Jesus Christ
The Real Story

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Introduction - Jesus Christ: The Real Story

Who was Jesus? Few will dispute that a man named Jesus lived 2,000 years ago and that He was a great teacher who impacted the world from His time forward.

He made a claim that was breathtaking in its audacity—that He was the very Son of God. For much of His lifetime He commanded only a small following, people who believed that claim and considered Him their promised Deliverer and King. Many others later came to believe that He was the Son of God as a result of the testimony of those followers.

Yet during His time the religious authorities rejected Him as the Son of God. Many of His statements were so contrary to their teachings and traditions that they opposed Him and eventually succeeded in having Him put to death.

Likewise, the local Roman authorities also saw Him as a threat and became complicit in His execution, being the ones who actually carried it out. The religions of His day opposed the growth of His teachings and used unlawful and violent means to try to destroy the Church He founded. The government of Rome also came to vigorously persecute the followers of this Jewish teacher from Galilee.

Controversy about Jesus continues

Today Jesus remains a controversial figure. The record of Jesus' life as recorded in the Gospel accounts has come into question in many ways. For example, the Gospel writers presented the miracles of Jesus as supernatural. Today, however, many rationalize them away as a normal function of nature misunderstood at the time, or they simply dismiss them altogether as fables.

Yet another and more modern reconstruction of the true Jesus appears in books and movies about His life. For example, most people have come to accept a popular likeness of Jesus far different from the way He really looked 2,000 years ago. These portrayals give an inaccurate picture of Christ's humanity. Such movies as The Last Temptation of Christ and the stage play Jesus Christ Superstar, along with countless television productions, have left a lasting impression on our minds and in the process distorted, as we will see, the true historical Jesus.

Of course, one can easily point to variations in the beliefs and practices of those who've claimed to be Jesus' followers down through the centuries and rightfully ask the questions, "Who is the real Jesus, anyway? And why should I want to follow Him?"

Certainly if you take His statements as recorded by His first-century disciples literally, and then you consider all that has happened since, you may well perceive that most of those who have professed to follow Jesus over the centuries actually haven't—and the same is true today.

Yet you might conclude that this is only to be expected—that Jesus taught nice but impractical ideas, things that can't really work in the real world. Then again, perhaps the old saying, "the trouble with Christianity is that it has never been tried," has a lot of truth to it. As Mahatma Gandhi once said, "Jesus I like, but I don't know about His followers."

Discovering the real Jesus

What is the real story? Can the true picture of Jesus emerge after 2,000 years of differing views? Who should we believe as we try to find it?

To know the real Jesus would include the fact that what He really taught, and what He really did, is essential for eternal life. Praying to His Father, Jesus said, "This is eternal life: to know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (John 17:3, Revised English Bible, emphasis added throughout).

Did Jesus do what the records show? Was He—is He—really who He claimed to be? Can it be proved historically? Or are we left to simply accept it on blind faith?

And then perhaps the most important question: Does it really matter?

Let's put it this way: If the story of Jesus is a myth, if the reported events of His life along with His claims and teachings are the fabrication of a small group of conspirators, then it certainly doesn't matter. We are then left to devise the meaning of human life from our own imaginations.

But if Jesus Christ is who He says He was—the Son of God who came to earth to live as a human being, who died at the hands of fellow human beings and who was raised from the dead three days and three nights later—then that changes everything.

For this one single event—God living and dying as a man—then becomes the most amazing event in the entire history of humanity.

It puts all of us in a situation that requires our full attention—because it leaves us ultimately accountable for how we choose to respond.

Can we know? This booklet seeks to address and answer the major questions that intelligent, reasoning people naturally ask in trying to understand Jesus Christ—the real story.

Who—and What—Was Jesus Christ?

The Roman governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate, faced a difficult situation when Jesus was brought before him. Apprehensively, he attempted to dismiss the picture that was emerging in front of him. When Pilate heard the accusation, it struck fear into his heart. "He has claimed to be the Son of God" (John 19:7, NRSV).

Pilate's next question betrayed his fear that he was not dealing with an ordinary man. He had just been given a message from his wife, who received a warning in a dream not to have anything to do with this innocent man (Matthew 27:19). Pilate himself knew that Jesus had been delivered to him because the chief priests were jealous of and despised Him (verse 18). Yet Pilate couldn't avoid his date with destiny.

He next asked Jesus, "Where are You from?" (John 19:9). Pilate already knew He was Galilean. But what geographical area this Jewish teacher came from was not the question. Where are you really from is what Pilate wanted to know. Jesus was silent. His claim to be the Son of God had already answered this question. But Pilate did not have the courage to deal with this answer.

Accepting the real answer would have made all the difference. The apostle Paul said that none of the rulers of this world knew who Jesus was, where He came from and His purpose for coming, "for had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory" (1 Corinthians 2:8).

Pilate could not face this issue. He knew what was right in this instance, but he feared losing power. He feared Caesar's reaction if it were reported that he did not deal with someone who posed a threat to Roman control in the region (John 19:12). He feared a popular uprising if he did not agree to the Jewish leaders' political demands. He also feared Jesus, because he was not quite sure with whom he was dealing.

Avoiding a difficult choice

In the end political expediency won out. The stage was set to both indict all mankind of guilt and make provision for their forgiveness. Pilate gave the order for Jesus to be crucified. The reality was denied, left for all to confront at a later time.

Most of us tend to ignore unpleasant realities and make choices that we think are beneficial to us. Confronted with evidence as to who Jesus really was, would you face a reality that is too difficult for you to accept? Deep down, maybe we intuitively realize it would change life as we know it. So perhaps it's better, we reason, not to look into this matter too deeply to leave ourselves an out. That's the route Pilate took.

But this is where we have to begin. Who, really, was Jesus of Nazareth? Where did He really come from? If we understand that, it explains everything He did and said.

Most see Jesus as a teacher, a wise man, a Jewish sage who died an unjust and horrible death

and founded a great religion.

Is there more to it than that? One of the most controversial topics is the true identity of Jesus Christ—and at the same time it is perhaps the most crucial. It lies at the heart of the Christian faith. What this entails is the understanding that Jesus was not simply an extraordinary human being, but that Jesus was actually God in human flesh.

But if He was God in the flesh, how was He God? This is the part that is often neglected in many explanations—and, as a result, many have difficulty grasping how this could be.

Jesus certainly regarded Himself as much more than only a man, prophet or teacher.

Some say that Jesus made no claims to be God. Some scholars even insist that, years later, leaders of the Christian Church concocted and edited into the record the titles Jesus used, the miracles and His claims and actions that showed He believed He was God. In other words, the argument is that the record has been fabricated and the Jesus portrayed in the New Testament is a legend, a theological product of the early Church.

However, this is historically impossible for several reasons—not the least of which is that immediately after the death and resurrection of Jesus, the Church grew explosively based on the conviction that He was God. There was no time for a legend to develop around exaggerated claims of who Jesus might be.

Peter immediately preached that Jesus had been resurrected from the dead and that He was indeed the Christ and Lord and equated Him with God (Acts 2:27, 34-35). The disciples and the Church knew who Jesus was, as the powerful growth of the Church shows.

The fact of the matter, staggering though it is, is that Jesus of Nazareth was God in the flesh. This fact, which we will further explore, is what makes Christianity unique and authoritative. If Jesus was not God, then the Christian faith doesn't differ in kind from other religions. If Jesus was not God, those in the early Christian Church would have had no basis for their beliefs—beliefs that, in the words of their enemies, "turned the world upside down" (Acts 17:6).

Jesus, the I AM

Perhaps the boldest claim Jesus made about His identity was the statement, "Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM" (John 8:58). Translated into English, His statement may appear or sound confusing. But in the Aramaic or Hebrew language in which He spoke, He was making a claim that immediately led the people to try to stone Him for blasphemy.

What was going on here? Jesus was revealing His identity as the actual One whom the Jews knew as God in the Old Testament. He was saying in one breath that He existed before Abraham and that He was the same Being as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Anciently when the great God first revealed Himself to Moses in Exodus 3:13-14, Moses asked Him what His name was. "I AM WHO I AM," was the awesome reply. "Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

Jesus clearly claimed to be this same Being—the "I AM" of Exodus 3:14, the God of Abraham,

Isaac and Jacob (verse 15).

"I AM" is related to the personal name for God in the Old Testament, the Hebrew name YHWH. When this name appears in our English Bibles, it is commonly rendered using small capital letters as LORD. It is transliterated as "Jehovah" in some Bible versions.

When Jesus made this startling statement, the Jews knew exactly what He meant. They picked up stones to kill Him because they thought He was guilty of blasphemy.

"I AM" and the related YHWH are the names of God that infer absolute timeless self-existence. Although impossible to translate accurately and directly into English, YHWH conveys meanings of "The Eternal One," "The One Who Always Exists" or "The One Who Was, Is and Always Will Be." These distinctions can apply only to God, whose existence is eternal and everlasting.

In Isaiah 42:8 this same Being says, "I am the LORD [YHWH], that is My name; and My glory I will not give to another, nor My praise to carved images." A few chapters later He says: "Thus says the LORD [YHWH], the King of Israel, and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: 'I am the First and I am the Last; besides Me there is no God" (Isaiah 44:6).

To the Jews, there was no mistaking who Jesus claimed to be. He said He was the One the nation of Israel understood to be the one true God. By Jesus making claim to the name "I AM," He was saying that He was the God whom the Hebrews knew as YHWH. This name was considered so holy that a devout Jew would not pronounce it. This was a special name for God that can only refer to the one true God.

Dr. Norman Geisler, in his book Christian Apologetics, concludes: "In view of the fact that the Jehovah of the Jewish Old Testament would not give his name, honor, or glory to another, it is little wonder that the words and deeds of Jesus of Nazareth drew stones and cries of 'blasphemy' from first-century Jews. The very things that the Jehovah of the Old Testament claimed for himself Jesus of Nazareth also claimed" (2002, p. 331).

Jesus identified with YHWH

Dr. Geisler goes on to list some of the ways Jesus equated Himself with YHWH of the Old Testament. Let's notice some of these.

Jesus said of Himself, "I am the good shepherd" (John 10:11). David, in the first verse of the famous 23rd Psalm, declared that "The LORD [YHWH] is my shepherd." Jesus claimed to be judge of all men and nations (John 5:22, 27). Yet Joel 3:12 says the LORD [YHWH] "will sit to judge all ...nations."

Jesus said, "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12). Isaiah 60:19 says, "The LORD will be to you an everlasting light, and your God your glory." Also, David says in Psalm 27:1, "The LORD (YHWH) is my light."

Jesus asked in prayer that the Father would share His eternal glory: "O Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was" (John 17:5). Yet Isaiah 42:8 says, "I am the LORD, that is My name; and My glory I will not give to another ."

Jesus spoke of Himself as the coming bridegroom (Matthew 25:1), which is how YHWH is characterized in Isaiah 62:5 and Hosea 2:16.

In Revelation 1:17 Jesus says He is the first and the last, which is identical to what YHWH says of Himself in Isaiah 44:6: "I am the First and I am the Last."

There is no question that Jesus understood Himself as the LORD (YHWH) of the Old Testament.

When Jesus was arrested, His use of the same term had an electrifying effect on those in the arresting party. "Now when He said to them, 'I am He,' they drew back and fell to the ground" (John 18:6). Notice here that "He" is in italics, meaning the word was added by the translators and isn't in the original wording. However, their attempt to make Jesus' answer more grammatically correct obscures the fact that He was likely again claiming to be the "I AM" of the Old Testament Scriptures.

"I and My Father are one"

The Jews confronted Jesus on another occasion, asking Him, "How long do You keep us in doubt? If you are the Christ [the prophesied Messiah], tell us plainly" (John 10:24). Jesus' answer is quite revealing: "I told you, and you do not believe" (verse 25). He had indeed confirmed His divine identity on a previous occasion (John 5:17-18).

Jesus adds, "The works that I do in My Father's name, they bear witness of Me" (John 10:25). The works He did were miracles that only God could do. They could not refute the miraculous works Jesus did.

He made another statement that incensed them: "I and My Father are one" (verse 30). That is, the Father and Jesus were both divine. Again, there was no mistaking the intent of what He said, because "then the Jews took up stones again to stone Him" (verse 31).

Jesus countered, "Many good works I have shown you from My Father. For which of those works do you stone Me?" The Jews responded, "For a good work we do not stone You, but for blasphemy, and because You, being a Man, make Yourself God" (verses 32-33).

The Jews understood perfectly well what Jesus meant. He was telling them plainly of His divinity.

The Gospel of John records yet another instance in which Jesus infuriated the Jews with His claims of divinity. It happened just after Jesus had healed a crippled man at the pool of Bethesda on the Sabbath. The Jews sought to kill Him because He did this on the Sabbath, a day on which the law of God had stated no work was to be done (which they misinterpreted to include what Jesus was doing).

Jesus then made a statement that the Jews could take in only one way: "My Father has been working until now, and I have been working." Their response to His words? "Therefore the Jews sought all the more to kill Him, because He not only broke the Sabbath [according to their interpretation of it], but also said that God was His Father, making Himself equal with God" (John 5:16-18).

Jesus was equating His works with God's works and claiming God as His Father in a special way.

Jesus claimed authority to forgive sins

Jesus claimed to be divine in various other ways.

When Jesus healed one paralyzed man, He also said to him, "Son, your sins are forgiven you" (Mark 2:5). The scribes who heard this reasoned He was blaspheming, because, as they rightly understood and asked, "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (verses 6-7).

Responding to the scribes, Jesus said: "Why do you raise such questions in your hearts?...But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—He said to the paralytic—"I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home" (verses 8-11, NRSV).

The scribes knew Jesus was claiming an authority that belonged to God only. Again, the LORD (YHWH) is the One pictured in the Old Testament who forgives sin (Jeremiah 31:34).

Christ claimed power to raise the dead

Jesus claimed yet another power that God alone possessed—to raise and judge the dead. Notice His statements in John 5:25-29:

"Most assuredly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live...All who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation."

There was no doubt about what He meant. He added in verse 21,"For as the Father raises the dead and gives life to them, even so the Son gives life to whom He will." When Jesus resurrected Lazarus from the dead, He said to Lazarus' sister, Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25).

Compare this to 1 Samuel 2:6, which tells us that "the LORD [YHWH] kills and makes alive; He brings down to the grave and brings up."

Jesus accepted honor and worship

Jesus demonstrated His divinity in yet another way when He said, "All should honor the Son just as they honor the Father" (John 5:23). Over and over, Jesus told His disciples to believe in Him as they would believe in God. "Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me" (John 14:1).

Jesus received worship on many occasions without forbidding such acts. A leper worshipped Him (Matthew 8:2). A ruler worshipped Him with his plea to raise his daughter from the dead (Matthew 9:18). When Jesus had stilled the storm, those in the boat worshipped Him as the Son

of God (Matthew 14:33).

A Canaanite woman worshipped Him (Matthew 15:25). When Jesus met the women who came to His tomb after His resurrection, they worshipped Him, as did His apostles (Matthew 28:9, 17). The demon-possessed man of the Gadarenes, "when He saw Jesus from afar ...ran and worshiped Him" (Mark 5:6). The blind man whom Jesus healed in John 9 worshipped Him (verse 38).

The First and Second of the Ten Commandments forbid worship of anyone or anything other than God (Exodus 20:2-5). Barnabas and Paul were very disturbed when the people of Lystra tried to worship them after their healing of a crippled man (Acts 14:13-15). In Revelation 22:8-9, when John the apostle fell down to worship the angel, the angel refused to accept worship, saying, "You must not do that!...Worship God!" (Revelation 22:8-9, NRSV).

Yet Jesus accepted worship and did not rebuke those who chose to kneel before Him and worship.

Jesus' instruction to pray in His name

Jesus not only tells His followers to believe in Him, but that when we pray to the Father, we are to pray in Christ's name. "And whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son" (John 14:13). Jesus made it clear that access to the Father is through Him, telling us that "no one comes to the Father except through Me" (verse 6).

The apostle Paul states of Jesus: "Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:9-11).

Paul is telling us that God the Father Himself is upholding the fact that Jesus is God, by exalting His name to the level of the One through whom we make our requests and the One before whom we bow. Jesus also assures us that He will be the One who will give the answer to our prayers ("...that I will do," John 14:13).

In so many ways Jesus revealed Himself as the God of the Old Testament. The Jews saw Him do many things that only God would or could do. They heard Him say things about Himself that could only apply to God. They were angered and responded with outrage and charged Him with blasphemy. They were so infuriated by His claims that they wanted to kill Him on the spot.

Jesus' special relationship with God

Jesus understood Himself to be unique in His close relationship with the Father in that He was the only One who could reveal the Father. "All things have been delivered to Me by My Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father. Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him" (Matthew 11:27).

Dr. William Lane Craig, an apologist writing in defense of Christian belief, says this verse "tells

us that Jesus claimed to be the Son of God in an exclusive and absolute sense. Jesus says here that his relationship of sonship to God is unique. And he also claims to be the only one who can reveal the Father to men. In other words, Jesus claims to be the absolute revelation of God" (Reasonable Faith, 1994, p. 246).

Christ's claims to hold people's eternal destiny

On several occasions Jesus asserted that He was the One through whom men and women could attain eternal life. "This is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day" (John 6:40; compare verses 47 and 54). He not only says that people must believe in Him, but also that He will be the One to resurrect them at the end. No mere man can take this role.

Dr. Craig adds: "Jesus held that people's attitudes toward himself would be the determining factor in God's judgment on the judgment day. 'Also I say to you, whoever confesses Me before men, him the Son of Man also will confess before the angels of God. But he who denies Me before men will be denied before the angels of God' (Luke 12:8-9).

"Make no mistake: if Jesus were not the divine son of God, then this claim could only be regarded as the most narrow and objectionable dogmatism. For Jesus is saying that people's salvation depends on their confession to Jesus himself" (Craig, p. 251).

The conclusion is inescapable: Jesus understood Himself as divine along with the Father and as possessing the right to do things only God has the right to do.

The claim of Jesus' disciples

Those who personally knew and were taught by Jesus, and who then wrote most of the New Testament, are thoroughly consistent with Jesus' statements about Himself. His disciples were monotheistic Jews. For them to agree that Jesus was God, and then to give their lives for this belief, tells us that they had come to see for themselves that the claims Jesus made about Himself were so convincing as to leave no doubt in their minds.

The first Gospel writer, Matthew, opens with the story of the virgin birth of Jesus. Matthew comments on this miraculous event with the quote from Isaiah 7:14, "'Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,' which is translated, 'God with us'" (Matthew 1:23). Matthew is making it clear that he understands that this child is God —"God with us."

John is likewise explicit in the prologue to his Gospel. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God ...And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:1, 14).

Some of them called Him God directly. When Thomas saw His wounds, he exclaimed, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28). Paul refers to Jesus in Titus 1:3 and 2:10 as "God our Savior."

The book of Hebrews is most emphatic that Jesus is God. Hebrews 1:8, applying Psalm 45:6 to

Jesus Christ, states: "But to the Son He says: 'Your throne, O God, is forever and ever.'" Other parts of this book explain that Jesus is higher than the angels (1:4-8, 13), superior to Moses (3:1-6), and greater than the high priests (4:14-5:10). He is greater than all these because He is God.

He left us no middle ground

The renowned Christian writer C.S. Lewis observes: "I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: 'I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God.' That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher ...

"You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronising nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to" (Mere Christianity, 1996, p. 56).

Jesus Christ: 'The Rock' of the Old Testament

The apostle Paul affirms that the God the Israelites of the Old Testament knew—the One they looked to as their "Rock" of strength (see Deuteronomy 32:4; Psalm 18:2)—was the One we know as Jesus Christ. Notice what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 10:1-4: "All our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ."

Jesus was the One who spoke to Moses and told Him to return to Egypt to bring the Israelites to freedom. Jesus was the LORD (YHWH) who caused the plagues to come on Egypt. He was the God who led the Israelites out of Egypt and through the wanderings for 40 years. He was the Lawgiver who gave the laws to Moses and spoke to Moses on a regular basis. He was the LORD who dealt with Israel throughout their national history.

Yes, astounding as it seems, Jesus Christ is the LORD (YHWH) spoken of so often in the Old Testament.

Jesus Christ's Disciples Understood Him to Be the Creator

The book of Hebrews speaks of the Son as the Being through whom God created the worlds (Hebrews 1:2) and who "sustains all things by his powerful word" (verse 3, NRSV). Only God is great enough to do such things.

John confirms that Jesus was the divine Word through whom God created the universe: "All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made" (John 1:3; see verses 1-3, 14).

Paul states quite clearly that "God ...created all things through Jesus Christ" (Ephesians 3:9). He elsewhere writes of Jesus: "For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him" (Colossians 1:16). He adds in verse 17, "and in Him all things consist."

The Old Testament presents God alone as Creator of the universe (Genesis 1:1; Isaiah 40:25-26, 28). When the early followers of Christ say Jesus is the One through whom all things were created, they are clearly saying that Jesus is God.

Jesus claimed to be all that God is, and the disciples believed and taught it. They understood that Jesus was "the express [exact] image of His [God's] person" (Hebrews 1:3) and "the image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15), and that "in Him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily" (Colossians 2:9, NRSV).

They understood precisely who He was and still is from His own words and actions. There was no question in their minds. They had seen Him prove it time and time again. They would go to their martyrdom firm in this conviction.

The Family of God

The Father and Jesus have, from the beginning, planned to increase Their kind. The God kind is a family! It is headed by the Father and now consists of the Father and the Son, Jesus Christ.

These two have always existed and always will exist. Their plan and desire are to add to Their kind—"bringing many sons to glory" (Hebrews 2:10). Just as all life was made to reproduce after its own kind as stated throughout Genesis 1, so God patterned man after the God kind. This is the ultimate meaning of verse 26, where God says, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness."

This is a two-stage process. First, God made man physical, of the dust of the earth. Then, through conversion and faith in Christ and obedience to God's spiritual law of love, men and women become a new spiritual "creation" (2 Corinthians 5:17; Ephesians 4:24). This leads to the final birth of new children into the divine family, who are then "like" Christ, Himself the firstborn Son of God (Romans 8:29; Galatians 4:19; 1 John 3:2).

Indeed, just as human children are the same kind of beings as their parents (that is, human beings), so will God's children be the same kind of beings as the Father and Christ (that is, divine beings). This is the awesome destiny of mankind! The God family will expand through God's wonderful plan as revealed in His Word.

All children of this family will forever in the future willingly be under the ultimate sovereignty, authority and leadership of the Father first and then the Son (see 1 Corinthians 15:24-28). Led by the Father and Christ, the members of this divine family will share a glorious and righteous eternity into the future.

