Lazarus as well.

1. John 11:1-44 2. John 11:25-26 3. John 11:45-53 4. John 11:54-57; John 12:1; John 12:9 5. John 12:10-11; cf. John 11:47-48

Token of life and hope

## 03.27. Triumphal entry

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### Triumphal entry

According to various psalms and prophecies, the Jewish people expected their messianic king, the Son of David, to enter the royal city of Zion in a triumphal procession. Jesus saw that the time had now come to make such an entry.<sup>1</sup> It was a bold challenge to the Jewish people, especially his opponents, and therefore he made secret arrangements with just a few trusted people, so that no one could find out beforehand and try to stop it from happening. When Jesus made his triumphal entry, he came not as a conquering warlord, but as a king of peace. He was humble and riding on a donkey. The people in Jerusalem, both local residents and visitors who came for the Passover, welcomed him enthusiastically as the Messiah, though many had little understanding of his messiahship.<sup>2</sup> The Jewish leaders, however, were furious. The thing they most feared was happening before their eyes. News of the raising of Lazarus had swelled the crowd, and now it seemed half the world was following Jesus.<sup>3</sup> The Jewish leaders seemed powerless.

Human nature inclines most people to be swept away by the praise they receive. Not so the Lord Jesus. He was not deceived by the excitement of the crowd. He knew that, when people understood properly the sort of Messiah he was, they would turn against him. Indeed, the nation as a whole would turn against him, and in the judgment that resulted, Jerusalem would be destroyed. He wept at the city's refusal to accept its Saviour.<sup>4</sup>

Once Jesus entered Jerusalem, he headed not for the palace but for the temple. This again showed that his messiahship was concerned not with political issues but with spiritual. What he saw in the temple displeased him, but it was too late in the day to do much, so he went back to Bethany for the night. The next day he returned to the temple to cleanse it of its ungodly practices.<sup>5</sup> 1. Matthew 21:1-5; Psalms 24:7-10; Psalms 110:1-7; Psalms 118:25-27; Zechariah 9:9 2. Luke 19:35-38; John 12:12-16 3. Luke 19:39-40; John 12:17-19 4. Luke 19:41-44; cf. Matthew 23:37-39 5. Mark 11:11-19; cf. John 2:13-22

From Bethphage down the Mount of Olives towards Jerusalem

## 03.28. Final teaching in Jerusalem

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### Final teaching in Jerusalem

Jesus' triumphal entry took place on the Sunday before Passover, and his cleansing of the temple the next day.<sup>1</sup> After cleansing the temple, he spent time there healing and teaching, and then went back to Bethany for the night.<sup>2</sup> On the Tuesday morning Jesus returned to Jerusalem,<sup>3</sup> where he spent much time in lively interaction with the people – arguments, debates, teachings, warnings. The religious leaders in particular challenged him with tough questions, and he replied with equally tough questions. Many of these were supplemented with parables and stories that forced the hearers to think hard about themselves and where they were heading.<sup>4</sup> Although Jesus saw his death approaching, he still engaged daily in this intense disputation, which must have made the nights at Bethany a welcome respite.

Jesus' chief teaching venue in Jerusalem was the temple.<sup>5</sup> On one occasion, perhaps on the Wednesday, he had finished teaching and was heading in the direction of Bethany when, in response to questions from his disciples, he stopped on the Mount of Olives to talk to them about some of the crises ahead.<sup>6</sup> The disciples seem to have thought that the predicted destruction of Jerusalem was linked to the return of the Messiah and the end of the age. Jesus pointed out that the two events were not necessarily connected. Certainly, people of his generation would live to witness the horror of Jerusalem's destruction, but they were not to believe every prediction of his soon return. Nor were they to think that every war, famine or earthquake was a sure sign that the end was near. What they were to be concerned with was that the good news of the kingdom be spread throughout the world, and that they themselves be ready always for his return. For he will return at a time that no one expects.