This, then, is the sense in which God is a family—indeed a growing family, presently comprised of two divine Beings, the Father and Christ the firstborn, yet ultimately to be joined by a vast multitude of others. (To learn more, request or download our free booklet Who Is God?)

Jesus' Amazing Fulfillment of Prophecy

To claim that you are God is one thing—but to convince people that you are indeed what you say you are is quite another. So how did Jesus' closest followers come to be so convinced that they would lay down their lives for that belief?

Many Old Testament prophecies of the Messiah were fulfilled in precise detail by Jesus of Nazareth. Neither the Jews nor the disciples of Jesus understood at the time that Jesus was fulfilling the messianic prophecies of the Old Testament—even though at times He told them this was the case (Luke 18:31; Matthew 26:56). They were looking for a far different Messiah than the One so many prophecies actually described.

One of Jesus' defenses to the Jews was to appeal to the Old Testament Scriptures themselves, which identified Him as the One to come. "You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me," He told them (John 5:39).

After Jesus was resurrected, He began to help His disciples understand the Scriptures, and the disciples were inspired to declare that Jesus was indeed the Messiah. The proof they offered was the very Scriptures they had not previously understood.

Putting together the prophetic puzzle

Shortly after His resurrection, Jesus met two of His disciples who were deep in discussion as they walked along the road to the town of Emmaus. Not recognizing Him, they openly reasoned how such events as the death of the Messiah could possibly happen. Jesus began to explain to them that His suffering and crucifixion were foretold in the Scriptures.

He gently chided them: "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" (Luke 24:25-26, NRSV). Then, "beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself" (verse 27).

Later that same day He appeared to nearly all of His apostles and clarified what He had been telling them before His death. "These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me" (verse 44).

"Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms" referred to the three major divisions of the Old Testament, something every believing Jew, as these apostles were, understood. "And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures. Then He said to them, 'Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day'" (verses 45-46).

God's Spirit opens the Scriptures to understanding

Within days the apostles began quoting passages from Scripture, declaring that these prophecies had been fulfilled by Jesus Christ.

Peter speaks of the death of Judas, the disciple who betrayed Jesus, in Acts 1:20, quoting from Psalm 69:25 and Psalm 109:8: "Let his dwelling place be desolate, and let no one live in it," and "Let another take his office." Peter and the disciples had begun to understand that the Scriptures spoke in detail of many aspects of Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

After receiving the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, their understanding of the Scriptures would increase greatly (John 14:26). Speaking on that day, Peter quotes from Joel 2:28-29, telling us that the sending of the Holy Spirit was a fulfillment of that prophecy (Acts 2:14-18).

Peter continues his message to the crowds gathered in Jerusalem by explaining the resurrection of Jesus with a reference to Psalm 16:8-11: "For David says concerning Him [Jesus]: 'I foresaw the LORD always before my face, for He is at my right hand... For You will not leave my soul in Hades [the grave], nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption [decay after death]...You will make me full of joy in Your presence [through resurrection from the grave]'" (Acts 2:25-28). Peter asserts that David was a prophet and foresaw the resurrection of Jesus the Messiah.

Even more astounding is David's picture of the resurrected Christ that Peter quotes: "The LORD said to my Lord, 'Sit at My right hand, till I make Your enemies Your footstool'" (verses 34-36). Peter now sees clearly that the Old Testament pictured the coming of Jesus the Messiah—the Messiah whom he followed for more than three years. Now Peter is quoting Scripture to his countrymen to prove to them that Jesus is the Messiah.

Many years later we find Paul, who originally violently opposed those who accepted Jesus as the promised Messiah, reasoning with the Jews in synagogues that Jesus is indeed the Messiah, the Christ (Acts 17:1-4). Likewise Apollos "refuted the Jews publicly, showing from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Christ" (Acts 18:28). Some of the Jews they addressed were beginning to understand their own Scriptures in the light of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ.

Fulfilled prophecies in the Gospels

Those Jews who believed that Jesus fulfilled the messianic prophecies were in the minority. The Gospel writers, however, are relentless in their quotations from the Scriptures to demonstrate how Jesus fulfilled in detail the many messianic prophecies.

The apostle Matthew, for example, appears to have specifically written his Gospel to a first-century Jewish audience. Through a series of Old Testament quotations, Matthew documents Jesus Christ's claim to be the Messiah. Jesus' genealogy, baptism, messages and miracles all point to the same inescapable conclusion: He is the prophesied Messiah.

Matthew's Gospel cites 21 prophecies that were fulfilled in circumstances surrounding the life and death of Christ. Eleven passages point out these fulfillments using such introductions as "that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of by the prophet..." or "then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet..."

Accidental fulfillment of prophecies?

The New Testament writers cite messianic prophecies from the Old Testament more than 130 times. By some estimates the Old Testament contains 300 prophetic passages that describe who the Messiah is and what He will do. Of these, 60 are major prophecies. What are the chances of these prophecies being fulfilled in one person?

Of course, as Dr. Geisler points out, God makes no mistakes. It is virtually inconceivable that God would allow either a total deception in His name or an accidental fulfillment in the life of the wrong person. Such things rule out a chance fulfillment (p. 343).

One might argue there is still that possibility—however remote. But the mathematical odds that all of these prophecies could have converged by chance in the events of the life of Jesus are staggeringly minute—to the point of eliminating any such possibility.

Astronomer and mathematician Peter Stoner, in his book Science Speaks, offers a mathematical analysis showing that it is impossible that the precise statements about the One to come could be fulfilled in a single person by mere coincidence.

The chance of only eight of these dozens of prophecies being fulfilled in the life of one man has been estimated at 1 in 10 to the 17th power. That would be 1 chance in 100,000,000,000,000,000.

How can we put this in terms we can comprehend? Dr. Stoner illustrates the odds with this scenario: "Take 10^{17} silver dollars and lay them on the face of Texas [with its approximate land area of 262,000 square miles]. They will cover all of the state two feet deep. Now mark one of these silver dollars and stir the whole mass thoroughly, all over the state. Blindfold a man and tell him that he can travel as far as he wishes, but he must pick up one silver dollar and say that this is the right one.

"What chance would he have of getting the right one? Just the same chance that the prophets would have had of writing these eight prophecies and having them all come true in any one man."

But that is only eight of the dozens of prophecies of the Messiah. Using the science of probability, the chance of as many as 48 of these prophecies coming to pass in one person is 1 in 10 to the 157th power—a 1 followed by 157 zeros (1963, pp. 100-109).

One or two fulfillments in Jesus' life could be dismissed as coincidental. But when the instances of fulfilled prophecies are counted up, the law of probability quickly reaches the point where mere probability becomes certainty. This is one of the proofs Jesus was the promised Messiah—the messianic prophecies were accurately and precisely fulfilled in Him.

Let's review some of these.

The Seed of Abraham and descendant of David

In Galatians 3:8 and 16, Paul explains that the promise made to Abraham, "In you all the

nations of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:3; 18:18; 22:18), was a reference to the coming Messiah. This promise was later repeated to Abraham's son Isaac (Genesis 26:4) and then later passed on through Abraham's grandson Jacob (Genesis 28:14).

Several hundred years later the future Messiah was prophesied to come through Jesse, the father of King David, of the tribe of Judah—one of Jacob's 12 sons. "There shall come forth a Rod [Shoot] from the stem [stock] of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of His roots" (Isaiah 11:1).

David was the son of Jesse from whom the line would come that would produce Jesus of Nazareth some 30 generations later. Through the prophet Jeremiah, God foretold that He would "raise up to David a righteous Branch" (Jeremiah 23:5, New International Version).

In this amazing progression of prophecies, beginning some 1,500 years before the Messiah would come, we are told in precise terms what the human lineage of the Christ would be. Jesus fulfilled these promises, as the apostle Matthew shows us in recording the descent of Jesus through the line of King David. The number of people who potentially could have fulfilled the messianic prophecies narrows greatly when limited to this family.

Messiah to come from Bethlehem

The Jews of Jesus' day also knew that the Messiah was to come from Bethlehem (Matthew 2:3-6). This was plainly understood from Micah 5:2: "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be Ruler in Israel, whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting."

There were two Bethlehems, one in the region of Ephrathah in Judea and the other to the north, in the region of the tribe of Zebulun. But Micah's prophecy is precise. The Messiah would be born in Bethlehem of Ephrathah. Jesus was born in this Bethlehem in Judea (Matthew 2:1).

The prophecies discussed so far strongly point to Jesus, but they are not conclusive. Other people could have qualified if you use only these three as the criteria. But these are only the beginning.

A virgin conceives

A remarkable prophecy in Isaiah 7:14, called "the Immanuel prophecy," foretells the unique birth of Jesus by a virgin: "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel."

Before Jesus was born, an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and told him that his betrothed, Mary, was expecting a child—conceived not by man, but by the Spirit of God. The angel referred to this prophecy from Isaiah (Matthew 1:18-23; compare Luke 1:26-35).

Jesus was a prophet

Moses, considered the greatest of the Hebrew prophets and teachers, wrote the messianic prophecy that God would raise up a Prophet like himself from among Israel, and He would directly represent God (Deuteronomy 18:15, 18).

Jesus was regarded as a prophet (Matthew 21:46; Luke 7:16; 24:19; John 4:19; 9:17). After He had miraculously multiplied fish and bread to feed the 5,000, Jesus was regarded specifically as the prophet of whom Moses had spoken (John 6:14; compare 7:40). Peter later explicitly referred to Jesus as this prophet (Acts 3:20-23).

A sacrifice for sins

The Old Testament prophecies of the details of the suffering and death of the Messiah were not at all well understood in Jesus' day. The Jews believed that the Messiah they were looking for would be a victorious king who would deliver them from the hated Romans and restore an Israelite kingdom—not a humble Teacher who would endure suffering and death for the sins of mankind.

Yet this is a major area of Old Testament prophecy and New Testament fulfillment. Virtually every aspect of Jesus' suffering and death was spelled out in considerable detail centuries before it actually happened.

The true picture revealed in these prophecies is that the Messiah would be "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). The people did not expect the promised Deliverer, the conquering King, to be One who would first give His life for others.

Hebrews 10:12 tells us that the death of Christ was the offering for sin once and for all: "But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God." Verses 5-7 quote Psalm 40:6-8 in describing the willingness of Christ to surrender Himself as a sacrifice to pay the price for the sins of everyone.

The sacrificial system God instituted in ancient Israel was a representation of Jesus' sacrifice that would pay this price once and for all. Shedding the blood of bulls, heifers, sheep and goats could not take away sin (Hebrews 10:4).

Only the shed blood of the Creator Himself could atone for their sins as well as the sins of every other human being. The sacrifices that were commanded under Moses pictured in a very graphic way the future sacrificial death of humanity's Savior for our sins. In this sense the sacrificial system itself was prophetic of the Messiah.

The Lamb of God

The Passover lambs that were slain on the 14th day of the first month by the Israelites (Exodus 12:3-6; Leviticus 23:5) were a powerful and poignant depiction of the sacrifice of the Messiah, though the Israelites never understood it at the time.

It was on this same day of the Hebrew calendar, the day the Passover lambs were slain, that Jesus was arrested, tried and executed. He truly was "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin

of the world" as spoken of by John the Baptist (John 1:29).

For centuries the Israelites missed this prophetic picture, as did the Jews of Jesus' day, and only after the fact did the disciples understand that Jesus fulfilled whole sections of Scripture that no one suspected would be fulfilled by the Messiah.

Prophecies surrounding His betrayal, suffering and death

No fewer than 29 prophecies were fulfilled in the 24-hour period leading up to Jesus' death. Some of the more notable are:

• He would be crucified. "They pierced My hands and My feet" (Psalm 22:16). This statement was written some 1,000 years before the event that fulfilled it (see John 20:25, 27). Perhaps even more remarkable, this prophecy described a form of execution that would not come into practice for centuries—some 800 years would pass before the Romans adopted crucifixion as a form of punishment for condemned criminals.

• His body would be pierced. "They will look on Me whom they pierced" (Zechariah 12:10). John tells us what happened: "One of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately blood and water came out" (John 19:34). John tells us that he was an eyewitness to this event (verse 35) and verifies this was fulfillment of that prophecy: "And again another Scripture says, 'They shall look on Him whom they pierced'" (verse 37).

• None of His bones would be broken. "He guards all his bones; not one of them is broken" (Psalm 34:20). John tells us: "Then the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first and of the other who was crucified with Him. But when they came to Jesus and saw that He was already dead, they did not break His legs" (John 19:32-33).

John verifies that this is a prophecy that was fulfilled: "For these things were done that the Scripture should be fulfilled, 'Not one of His bones shall be broken'" (verse 36).

• People would cast lots for His clothing. "They divide My garments among them, and for My clothing they cast lots" (Psalm 22:18). John testifies that this detail, too, was fulfilled.

"Then the soldiers, when they had crucified Jesus, took His garments and made four parts, to each soldier a part, and also the tunic. Now the tunic was without seam, woven from the top in one piece. They said therefore among themselves, 'Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it, whose it shall be,' that the Scripture might be fulfilled" (John 19:23-24).

• He would pray for his executioners. "He... made intercession for the transgressors" (Isaiah 53:12). Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do" (Luke 23:34).

• He would be executed with criminals. "And He was numbered with the transgressors" (Isaiah 53:12). Matthew 27:38 tells us that "two robbers were crucified with Him, one on the right and another on the left."

• He would not retaliate. "He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His

mouth; He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so He opened not His mouth" (Isaiah 53:7).

Matthew 27:12 tells us that "while He was being accused by the chief priests and elders, He answered nothing." Pilate, the Roman governor, also tried to get Him to answer, "but He answered him not one word, so that the governor marveled greatly" (verses 13-14).

• He would be forsaken by His followers. "Strike the Shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered" (Zechariah 13:7). When Jesus was arrested, all His disciples "forsook Him and fled" (Mark 14:50).

• He would be betrayed by a trusted friend. The betrayal of Jesus by Judas, one of His disciples, was prophesied in Psalm 41:9: "Even my own familiar friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted up his heel against me." Jesus proclaims this prophecy to be fulfilled when He gives Judas the piece of bread in John 13:18 and verse 26.

• The price of the betrayal would be 30 pieces of silver. The 30 pieces of silver paid to Judas for the betrayal of Jesus (Matthew 26:14-15) is understood to have been prophesied in Zechariah 11:12: "So they weighed out for my wages thirty pieces of silver."

• He would be offered vinegar and gall. Jesus being offered vinegar with gall to drink while being crucified (Matthew 27:34) is understood to be referred to in Psalm 69:21: "They also gave me gall for my food, and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink."

Once again, the sheer number of prophecies and their precision all point to their being fulfilled by one person, Jesus of Nazareth. Yet in spite of so much specific, eyewitness testimony to fulfilled prophecies, some people still raise various objections.

Was their fulfillment contrived?

A common objection some raise is that Jesus and His followers deliberately attempted to fulfill these prophecies. Several books have proposed variations of this theory, among them The Passover Plot. Advocates of this idea allege that Jesus manipulated events to make it look like He fulfilled the prophecies. Somehow Jesus managed to fake His own death, to be revived later.

There is no doubt that Jesus did take some steps to directly fulfill prophecy, such as securing the donkey on which to ride into Jerusalem and making sure that His disciples had swords to be reckoned as criminals (see Matthew 21:1-7; Luke 22:36-38). This was not, however, deceptive. After all, God explained in the Old Testament how He is able to foretell the future: "I am God... declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things that are not yet done... Indeed I have spoken it; I will also bring it to pass" (Isaiah 46:9-11).

Christ, as God made flesh, was simply bringing to pass what He had foretold. However, if only a typical human being, Jesus would not have been able to fulfill everything foretold about the Messiah.

While the idea might sound intriguing, it's impossible when you consider what Jesus would actually have had to do. To begin, He would have to have successfully manipulated His own

place of birth and His human lineage. He would have to have arranged for His time to be born, so that as an adult He could begin His ministry and arrange for His death all according to the time frame of the prophecy of Daniel 9. On top of that, He would have to have engineered His own miraculous virgin birth.

If this theory had any sense of plausibility, it still would make no sense that Jesus would not fulfill the Jewish expectation of a Messiah who was to come as a king to rule the people at that time. Jesus certainly had that opportunity if He had wanted to become a physical king and leader of the Jewish nation. Many were willing to follow Him and make Him king (John 6:15; 12:12-19). Instead He took the route that led to His horrible suffering and death.

He accurately fulfilled the prophecies according to the intent of God, but contrary to the common understanding at the time. He became a servant and was willing to give His life as payment for the sins of all (Matthew 20:28). The character of such a person hardly qualifies Him to be a charlatan and a fake—one who manipulates events for His own benefit.

Fulfillment of prophecy is proof

God, who is able to control all events, caused these prophecies to be written hundreds of years before they were fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth. As Peter proclaimed, "Those things which God foretold by the mouth of all His prophets, that the Christ would suffer, He [Jesus] has thus fulfilled" (Acts 3:18).

Paul reaffirmed that "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures" and that "He was buried, and...He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3-4).

To accurately foretell these events 200 to 800 years in advance is nothing less than a miracle—one that required divine knowledge and power to bring them to pass as foretold. God doesn't do things by chance. He knew even from the foundation of the world that His Son would have to come to earth (1 Peter 1:20), and He foretold the events of His birth, death and life so we would have firm evidence on which to base our belief.

The Bible Prophesied the Exact Year the Messiah Would Appear

An amazing prophecy in Daniel 9:25 gives the specific year the Messiah would appear. The angel Gabriel revealed this information to Daniel approximately 580 years before its fulfillment. Let's examine this remarkable prophecy and how it was fulfilled.

"Know therefore and understand, that from the going forth of the command to restore and build Jerusalem until Messiah the Prince, there shall be seven weeks and sixty-two weeks ..."

The word translated "weeks" here literally means "sevens." While it could mean seven-day weeks, that is evidently not the case here. Daniel had been specifically praying earlier in the chapter about a prophetic period of 70 years. In this answer to his prayer, he is told of a period of 70 sevens—clearly meaning 70 sevens of years in this context, i.e. 70 seven-year periods.

Adding 7 plus 62 (69) of these seven-year periods—that is, a total of 483 years—from a decree to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem gives the year the Messiah would appear on the scene.

After Jerusalem's destruction by the Babylonians in 586 B.C., the Babylonian Empire was succeeded by the Medo-Persian Empire. This empire's kings issued several such decrees that were recorded in the Bible (by Cyrus in 538 B.C., found in Ezra 1:1-2, and by Darius in 520 B.C., described in Ezra 6:8).

But the one that was issued by Artaxerxes Longimanus in 457 B.C. (Ezra 7:11-26) points us specifically to Christ's ministry. Counting 483 years from the 457 B.C. date of this decree brings us to A.D. 27 (keep in mind that because there is no year "0" we have to add one year to the calculation).

A.D. 27 was a significant year. Jesus was baptized this year and began His public ministry.

The Jews of Christ's day were certainly familiar with Daniel's prophecy. And regardless of which decree one might choose as the starting point of the 483 years, the time for the Messiah to appear had elapsed during Jesus' day. Messianic fervor was rampant with the realization that the fulfillment of this prophecy was near at hand (compare John 1:41; 4:25).

If the Messiah was to come, He would have to arrive on the scene just when Jesus did—in the exact year!

Was Jesus Born on Dec. 25?

Most people assume Jesus was born on Dec. 25. After all, that's the date celebrated throughout the world as the day of His birth. A careful analysis of Scripture, however, clearly indicates that Dec. 25 is an unlikely date for Christ's birth. Here are two primary reasons:

First, we know that shepherds were in the fields watching their flocks at night at the time of Jesus' birth (Luke 2:7-8). However, shepherds did not remain in the fields of Judea at night during December due to lack of forage and the bad weather.

According to Celebrations: The Complete Book of American Holidays, Luke's account "suggests that Jesus may have been born in summer or early fall. Since December is cold and rainy in Judea, it is likely the shepherds would have sought shelter for their flocks at night" (p. 309).

Similarly, The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary says this passage argues "against the birth [of Christ] occurring on Dec. 25 since the weather would not have permitted" shepherds watching over their flocks in the fields at night.

Second, Jesus' parents came to Bethlehem to register in a Roman census (Luke 2:1-4). The Romans would have known better than to have taken such a census in the dead of winter, when temperatures often dropped below freezing and roads were in poor condition for traveling. Taking a census under such conditions would have been self-defeating.

So if Jesus Christ was not born on Dec. 25, does the Bible indicate when He was born? The biblical accounts point to the autumn of the year (in the northern hemisphere) as the most likely time of Jesus' birth, based on details of the conception and birth of John the Baptist.

Since Elizabeth (John's mother) was in her sixth month of pregnancy when Jesus was conceived (Luke 1:24-36), we can determine the approximate time of year Jesus was born if we know when John was born. John's father, Zacharias, was a priest serving in the Jerusalem temple during the course of Abijah (Luke 1:5). Historical calculations indicate this course of service corresponded to June 13-19 in that year (The Companion Bible, 1974, Appendix 179, p. 200).

It was during this time of temple service that Zacharias learned that he and his wife, Elizabeth, would have a child (Luke 1:8-13). After he completed his service and traveled home, Elizabeth conceived (verses 23-24). Assuming John's conception took place near the end of June, adding nine months brings us to the end of March as the most likely time for John's birth. Adding another six months (the difference in ages between John and Jesus) brings us to the end of September as the likely time of Jesus' birth.

Although it is difficult to determine the first time anyone celebrated Dec. 25 as Christmas, historians are in general agreement that it was sometime during the fourth century.

This is an amazingly late date. Christmas was not observed in Rome, the capital of the Roman Empire, until about 300 years after Christ's death. Its origins cannot be traced back to either the teachings or practices of the earliest Christians.

A Sinless and Miraculous Life

Living a sinless life, as unique as that would be, wouldn't necessarily prove someone is God. However, since Jesus claimed that He was God, and lived a sinless and virtuous life and backed up His claim with miracles, that is a different matter.

The Bible states that "sin is the transgression of the law" (1 John 3:4, King James Version). Paul tells us that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

Later Paul says, "The wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). God will not compromise with His holy and righteous law. Jesus said that "one jot or tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled" (Matthew 5:18). The penalty for breaking that law will be paid.

Since we have all sinned, we have all earned death, as Paul says. That is the fate of all human beings—unless someone came along and satisfied the law's demands. Jesus did this. And, as we will see in a later chapter, it took God to do this. No life of an ordinary human being could be sufficient to satisfy the law's demand for all of humanity. A life that could satisfy the penalty for the sins of all of us would have to be greater than that of all of us—the life of the very Creator Himself.

This—that the Creator God would be the one to die for human beings so they might live—was thought out before the creation of humanity ever took place. Jesus, as we have seen, is the Creator of all things—and therefore greater than all things, and within Him is the inherent value to satisfy the demand.

It was essential for Jesus, therefore, to live a sinless life. "Him who never knew sin God made to be Sin, on our behalf; so that we, through union with him, might become the Righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21, Twentieth Century New Testament).

He became the offering for sin that the law expected. "And it is in the fulfillment of the will of God that we have been purified by the sacrifice, once and for all, of the body of Jesus Christ" (Hebrews 10:10, TCNT).

Jesus knew this was a major purpose of His coming to earth to live as a human being. "Now My soul is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save Me from this hour'? But for this purpose I came to this hour" (John 12:27).

A sinless life laid down for us

The prophet Isaiah tells us that God the Father "laid on Him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:6) and "for the transgressions of My people He was stricken" (verse 8). Then Isaiah asserts His innocence—"He had done no violence, nor was any deceit in His mouth" (verse 9).

Peter, picking up on Isaiah's words after Jesus' death, confirms that this was so. "For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: 'who committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth'; who, when He was

reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously; who Himself bore our sins in His own body" (1 Peter 2:21-24).

This is an amazing legacy! No sin—not in word, deed or even thought, even under the greatest temptation and stress! Hebrews 4:15 says it this way: He "was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin."

Some people may claim to be righteous, maybe even perfect. But few will take them seriously, especially those well acquainted with them. But with Jesus, those closest to Him—who traveled with Him, ate with Him and walked and talked with Him constantly throughout His ministry—testified to and were willing to die for their belief that He was the sinless Son of God.

Jesus challenged His enemies, "Can any of you prove me guilty of sin?" (John 8:46, NIV). The record shows that all the enemies of Jesus could do was hurl wild, unsubstantiated allegations: "We were not born of fornication"—implying that He was (verse 41); "He deceives the people" (John 7:12); and "He has a demon and is mad" (10:20). Even at His trial His accusers had to resort to false witnesses because no one could testify to any wrong He had ever done (Matthew 26:59-61).

Even those who were not His disciples agreed that the character of Jesus of Nazareth was without blame. Pilate's verdict was, "I find no fault in Him" (John 19:6). The centurion who oversaw Jesus' execution, having witnessed a mind and spirit unlike any he had ever seen, "glorified God, saying, 'Certainly this was a righteous Man!'" (Luke 23:47).

One of the criminals who was crucified with Jesus added his testimony to the righteousness he witnessed. He rebuked the other condemned man: "Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong" (verses 40-41).

Jesus lived a sinless and a virtuous life as confirmed by those who knew and observed Him in everyday as well as difficult circumstances. Even members of His own family who had known Him from childhood—His half brothers who initially didn't believe in Him (John 7:5)—came to accept Him as the perfect, sinless Son of God (see "Jesus' Family Connections"). His life of character was itself evidence of the truth He claimed about Himself.

Jesus' miraculous life

Jesus' life was marked by miracles from the beginning. He was born of a virgin, He turned water into wine, He walked on water, He quieted the storm. He multiplied bread to feed the multitude, He opened the eyes of the blind, He healed the lame and made lepers whole again. He healed all manner of sicknesses among all kinds of people, cast out demons and even raised the dead to life again.

These miracles were so astounding that the people remarked, "When the Christ comes, will He do more signs than these which this Man has done?" (John 7:31).

Jesus pointed to the miracles as proof of who He was. "The works that I do in My Father's name, they bear witness of Me," He told some questioners (John 10:25). Jesus held up the miracles as credentials that He was the Son of God: "If I do not do the works of My Father, do

not believe Me; but if I do, though you do not believe Me, believe the works, that you may know and believe that the Father is in Me, and I in Him" (verses 37-38).

When the messengers from John the Baptist went to Jesus to ask Him if He were indeed the One who was to come in fulfillment of all the messianic prophecies, notice Jesus' reply: "Go and tell John the things which you hear and see: The blind see and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them" (Matthew 11:1-5). Jesus fully expected John to understand that such works would be all the evidence he needed.

The miracles demonstrated clearly who Jesus was, just as He intended. He healed one paralyzed man with the accompanying words, "Son, your sins are forgiven you" (Mark 2:5). He explained to those gathered there that He had healed the man "that you may know that the Son of Man has power [authority] on earth to forgive sins" (verse 10). His critics got the point. They remarked, "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (verse 7).

On another occasion He said, "If I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Matthew 12:28). Jesus wanted them to know that they were dealing with a person who was empowered by the Spirit of God, representing the very Kingdom of God.

Pharisees seek a sign

These miraculous healings weren't enough for the skeptics, however. They wanted more. Twice He was asked for a miraculous sign (Matthew 12:38; 16:1). His reply was the same on both occasions. "An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah" (Matthew 12:39; 16:4).

The skeptics in Matthew 12 had just witnessed the miracle of Jesus casting out a demon and thereby healing the blind and mute man (verse 22). They justified their disbelief by snarling that Jesus had only been able to perform this miracle by demonic power (verse 24). Jesus showed the ridiculousness of their argument and proceeded to give them a stern warning about denying what they had witnessed with their own eyes.

Unwilling to accept the conclusion to which these wondrous works plainly led, they then asked for another sign. Jesus then drew the conclusion for them. "The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater [One] than Jonah is here" (verse 41).

Jesus was saying that the miracle they acknowledged had occurred, but chose to explain away, was sufficient to prove to any reasonable person who He was. Their demands for signs were met with a rebuke from Jesus. Then He simply left them (Matthew 16:4). The only sign He gave —"the sign of the prophet Jonah"—would be His final proof that He was indeed the Son of God. What was this proof? He would be in the grave, following His death, only and exactly three days and three nights—for He would rise again at the end of that period (see "When Was Jesus Christ Crucified and Resurrected?").

Beginning and ending with miracles

Miracles have always been a challenge to the skeptic. If a person begins with the denial of anything that defies the laws of nature—the supernatural, in other words—then it's a forgone conclusion that the miracles really didn't happen. Then one can only look for other ways to explain the occurrences recorded in the Bible—or deny that they happened at all.

But the true historical record of Jesus shows that His physical life here on earth began with an intervention of divine will superimposing its power over natural law—that of a virgin conceiving and bearing a Son. The story of the Gospels ends in the same way—with the divine power extended to resurrect Jesus back to life. His entire life was a miracle from beginning to end—and to beginning again. We'll learn more about that in the next chapter.

Could Jesus Perform Miracles?

One of the major objections to miracles is that they violate natural law. Critics argue that natural law is immutable, therefore natural law cannot be violated.

If there was no God, then this might be true. But where did the laws of nature, physics, energy and matter come from? How did they originate? Did these laws of such incredible precision and orderliness create themselves? Those who deny a Creator have no answers.

But if God is real, we would expect that miracles—in exactly the way they are recorded for us in the Gospels—would be a very reasonable part of the life of One who wanted to prove His divine identity to those around Him.

Strictly speaking, Jesus did not perform miracles on His own, having given up that divine power (Philippians 2:6-8). He clearly said He did not have the ability to perform supernatural works on His own, saying, "the Son can do nothing of Himself" and "I can of Myself do nothing" (John 5:19, 30). Obviously, then, Jesus relied on God the Father to perform the many miracles that characterized His ministry (John 14:10).

And for God, the omnipotent Creator who designed the laws of nature, it is nothing to supernaturally intervene in the creation to carry out what we might deem impossible. Jesus said: "With God all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26).

Miracles do indeed happen. In Christ's case, the Father answered His every prayer and backed up His every command, so that, as Christ's disciples recognized in Matthew 8:27, even the wind and the sea obeyed Him.

Did Jesus Really Die and Live Again?

One of the greatest proofs that Jesus is exactly who He said He was—the Son of God and the only One through whom eternal life is offered—is His resurrection from the dead.

His followers were convinced that He was the Messiah and the Son of God. His miracles, His sinless life and His teachings all proved to them who He was. But His resurrection confirms every claim Jesus made to all people for all time.

What is astounding is that Jesus put everything on the line with His own statements that He would die and be raised to life again. He foretold His own resurrection on several occasions. "And He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again" (Mark 8:31).

When the scribes and Pharisees wanted a sign from Him, He said only one sign would be given: "For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (Matthew 12:40).

It is quite risky to foretell your own resurrection. Yet Jesus not only foretold His resurrection, but announced precisely when He would be resurrected (see "When Was Jesus Christ Crucified and Resurrected?").

So it comes down to this one event. How do we know that Jesus' resurrection from the dead happened? If it didn't happen just as He said, then we have no reason to believe that the way of life that Christ brought was any better or more right than any other religion. There would be nothing earthshaking about Jesus of Nazareth; He would be simply another religious fraud.

But if it did happen, there is one great difference between Jesus and all other religious leaders: Jesus' teachings are true, and everything He said is true, and He is exactly who He claimed to be.

In his book Reasonable Faith, Dr. William Craig gives three great, independently established facts on which the evidence for Jesus' resurrection rests: the empty tomb, the resurrection appearances and the origin of the Christian faith (p. 272). Let's examine the details and implications of each of these.

Did Jesus really die?

That Jesus died and was buried is one of the best-established facts about Jesus. The Bible says again and again that Jesus died. Some critics have argued that Jesus wasn't completely dead when He was entombed. The Koran, considered holy by Muslims, claims that Jesus only seemed to be dead. Some skeptics have claimed that He merely appeared to be dead, possibly drugged, but revived while in the tomb and escaped to convince His disciples that He had risen from the dead.

But when we examine the facts, what such theories suggest is physically impossible. The extent of Jesus' tortures and wounds was such that no man could have survived the crucifixion and three days and nights isolated in a dark, cold tomb.

To say that He was drugged ignores the record. He turned down the painkiller that was usually given to crucifixion victims (Mark 15:23). Later He was offered a sip of sour wine from a sponge, but there is no indication of a drugging effect on Jesus from this because of His obvious agony and final death cry (verses 36-37).

Death at the hands of Roman torturers and executioners was certain and could come from several causes. Journalist Lee Strobel, in an interview with Dr. Alexander Metherell, describes the death of Jesus from a medical point of view (The Case for Christ, 1998, pp. 193-200).

Jesus had been beaten repeatedly and lashed with a Roman scourge before His crucifixion (Matthew 27:26). The leather scourge, a type of whip, was designed to inflict maximum pain and damage on the victim. It was braided with pieces of bone and metal woven into the ends that tore into the flesh with each stroke. The scourge would rip into the underlying muscles and produce strips of quivering, bleeding flesh.

Eusebius, a third-century historian, reports that "the sufferer's veins were laid bare, and the very muscles, sinews, and bowels of the victim were open to exposure" (quoted by Strobel, p. 193). Many victims would die from the scourging before they could be crucified.

The extreme pain, coupled with loss of blood, would often cause the victim to go into shock—his blood pressure would drop and cause fainting, collapse and intense thirst. The Gospels record that Jesus experienced these symptoms on His way to Golgotha. Weakened to the point of collapse, He couldn't bear the weight of the beam He was carrying and a bystander, Simon of Cyrene, was forced to carry it part of the way for Him (Mark 15:21). When He was crucified, He said, "I thirst" (John 19:28).

He had already suffered savage beatings before the scourging. At His trial before the Sanhedrin, "they spat in His face and beat Him; and others struck Him with the palms of their hands, saying, 'Prophesy to us, Christ! Who is the one who struck You?'" (Matthew 26:67-68). When they turned Him over to the Roman soldiers, they further brutalized Him, beating Him with their fists, slapping Him and shoving a crown of thorns on His head (Matthew 27:29-30; Mark 15:16-19; John 19:3).

The extent of this beating is indicated in the prophecy of Isaiah 50:6: "I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting" (NIV).

Another prophecy in Isaiah 52:14 is even more graphic: "His form, disfigured, lost all human likeness; his appearance so changed he no longer looked like a man" (REB). What this tells us is that He was so badly beaten, so bloodied and maimed, that He was scarcely recognizable as a human being.

Pilate appears to have thought that when he had Jesus brought out to the crowd after the beatings and scourging, He would present such a pitiable spectacle that it would satiate His accusers' thirst for blood (John 19:1, 4-6). But their hatred of the bloodied man from Nazareth would not be satisfied. They insisted He be crucified.

The agony of crucifixion

Because of the terrible effects of these beatings and the scourging, from a medical standpoint Jesus would have already been in serious to critical condition even before He was taken away to be crucified (Alexander Metherell, M.D., quoted by Strobel, p. 196).

In a crucifixion, the Romans typically used iron nails, five to seven inches long and about three eighths of an inch square, driven into the victim's wrists and feet to fasten him to the wooden members. The Bible says nails were driven through Jesus' hands, but in the language of the day the wrist was considered part of the hand. Nails were driven into the wrists, between the arm bones, because the hands themselves could not support the weight of the body.

This placement of nails is supported by the 1968 discovery in Jerusalem of the bones of a man who had been crucified and buried in a first-century tomb. His right heel bone still had a large iron nail embedded in it, and one of his right forearm bones had a groove and wear marks consistent with a nail being driven between the two arm bones near his wrist.

The nails pounded through the wrists would have crushed the median nerve, the largest nerve going to the hand, causing indescribable pain. "The pain was absolutely unbearable," says Dr. Metherell. "In fact, it was literally beyond words to describe; they had to invent a new word: excruciating . Literally, excruciating means 'out of the cross.'

"Think of that: they needed to create a new word, because there was nothing in the language that could describe the intense anguish caused during the crucifixion" (quoted by Strobel, pp. 197-198). Nails driven through the feet would have brought similar pain.

We can't know for sure whether Jesus was crucified on a simple stake or a cross with a crossbeam (see "Roman Forms of Crucifixion"). Either way, being hung by His arms would have caused great stresses on His body. His arms would have been stretched several inches and both shoulders likely were dislocated.

The prophecy of Christ's suffering in Psalm 22:14 refers to His tortured condition: "I am poured out like water, and all My bones are out of joint; My heart is like wax; it has melted within me."

Dr. Metherell continues with a description of the agonies Jesus endured: "Once a person is hanging in the vertical position...crucifixion is essentially an agonizingly slow death by asphyxiation. The reason is that the stresses on the muscles and diaphragm put the chest into the inhaled position; basically, in order to exhale, the individual must push up on his feet so the tension on the muscles would be eased for a moment. In doing so, the nail would tear through the foot, eventually locking up against the tarsal bones.

"After managing to exhale, the person would then be able to relax down and take another breath in. Again he'd have to push himself up to exhale, scraping his bloodied back against the coarse wood of the cross. This would go on and on until complete exhaustion would take over, and the person wouldn't be able to push up and breathe anymore" (Strobel, pp. 265-266).

What was the cause of Jesus' death?

Many people assume that Jesus simply expired from the trauma or suffocated, which were the common causes of death in crucifixion. Various medical doctors have studied execution by crucifixion and come to similar conclusions. Some theologians and churches have taught that Jesus died of a broken heart. Can we know what actually killed Him?

Zechariah 12:10 contains a prophecy of Jesus' crucifixion. Referring to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, it says: "They will look on me, the one they have pierced" (NIV). Time and time again the Scriptures speak of the importance of Christ's shed blood (Acts 20:28; Ephesians 2:13; Hebrews 9:11-14; 1 Peter 1:18-19). Jesus Himself said that the wine of the New Testament Passover represented "my blood...which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:28, NIV).

Clearly a central focus of Christ's sacrifice was His blood, which He shed as a sacrifice for the sins of all humanity. Regrettably, this is obscured somewhat in John 19:30-34, which makes it appear that Jesus died and then later was stabbed by one of the Roman soldiers, "bringing a sudden flow of blood and water" (verse 34, NIV). However, there is a problem if this were the specific order of events, because dead bodies, once the heart has stopped its pumping action, no longer bleed like that.

This problem is resolved when we consider many older manuscripts of Matthew's Gospel, which contain words that appear in a few Bible translations but were left out of most modern versions. These missing words tell us the proper sequence of events.

The Twentieth Century New Testament, which includes these words, reads: "And about three [o'clock in the afternoon] Jesus called out loudly: 'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabacthani'—that is to say, 'O my God, my God, why has thou forsaken me?' Some of those standing by heard this, and said [mistakenly]: 'The man is calling for Elijah!'

"One of them immediately ran and took a sponge, and, filling it with common wine, put it on the end of a rod, and offered it to him to drink. But the rest said: 'Wait and let us see if Elijah is coming to save him.' However another man took a spear, and pierced his side; and water and blood flowed from it. But Jesus, uttering another loud cry, gave up his spirit" (Matthew 27:46-50).

The missing words, noted here in italics, show that Jesus was stabbed in the side with a spear, uttered a loud cry and then died. Other versions that contain the missing words include the Moffatt Translation and the Rotherham Emphasized Bible, and various other Bible versions include a footnote or marginal reference noting the omitted words.

So does Matthew's account conflict with John's? No. Both describe the same events, but from different perspectives.

Matthew jumps immediately from Jesus' death to a description of the temple veil being torn in half, while John focuses on the fact that, in contrast to the two criminals crucified with Jesus, not one of His bones was broken. John then explains parenthetically how Jesus had already died so that His bones did not need to be broken—His side had been pierced with a spear (John 19:31-34).

John then tells us in verse 36 that this took place in fulfillment of Psalm 34:20 and the symbolism of the Passover lambs, which were to be slain and not have a single bone broken

(Exodus 12:6, 46; Numbers 9:12). The Passover lambs that had their blood shed to save the Israelites (Exodus 12:6-7, 13) pictured Jesus, "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).

The final fatal blow

Continuing in John 19:37, John explains that the prophecy of Zechariah 12:10 that Jesus' body would be pierced was fulfilled. What was this final, fatal thrust like that ended Jesus' life?

John Lyle Cameron, M.D., explains: "The soldier was a Roman: he would be well trained, proficient, and would know his duty. He would know which part of the body to pierce in order that he might obtain a speedily fatal result or ensure that the victim was undeniably dead...

"The soldier, standing below our crucified Lord as He hung on the cross, would thrust upwards under the left ribs. The broad, clean cutting, two-edged spearhead would enter the left side of the upper abdomen, would open the...stomach, would pierce the diaphragm, would cut, wide open, the heart and great blood vessels, arteries and veins..., and would lacerate the lung.

"The wound would be large enough to permit the open hand to be thrust into it [compare John 20:24-27]. Blood..., together with water from the...stomach, would flow forth in abundance. The whole event as described by St. John must, indeed, have happened, for no writer could have presented in such coherent detail so recognizable an event, unless he or someone had actually witnessed its occurrence" (quoted by R.V.G. Tasker, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: John, 2000, pp. 212-213).

The idea that Jesus didn't really die, that He fainted or was drugged and was later resuscitated, has no basis in fact when you consider the clear statements that He died. The apostle John had been an eyewitness to that death, having been right there with others as these events unfolded (John 19:25-27, 35).

The Roman soldiers, too, knew He was dead. They may not have been medical experts, but they were used to seeing executions and knew when someone was dead. Before releasing the body of Jesus to Joseph of Arimathea, Pilate confirmed with the centurion overseeing the execution detail that Jesus was indeed dead (Mark 15:43-45).

Even if we assume Jesus could have physically survived the crucifixion, how could He then have lived for three days and nights in a tomb, sealed away from any kind of medical care or treatment?

There is one other point we should make here. Assuming the seemingly impossible notion that a man could somehow have lived through all this, the accounts of Jesus appearing to His disciples after the ordeal would have been just that much more impossible. And even if He had somehow managed it, He certainly couldn't have appeared as One who would inspire His disciples to proclaim that He had been resurrected to a glorious and powerful state. He would've been a severely broken, wounded man—psychologically traumatized, physically crippled and maimed for life.

Any theory to explain that Jesus really didn't die cannot be taken seriously in light of the clear evidence we have.

Jesus' burial

Jesus was buried by Joseph of Arimathea in a new tomb that Joseph had reserved for himself.

Because Joseph of Arimathea was a member of the same Jewish high court that condemned Jesus, he is unlikely to be a Christian invention. Mark's Gospel tells us that "Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent council member,… taking courage, went in to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus" (Mark 15:43).

Given permission to take the body, Joseph "bought fine linen, took Him down, and wrapped Him in linen. And he laid Him in a tomb which had been hewn out of the rock, and rolled a stone against the door of the tomb" (verse 46).

No one trying to contrive and pawn off a fabrication would have invented a person who did not exist and say he was a member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling council of the Jewish nation. Members of the Sanhedrin were widely known. Because Joseph was a respected public figure, many people would have known the location of his tomb. If Jesus had not been buried in his tomb, the ruse would have been all too easy to expose.

Notice also the precautions taken to make sure nothing could happen to the body of Jesus once it had been placed in the tomb: "The next day...the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate. 'Sir,' they said, 'we remember that while he was still alive that deceiver said, "After three days I will rise again."

"'So give the order for the tomb to be made secure until the third day. Otherwise, his disciples may come and steal the body and tell the people that he has been raised from the dead. This last deception will be worse than the first.' 'Take a guard,' Pilate answered. 'Go, make the tomb as secure as you know how.' So they went and made the tomb secure by putting a seal on the stone and posting the guard" (Matthew 27:62-66, NIV).

Roman guards were placed around the tomb the day after Jesus' burial. Surely they would have noticed had Jesus awakened from a near-death state or His body been stolen by His followers. Their orders were clear: They were to make sure nothing happened to the body of Jesus. If they failed at this duty, they could be put to death just as Jesus had been.

Both the Jews and the disciples of Christ would have known the location of this tomb. The women who would figure prominently in the discovery of the empty tomb observed where the tomb was and that Jesus was in fact laid inside it (Luke 23:55). They also knew a massive stone had been rolled over the entrance of the tomb (Mark 15:46-47) and knew it had to be rolled back when they returned to the same location to apply the burial spices they had prepared (Mark 16:3).

There was no question in the mind of the women and His other disciples that Jesus was in that tomb.

Women discover the empty tomb

Mark also records for us the detail that three women—Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of

James, and Salome—approached the tomb before sunrise to anoint the body of Jesus with spices. Finding the heavy stone rolled away, they entered the tomb and were shocked and afraid when they saw "a young man clothed in a long white robe sitting on the right side." The man told the women, "He is risen!" and instructed them to go and tell Jesus' other disciples (Mark 16:1-8).

In the society of the day, the testimony of women was held in such low regard that they were not even permitted to serve as witnesses in a court of law. How remarkable it is, then, that women were the acknowledged discoverers of Jesus' empty tomb!