1. John 12:12 cf. v. 1; Mark 11:11-12; Mark 11:15 2. Matthew 21:12-17 3. Matthew 21:18

4. Matthew 21:23; Matthew 21:28; Matthew 21:33; Matthew 21:45; Matthew 22:1; Matthew 22:15; Matthew 22:23; Matthew 22:34; Matthew 22:41 5. Matthew 21:14; Matthew 21:23; Matthew 24:1; Matthew 26:55; Mark 12:35; Mark 12:41; Luke 21:37-38 6. Matthew 24:1-44

Jerusalem

## 03.29. Preparing for Passover

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Preparing for Passover On the Thursday, Jesus began preparation for Passover, scheduled for the next day. This feast commemorated Israel's escape from bondage in Egypt, when each Israelite family sacrificed a lamb in place of its firstborn and thereby ensured that God would 'pass over' its house. The occupants, having been spared, then escaped from bondage, eating bread made in haste as they fled.<sup>1</sup> The time for a greater deliverance had now arrived. Jesus would die as the true Passover lamb, to bear sin's penalty and release sinners from its bondage. Normally, the Jews killed the lamb on the afternoon of Passover day and ate it in a meal that night. But Jesus planned to eat the meal with his disciples the night before. And they probably ate it without a lamb, because the next day Jesus himself was to be the lamb.<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile, the Jewish leaders were plotting how to arrest Jesus, but they preferred not to do it during the festival. Excitement was high and they did not want a riot. Their task was made easier when one of the twelve, Judas, struck a deal with them to betray Jesus. He could tell them of Jesus' movements, so that they could arrest him without the public knowing.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus, however, knew what Judas was plotting. Therefore, he made careful arrangements for the feast, so that the only people who knew where it would be held were various unnamed people to whom he gave secret instructions.<sup>4</sup> We know the place simply as 'the upper room'. The treachery of Judas was in sharp contrast to the affection of a woman who anointed Jesus' feet with expensive perfume.<sup>5</sup> Judas saw her action as a waste of money; the woman saw it as an act of devotion; Jesus saw it as symbolic of his anointing for burial.

1. Exodus 12:1-20; Exodus 12:39 2. Exodus 12:6; Exodus 12:8; 1 Corinthians 5:7 3. Matthew 26:3-5; Matthew 26:14-16 4. Mark 14:12-16 5. Mary of Bethany, if Matthew 26:6-13 and John 12:1-8 refer to the same incident

Middle Eastern perfumes

## 03.30. The last night together

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### The last night together

During the meal with the twelve that night, Jesus took some water and a towel and began to wash their feet.<sup>1</sup> They were embarrassed at this, but Jesus was giving them important matters to think about. First, he was God's perfect servant, the only one who could cleanse sinners, and he was about to do this by offering his life as a sacrifice. Second, if he, the disciples' Lord, humbled himself by washing their feet, how much more should they, his servants, humble themselves by serving each other.

Jesus gave another graphic demonstration of the sacrifice he was about to make by taking bread and wine, part of the Passover meal, and using them as symbols of his own body and blood. His sacrifice would seal God's promise of forgiveness and life to all who receive Jesus Christ. To this day, cleansed sinners relive all that Christ's sacrifice means to them when they eat bread and wine together in an act of communion known as the Lord's Supper.<sup>2</sup> On the occasion of the meal in the upper room, Jesus had much more to say to his disciples. This is represented in the teaching of John 14:1-31; John 15:1-27; John 16:1-33, to which is added the prayer of Jesus in John 17:1-26. The minds of the disciples, however, were in a state of confusion. Since the triumphal entry only a few days earlier, more had happened than the disciples could clearly grasp. Jesus knew they could not take in all he was saying, but he said it nevertheless, confident that after his resurrection and their reception of the Holy Spirit, they would recall his words and understand their significance.<sup>3</sup>

Earlier that night, the disciples learnt that one of the twelve was a traitor. The response of the others to this news was a mixture of disbelief, anxiety and confusion. It even led to an argument among them – not about who was the worst, but about who was the best!<sup>4</sup> To be impressed with Jesus' example of self-sacrificial service is one thing; to follow it, quite another.

1. John 13:1-16 2. Matthew 26:26-30; 1 Corinthians 10:16; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 3. John 14:1; John 14:25-27; John 16:4-13 4. Luke 22:22-24; John 13:21-22; John 13:37

An 'upper room' in Jerusalem

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