Had someone fabricated the story at a later date, as many critics assume to have been the case, the plot surely would have made male disciples such as Peter and John the discoverers of the empty tomb. That it was women who were the chief witnesses to the fact of the empty tomb is best explained by the straightforward truth that the women named were indeed the actual discoverers.

The Gospel writers faithfully recorded what for them was an awkward and potentially embarrassing detail.

Jesus' enemies acknowledged that the tomb was empty

What was the reaction of Jesus' enemies to the disciples' stunning declaration that Jesus was alive again after having been publicly executed?

Their reaction is very revealing. Did they respond that the disciples were lying, that Jesus' body still lay in the rock-hewn tomb? No. Did they claim that the disciples were hallucinating? No. Instead, they bribed the Roman soldiers responsible for guarding the sealed tomb to spread what they knew was a lie. They told them to spread a cover story, to claim that Jesus' disciples had come and stolen His body while they slept, and that they would cover for the soldiers if they got in trouble with the Roman governor.

Read the account in Matthew 28:11-15. This was the best excuse the authorities could come up with to explain why Jesus' body was missing and could not be found!

Here we have evidence from the very enemies of Christ that His tomb was empty. The best rationale they could come up with they knew to be a lie. There is no other explanation for how the tomb became empty except that Jesus was resurrected bodily and left the tomb.

Eyewitness accounts of His appearances

On multiple occasions and under various circumstances individuals and groups of people saw Jesus alive after knowing He had died.

Notice what the apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthian church: "He was seen by Cephas [Peter], then by the twelve. After that He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep. After that He was seen by James, then by all the apostles. Then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of

due time" (1 Corinthians 15:5-8).

How did Paul receive this information? He was acquainted and had spoken with the people involved. He had heard the account in their own words. Most who could verify it were still alive. He is making this assertion knowing he could be proven wrong if it were not true!

Such eyewitness accounts cannot be dismissed as fantasy. They must refer to actual events that were witnessed by many people alive at the time of Paul's writing. Paul even lists the names of the best known of the witnesses so others could verify the facts of Jesus' resurrection for themselves!

Appearances in bodily form

All of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances in the Gospels are in bodily form. "Why do doubts arise in your hearts?" He asked His apostles when He appeared to them, as recorded in Luke 24:36-43.

He invited them, "Behold [look at] My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself. Handle Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see I have." When they still did not believe, perhaps because it was too good to be true, He asked them for food, which He took and ate in front of them.

Then there is the occasion when Jesus appeared to all His apostles, including Thomas, who apparently was missing on the previous occasion. Thomas was adamant that he would not believe unless he saw Jesus' wounds with his own eyes and felt the wounds with his own hands (John 20:24-29). Yet he was absolutely convinced when Jesus appeared to them all and specifically invited Thomas to verify that He was indeed the same Jesus whom Thomas and the rest had known for so long.

On yet another occasion Jesus appeared to the disciples on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. On this occasion He performed a miracle, fixed and ate a breakfast of bread and fish with them and gently rebuked Peter for returning to his life as a fisherman rather than taking care of the far more important business of tending to His Church (John 21:1-23).

It's been suggested that these appearances were merely hallucinations on the part of the disciples. But this theory cannot account for the fact that the appearances were in different places, at different times and in front of different groups of people. Jesus appeared in ways that were convincing to all the apostles. These appearances left no doubt in their minds—including that of Thomas, who staked out his position that he wouldn't believe unless he literally saw and felt the Jesus whom he knew.

The disciples' astounding transformation

One of the major proofs of the resurrection of Jesus is the dramatic change in the lives of His disciples.

The Gospel accounts are not flattering to the apostles (which is further evidence that they didn't

fabricate the story). At the time of Christ's arrest and trial, all His apostles forsook Him and fled (Matthew 26:56). Peter, who vowed that he would always stand by Jesus, even cursed and swore in denying that he knew Him (verses 69-75).

Jesus, we remember, foretold Peter's weakness and even forewarned His apostles that they would also stumble because of their association with Him (verses 31-35).

Within a short time, however, we see a dramatic change. We find the apostles speaking to large crowds and openly declaring that Jesus had risen from the dead. Far from running away and hiding, now they boldly confronted the civil and religious authorities with the fact that Jesus had been killed and raised to life again.

They defied orders threatening them with imprisonment if they continued to speak about this man Jesus (Acts 4:1-23). They courageously faced beatings and endured death threats because they preached that Jesus was alive and was the Messiah (Acts 5:17-42).

Whereas only weeks before they had denied they even knew Him, now nothing could stop them from openly publicizing what they obviously knew to be true. Only one explanation for their new unshakable belief even in the face of imprisonment and execution is plausible: They saw Jesus Christ alive after they knew He was dead. They spoke with Him, ate with Him, received extensive instructions from Him, spent time with Him and touched Him.

These men gave the remaining years of their lives, and ultimately life itself, for the One they knew had conquered death. Had they all been only participants in a giant hoax, could we believe these men would give their lives for something they knew to be a lie?

Peter's remarkable change

The apostle Peter is the best known of the disciples whose lives were so remarkably changed. His boldness on the Feast of Pentecost was amazing. At the temple he addressed a huge crowd of people, from which 3,000 became disciples of Jesus the Messiah.

Peter spoke to people who lived in Jerusalem and all of Judea as well as many other parts of the Roman world. They were in Jerusalem to observe the Feast of Pentecost, also called the Feast of Weeks, as God had commanded in Deuteronomy 16:16. Peter reminded them that they all knew who Jesus was and what had happened to Him seven weeks earlier at the Passover feast (Acts 2:22-24).

Peter, who had denied his acquaintance with Jesus before He died, now fearlessly proclaimed to the people that they were the ones who had crucified the promised Messiah—but that God had raised Him up.

The reaction of the people is quite telling. There is no denial, no outcry, no attempt to stone Peter for this apparently outrageous charge. Many of them knew of the events surrounding the arrest, trial and crucifixion of Jesus. They knew that many—perhaps even some of those standing there listening to Peter—had shouted for Christ's blood. They knew of the strange disappearance of the body from the tomb, a mystery no one had been able to solve.

They knew or had heard of other strange events that took place at the time: the mysterious

darkness that descended on the land as Jesus was being crucified, people being resurrected from the grave and walking the streets of Jerusalem, and the massive veil in the magnificent temple tearing from top to bottom with no apparent cause.

How were these events to be explained? What did they mean? Peter was giving them the amazing explanation—an explanation that would require them to make a decision that would affect the rest of their lives.

Peter contrasted the empty tomb of Jesus with the nearby tomb of Israel's greatest king, David. "Men and brethren, let me speak freely to you of the patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried, and his tomb is with us to this day" (Acts 2:29). His point was unmistakable: Everybody knew where David's tomb was and that this was where the king's body was buried. But Jesus, unlike David, was no longer bound by the grave!

Jesus of Nazareth, Peter declared, had been raised up by God, and many witnesses could testify to that fact. Once again there was no argument from the crowd. On the contrary, the people asked what they should do now that they, too, were convinced that Peter was right. Peter replied that they should repent and be baptized and that they also would receive the Holy Spirit, as the disciples had on that very day (Acts 2:37-38).

The only way to explain the dramatic transformation of the disciples from a frightened band ready to throw everything away and flee back to Galilee is that Jesus left behind dramatic and powerful evidence: an empty tomb and then multiple bodily appearances. Ordinary men from ordinary walks of life, who had denied their Master and failed Him miserably, suddenly changed almost overnight into dynamic leaders of a Church that was to defy and challenge the ancient pagan world.

James, half brother of Jesus, becomes a believer

Perhaps an even more remarkable transformation took place in the life of James, the half brother of Jesus (James was the natural son of Mary and Joseph while Jesus was the son of Mary and God the Father). Notice how J.P. Moreland describes events in James' life as recorded in the Bible and contemporary history:

"Why did these men change? Why did they undergo hardship, persecution, pressure, and martyrdom? Consider James the brother of Jesus. Josephus, the first-century Jewish historian, tells us that he died a martyr's death for his faith in his brother. Yet the Gospels tell us that during Jesus' life, he was an unbeliever and opposed Jesus.

"Why did he change? What could cause a Jew to believe that his own brother was the very Son of God and to be willing to die for such a belief? It certainly was not a set of lovely teachings from a carpenter from Nazareth. Only the appearance of Jesus to James (1 Corinthians 15:7) can explain his transformation.

"As with James, so it is with the other disciples. One who denies the resurrection owes us an explanation of this transformation which does justice to the historical facts" (Scaling the Secular City, 1987, pp. 178-179).

Paul the persecutor is transformed

The apostle Paul is another remarkable example. As a devout Jewish rabbi and strict Pharisee, he was resolutely convinced that Jesus' resurrection had not taken place. Paul persecuted members of the early Church for believing in such nonsense. He staked his whole mission in life on his conviction that the resurrection was a fabrication and the movement was a threat to every tradition he held sacred.

This new movement, he was convinced, deserved to be stamped out by any means, including imprisonment and execution (Acts 22:4)—and this would be his personal crusade. Then something happened. Jesus Christ appeared to Paul and spoke to him.

Paul was not a man given to the vivid imaginations of superstitious people. He was a levelheaded intellectual. Yet he later was prepared to defend his zeal for Christ before hostile mobs as well as governors, kings and other rulers. In the end Paul was prepared to die for what he knew was true: Jesus was indeed the Messiah and was alive and well at the right hand of God.

The existence of the Christian Church

Dr. Moreland puts it this way: "What cause can be postulated to explain the fact that the Christian church transformed the world of the first century? The odds for its success were antecedently poor. Several religions existed in the first century and some of the elements of Christianity can be found in them. Why did Christianity succeed, especially when it was such an exclusivist faith which frowned on syncretism? What caused the church to get started? There never was a form of Christianity which did not emphasize the centrality of the death and resurrection of a divine Jesus.

"The resurrection of Jesus is the explanation the church herself gave, and it is the only adequate one. Cambridge New Testament scholar C.F.D. Moule argues this way: 'If the coming into existence of the Nazarenes, a phenomenon undeniably attested by the New Testament, rips a great hole in history, a hole of the size and shape of Resurrection, what does the secular historian propose to stop it up with?'" (ibid., pp. 180-181).

That Jesus Christ really was resurrected from the dead is the only truly reasonable conclusion.

Roman Forms of Crucifixion

Crucifixion wasn't always carried out the way we've seen it typically depicted in paintings and pictures. In fact, as noted in this chapter, a crucifixion victim likely wasn't nailed through the hands, since their structure cannot support the weight of a human body. Most likely victims were nailed through the wrist or, in some instances, had their arms tied rather than being nailed.

Nor were victims always crucified on the kind of cross typically shown in depictions of Christ's crucifixion. Note what The Anchor Bible Dictionary says in its article on crucifixion:

"At times the cross was only one vertical stake. Frequently, however, there was a cross-piece attached either at the top to give the shape of a 'T' (crux commissa) or just below the top, as in the form most familiar in Christian symbolism (crux immissa). The victims carried the cross or at least a transverse beam (patibulum) to the place of execution, where they were stripped and bound or nailed to the beam, raised up, and seated on a sedile or small wooden peg in the upright beam...

"Executioners could vary the form of punishment, as [Roman historian] Seneca the Younger indicates: 'I see crosses there, not just of one kind but made in many different ways: some have their victims with head down to the ground; some impale their private parts; others stretch out their arms on the [cross-piece]'...

"In his account of what happened to Jewish refugees from Jerusalem [in the Jewish war of A.D. 67-70], [first-century historian] Josephus also lets us see that there was no fixed pattern for crucifying people. Much depended on the sadistic ingenuity of the moment" (David Noel Freedman, editor-in-chief, 1992, Vol. 1, pp. 1208-1209).

"The accursed tree"

The Roman historian Seneca, describing the horror of crucifixion, argued that it would be better to commit suicide than endure such a tortured death. "Can anyone be found who would prefer wasting away in pain dying limb by limb, or letting out his life drop by drop, rather than expiring once for all? Can any man be found willing to be fastened to the accursed tree, long sickly, already deformed, swelling with ugly weals on shoulders and chest, and drawing the breath of life amid long-drawn-out agony? He would have many excuses for dying even before mounting the cross" (ibid., p. 1209).

Seneca's reference to "the accursed tree" is strongly reminiscent of Peter's words when he speaks of Jesus, "who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree" (1 Peter 2:24; compare Acts 5:30). In some cases crucifixions seem to have been carried out on a literal tree, albeit one that was basically only a trunk from which the branches had been cut away.

In these crucifixions the condemned victim would be nailed to the upright trunk or would carry his own crossbeam, which would then be fastened to the trunk and him nailed to both. It's possible that the "cross" Jesus carried to His execution, carried part of the time by Simon of Cyrene, was simply a large beam of wood.

Shape of the cross not spelled out

The word translated "cross" in the New Testament is the Greek word stauros, which "denotes, primarily, 'an upright pale or stake'" (Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words, 1985, "Cross, Crucify").

"Both the noun and the verb stauroo, 'to fasten to a stake or pale,' are originally to be distinguished from the ecclesiastical form of a two beamed 'cross'" (ibid.).

The Bible contains no specific description of the stauros on which Jesus died. The word stauros was used in nonbiblical writings of the time to refer to pieces of wood of various shapes, with and without crosspieces. If it were important that we know its exact shape, the Gospel writers could have easily provided us that information—yet none of them do. What is important for us to know is the willing sacrifice Jesus made of His own life for our sakes.

If we don't know whether Jesus was executed on a stake or a cross, or what shape of cross, how did the t-shaped cross come to be the most popular symbol of Christianity?

Vine's explains: "The shape of the [two-beamed cross] had its origin in ancient Chaldea, and was used as the symbol of the god Tammuz (being in the shape of the mystic Tau, the initial of his name) in that country and in adjacent lands, including Egypt. By the middle of the 3rd cent. A.D. the churches had either departed from, or had travestied, certain doctrines of the Christian faith.

"In order to increase the prestige of the apostate ecclesiastical system pagans were received into the churches...and were permitted largely to retain their pagan signs and symbols. Hence the Tau, or T, in its most frequent form, with the cross-piece lowered, was adopted to stand for the 'cross' of Christ'" (ibid.).

Thus we see that the most common symbol of Christ and Christianity was a symbol that long predated Jesus and biblical Christianity.

When Was Jesus Christ Crucified and Resurrected?

In Matthew 12:38, some of the scribes and Pharisees asked Jesus for a sign to prove He was the Messiah. But Jesus told them that the only sign He would give was that of the prophet Jonah: "For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (verse 40).

But how can we fit "three days and three nights" between a Friday-afternoon crucifixion and a Sunday-morning resurrection? This traditional view allows for Jesus to have been entombed for only a day and a half.

Some believe that Christ's "three days and three nights" statement does not require a literal span of 72 hours, reasoning that a part of a day can be reckoned as a whole day. Thus, since Jesus died in the afternoon, they think the remainder of Friday constituted the first day, Saturday the second and part of Sunday the third. However, they fail to take into consideration that only two nights—Friday night and Saturday night—are accounted for in this explanation. Something is obviously wrong with the traditional view regarding when Christ was in the tomb.

Jonah 1:17, to which Christ referred, states specifically that "Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights." We have no basis for thinking that Jesus meant only two nights and one day, plus parts of two days. If Jesus were in the tomb only from late Friday afternoon to early Sunday morning, then the sign He gave that He was the prophesied Messiah was not fulfilled.

Let's carefully examine the details from the Gospels. When we do, we uncover the real story of how Jesus' words were fulfilled precisely.

Notice the events outlined in Luke 23. Jesus' moment of death, as well as His hasty burial because of the oncoming Sabbath that began at sundown, is narrated in verses 46-53. Verse 54 then states, "That day was the Preparation, and the Sabbath drew near."

Many have assumed that it is the weekly Sabbath mentioned here, and that Jesus was therefore crucified on a Friday. But John 19:31 shows that this approaching Sabbath "was a high day"— not the weekly Sabbath (Friday sunset to Saturday sunset) but the first day of Unleavened Bread, which is one of God's annual high, or Sabbath, days (Exodus 12:16-17; Leviticus 23:6-7). These annual Holy Days could—and usually did—fall on days of the week other than the regular weekly Sabbath day.

This high-day Sabbath was Wednesday night and Thursday, since Luke 23:56 shows that the women, after seeing Christ's body being laid in the tomb just before sunset, "returned and prepared spices and fragrant oils" for the final preparation of the body.

Such work would not have been done on a Sabbath day since it would have been considered a violation of the Sabbath. This is verified by Mark's account, which states, "Now when the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices

[which they would not have purchased on the high-day Sabbath], that they might come and anoint Him" (Mark 16:1).

The women had to wait until this annual "high day" Sabbath was over before they could buy and prepare the spices to be used for anointing Jesus' body. Then, after purchasing and preparing the spices and oils on Friday, "they rested on the Sabbath according to the commandment" (Luke 23:56). This second Sabbath mentioned in the Gospel accounts is the regular weekly Sabbath, observed from Friday sunset to Saturday sunset.

By comparing details in both Gospels—where Mark tells us the women bought spices after the Sabbath and Luke relates that they prepared the spices before resting on the Sabbath—we can clearly see that two different Sabbaths are mentioned. The first, as John 19:31 tells us, was a "high day"—the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread—which, in A.D. 31, fell on a Thursday. The second was the weekly seventh-day Sabbath.

After the women rested on the regular weekly Sabbath, they went to Jesus' tomb early on the first day of the week (Sunday), "while it was still dark" (John 20:1), and found that He had already been resurrected (Matthew 28:1-6; Mark 16:2-6; Luke 24:1-3).

When we consider the details in all four Gospel accounts, the picture is clear. Jesus was crucified and entombed late on Wednesday afternoon, just before a Sabbath began at sunset. However, that was a high-day Sabbath, lasting from Wednesday sunset to Thursday sunset that week, rather than the regular weekly Sabbath, lasting from Friday sunset to Saturday sunset.

He remained in the tomb from Wednesday at sunset until Saturday at sunset, when He rose from the dead. While no one witnessed His resurrection (which took place inside a sealed tomb), it had to have happened near sunset on Saturday, three days and three nights after His body was entombed. It could not have happened on Sunday morning, because when Mary Magdalene came to the tomb that morning before sunrise, "while it was still dark," she found the stone rolled away and the tomb empty.

We can be assured that the length of His entombment that Jesus gave as proof He was the Messiah was exactly as long as He foretold. Jesus rose precisely three days and three nights after He was placed in the tomb.

Because most people do not understand the biblical high days Jesus Christ and His followers kept, they fail to understand the chronological details so accurately preserved for us in the Gospels.

The Chronology of the Crucifixion and Resurrection

Tuesday
Jesus Christ ate an evening Passover meal with His disciples and instituted the New Covenant symbols (Matthew 26:26-28). Jesus was then betrayed by Judas, arrested and during the night brought before the high priest.

Wednesday
Jesus died around 3 p.m. (Matthew 27:46-50). This was the preparation day for the annual, not weekly, Sabbath, which began at sunset (Mark 15:42; Luke 23:54; John 19:31). Jesus' body was placed in the tomb just before sunset (Matthew 27:57-60).

Thursday
This was the high-day Sabbath, the first day of Unleavened Bread (John 19:31; Leviticus 23:4-7). It is described as the day after the "Day of Preparation" (Matthew 27:62).

Friday
The high-day Sabbath now past, the women bought and prepared spices for anointing Jesus' body before resting on the weekly Sabbath day, which began at Friday sunset (Mark 16:1; Luke 23:56).

Saturday
The women rested on the weekly Sabbath, according to the Fourth Commandment (Luke 23:56; Exodus 20:8-11). Jesus rose near sunset, exactly three days and three nights after burial, fulfilling the sign of Jonah and authenticating the sign He gave of His messiahship.

Sunday
The women brought the spices early in the morning while it was still dark (Luke 24:1; John 20:1), finding that Jesus had already risen (Matthew 28:1-6; Mark 16:2-6; Luke 24:2-3; John 20:1). He did not rise on Sunday morning, but near sunset the day before.

Do Other Nonbiblical Sources Confirm Jesus Christ's Existence?

Many people assume that, apart from the Bible, history is silent concerning Jesus of Nazareth. But in fact, several independent witnesses testify of Jesus' existence. Let's notice a few.

Testimony from the Romans

Cornelius Tacitus (ca. 56-120) was a Roman senator, consul and governor of the Roman province of Anatolia (covering most of modern-day Turkey) as well as one of ancient Rome's greatest historians. Late in his life he wrote a 16-volume history of the Roman emperors, the Annals.

No friend to either Nero or Christians, Tacitus writes that Nero blamed "a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace." He goes on to explain that "Christus [Christ], from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty [crucifixion] during the reign of Tiberius at the hand of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome ..." (Annals, 15:44, quoted by Lee Strobel, The Case for Christ, 1998, p. 82).

A contemporary of Tacitus, Caius Suetonius Tranquillus (ca. 69-140), overseer of Rome's libraries and court official to several emperors, writes that the emperor Claudius "banished the Jews from Rome, who were continually making disturbances, Chrestus [Christ] being their leader" (Lives of the First Twelve Caesars: Life of Claudius, quoted by Grant Jeffrey, Jesus: The Great Debate, 1999, p. 163). This banishment of Jews from Rome is mentioned in Acts 18:2.

Also, "Pliny the younger, the Roman legate of Bithynia-Pontus (what is now north-central Turkey) in the early second century, wrote to the emperor Trajan, requesting advice on how to deal with Christians who refused to reverence Caesar's image. Pliny noted that these Christians met regularly and sang hymns 'to Christ as if to a god' (Letters 10:96.7). The phrase 'as if to a God' suggests that Pliny knew Jesus had been a person who had lived on earth but was reluctant to call him divine" (Craig Blomberg, The Historical Reliability of the Gospels, 1987, p. 196).

From these historical sources, none connected in any way with the Bible, we see references to these facts:

• A group called "Christians" derived its name from "Christus" (Christ).

• This "Christus" was executed during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of Pontius Pilate (Tiberius reigned A.D. 14-37; Pilate held office from 26 to 36 or 37).

• This new movement involved "a most mischievous superstition," quite possibly a reference to Christians' belief that Jesus rose from the dead after His crucifixion.

• This new movement begun by Christians began in Judea and spread to Rome.

• Early Christians considered Christ to be a divine Being.

Testimony from Josephus

Flavius Josephus, a prominent Jewish historian of the first century, is well known to historians and scholars. Born into a priestly family in A.D. 37, Josephus was well educated and commanded a Jewish detachment in Galilee during the Jewish revolt of 66-70 until his capture by the Romans. At the end of the war he went to Rome with the Roman general Titus, where he lived and wrote until his death about A.D. 100.

Josephus twice mentions Jesus in his monumental work Antiquities of the Jews, written A.D. 90-95. His most extensive quote reads:

"Now, there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man, for he was a doer of wonderful works,—a teacher of such men as received the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews, and many of the Gentiles. He was [the] Christ; and when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him, for he appeared to them alive again the third day, as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him; and the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day" (Antiquities, Book 18, chapter 3, section 3).

While many scholars dispute parts or all of the passage, it is quoted as above by the historian Eusebius as early as 315.

A second mention of Jesus by Josephus is seldom disputed by scholars. It concerns the martyrdom of James, His half brother: "Festus was now dead, and Albinus was but upon the road; so he assembled the sanhedrin of the judges, and brought before them the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James, and some others [or some of his companions;] and when he had formed an accusation against them as breakers of the law, he delivered them to be stoned ..." (Antiquities, 20:9:1).

Another prominent figure from the Gospels mentioned by Josephus is John the Baptizer: "Herod, who feared lest the great influence John had over the people might put it into his power and inclination to raise a rebellion,...thought it best, by putting him to death, to prevent any mischief he might cause...Accordingly he was sent a prisoner, out of Herod's suspicious temper, to Macherus,...and was there put to death" (Antiquities, 18:5:2).

Although Josephus was never a Christian, in his works we find mention of many other figures from the Gospels and other New Testament books. These include the family of the Herods; the Judean procurators and members of the high priestly families. His books, like the writings of the Roman historians and officials, provide powerful independent corroboration of the historical accuracy of the Gospels and the existence of Jesus Christ.

Much More Than a Man

Today it isn't politically correct to state dogmatically that Jesus was more than an extraordinarily gifted person, a moral person, a wise philosopher, a Jewish sage or a political reformist. Nor is it acceptable to say that His teachings are the only route to a life beyond the grave and to lasting peace for the world.

After all, we live in a world that dislikes such absolutes. And some dislike even more the authority that One who claimed to be God might claim over their lives. Thus throughout history all kinds of ideas have sprung up about Jesus of Nazareth.

Why is there so much controversy over one man? He regularly makes the cover of weekly newsmagazines. More books have been written and more scholarly work done about this Jewish teacher from Galilee than any other man who ever lived.

The simple answer is that He claimed to be God—and from the record was able to support that claim, as we have seen.

He assures us He will prove it to the entire world when He comes to earth a second time in glory, majesty and divine supernatural power that will astound people all around the globe.

God comes to earth

The question remains: How was Jesus God? If Jesus was God, then who was the Father He spoke of so often? How could Jesus and the Father both be God at the same time?

Where did Jesus come from? Was He created at some point? Did He come into existence when He was born of Mary? Was He an angel? Was He a spiritual essence or "thought" in the Father's mind prior to His human existence?

The story of how Jesus came to be born tells us that He was no ordinary human being. The record takes great pains to explain that He did not have a human father, but that His Father was God Himself.

"Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: After His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 1:18).

"Betrothed" in their culture meant the agreement for them to marry was binding even though the marriage itself had not yet taken place. Both Joseph and Mary knew they had not been together in physical union, and Mary certainly knew she was a virgin. But Joseph was naturally questioning why his intended bride was pregnant, and he worried over how to handle this crisis.

"Then Joseph her [betrothed] husband, being a just man, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly. But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she will

bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins'" (verses 19-21).

Joseph needed reassurance that Mary was telling the truth about her pregnancy, and the obvious way to convince him was by having an angel speak to him. Mary had received a similar message as recorded in Luke 1:26-38. The angel Gabriel appeared and announced to Mary that she would conceive a son whom she was to name Jesus. She insisted that she had never been with a man—she was a virgin.

Gabriel then explained how this would happen. He said, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God" (verse 35).

In traditional theological terms, this is something of an enigma. Jesus recognized that God was His Father, but we are told that what Mary conceived in her womb was by the Holy Spirit. Most people believe the Holy Spirit is the third person in the Trinity. But since the Holy Spirit engendered Jesus in Mary's womb, how could God the Father be Jesus' Father?

The answer is simply that the Holy Spirit is not a person, as is assumed in the traditional teaching of the Trinity. The Bible nowhere teaches that the Holy Spirit is a distinct person. It does, however, refer to the Holy Spirit as the power of God.

God, whom Jesus referred to as His Father, used His own power, referred to as the "Holy Spirit," to beget Jesus in the womb of Mary. Therefore, Jesus is the Son of God by birth.

Matthew, writing under divine inspiration, explained the significance of the angel's message to Joseph, showing that it fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy of the virgin birth of "'Immanuel,' which is translated, 'God with us'" (Matthew 1:23).

When Jesus was born, He was God in the flesh—"God with us." This was what the angel was saying and what God had foretold long before.

Who was Jesus before His human birth?

The most definitive and clear statement about Jesus before His human birth is recorded in the first few verses of John's Gospel. John, Jesus' closest disciple, takes great care to explain that this Jesus is no ordinary man.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). Who was this "Word"? "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth" (verse 14). John goes on to explain that the Word who "became flesh and dwelt among us" was Jesus of Nazareth. He also gives us explicit and definitive statements containing important details about Jesus prior to His human birth.

"The Word" is Jesus and He was with God, and He was God. This language is unmistakable and can mean only one thing: There were two beings—God and the Word.

The Word "was in the beginning with God" (verse 2). The beginning of what?

Jesus existed before the beginning

Since John's Gospel begins with the words "In the beginning," it seems likely that John is alluding to Genesis 1:1. But while Genesis 1:1 continues with, "God created...," John begins his Gospel with, "In the beginning was the Word..." He tells us that the Word already existed "in the beginning."

In Genesis the creation of the universe and time itself marks "the beginning"; in John the existence of the Word precedes that beginning.

The Creator of the universe obviously existed before the universe because He caused the universe to come into being.

John explicitly says that it was the Word—Jesus Christ—through whom all things were created (John 1:3). Paul agrees completely with John in language that is unmistakable (Ephesians 3:9), adding, "He is before all things and in Him all things consist" (Colossians 1:16-17). (See "Jesus Christ's Apostles Understood Him to Be the Creator.")

Paul makes the logical point that since Christ was the agent by whom all things were created, then He must have necessarily existed before the creation. Jesus also referred to His existing before the creation when, in praying to the Father, He spoke of "the glory I had with you before the world began" (John 17:5, NIV).

Jesus speaks of the relationship between Himself and the Father "before the foundation of the world" (verse 24), a phrase echoed by Paul in Ephesians 1:4.

The Word

The preexistent Jesus is characterized by the name or title "the Word." Perhaps one of the reasons the Greek word logos, translated "Word," is used is that this best describes one of the major roles of Christ—He was to reveal the Father. Logos means "the expression of thought" (Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words, "Word").

Logos is used in the New Testament of a saying or statement of God, the word of God, the revealed will of God and direct revelation given by Christ, and could be spoken and delivered (ibid.). John applied this word as a personal title to the One who "became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14).

What John is saying is that a personal Being, whom he calls the logos or "the Word," became incarnate—became a flesh-and-blood human being—in the person of Jesus Christ. The fact that the Word became a flesh-and-blood person implies that the Word was a specific individual being prior to His becoming a physical human baby born to Mary.

John also tells us that the Word is personally distinct from the Father, though He is at the same time one with the Father. They are the same, eternal, and are of the same nature and essence. The Word is God as truly as is the One with whom He exists in the closest union of being and life. As Jesus said, "I and My Father are one" (John 10:30).

The oneness between the Father and the Word has to do with their complete harmony and agreement in working together—not that they constitute only one Being as the Trinitarian theory mistakenly teaches.

Who and what is God?

John's simple but clear statements give us an understanding of God that was now made plain by the appearance of Jesus Christ. The language used expresses to us that there are two Beings, coexisting and called God—God and the Word who is also God.

If they existed in some other form than two self-existing beings, both the Greek and the English language are capable of describing something altogether different. But the language does not do this. It speaks clearly of two, together, both of whom are God. If there was only one, alone, then John wouldn't have said, "the Word was with God."

The question arises: If Jesus was the Word, and thus God, how could God who is infinite become finite? What happened to the Word at the moment He became an ovum begotten with life from the Father in the womb of Mary?

We don't know exactly how God performed this miracle, but it's evident from Scripture that God could become a physical human being and therefore become subject to a finite, physical existence—limited to time and space, subject to pain, suffering and death and to being tempted.

And Jesus did this. As Paul described it: "He, who had always been God by nature, did not cling to his privileges as God's equal, but stripped himself of every advantage by consenting to be a slave by nature and being born a man. And, plainly seen as a human being, he humbled himself by living a life of utter obedience, to the point of death, and the death he died was the death of a common criminal" (Philippians 2:6-8, New Testament in Modern English).

Jesus could die. Jesus could experience human emotion. Jesus could feel hunger and pain. He could agonize at the prospect of pain and death. Yes, God could die. But only if He were to become a physical human being. This He did. And who was He? He was the same person He had always been, even having memories of His past eternity with the Father.

Notice Jesus' prayer in John 17:5: "And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began" (NIV). Here He speaks straightforwardly of His past experiences and memories with the Father, confirming everything John wrote in the first few verses of his Gospel.

Yes, Jesus' sacrifice was one of virtually unimaginable proportions. And knowing who He was and what He willingly gave up should make all the difference to you and me when coming to terms with the enormous magnitude of His sacrifice.

Was Jesus a Created Being?

John 1:3 contains two direct statements that tell us that it was the preexistent Jesus who created all things. "All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made." Notice that John is not content to say only that all things were made through Him, but John adds the fact that "without Him nothing was made."

Paul confirms exactly what John wrote: "For by Him all things were created." Paul goes on to make sure that we understand what he means by all things—"that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him" (Colossians 1:16).

Since Jesus created all things, He could not have been one of the "created things." Paul then adds, so there can be no mistake, "He is before all things, and in him all things hold together" (verse 17, NIV).

Dr. Norman Geisler comments: "The context of this passage makes it clear that there are no exceptions; Christ is the Creator of all things including angels and everything visible or invisible. Nowhere is this made more clear that Christ is not a creature—angelic or otherwise—than in the relation of angels to Him. Since Christ could not be both the Creator of everything and at the same time a creature Himself, it is necessary to conclude that He is Himself the uncreated Creator of all creation" (Christian Apologetics, 1988, p. 338).

He adds a footnote: "In view of the clear teaching that Christ is Creator and not a creature, the Arian misinterpretations of phrases like Christ is 'firstborn' (Colossians 1:15) or 'beginning of creation' (Revelation 3:14) are wrong. Christ is 'firstborn' in the sense of being the unique (not created) Son of God. Christ is first over creation, not first in it" (ibid.).

Micah 5:2 stated that the messianic King to come was "from everlasting." Jesus had appeared in His divine life before His human birth as the priest-king Melchizedek (see Hebrews 7), "having neither beginning of days nor end of life" (verse 3).

Jesus was not created. He existed from eternity along with God the Father.

The God Who Became a Human Being

How could someone who is spirit, having lived for all eternity in the past, become human? Was Jesus a human being just like us? And when He was a human being, was He still God?

Jesus was prophesied to be "God with us" (Matthew 1:23). Jesus was a human being and He was also God. There was never a time when He ceased to be who He always was. His identity did not change. When He was in the womb of Mary, He was God. When He was a baby boy lying in the manger, He was God. When He was a youngster growing up in Nazareth, He was God. And when He was dying, He was God.

As a spirit being, prior to His human birth, He was infinite in knowledge, power and presence. As God He would know everything and have unlimited power to act on any object, anywhere. But if He was human, He could not do everything. He would be limited to the normal abilities any normal human being would have. He could not have been both infinite and finite simultaneously.

A physical body with physical limitations

When Jesus became flesh He was still God in terms of His identity, but He was nevertheless a human being in every sense of the word.

Jesus had a physical body. His closest disciple attests that He was a physical person: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life—the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness" (1 John 1:1). John is establishing the humanity of Jesus Christ when he says they heard, saw and touched Jesus.

He had a fully human body. He was born. He grew and developed just like any other child.

Jesus was subject to the same physical limitations as other human beings, because He had the same kind of body. He experienced hunger when He fasted (Matthew 4:2) and thirst (John 19:28). He experienced fatigue from a long walk (John 4:6).

Jesus suffered physically and died. Hebrews 2:10 tells us that He was made "perfect through sufferings." Physiologically, He was a human being just as we are human, subject to death. "Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil" (verse 14, NRSV). He was made flesh "that He ...might taste death for everyone" (verse 9).

Jesus suffered terribly when He died, as is evident in the crucifixion accounts. When the spear was thrust in His side, water and blood poured out. His body was the same as ours. There can be no doubt that He felt physical suffering as genuinely as we do when He was beaten and scourged, when the crown of thorns was shoved onto His head and when the nails were driven into His wrists and feet.

Jesus felt human emotions

Jesus also experienced many of the same emotional and intellectual qualities we do. He thought, reasoned and felt the full range of human emotions. He had strong affection for people (John 11:5; 13:23; 19:26). He felt compassion and pity for those who were hungry or physically or spiritually afflicted (Matthew 9:36; 14:14; 15:32; 20:34).

He could be distressed and troubled, as was evident to His disciples when He anticipated His impending suffering and death (Luke 12:50; John 12:27). He was deeply troubled when considering that one of His disciples would betray Him (John 13:21). He grieved and wept over the mourning of Lazarus' family and friends when Lazarus died (John 11:33-35).

Jesus was "deeply distressed" and "exceedingly sorrowful" and didn't want to be left alone when He was struggling with His thoughts and feelings just before His arrest (Matthew 26:37-40). Obviously Jesus possessed the same human capacity to feel sorrow and anguish as deeply as we sometimes do.

He also experienced joy (John 15:11; 17:13). He could be angry and grieved with people's attitudes (Mark 3:5) and indignant toward His own disciples (Mark 10:14, NRSV).

Jesus' intellectual abilities

Yet the Gospels clearly reveal that Jesus had knowledge of the past, present and future in a way that was far beyond what any ordinary man would have. However, these remarkable abilities were not something that He had inherently. They were given to Him by the Father. As Jesus clearly said, "I can of Myself do nothing" (John 5:30)—that is, nothing supernatural on His own. We will explore this idea more when we discuss the works of Jesus.

What are some of the ways Jesus had knowledge beyond normal human abilities? We first see this when, at the age of 12, He showed understanding far beyond His age in His discussions with the teachers at the temple (Luke 2:46-47).

He knew the thoughts of both His friends (Luke 9:47) and His enemies (Matthew 9:4). He knew the Samaritan woman had five husbands and at the time was living with a man to whom she was not married (John 4:18). He knew that Lazarus had died from his illness even though He and the disciples were miles away (John 11:1, 11-14).

He knew which disciple would betray Him long before Judas had made the decision to turn Jesus over to those who wanted to kill Him (John 6:70-71). He told Peter that he would deny Him three times on the night He was arrested and that a rooster would crow after the third denial (Luke 22:34).

At the same time, He did not know everything. There was knowledge that He did not have and therefore asked to find out. He inquired from the father of the child who had the mute spirit, "How long has this been happening to him?" (Mark 9:21). When Jesus gave the amazing prophecies about the end of the age and His return, He acknowledged that He did not know the exact time of His coming. "But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (Mark 13:32).

Jesus here is relying on the Father to present Him with the time of His return. This helps us to understand that the Father also gave Him the understanding of the hearts of men, prophetic events and other information that He wasn't told.

Jesus constantly depended on God the Father for guidance on what to do, what to say and how to answer, for insight into the hearts of men and for anything else the Father might see fit to give to Him. He relied on God the Father for help to obey, to have power over demonic spirits and to have strength to resist and overcome temptation.

Sometimes He prayed for long periods (Luke 5:16; Mark 1:35). Before choosing the 12 apostles He prayed all night (Luke 6:12-16). On the night before His crucifixion, He prayed repeatedly in the Garden of Gethsemane and the Father sent an angel to strengthen Him during this terrible ordeal (Luke 22:41-44).

Hebrews 5:7 tells us, "In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission" (NRSV). As a human being, Jesus trusted the Father completely for the strength He needed to prevail against the forces that worked so fervently against Him.

Could Jesus have sinned?

This brings us to another question about Jesus' humanity. Was it possible for Jesus to sin? The Bible is quite clear that Jesus did not sin. Paul says that Jesus "knew no sin" (2 Corinthians 5:21). John confirms that "in Him there is no sin" (1 John 3:5). None of His enemies could convict Him of sin (John 8:46).

But could He have sinned? Hebrews 4:15 tells us that "we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin." If it wasn't possible for Jesus to sin, then was His temptation genuine?

It's more fitting to say that while He could have sinned, it was certain that He would not. He faced genuine struggles and temptations, but refused to give in to the temptation to sin.

When He was tempted of the devil for 40 days and nights (Luke 4:1-2), was this real temptation or merely a pointless exercise? One could hardly say that His "prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death" were not a result of experiencing strong temptation.

Such a time came when He prayed under such duress immediately before His arrest that, "being in agony, He prayed more earnestly. Then His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground" (Luke 22:44). Jesus then urged His disciples to "rise and pray, lest you enter into temptation" (verse 46).

For Jesus to fully know how human beings have to deal with sin, "...he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested" (Hebrews 2:17-18, NRSV).

How could He be our example if He wasn't human and therefore wasn't tempted exactly as we are? This is why He had to be tempted in every way as we are. Yet He went beyond. If a person yields to temptation, he has not felt its full power, but has given in while he has yet more to resist. Only the one who successfully prevails against a particular temptation and remains sinless knows the full extent of that temptation.

Was He really God?

We have explained that Jesus was God as the Bible explicitly says (John 1:1). What was the difference, then, between how He was God prior to His human birth and when He was a human being?

Paul addresses this very question in Philippians 2. Paul tells us what He left behind and what He took upon Himself. "He, who had always been God by nature, did not cling to his privileges as God's equal." Instead He "stripped himself of every advantage by consenting to be a slave by nature and being born a man" (verses 6-7, NTME).

Verse 8 tells us that "he humbled himself by living a life of utter obedience, to the point of death, and the death he died was the death of a common criminal" (NTME).

In taking on the form of a human being, Jesus gave up the independent exercise of His attributes that He had when He was with the Father. This doesn't mean that He lost them but that, to become truly human, it was necessary that He voluntarily give up the ability to exercise them on His own. And having given them up, He no longer had these attributes inherently while a man. Indeed, as quoted above, Jesus clearly said He did not have the ability to perform supernatural works on His own: "I can of Myself do nothing" (John 5:30). He could exercise the attributes of divinity only in submission to the will of the Father.

Jesus performed many wondrous works, but He emphatically told His disciples that "I do not speak on My own authority; but the Father who dwells in Me does the works" (John 14:10). Again and again, Jesus declared that the works He did were the Father's, not His own, and He pointed to the works as proof that He had been sent from the Father (John 10:32, 37-38).

While in prior centuries Jesus had authority to speak as YHWH of the Old Testament, He now spoke and acted under authority to God and in full dependence on Him. "Most assuredly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do; for whatever He does, the Son also does in like manner" (John 5:19).

The One who existed with the Father from before the beginning of the universe, now as a human being, explained the relationship: "I do nothing of Myself; but as My Father taught Me, I speak these things" (John 8:28).

Jesus' salvation

Jesus placed His entire future squarely in the hands of the Father. The self-existing One now would have no life unless it were through the Father (John 6:57). If He were to again have eternal life, He would now have to obtain it as a human being, in the same way you and I would

achieve salvation—through submission to the Father and the resurrection from the dead.

Hebrews 5:9 explains that Jesus became "the author of eternal salvation" by experiencing the process of salvation as a human being—with one exception. Jesus didn't have to repent of sin. But He did have to remain sinless. And "though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered" (verse 8).

He was always obedient. Yet His obedience and character were tested and strengthened through hardships and trials. "And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him" (verse 9). He was already perfect before His human birth. Now He was perfected as a human being. He is "declared to be the Son of God ...by the resurrection from the dead" (Romans 1:4). However, He already was the Son of God by virtue of who He was (verse 3).

It becomes clear that "in all things He had to be made like His brethren" (Hebrews 2:17).

The enormity of the sacrifice Jesus made becomes difficult for us to comprehend when we realize the position He voluntarily put Himself in. His very existence was on the line. If Jesus had sinned, then who would be the sacrifice for Him? If He had made a choice to sin, just once, He would have incurred the penalty of death—death for all time. The very law that He spoke Himself as God from Mt. Sinai would require it.

Could God die?

When talking about God, some people don't like to consider the possibility that God could die. How could God cease to exist? As an infinite, immortal spirit Being, He couldn't. But if He volunteered to become a human being and to possess all the attributes of human nature and a physical existence, then He could die. And indeed He did die—and when He died, He was really dead. If He wasn't really dead, in the same way we would be dead if someone killed us, then it couldn't really be a genuine substitution—His life for ours.

It would have been only make-believe, an illusion. Not only did Jesus die, but He also could have died the death from which there was no resurrection—the death of a sinner without any redemption.

His salvation was through the Father in whom He had complete confidence. That relationship was one that could only be described as total, complete and utter trust in and reliance on His Father (John 8:29). Jesus submitted His will to His Father (John 6:38). He asked for no glory as a human being (John 17:5). He was obedient all the way to His death (Philippians 2:8).

He put His salvation on the same basis as ours. We have a forerunner, an example, an author of salvation, a captain of salvation. Who He would forever be hung in the balance of a few short years on earth (Philippians 2:8-11).

Was there ever a doubt in the outcome? There was none—not because He couldn't fail, but because He and the Father knew what each could do and would do. The strength of God is the greatest strength there is, and the faith of Jesus was absolute. It is the same faith through which we are saved (Galatians 2:20, KJV).

Jesus' Family Connections

When we read the Gospels carefully, we see a number of family connections that help us better understand certain events.

We find one of the most important connections in Luke 1:36, where the same angel who informs Mary that she will bear a Son also tells her, "Elizabeth your relative has also conceived a son in her old age." This same Elizabeth would give birth to a son named John, who would be known to history as John the Baptist (verses 57-60, 80).

The exact relationship between Mary and Elizabeth isn't spelled out, but apparently they were cousins, which made Jesus and John cousins. The two of them were clearly aware of each other's ministries, and when John saw Jesus coming to him to be baptized, he exclaimed, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29).

While it was divinely revealed to John that his cousin Jesus was the prophesied Messiah (verses 30-34), the fact that John so unhesitatingly accept-ed the truth of this revelation testifies to the fact that Jesus had to have lived a sinless and upright life.

Some apostles were cousins

Although few people are aware of it, at least two of Jesus' apostles also apparently were cousins. We discover this when we compare the lists of the four women who witnessed Jesus' crucifixion as recorded in Matthew 27:56, Mark 15:40 and John 19:25. Comparing these accounts we see that the women included:

• Mary of Magdala or Mary Magdalene (mentioned by Matthew, Mark and John);

• Mary, the mother of Jesus (mentioned by John);

• Another Mary, identified by John as "Mary wife of Clopas" and by Matthew and Mark as "Mary the mother of James and Joses."

This James is generally identified as James the Less, one of the 12 apostles, also called "James the son of Alphaeus" (Matthew 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15). "Clopas" and "Alphaeus" seem to be variations of the Aramaic name "Chalphai," which can be transliterated into Greek as "Clopas" and Latin as "Alphaeus."

The 2nd-century historian Hegesippus states that Clopas was a brother of Joseph, Mary's husband and stepfather of Jesus. If true, then this apostle James was a cousin of Jesus.

• Salome (mentioned by Mark), also called "the mother of Zebedee's sons" by Matthew and "His [Jesus'] mother's sister" by John. With Salome and Mary being sisters, their children—Jesus, son of Mary, and the disciples James and John, sons of Salome and Zebedee—were first cousins.

This relationship sheds light on the incident in Matthew 20:21, where "the mother of the sons of

Zebedee" asked that her sons, James and John, be given the two most prominent positions in Christ's Kingdom. The request seems quite audacious—but then we realize that the requester was Jesus' aunt, making the request on behalf of His two cousins.

Their closeness to Jesus as family members likely made them think such a request wouldn't be seen as too forward—and also helps explain Jesus' tactful but firm response.

This family relationship also helps us understand why James and John, along with Peter, were the three disciples Jesus seems to have been closest to, asking them to accompany Him at significant times and events (Matthew 17:1-9; 26:36-37; Mark 5:37). Jesus was evidently close to these two cous-ins in particular, and obviously enjoyed their companionship. It isn't much of a stretch of our imagination to think they might have grown up together and been friends from childhood.

Jesus' brothers and sisters

The Gospels also show us that Jesus had many half brothers and half sisters who were born to Joseph and Mary. In Matthew 13:55-56 we see that some residents of Nazareth asked: "Is this not the carpenter's son? Is not His mother called Mary? And His brothers James, Joses, Simon, and Judas? And His sisters, are they not all with us?"

This passage names four half brothers —Jacob, Joseph, Simeon and Judah in Hebrew—and mentions His half sisters (plural). Thus Jesus had at least six half siblings—four brothers and two sisters.

During Jesus' life, His half brothers did not believe in Him as Savior and Messiah (John 7:5). Yet, after His resurrection, James became a prominent believer. In Acts 1:14 James, along with his other brothers and his mother Mary, is among the original members of the Church, the same group that received God's Spirit on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4).

James later became a leader of the Jerusalem congregation. He played a prominent role in the conference of Acts 15 (see verses 13-21). Paul later visited James in Jerusalem (Acts 21:18). In Galatians 2:9 Paul refers to James as a "pillar" of the Church. James also wrote the New Testament epistle that bears his name (James 1:1). Another brother listed above, Judas or Judah (Matthew 13:55), wrote the short epistle of Jude (Jude 1).

The fact that these relatives, including half brothers who grew up with Him under the same roof, accepted Jesus as Messiah and personal Savior is also strong testimony to fact that He lived an exemplary and sinless life. And the fact that they became believers after His resurrection is a powerful witness to the reality of that resurrection from the grave.

Did Jesus Have Long Hair?

Most people assume that Jesus had long hair. After all, that's the way they've always seen Him portrayed in every painting, drawing or movie. That's the only Jesus they've ever seen. But are those depictions accurate?

The fact is, we don't know what Jesus looked like, because the first depictions of Him weren't done until hundreds of years later. Thus every image we've ever seen of Him is based solely on artists' imaginations.

While we don't know what Jesus looked like, we do know that He didn't look like the common depictions of Him with long hair. After all, this same Jesus inspired the apostle Paul to write in 1 Corinthians 11:14: "Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him?"

In addition to this instruction regarding long hair on men, the Bible also contains circumstantial evidence that Jesus didn't have long hair.

Perhaps the most telling is that when Judas betrayed Jesus, he had to identify Jesus by a kiss. That was the prearranged signal Judas had given so that the guards could identify Jesus. Why did Judas have to do that? Because Jesus looked just like any average man of His day, and they wouldn't have been able to identify Him if Judas hadn't betrayed Him with a kiss.

This incident shows us that Jesus looked like any ordinary, average Jew of His day; there was nothing distinguishing about Him. The messianic prophecy of Isaiah 53:2 (NIV) says of Him: "He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him."

The Gospels tell us that on at least two occasions Jesus slipped away into the crowds when people were trying to kill Him (Luke 4:30; John 8:59). He was able to escape harm because He was simply an average-looking man of His day and blended in with the other people around Him.

A Feb. 24, 2004, Associated Press article reports: "'Jesus didn't have long hair,' said physical anthropologist Joe Zias, who has studied hundreds of skeletons found in archaeological digs in Jerusalem. 'Jewish men back in antiquity did not have long hair.' 'The Jewish texts ridiculed long hair as something Roman or Greek,' said New York University's Lawrence Schiffman" ("Jesus Scholars Find Fault in Gibson's 'Passion'"). However, it wasn't at all typical among even the Greeks and Romans, as plenty of statues and coins from the time attest.

"Along with extensive writings from the period, experts also point to a frieze on Rome's Arch of Titus, erected after Jerusalem was captured in AD 70 to celebrate the victory, which shows Jewish men with short hair taken into captivity" (ibid.).

Jesus wasn't the tender, effeminate man with a somewhat angelic appearance as commonly depicted in paintings. He was a carpenter, a builder, a man who knew the construction trade. He knew how to cut down trees and make wooden beams, to haul rocks to build walls, to construct buildings from stone and timber.

The Gospels make it clear that He spent a lot of time outdoors. He hung out with fishermen, the kind of characters who would never respect and look up to a weakling. Yet Jesus had 12 disciples who followed Him everywhere He went and who in time died for Him. They knew Him as a real man, not the fabrication we see in so many paintings.

The Messiah's Misunderstood Mission

Jesus performed miracles and signs. He healed the sick, raised the dead, quelled storms of nature, fed the multitudes and exercised absolute authority over the spirit world—yet He wasn't accepted as Israel's Messiah.

One might think that with those credentials, He would be automatically proclaimed Messiah. We are told, however, that "He came to His own [people], and His own did not receive Him" (John 1:11). After a 3 1⁄2-year ministry, only 120 followers were there for the miraculous beginning of His Church (Acts 1:15).

One of the prophecies about the Messiah foretold that He would be "despised and rejected by men" (Isaiah 53:3). The great works Jesus did that brought about His popularity in the country were not enough to overcome the disfavor He incurred from the religious authorities—or enough to secure loyalty from the fickle hearts of the common man.

His mission and His teachings were at cross purposes to those who held high positions in the nation, and His purpose was also misunderstood by most of those who saw and heard Him.

What were the Jews looking for?

The Jews were acquainted with many of the prophecies about the Messiah, the chosen or "anointed one" as the word means in Hebrew. They firmly believed that the Messiah would be a strong and glorious earthly king who would deliver them from their Roman oppressors and form once again a great and independent Jewish kingdom. The wise men who came from the east seeking the newborn Jesus inquired at Jerusalem, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?" (Matthew 2:1-2).

King Herod, who ruled Judea under the Romans, clearly understood that the Messiah the Jews expected was to be another king and thus a rival to himself. He then asked the chief priests and scribes "where the Christ was to be born" so he could eliminate the threat to his power (Matthew 2:3-16).

In the Greek language in which the New Testament was written, Christos (Christ in English) has the same meaning as the Hebrew word Mashiach (Messiah in English)— "anointed one," signifying one who was specially chosen by God (see "What Do 'Messiah' and 'Jesus Christ' Mean?" beginning on page 68). Herod and the Jewish rulers considered the title "Christ" as synonymous with that of "King of the Jews" in accordance with the general expectation of the time (compare verses 2 and 4).

The expectation that the Christ would be a king fit with their understanding that He would also be a descendant of David, the most famous of all the kings of Israel and the one by whom all other kings were measured. We see this illustrated in Matthew 22:42, when Jesus asked the Pharisees, "What do you think about the Christ? Whose Son is He?" Their response was, "The Son of David" (Matthew 22:42).

Jesus was addressed as "Son of David" by two blind men (Matthew 9:27), by the woman of Canaan (Matthew 15:22) and by the blind men at Jericho (Matthew 20:30). When Jesus healed a demon-possessed man who was both blind and mute, "all the multitudes were amazed and said, 'Could this be the Son of David?'" (Matthew 12:22-23). At His entry into Jerusalem He was greeted with shouts of "Hosanna to the Son of David!" (Matthew 21:9).

The number and scope of the miracles Jesus performed—miracles not equaled in the history of Israel even by the great prophets—led people to the conclusion that He had to be the prophesied Messiah. "And many of the people believed in Him, and said, 'When the Christ [Messiah] comes, will He do more signs than these which this Man has done?'" (John 7:31).

Time for a restored kingdom?

When the people desired the appearance of "the Son of David," they were hoping for the prophesied One who would restore the kingdom of Israel under the Davidic dynasty.

At one point when Jesus miraculously fed a following of 5,000 men, they were convinced that He was "the Prophet who is to come into the world" (John 6:14). This is an allusion to Moses' prophecy of "a Prophet like me" in Deuteronomy 18:15-19. The disciples of Jesus identified Jesus as this same Prophet, "Him of whom Moses in the law, and also the prophets, wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph" (John 1:45).

What better king can you have than one who will miraculously feed you? This miracle caused a groundswell of support to make Him king then and there. But "when Jesus perceived that they were about to come and take Him by force to make Him king, He departed again to the mountain by Himself alone" (John 6:14-15). He made Himself scarce. To become a human king over a powerful Israel was not a part of Jesus' mission at that time.

Even after His death and resurrection, His disciples were still focused on the idea that He would restore the Davidic kingdom to Israel then and there. They asked Him, "Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). They didn't yet understand all the pieces of the prophetic puzzle He was unveiling to them.

Understanding the messianic prophecies

These misconceptions were based in part on misunderstanding the timing of the prophecies from their own Scriptures. On close examination, Jesus spoke and acted in a way that revealed His true mission for His first coming—which was spelled out in Bible prophecy, though not in a way that they understood.

The Messiah was indeed prophesied to come to His people. We have already shown that many of those prophecies were fulfilled when He came to earth in the flesh. He was a servant, suffered during His life and willingly offered His life as a sacrifice. But there were many prophecies that were not fulfilled—at least not at that time.

There are the great prophecies of Isaiah, for instance, that tell us that "in the latter days … the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be

exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow to it" (Isaiah 2:2).

In Bible prophecy, mountains and hills are used to represent governments or nations. This prophecy foretells a time when the future Kingdom of the Messiah will be established and will reign over all earthly governments and nations. The prophetic understanding of this divine Kingdom was at the heart of Jesus Christ's message as well as the ultimate role of the Messiah.

When Jesus announced the Kingdom of God is at hand (Mark 1:15), He was simply speaking of the future Kingdom of God that would come to earth—and He was the way into that Kingdom. Many times, when the Gospels say that "they believed in Him," they believed He was the Messiah who would create a kingdom of Israel at that time!

Why Jesus wasn't more direct

Throughout His ministry Jesus corrected people's misconceptions of the expected Messiah by calling attention to the true meaning of the Scriptures they relied on but misinterpreted. The Jews of His day so misunderstood the Old Testament prophecies that they could not recognize the very Messiah that they expected at any moment to appear among them!

Interestingly, Jesus did not go around announcing that He was the Christ. He forbade the demons He had cast out of those possessed to confess that He was the Christ (Luke 4:41). And when Peter—in reply to Jesus' direct question "Who do you say that I am?"—responded that He was the Messiah, Jesus strictly commanded the disciples to tell no one that He was the Christ (Matthew 16:15-16, 20).

He answered the question of the imprisoned John the Baptist ("Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?") by directing him to the proofs of His messianic claims—His teachings and His works (Matthew 11:2-6).

But there were a few occasions where He affirmed His messianic identity quite plainly. For example, He revealed who He was to the Samaritan woman at the well. "I know that Messiah is coming," she told Him—to which Jesus responded, "I who speak to you am He" (John 4:25-26). Even at the beginning of His ministry, He accepted the confession of His first disciples when they acknowledged Him to be the Messiah (John 1:41-50).

Jesus privately on occasion accepted the titles "Messiah" and "Son of God," but publicly He avoided such designations. What He would have intended by these titles and the way in which the Jews would have taken them were two different things. Jesus couldn't deny who He was nor what He intended to do, but He was careful to explain the nature of the future Kingdom and dispel misapprehensions about His mission.

Jesus understood what His people were looking for in a Messiah. It's probably partially for that reason that He usually refrained from claiming the title for Himself and discouraged others from using it. To fulfill the mission of His first coming, He did not want to spark a popular uprising of Jews anxious to establish their own independent kingdom against the despised Roman rule at that time.

Moreover, had Jesus proclaimed Himself as the Messiah, it would have provoked immediate confrontation between Himself and the Jewish and Roman authorities, thereby bringing about

His execution prematurely. Yet when it was time, Jesus affirmed to both the Jewish and Roman authorities that this was who He was.

Jesus the King

At Jesus' trial the high priest asked him, "Are You the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?" Jesus answered: "I am. And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven" (Mark 14:61-62). The high priest immediately accused Jesus of blasphemy and deserving of death (verse 64).

Yes, Jesus was indeed the Messiah, sent from God and born to be king. He made this fact clear when He stood before Pilate. However, Jesus had preached the Kingdom of God rather than the kingdom of Israel.

The Jews accused Him before Pilate of claiming to be "Christ, a King," which would make Him a direct threat to Roman authority (Luke 23:2).

Pilate, concerned about this allegation, asked Jesus about the charge. Jesus answered by saying, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here" (John 18:36). Pilate pressed Jesus further, asking if He were indeed a king. Jesus replied: "You say rightly that I am a king. For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world" (verse 37).

However, Pilate got the impression that Caesar's kingdom was under no threat from Jesus. Yet, in the end, the Jews convinced Pilate to have Him executed on the grounds that He claimed to be a king (John 19:12). Pilate even had the title " King of the Jews" placed above Jesus' head as He was crucified (verse 19-22).

After having ordered Jesus to be scourged, Pilate brought Him out to the crowd and announced, "Behold your King," apparently thinking the heinous beating He had endured would satisfy them. "But they cried out, 'Away with Him, away with Him! Crucify Him!' Pilate said to them, 'Shall I crucify your King?' The chief priests answered, 'We have no king but Caesar!'" (John 19:14-15).

They didn't recognize their own King.

The future Kingdom

Jesus plainly told Pilate His Kingdom was not then, not there. It would not be one of the kingdoms of this present world—of this present age of man. But there is a future age coming, in which His Kingdom will be established on the earth to rule all nations.

Many prophecies about Jesus' role as the Messiah were indeed fulfilled by Him during His 3 1⁄2-year ministry. But the fulfillment of many more—those about the establishment of the Kingdom of God over the whole earth—are yet to be fulfilled by Jesus Christ.

When Jesus began to speak about the Kingdom of God, the people did not fully understand. In the thinking of most first-century Jews, there was no distinction between the prophecies of the Messiah's first coming and those of His second.

To the people of His day, the prophecies of the Messiah and the Messianic Kingdom were like looking at the stars. They all appear to be as a canopy above us, all about the same distance. But in reality there are vast distances between the stars. With the naked eye, we cannot tell which ones are closer and which are farther away. The messianic prophecies appeared like that to the Jews. Most expected all prophecies to be fulfilled in a single coming of the Messiah.

His second coming

Although most people missed Jesus' first coming, no one will miss His second. Jesus said all the people of the earth "will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory" (Matthew 24:30).

But when He comes the second time, will He be accepted then? What will people expect? Will the Jews think that He will come just to them? Will Christians think they are going to be taken away from the earth? Will the world think He is an invader from somewhere?

Jesus gave a vision to His apostle John, recorded for us in the book of Revelation. In it Jesus completes the prophecies He gave during His earthly ministry. It's most interesting to note that He will not be accepted by the world the second time, just as He wasn't accepted at His first coming. When He comes the second time, He won't come as one announcing the Kingdom of God, He will come as Ruler to establish the Kingdom of God!

Make no mistake—the nations will again reject Him. He speaks of the time of His return as being "the great day of His wrath," when the nations are angry at God's intervention (Revelation 6:16-17; 11:17-18). Leaders of the world will "gather … to the battle of that great day of God Almighty," in which they will fight against Him (Revelation 16:14).

At Jesus' second coming He is pictured as One who "judges and makes war" (Revelation 19:11). He will "strike the nations" with a sword and tread "the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God" (verse 15).

Such passages make it clear that the world will not receive Christ with open arms when He comes back. This is the other side of the picture of Jesus that is not taught very much today. When He returns, He will meet with a hostile reception from the world—just as He did the first time.

This leads us to ask the question, do we really know the real Jesus? Do we really know what He is doing? Are we really preparing ourselves to be accepted and rewarded by Him when He establishes His Kingdom? And what is that Kingdom all about? We'll address those crucial questions in the next chapter.

What Do 'Messiah' and 'Jesus Christ' Mean?

The term Christ is an English derivative of the New Testament Greek word christos, which means "anointed." The equivalent Hebrew word in the Old Testament is mashiach. This term is transliterated in the King James New Testament as messias (John 1:41; 4:25), a word that has come down into modern English, including many Bible versions, as "messiah." Both Christ and Messiah mean "anointed" or "anointed one."

What was the significance of anointing? The Oxford Companion to the Bible states: "In the Hebrew Bible, the term is most often used of kings, whose investiture was marked especially by anointing with oil (Judg[es] 9.8-15; 2 Sam[uel] 5.3; 1 Kings 1.39; Ps[alm] 89.20 ...), and who were given the title 'the Lord's anointed' (e.g., 1 Sam[uel] 2.10; 12.3; 2 Sam[uel] 23.1; Ps[alm] 2.2; 20.6; 132.17; Lam[entations] 4:20)" (Bruce Metzger and Michael Coogan, editors, 1993, "Messiah," p. 513, emphasis added).

Anointing, this source tells us, "was widely practiced in the ancient Near East; the Amarna letters [on clay tab-lets found in central Egypt] suggest that anointing was a rite of kingship in Syria-Palestine in the fourteenth century BCE [B.C.], and ...[a story from the time of Judges] assumes its familiarity (Judg[es] 9:8, 15)" ("Anoint," p. 30).

Yet, as this and other sources point out, it was not only kings who were anointed in Scripture. Israel's high priests were anointed (Exodus 29:7; Leviticus 4:3, 5, 16), as were some prophets (1 Kings 19:16).

In biblical usage, anointing is an act of consecration —setting one apart for the holy work of God. It was symbolic of the pouring out of God's Spirit onto someone (compare Isaiah 61:1; Romans 5:5)—representing God's power and intervention to, in the cases cited, perform the duties of the office one was anointed to. Jesus Himself was "anointed...with the Holy Spirit and with power" (Acts 10:38).

The Jews of Jesus' day eagerly anticipated a specific prophesied figure referred to in several scriptures as the Messiah or Anointed One, a great King of the lineage of David who, by the power of God, would restore Israel and rule the world. Jesus of Nazareth was that Anointed One—and He will yet fulfill these prophecies.

What about the name "Jesus"? How did He receive this name, and what does it mean?

In Matthew 1 we find that Mary was discovered to be pregnant during her engagement to Joseph. Joseph was considering how to best handle the difficult situation.

"But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins'" (Matthew 1:20-21).

The Greek name "Jesus" is a transliteration of the Hebrew name Yehoshua or Yeshua, the English form of which is "Joshua." This name literally means God is salvation. So the angel's message to Joseph was "You shall call His name 'God is salvation,' for He will save His people

from their sins." That name tells us of Jesus' purpose in God's plan—that it is through Him that God carries out His plan to save humanity from death, giving us eternal life in His family.

What Was Jesus' Gospel?

Now after John was put in prison, Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel'" (Mark 1:14-15).

Jesus began His ministry with these words announcing the Kingdom of God. The time He had in mind to be "fulfilled" was probably a reference to the prophecy in Daniel 9:24-25, where it is said that the Messiah would come 483 years from the decree to rebuild Jerusalem. The year A.D. 27 was when the 483 years specified in the prophecy would end (see "The Bible Prophesied the Exact Year the Messiah Would Appear"). The year 27 is significant because that is the year Jesus began His ministry. He began preaching the message of the Kingdom of God in Galilee.

As we saw in the last chapter, the people and even Christ's own disciples had many misconceptions about the Messiah and His mission. People still misunderstand today, but in a totally different way. Many fail to realize that the future, world-ruling Kingdom prophesied in so many places in the Old Testament was at the heart of Jesus' message and teaching.

A literal kingdom on earth

Most people don't understand that the Kingdom of God is a literal kingdom, a government both divine and royal ruling over literal people on the earth. This is not merely a symbolic or a spiritual rule, a sentiment that exists only in human hearts. As we will see, it is far more. And Jesus simply continued the prophecies about this Kingdom that had begun to be revealed in the Old Testament.

A prophecy of this coming Kingdom is graphically depicted in Daniel 2. In this prophecy the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, was shown an image that represents the major kingdoms or empires that would dominate the Middle East. The image represents first the kingdom of Babylon, and then three successive kingdoms that would rule until the Kingdom of God would be "set up." This Kingdom of God will put an end to the rule of the previous kingdoms.

Notice the description of this final Kingdom, the Kingdom of God, in verse 44: "And in the days of these [final] kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed; and the kingdom shall not be left to other people; it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand forever."

The image Nebuchadnezzar saw represented the successive kingdoms existing from the time of Daniel to the time when the Kingdom of God is established, when they will be destroyed by the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God "shall never be destroyed" and "shall stand forever."

Just as these are literal kingdoms, each with a ruler, government, laws, subjects and territory, so too is the Kingdom of God. Its Ruler will be Jesus Christ (Revelation 11:15). Its government and laws will be the government and laws of God (Isaiah 2:2-4). Its subjects and territory will be all nations of the earth (Daniel 7:14). The Kingdom of God will rule over the whole earth!

Let's notice several of the more well-known prophecies that picture the same Kingdom of which Jesus spoke.

The famous prophecy of Isaiah 9:6-7 describes His rule: "For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David and over His kingdom, to order it and establish it with judgment and justice from that time forward, even forever." This is the world kingdom Jesus spoke of that has not yet come!

The prophecy of Isaiah 2 (partially quoted in the last chapter) will be fulfilled at the time of Jesus' return. Notice verses 3-4:

"Many people shall come and say, 'Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us His ways, and we shall walk in His paths.' For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and rebuke many people; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore."

The Kingdom of God will eradicate war

When Jesus spoke so often of the Kingdom of God, He was simply continuing the message of the Old Testament prophets. Jesus referred often and unmistakably to His return to earth to establish the Kingdom these prophets had foretold. In His most lengthy prophecy, given in response to His disciples' question, "What will be the sign of Your coming and of the end of the age?" (Matthew 24:3), He described the end of the age of human-led governments and the arrival of His divine reign on earth.

He specifically answered the disciples' question in verse 30: "Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory."

Eight times in this chapter alone He speaks of His coming to earth in a far different way than when He arrived the first time. The first time He proclaimed the good news of the Kingdom of God. The second time He will come as its omnipotent ruling King to establish His Kingdom over the entire earth.

"When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world'" (Matthew 25:31-34).

What kingdom is He talking about? The Kingdom of God of which He so often taught! This Kingdom was in planning and preparation "from the foundation of the world." Jesus, "the Son of Man," will be the King of this Kingdom. This is what Jesus came to announce—this was the heart of His message!

Jesus' parable of the talents

Because of misunderstandings of the Kingdom, Jesus gave a parable in which He made it clear His reign would involve a literal kingdom ruling in the physical realm as well as in the spiritual realm.

"Now as they heard these things, He spoke another parable, because He was near Jerusalem and because they thought the kingdom of God would appear immediately" (Luke 19:11). The people were looking for the establishment of the Kingdom of God with Jerusalem as the center of government over the nations, with the Jews being the prominent people of the Kingdom, as the prophets had foretold.

So Jesus explained it this way: "A certain nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom and to return" (verse 12). Jesus, the nobleman of the parable, taught that while He was away (in heaven) for an unspecified length of time, His servants would continue where they were (on earth) doing their Lord's business until He returned, when they would be rewarded (verses 13-27). And what is their reward in this parable? It is having authority over cities—physical cities filled with men, women, boys and girls (verses 17, 19).

The parable of the talents in Matthew 25:14-30 is similar, giving the same kind of message. The basic scenario is the same: "...The kingdom of heaven is like a man traveling to a far country, who called his own servants and delivered his goods to them" (verse 14).

The reward for those who increased their talents (a denomination of money here symbolic of spiritual means) is being made "ruler over many things" (verses 21, 23). The Kingdom of God when it is established by Jesus Christ at His return will be a literal government, ruling on earth and functioning not only in the spiritual affairs of man, but in his temporal affairs too.

This is the Kingdom that Jesus announced would be coming. And He began to invite some to "repent, and believe in the gospel"—the good news of His message—because "the kingdom of God is at hand" (Mark 1:15). He was now announcing that Kingdom, and they had the opportunity to prepare to be a part of the Kingdom of God at His return.

Salvation Is Entrance Into the Kingdom of God

Typically, Jesus' mission to earth is characterized something like, "Jesus came to die for us so we can have salvation." But to leave the purpose of Christ at this is incomplete.

Salvation is hardly ever explained the way Jesus explained it. Jesus expressed the idea of salvation and eternal life in terms of entrance into the Kingdom of God.

Jesus taught, "Unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3).

Notice Jesus' teaching in chapter 19 of Matthew's Gospel. The rich young man came to Jesus and asked, "What good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?" (verse 16). Jesus responded, "If you want to enter into life, keep the commandments" (verse 17). He went on to explain to His disciples that "it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven" (verse 23) and "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (verse 24). His disciples, hearing Jesus' comments, "were greatly astonished, saying, 'Who then can be saved?'" (verse 25).

Jesus clearly taught, and the disciples clearly understood, that eternal life, being saved and entering the Kingdom of God are all synonymous!

In the same passage (verses 27-29), when Peter remarked that they had left everything to follow Jesus and asked how this would be re-warded, Jesus answered, "When the Son of Man sits on the throne of His glory, you who have followed Me will sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel ... and inherit eternal life."

The apostle Paul elaborates on Christ's teaching about entrance into the Kingdom of God. "Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God ..." (1 Corinthians 15:50). "Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed—in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed" (verses 51-52).

"The last trumpet" will sound when Jesus Christ returns to reign in His Kingdom. Jesus Himself inspired this prophecy in Revelation 11:15: "Then the seventh angel sounded: And there were loud voices in heaven, saying, 'The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever!'"

How important is it to believe in the gospel of the Kingdom of God? Jesus said in Mark 1:15 that you have to believe the gospel of the Kingdom of God if you want to be saved!

The salvation that Christ preached must be understood in terms of entering the Kingdom of God. This tells us clearly what salvation or eternal life is and that it includes a serving style of leadership in the Kingdom of God, which will replace all other human kingdoms and be the ruling kingdom on this earth (Matthew 20:25-28; Revelation 20:4, 6).

Every purpose and teaching of Jesus was concerned with the future establishment of the Kingdom of God.

Jesus began His ministry with the simple statement, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 4:17). He was offering His followers a place in that Kingdom.

Peter, Andrew, James, John and the rest of the first disciples of Jesus saw the decisions they made to leave all behind in light of the unique opportunity to be "on the ground floor" of the Kingdom of God. They knew the Kingdom of God was a literal kingdom; they just didn't know when it would be established. They did know that they had to make a once-in-a-lifetime decision then and there.

The same message is still being preached, and the opportunity is still there for those who can grasp the vision of what Jesus meant.

To know the real Jesus, you have to understand clearly the Kingdom of God. To be with Him, you have to believe the message He preached.

Other Names for the Kingdom

Although most often called the "Kingdom of God," occasionally other terms are used in describing the Kingdom. Three of the writers of the Gospels—Mark, Luke and John—use the term "Kingdom of God" to refer to the Kingdom by name.

"Kingdom of heaven" is a term used exclusively by Matthew, with 32 references in his account of the life of Jesus Christ. However, he uses the terms "kingdom of God" and "kingdom of heaven" interchangeably. In Matthew 19:23-24, he uses the terms in consecutive verses, clearly implying that they were synonymous. Often he calls it simply "the kingdom."

Why did Matthew call it "the kingdom of heaven"? Because he was writing primarily to a Jewish audience. According to the Jewish Encyclopedia article "kingdom of God," Malkut Shamayim, meaning "Kingdom of heaven," is the way the Jews of that day designated the Kingdom of God. They understood it in two ways. One was the literal Kingdom as prophesied in Daniel 2, where this Kingdom is represented by a stone "from heaven" that comes down and smashes the kingdoms of this world and then grows to fill the whole earth. And indeed, heaven is the place from which Jesus will come to establish the Kingdom on earth. In short, it is the Kingdom of heaven because it is the Kingdom from heaven (not because, as some now contend, it is a kingdom in heaven).

Another aspect of Jewish understanding of the Kingdom of God in Christ's day concerned the "reign or sovereignty of God as contrasted with the kingdom of worldly powers" (ibid.). In other words, when one committed himself to total obedience to God's laws and His revealed way of life, he was submitting himself to the authority of the "Kingdom of God" or "Kingdom of heaven" in contrast to all other human or worldly authority. At times and in certain contexts Jesus appeared to use the term with this meaning.

Another factor, as is pointed out in some commentaries, is that because of the reluctance the Jews had about pronouncing or using God's name, Matthew substituted "kingdom of heaven" for "kingdom of God." This is apparent when we compare such passages as Matthew 4:17 with Mark 1:15 and Matthew 5:3 with Luke 6:20, where Matthew uses the phrase "kingdom of heaven" while Mark and Luke use "kingdom of God" in quoting Jesus regarding the same events. It should be realized, however, that the Jews sometimes did use the term "kingdom of God" or "kingdom of the Lord" and not just "kingdom of heaven." Evidently, Jesus Himself used the terms interchangeably.

The apostle Paul usually uses the term "kingdom of God" in his letters. However, acknowledging the role of Jesus Christ as the Ruler of that Kingdom and the way by which we enter that Kingdom, he also calls it "the kingdom of Christ and God" (Ephesians 5:5). He also expresses the deep, loving relationship between God the Father and Jesus Christ by calling it "the kingdom of the Son of His love" (Colossians 1:13).

The apostle Peter, also acknowledging the centrality of Christ's role in the Kingdom, refers to it as "the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 1:11). Jesus Christ is our Lord and Master now, and He will reign supreme in the coming Kingdom (Revelation 17:14; 19:16). As Savior of mankind, He is "the door" and "the way" by which we have access to God

the Father and salvation in God's Kingdom (John 10:9; 14:6).

Jesus' Teaching on God's Law

Perhaps the most widespread controversies about the teachings of Jesus concern His attitude toward the laws of God recorded in the Old Testament. The approach of most churches and denominations regarding Jesus is that He brought a new teaching differing considerably from the instructions of the Old Testament. The common view is that the teachings of Christ in the New Testament annulled and replaced the teachings of the Old Testament. But do they?

The idea that Jesus departed from the Old Testament is also a common assumption within Judaism. Jacob Neusner, in his book A Rabbi Talks With Jesus, explains why Jews as a whole do not follow Jesus and reject any possibility that He could be the Messiah. "Jews believe in the Torah of Moses," he explains, "...and that belief requires faithful Jews to enter a dissent at the teachings of Jesus, on the grounds that those teachings at important points contradict the Torah" (1993, pp. xii).

Here is a serious mistake both Christianity and Judaism make about the teachings of Jesus. Both hold the erroneous view that Jesus departed from the teachings of the Old Testament, especially with regard to law.

As we will see, the record shows that while Jesus disagreed with the religious leaders, He didn't disagree with Old Testament Scriptures. The same record shows that traditional Christianity itself does not follow the teachings of Christ.

To know the real Jesus we have to ask: What did He really say? It doesn't ultimately matter what people say about Him. Nor does it really matter what interpretations they give of what He said. What truly matters is what He really said, and whether we're going to believe what He said.

Clear statement in the Sermon on the Mount

The Sermon on the Mount is a good place to begin. Since this is the longest recorded statement of Jesus Christ's teachings, we should expect to find in it His view toward the laws of God as recorded in the Old Testament. And indeed we do.

One of the reasons for some of Jesus' statements in the Sermon on the Mount is that—because His preaching was so different from that of the Pharisees and Sadducees—some people believed His intention was to subvert the authority of God's Word and substitute His own in its place. But His real intention was to demonstrate that many of the things the Pharisees and Sadducees had taught all along were contrary to the original teachings of the Torah of Moses, the first five books of the Bible.

Jesus refuted the erroneous ideas people had formed regarding Him with three emphatic declarations about the law. Let's look at them.

"I did not come to destroy but to fulfill"

Jesus explains His view of the law very quickly after giving the beatitudes: "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill" (Matthew 5:17).

So immediately we see that Jesus had no intention of destroying the law. He even tells us not to even think such a thing. Far from being antagonistic to the Old Testament Scriptures, He said He had come to fulfill "the Law and the Prophets" and proceeded to confirm their authority. "The Law and the Prophets" was a term commonly used for the Old Testament Scriptures (compare Matthew 7:12).

"The Law" referred to the first five books of the Bible, the books of Moses in which God's laws were written down. "The Prophets" referred not only to the writings of the biblical prophets, but also to the historical books of what came to be known as the Old Testament.

We have discussed in earlier chapters how Jesus fulfilled "the Prophets." But what did Jesus mean when He spoke of fulfilling the law?

Regrettably, the meaning of "fulfilling the law" has been twisted by many who claim the name of Jesus but don't really understand what He taught. They say that since Jesus said He would fulfill the law, we no longer need to keep it and the law has no further obligation on His followers.

Another view of "fulfilling the law" is that Jesus "filled full" what was lacking in the law—that is, He completed it, partly canceling it and partly adding to it, forming what is sometimes referred to as "Christ's law" or "New Testament teaching." The implication of this view is that the New Testament brought a change in the requirements for salvation and that the laws given in the Old Testament are obsolete. But do either of these views accurately reflect what Jesus meant?

Jesus' view of fulfilling the law

The Greek word pleroo, translated "fulfill" in Matthew 5:17, means "to make full, to fill, to fill up,...to fill to the full" or "to render full, i.e. to complete" (Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, 2002, Strong's number 4137). In other words, Jesus said He came to complete the law and make it perfect. How? By showing the spiritual intent and application of God's law. His meaning is clear from the remainder of the chapter, where He showed the spiritual intent of specific commandments.

Some distort the meaning of "fulfill" to have Jesus saying, "I did not come to destroy the law, but to end it by fulfilling it." This is inconsistent with His own words. Through the remainder of the chapter, He showed that the spiritual application of the law made it even more difficult to keep, not that it was annulled or no longer necessary.

Jesus, by explaining, expanding and exemplifying God's law, fulfilled a prophecy of the Messiah found in Isaiah 42:21: "The LORD is well pleased for His righteousness' sake; He will exalt the law, and make it honorable." The Hebrew word gadal, translated "exalt" or "magnify" (KJV) literally means "to be or become great" (William Wilson, Wilson's Old Testament Word Studies, "Magnify").

Jesus Christ did exactly that, showing the holy, spiritual intent, purpose and scope of God's law. He met the law's requirements by obeying it perfectly in thought and deed, both in the letter and

in the intent of the heart.

All will be fulfilled

The second major statement by Jesus given in the exact same context makes it even clearer that Jesus did not come to destroy, rescind, nullify or abrogate the law. "For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled" (Matthew 5:18).

With these words, Jesus likened the continuance of the law to the permanence of heaven and earth. He is saying that the law is immutable, inviolable and unchangeable and can only be fulfilled, never abrogated.

We should note that in this verse a different Greek word is used for "fulfilled": ginomai, meaning "to become," "to come into existence" or "to come to pass" (Thayer's, Strong's number 1096). Until the ultimate completion of God's plan to glorify humanity in His Kingdom comes to pass—that is, as long as there are still fleshly human beings—the physical codification of God's law in Scripture is necessary. This, Jesus explained, is as certain as the continued existence of the universe.

His servants must keep the law

The third statement of Jesus pronounces that our fate rests on our attitude toward and treatment of God's holy law. "Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least [by those] in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:19). The "by those" is added for clarification, since, as explained in other passages, those who persist in lawbreaking and teach others to break God's law will not themselves be in the Kingdom at all.

Jesus makes it very clear that those who follow Him and aspire to His Kingdom have a perpetual obligation to obey and uphold God's law. He is saying that we cannot diminish from the law of God by even a jot or tittle—the equivalent of the crossing of a "t" or dotting of an "i."

The value He places on the commandments of God is also unmistakable —as well as the high esteem toward the law that He requires from all those who teach in His name. His disapproval falls on those who slight the least of the law's commands, and His honor will be bestowed on those who teach and obey the commandments.

Since Jesus obeyed the commandments of God, it follows that His servants, too, must keep the commandments and teach others to do the same (1 John 2:2-6). It is in this way that the true ministers of Christ are to be identified—by their following the example He left them (John 13:15).

Must exceed the scribes and Pharisees

With the next statement in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus leaves no doubt as to what He

meant in the previous three declarations. He meant without question for His disciples to obey God's law—and He was requiring them to obey according to a standard that went beyond anything they'd heard before. "For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20).

Who were the scribes and Pharisees? The scribes were the most renowned teachers of the law —the interpreters of the law, the learned men, the experts. The Pharisees, a related group, were commonly viewed as the most exemplary models of Judaism. They formed a sect of Judaism that established a code of morals and rituals more rigid than that spelled out in the law of Moses, basing much of their practices on years of traditions. The scribes and Pharisees were both highly strict and highly respected in Judaism (Acts 26:5).

While the scribes were the experts, the Pharisees professed the purest practice of righteousness. So when Jesus stated that one's righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees, this was a startling declaration!

The Pharisees were looked up to as those who had attained the very pinnacle of personal righteousness, and the common people supposed that such heights of spirituality were far beyond their reach. But Jesus asserted that the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees wasn't enough to entitle them to enter the Kingdom of which He spoke! What hope, then, did others have?

Jesus condemns religious hypocrisy

In actual fact, there was a real problem with the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. The heart of the matter was that their righteousness was defective in that it was external only. They appeared to obey the law to those who observed them, but broke God's law inwardly, where it couldn't be seen by others.

Notice Jesus' scathing denunciation of their hypocrisy in making a show of religion: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence ...For you ...indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness ...You also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness" (Matthew 23:25-28).

These self-appointed religious teachers emphasized minor aspects of the law while neglecting more important issues. "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone" (verse 23). Jesus was concerned that every part of the righteous requirement be obeyed, and angry that they were blind to the "weightier" parts—the major spiritual aspects—of the law.

While they were fastidious with their ceremonial traditions, at the same time they took liberties to disobey God's direct commands. In some situations they actually elevated their traditions above the clear commands of God (Matthew 15:1-9).

Behind their actions was the base motive of self-exaltation and self-interest. They went public

with what should have been their private devotions toward God—prayer, fasting and giving alms —all so they could be seen and thought of by others as righteous (Matthew 6:1-6; 23:5-7).

Religious leaders did not keep God's law

Immediately after His statement that He had no intention of doing away with God's law, Jesus proceeded to give examples of the traditions and teachings of the Jewish religious leaders that completely missed the point or even contradicted the spiritual intent of God's laws.

The first example He gave was the Sixth Commandment, "You shall not murder." All that the Pharisees understood about this commandment was that the act of murder was prohibited. Jesus taught what should have been obvious, that the intent of the Sixth Commandment was not just to prohibit the literal act of murder, but every evil attitude of heart and mind that led to murder—including unjust anger and contemptuous words (Matthew 5:21-26).

He did likewise with their narrow view of the Seventh Commandment, "You shall not commit adultery." The Pharisees of the day understood the physical act of sexual relations with a woman outside of marriage to be sin. They should also have known, as in the case of the Sixth Commandment, that lust for another woman was sinful because the one lusting had already broken the Commandment in his heart.

These are examples of the "righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees" that Jesus characterized as making the outside of the cup and dish clean, while on the inside remaining "full of greed and self-indulgence" (Matthew 23:25, NRSV).

Jesus instructed His disciples that God's law must indeed be obeyed outwardly, but it must also be obeyed in the spirit and intent of the heart. When Jesus taught such heartfelt obedience to God's laws, He was faithful to what the Old Testament taught: "For the LORD does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7).

The prophet Jeremiah looked forward to a time when God would establish a new covenant in which God promised to "put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts" (Jeremiah 31:33). God's original intent for His law was that people would observe it from their hearts (Deuteronomy 5:29). The failure of human beings to obey God's law in the "inward being" (Psalm 51:6, NRSV) inevitably led to outward disobedience.

Jesus did not change the law

Jesus prefaced His contrast of the scribes' and Pharisees' narrow interpretation of the law with its true spiritual intent using the words, "You have heard that it was said ...But I say to you..." (Matthew 5:21-22, 27-28).

Some erroneously think Jesus' intention was to contrast His own teaching with that of Moses and thereby declare Himself as the true authority. They assume that Jesus was either opposed to the Mosaic law or modifying it in some way.

But it's hard to imagine that Jesus, just after delivering the most solemn and emphatic proclamation of the permanence of the law and emphasizing His own high regard for it, would now undermine the authority of the law by other pronouncements. Jesus wasn't inconsistent; He honored and upheld the law in all His statements.

In this passage He is not pitting Himself against the Mosaic law, nor is He claiming a superior spirituality. What He was doing was refuting the wrong interpretations perpetuated by the scribes and Pharisees. This is why He declared that one's righteousness must exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. Jesus was restoring, in the minds of His listeners, the Mosaic precepts to their original place, purity and power.

It should also be obvious that because the same God is the Author of Old and New Covenant alike, there can be no vital conflict between them, and that the fundamental laws of morality underlying both must be and are in full accord. God tells us in Malachi 3:6, "I am the LORD, I do not change."

Jesus and the Sabbath

Among those who claim to follow Jesus, no biblical command has aroused as much controversy as the Fourth Commandment—God's instruction to remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy (Exodus 20:8-11). Here in particular we find that people's interpretations of Jesus' teaching are all over the map.

Some argue that Jesus annulled all of the Ten Commandments but that nine were reinstituted in the New Testament—all except the Sabbath. Some believe that Jesus replaced the Sabbath with Himself, and that He is now our "rest." Some believe that no Sabbath at all is needed now, that we can rest or worship on any day or at any time we choose. Regardless of which argument one uses, an overwhelming portion of traditional Christianity believes that Sunday, the first day of the week, has replaced the Sabbath, the seventh day of the week.

Can we find support for these views in Christ's practice or teaching? In light of Jesus' clear teaching on the permanence of God's laws, what do we find when it comes to His attitude toward the Sabbath day?

In studying the Gospels, one of the first things we should notice is that Jesus' custom was to attend the synagogue for worship on the Sabbath (Luke 4:16). This was His regular practice. On this particular occasion, He even announced His mission as Messiah to those in the synagogue that day.

Interestingly, we later find that Paul's custom was also to worship and teach in the synagogues on the Sabbath day (Acts 17:2-3). Neither he nor Jesus ever so much as hinted that they needn't be there or that they should worship on a different day!

Confrontations over how, not whether, to keep the Sabbath

Where many people jump to wrong conclusions about Jesus and the Sabbath is in His confrontations with the scribes and Pharisees. Yet these confrontations were never over whether to keep the Sabbath—only over how it should be kept. There is a crucial difference between the two!

For example, Jesus boldly challenged the Jews concerning their interpretation of Sabbath observance by performing healings on the Sabbath (Mark 3:1-6; Luke 13:10-17; 14:1-6).

According to the Pharisees, rendering medical attention to someone, unless it were a matter of life and death, was prohibited on the Sabbath. And since none of these healings involved a life-and-death situation, they thought Jesus was breaking the Sabbath. But as the Savior, Jesus understood the purpose of the Sabbath, that it was a perfectly appropriate time to bring His message of healing, hope and redemption to humanity and to live that message through His actions.

To make His point, Jesus asked the Pharisees the question, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" (Mark 3:4). He exposed their hypocrisy in that they saw nothing wrong with working to rescue an animal that fell into a pit on the Sabbath day, or watering an animal on that day, yet they were condemning Him for helping on the Sabbath a human being—whose worth was far greater than that of any animal (Luke 13:15-17; Matthew 12:10-14).

He was rightfully angry at their inability to see that they placed their own traditions and interpretations over the true purpose of Sabbath observance (Mark 3:5). Yet they were so spiritually blind that they hated Him for exposing their distortions of God's commands (verse 6).

On one occasion Jesus' disciples, as they walked through a field on the Sabbath day, picked handfuls of grain so they would have something to eat. The disciples weren't harvesting the field; they were merely grabbing a quick snack to take care of their hunger. But the Pharisees insisted this was not lawful. Jesus used an example from Scripture to show that the spirit and intent of the law were not broken and that God's law allowed for mercy (Mark 2:23-26).

It was in this context that Jesus gives the true purpose of the Sabbath. "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath," He said (verse 27). The Pharisees had reversed the priorities of the law of God. They had added so many meticulous regulations and traditions to the Sabbath commandment that trying to keep it as they demanded had become an enormous burden for people rather than the blessing God had intended it to be (Isaiah 58:13-14).

Jesus then claimed to have authority to say how the Sabbath should be observed: "Therefore, the Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath" (verse 28). Here Jesus takes His rightful place as the One who gave this law of the Sabbath in the first place. For, being the very Creator as we have previously seen (Colossians 1:16; John 1:3), He is the One who created the Sabbath by resting on it (Genesis 2:2-3). Thus it is foolish to argue that Jesus would abolish or annul something that He had personally created for the benefit of every human being!

What Jesus is in essence saying to the Pharisees here is: You don't have a right to tell people how to keep God's laws. I am the One who gave the law to man in the first place, therefore I know why it was commanded and how it was intended to be observed.

When Jesus spoke, it was from the authority He inherently possessed as the great Lawgiver.

Jesus never abrogated His own law! But He did most certainly correct these religious leaders' perversions of the law without hesitation.

Judaism forsook Moses, Christianity forsook Christ

When it comes to Jesus and the law, we have to conclude that the "Christian" religion has let us down by not holding to the original teachings of Christ, who Himself held to the original teachings of the Old Testament Scriptures. And as the teachings of Jewish religious leaders corrupted Moses, so did the later teachers of Christ—that is, false teachers—corrupt the teachings of Jesus. In reality, Jesus and Moses agreed.

Let's ask a question here. If Jesus were here today, which day would He observe as the Sabbath? It would be the day He commanded in the Ten Commandments, the seventh day.

The real Jesus kept the law and expected His disciples to do the same. He made clear His attitude about anyone diminishing one iota from the law. Anyone not keeping it is only using the good name of Christ without doing what He said.

He warns us: "Not everyone who says to Me, 'LORD, LORD,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, 'LORD, LORD, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'" (Matthew 7:21-23).

So we have to ask, Do the churches which claim to represent Christ really represent Him accurately?

Jesus often pointed out that His teaching was based in the Old Testament Scriptures. When challenged concerning His teaching He responded, "Have you not read...?" before pointing His challengers to the Scriptures that supported what He had said (Matthew 12:3, 5; 19:4; 22:31).

Those who say that Jesus departed from the Old Testament are simply wrong. In this chapter we have demonstrated that both many Jews and most of Christianity are incorrect in their assessment of Jesus' teachings. Jesus faithfully taught the written word of the Old Testament.

We have seen earlier that Jesus was actually God in the Old Testament. God doesn't change His ways. He is eternal. It would not inspire much faith to know that He required one thing in the Old Testament but then changed His mind and came up with a wholly different set of requirements in the New. Jesus Christ is consistent, "the same yesterday, today, and forever" (Hebrews 13:8).

Other Important Ways Jesus Fulfilled the Law

The law required perfect obedience and pronounced a death sentence on any who broke it. Paul tells us that "the wages of sin is death..." (Romans 6:23).

Consider, for a moment the penalty that each of us brought on ourselves by sin. It isn't purgatory or hell, or some other place or state of being or consciousness. It is death —eternal oblivion, a nothingness, a total blotting out of existence from which we could never escape were it not for God's promise of the resurrection.

Paul continues in Romans 6:23, "...But the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." Since we all sin, the law can only demand our death. It has no provision for giving us eternal life. So how could anyone hope for life beyond the grave?

Jesus also fulfilled the law in the sense that He met the law's requirement by paying the penalty each of us incurred for disobedience, which is death. Jesus, who never sinned, never brought on Himself the death penalty that was required by the law. But as Creator of humankind and our perfect sacrifice for sin, He was able to satisfy the law's demands that required our death. Thus He "put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself" (Hebrews 9:26). Having "washed us from our sins in His own blood" (Revelation 1:5), Jesus makes it possible for us to receive God's gift of eternal life.

The "Law" section of the Bible, the five books of Moses, contains several kinds of laws. In addition to what we might call the moral laws that govern human behavior (such as the Ten Com-mandments), this section also contained various sacrificial laws requiring sacrifices for sin. Of themselves these laws and sacrifices could never remove the death penalty for sin.

Hebrews 10:1-14 tells us that this sacrificial system "can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered year after year, make perfect those who approach. Otherwise, would they not have ceased being offered, since the worshipers, cleansed once for all, would no longer have any consciousness of sin?

"But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sin year after year. For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, 'Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me ...

"It is by God's will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all ... when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, 'he sat down at the right hand of God,'...For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified" (NRSV).

What this is telling us is that Jesus fulfilled everything prescribed in the offerings for sin in the law of sacrifices. Jesus upheld the entire law by becoming the sacrifice for sin.

If Christ had not presented Himself as an offering for sin, the sacrifices that foreshadowed the "single offering for sins" would have been an unfulfilled prophecy or pledge, because they all pointed to Him.

Jesus said He came not to destroy the Law or the Prophets, but to fulfill them. He did so on several different levels and in several different ways. He showed the full spiritual intent of the law, living it perfectly as an example for us. The prophets had previously announced His person, His mission and many details of His birth, life, death and resurrection—which He fulfilled. The sacrifices of the law foreshadowed His sacrificial death for the sins of all mankind—which He alone could fulfill.

What Jesus was saying is that the Old Testament in all its parts and elements—moral and prophetic—referred to Himself and was accomplished by Him. He fulfilled all aspects of what the Law and Prophets required, substantiating them and making good what they demanded and announced.

Christ's New Commandment

Jesus said, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another" (John 13:34). Did Jesus replace the clear definitions of the Ten Commandments with a new religious principle, that love alone can guide our lives?

Does this new commandment supersede the Ten Commandments and replace all other biblical laws? Jesus clearly answered this fundamental question when He said, "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets" (Matthew 5:17).

Yet many people who believe in Christ as their Savior also believe this new commandment frees them from any obligation to obey God's laws.

They misunderstand what Jesus said and meant. The Holy Scriptures, in the Old and New Testaments, teach that we should love each other (Leviticus 19:18). Jesus did not introduce love as a new principle. That was already in the Bible and a fundamental part of God's instruction to ancient Israel.

What, then, was new in Christ's "new commandment"? Notice His wording. He said we are to "love one another; as I have loved you."

What was new was His own example of love! The whole world has a perfect model of the love of God in Christ's perfect example of loving obedience. Christ loved us so much that He sacrificed His own life for us. He Himself explained: "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends" (John 15:13).

Jesus came as the light of the world to illuminate the application and practice of the royal law of love. We no longer have an excuse for saying we don't understand what to do or how to do it. Jesus demonstrated what loving obedience is all about:

"If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love" (John 15:10).

We comply with Jesus' new commandment when we obey every commandment of God in a genuinely loving manner and are willing to lay down our lives for the sake of others.

Does the New Covenant Abolish the Commandments?

The Bible tells us that Christ came as the Mediator of a better covenant (Hebrews 8:6). The popular belief that the New Covenant abolishes God's law reflects a misunderstanding of both covenants. God tells us that He altered the original covenant and made "a better covenant, which was established on better promises" (verse 6). But it was not established on different laws. The law stayed the same.

There was, however, a weakness, or fault, in the original covenant. That fault was with the people, not with the law. "Because finding fault with them, He says: 'Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah'" (verse 8). It was because the people "did not continue in My covenant, and I disregarded them, says the Lord" (verse 9).

In the Old Covenant, God wrote the law on tablets of stone. It was external, not part of the thinking and motives of the people. It was in their literature but not in their hearts. In the New Covenant, God writes the law in the minds and hearts of His people (Hebrews 8:10; Jeremiah 31:33-34).

To enable people to internalize His law—to love it and obey it eagerly and willingly—God makes this promise: "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them" (Ezekiel 36:26-27). God's Spirit enables His people to obey His laws!

People lacking the Holy Spirit are incapable of wholehearted obedience. Why? "Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God" (Romans 8:7-8).

This is why the Old Covenant and the New Covenant differ. Paul explains that "what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh" God has accomplished by sending Jesus, who overcame the flesh and "condemned sin [lawlessness] in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit" (Romans 8:3-4; see also 1 John 3:4).

The International Critical Commentary, in reference to Romans 8:4, says: "God's purpose in 'condemning' sin was that His law's requirement might be fulfilled in us, that is, that His law might be established in the sense of at last being truly and sincerely obeyed—the fulfillment of the promises of Jer[emiah] 31:33 and Ezek[iel] 36:26.1."

In a footnote to Jeremiah 31:33-34 the commentary explains that this passage "is often misunderstood as a promise of a new law to take the place of the old or else as a promise of a religion without law at all. But the new thing promised in v. 33 is, in fact, neither a new law nor freedom from law, but a sincere inward desire and determination on the part of God's people to obey the law already given to them..."

The following passages in the New Testament confirm, either explicitly or by example, that Jesus and the apostles viewed the Ten Commandments necessary for true Christian living.

• First Commandment: Matthew 4:10; 22:37-38.

• Second Commandment: 1 John 5:21; 1 Corinthians 6:9; 10:7, 14; Ephesians 5:5.

• Third Commandment: Matthew 5:33-34; 7:21-23; Luke 11:2; 1 Timothy 6:1.

• Fourth Commandment: Luke 4:16; Acts 13:14, 42, 44; 16:13; 17:2; 18:4; Hebrews 4:4, 9.

• Fifth Commandment: Matthew 15:3-6; 19:17-19; Ephesians 6:2-3.

• Sixth Commandment: Matthew 5:21-22; 19:17-18; Romans 13:9, Galatians 5:19-21; James 2:10-12.

• Seventh Commandment: Mat-thew 5:27-28; 19:17-18; Romans 13:9; 1 Corinthians 6:9; 10:8; Ephesians 5:5; Galatians 5:19-21; James 2:10-12.

• Eighth Commandment: Matthew 19:17-18; Romans 13:9; Ephesians 4:28.

• Ninth Commandment: Matthew 19:17-18; Romans 13:9; Colossians 3:9; Ephesians 4:25.

• Tenth Commandment: Luke 12:15; Romans 7:7; 13:9; Ephesians 5:3, 5.

Jesus Christ and the Festivals of the Bible

In addition to the biblical Sabbath day, Jesus observed the biblical festivals recorded in the Old Testament; the Gospels do not show Him ever being accused of violating the Holy Day observances. John 7 records Him teaching at the temple during the Feast of Tabernacles. All four Gospels record His actions leading up to and during His last Passover with His disciples the night before He was crucified.

The Church that He founded was started on the Feast of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4). After His death and resurrection the apostles continued to keep these biblical feasts (Acts 18:21; 20:6; 1 Corinthians 5:6-8; 16:8).

Since Jesus, the apostles and the early Church observed these biblical festivals, why don't churches today keep them and teach about them? Instead they have substituted other holidays for the Holy Days of the Bible.

If Jesus had wanted His Church to observe festivals different from those that He observed, shouldn't He have left this instruction? He was clear and emphatic in His instructions to His disciples. It's hard to imagine that Jesus would have set an example of observing the biblical Sabbath and festivals but later led or inspired His Church to dismiss them and replace them with alternate observances that originated in paganism.

Christmas and Easter are nowhere taught in the Bible, yet they have become the greatest holidays of popular Christianity. Likewise Sunday became the major day of worship instead of the seventh-day Sabbath. But why? And how?

Who Killed Jesus?

The death of Jesus Christ is the most famous in history. The state-sanctioned murder that took place almost 2,000 years ago is still in today's news. No other crime against the innocent has remained so widespread in the consciousness of humanity for so long. This one lives on as a story that is told again and again.

The injustice of the arrest, trial and death of Jesus Christ is profound in that no person was ever so innocent, so sinless, so blameless, so undeserving of such punishment. Peter testifies that He "committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth" (1 Peter 2:22). He was the most virtuous man who ever lived.

Jesus challenged His enemies, "Which of you convicts Me of sin?" (John 8:46). The centurion, the officer in charge of His execution, was convinced that He had executed a righteous man (Luke 23:47). One of the thieves crucified with Him understood that Jesus had done nothing wrong and didn't deserve to die (Luke 23:41).

Pilate, the governor who issued the final command for the execution to proceed, proclaimed twice to the Jews that he found no fault in Jesus (John 18:38; 19:4). Yet the deed was carried out, in all its horror and intensity, not sparing this innocent Man.

He did nothing to deserve the horrendous death imposed on Him, for He was "holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners" (Hebrews 7:26). He was, after all, the Son of God, as the centurion recognized (Mark 15:39). This was not the injustice of the century, or the millennium, but the injustice of the history of the human race.

Justification for genocide

The story of Jesus' murder is dramatic enough in itself. But attempts to fix the blame for His death have led to horrible acts of spiritual depravity. The Jewish people have usually borne the brunt of the blame. Their implication in the death of Christ has resulted in an unchristian persecution of the Jewish people down through the centuries. "Christ-killers!" was the epithet hurled at them, and the last words many a Jew heard just before his own brutal murder.

The Nazis cited this for the genocide of 6 million Jews just over half a century ago during World War II. With no real respect for the teachings of Christ, Hitler and his followers declared that the Jewish race was solely and collectively responsible for killing the Son of God. This poisonous doctrine brainwashed the führer's followers into believing the Jews themselves should be exterminated for murdering the Savior of mankind.

The idea of unique and total Jewish responsibility for Christ's death is not supported by the Bible. But, sadly, this concept did not originate with the Nazis. For almost 2,000 years mainstream Christianity, Catholic and Protestant, took this same position—often using lethal brutality.

The plot to murder Jesus

Blaming others can be—and often is—nothing more than an attempt to absolve oneself of guilt. The question that should've been asked long ago—and should continue to be asked today—is, who really caused the death of Jesus Christ?

Jesus made many enemies. He upset the status quo, the powerful, the well-positioned people of the day. Many had reason to want Him out of the way. It wasn't the general public who wanted Jesus dead, but the civil leaders, chief priests, the scribes and Pharisees were the ones identified again and again as those determined to put Jesus to death.

But the main instigators were able to manipulate the public to help convince Pilate to carry out the death sentence (Mark 15:11).

The ones to whom Jesus spoke, among whom He had taught and performed miracles—the same ones who only a few days before were lining the streets welcoming Him into Jerusalem as the prophesied Messiah, the Son of David (Matthew 21:9)—had become disillusioned and even called for His death.

The Romans were also guilty in the death of this innocent Man. Pilate sentenced Him, knowing He was innocent of the charges brought against Him. The Romans carried out the sentence in typical fashion—a brutal beating, scourging and crucifixion. It was a Roman who drove the nails into His wrists and feet. It was a Roman spear thrust into His side.

Who bears the blame?

Several weeks later, Peter was quick to say who was implicated in the death of Jesus: "For truly against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together" (Acts 4:27). It doesn't seem that many people were left out.

It's easy to assign blame for Jesus' death to a small group of people—the religious hypocrites and civil leaders who wanted to retain their positions seem to be implicated the most. It's also easy to lay the guilt of this murder on a whole race of people. And it's also true that we can implicate the ruling Roman state. But it's not as simple as that.

It's safe to say that if Jesus would have come to any society and culture and exposed it for its failings, its hypocrisy, He would not have been accepted. If Jesus had exposed any society that was equally far from its ideals, they too would have killed Him.

This is the horrible truth we all want to avoid. What the original followers of Jesus are telling us is that no one is innocentof this crime. We all were complicit in the death of Christ. Paul was convinced of his personal guilt: "Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst" (1 Timothy 1:15, NIV).

A world unknowing, unaware

Paul, the former Pharisee, says of himself, "Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief" (verse 13, NIV). That's the problem. We were ignorant of all this. Paul tells us that "at the appointed time, Christ died for the wicked" (Romans 5:6, REB). The world just doesn't know what it is doing!

But God does, and one day we will all know too. It was His purpose from the beginning. Jesus came into this world knowing He would be killed (John 12:27). Jesus inspired the Old Testament prophets to not only foretell His death, but to describe it in graphic detail. The sacrificial system given to Israel prefigured the perfect offering that was to come.

Jesus foretold His death and suffering to His disciples on several occasions, but for the most part they refused to accept what He said. It was far more comfortable to believe that He would establish His Kingdom then and there, and all their worries would be over.

Paul speaks of "the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages...which none of the rulers of this age knew; for had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory" (1 Corinthians 2:7-8).

In Acts 3:17 Peter says, "Yet now, brethren, I know that you did it in ignorance, as did also your rulers." He adds, "But those things which God foretold by the mouth of all His prophets, that the Christ would suffer, He has thus fulfilled" (verse 18).

Don't remain in ignorance

But God doesn't want us to remain ignorant. The crime was so unthinkable, so unequaled, that the story just keeps coming back and we can't get rid of it.

Yes, the Jewish leaders initiated the deed, and the Romans carried it out. But because each of us has sinned, He died for every single one of us. There's nothing complicated about that. That's what He wants us to see. If we had not sinned, if I had not sinned, He wouldn't have had to die. If we weren't so hardened, His suffering and death wouldn't have had to be so horrendous. None of us are innocent of this crime. This is what Peter and Paul and John are trying to tell us.

We read the account of the jealousy and hatred toward Christ and we may silently say to ourselves, "I wouldn't have done that if I were there." We're wrong on two counts.

Is there really a difference in the way we express jealousy, envy, greed, anger and hatred toward others and what those people did to Jesus? Jesus makes the point Himself: "Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these...you did it to Me" (Matthew 25:40, 45).

Sin is sin; it doesn't matter who the victim is. And if He had not taken our place in death, that's the penalty we would be staring at. So where does any one of us get off blaming someone else for Christ's death, when all of us had our part in it too?

Secondly, would we really have done any better had we been there?

Judas, His ardent disciple at the beginning, betrayed Him for a sum of money. Peter, His most

outspoken supporter, denied he even knew Jesus when Jesus was on trial. The other disciples, all of whom asserted their loyalty to the death (Matthew 26:35), vanished into the night after He was arrested.

No one provided a defense for Jesus at His trial. No one supported Him; no one stood by Him. Pilate knew He was innocent, but to maintain some favor in the eyes of others—at such a devastatingly high cost—he agreed to condemn an innocent Man to a hideous death. The religious leaders of the day simply couldn't allow someone to come along and mess things up for them. And the people, in the end, became just a part of the crowd.

God's will and our guilt

Let's ask the question again: Who was it that killed Christ? All of us, because of our sins, are guilty. And yet we are not wholly responsible for Jesus' death in an ultimate sense—for our redemption from sin and its penalties through the suffering and death of Christ was according to the will of God the Father and Christ Himself.

God, we must remember, "gave His only begotten Son" (John 3:16). Isaiah 53:10 tells us, "The LORD decided his servant would suffer as a sacrifice to take away the sin and guilt of others" (Contemporary English Version). Jesus Himself said: "I lay down My life...No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself...This command I have received from My Father" (John 10:17-18). By this He meant that no one accomplished His killing of and by themselves—without His and His Father's willingness and orchestration of events for His sacrificial death to occur. Indeed, this was God's plan from the beginning.

Of course, this fact does not excuse man's role in Christ's death. The act of killing Christ was a sin though it was foreordained. And, again, it was the sins of all of us that necessitated Christ's sacrifice.

Does God wants us to feel racked with guilt over Christ's death? Initially we certainly should feel guilt to make us sorry for what we've done and motivate us to cry out to God for forgiveness and help to change. But then our focus should be one of thankfulness for God's great mercy. Through the same plan that called for Jesus' death, we are forgiven and relieved of guilt for our part in His death upon repentance. Let us all, then, repent and accept God's forgiveness through Christ.

Jesus Christ, the Wisdom of God

We've seen the facts, now we need to understand the implications behind them. We need to comprehend the significance of Christ's crucifixion.

If Jesus is exactly who He said He was, then everything He said is truth. Our entire future depends on whether we believe that. And whether we are going to believe what He taught, whether we are going to obey Him and follow in His steps in every respect, will depend on whether we are convicted on this issue.

The real story of Christ's life, death, resurrection and future return is too momentous for us to dismiss.

Of course, it was planned this way so that we would sit up and take notice! No matter how long after the event, it was meant to have an impact on every one of us.

We face an issue here that should affect us all on the deepest level. In the story of Jesus Christ we have something unheard of in all the history of man and religion: The very Creator God comes to earth as a human being. He relinquishes the privileges and power He had in His past self-existence, puts His life and His entire future existence into the hands of the Father, is born into a family within an occupied nation to live a life that totally reveals God, and then dies for us.

Jesus, the revelation of God

Jesus said, "All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (Matthew 11:27, NRSV). Jesus is claiming to be the sole Revealer of God. Jesus declared, "He who has seen Me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). Paul writes that "He is the image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15).

Hebrews 1:1-3 says that "God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son...[who] is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being" (Hebrews 1:1-3, NRSV).

This tells us that long ago God revealed His will through men whom He used to speak for Him, but now He is revealing Himself and His will through Jesus, whom He sent from His very throne in heaven.

"All things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you," said Jesus (John 15:15). But not only did He speak God's will, He came to earth and lived it under the most trying circumstances in witness to all humanity.

The glory of God, the truth of God and God Himself were revealed to every human being in the person of Jesus Christ. For as Jesus said, "He who has seen Me has seen the Father..." (John 14:9).

Jesus represented the Father perfectly. When you saw Jesus, you saw reflected in Him the love and perfect, righteous character of God. Throughout Christ's ministry in the flesh, the total and enduring love of God for mankind came shining through.

God's revelation versus other religions

Ravi Zacharias, in his book Jesus Among Other Gods, gives insight into the differences between Jesus and founders of other world religions: "At the heart of every major religion is a leading exponent. As the exposition is studied, something very significant emerges. There comes a bifurcation, or a distinction, between the person and the teaching—Mohammed, to the Koran. Buddha, to the Noble Path. Krishna, to his philosophizing. Zoroaster, to his ethics.

"Whatever we may make of their claims, one reality is inescapable. They are teachers who point to their teaching or show some particular way. In all of these, there emerges an instruction, a way of living...it is Zoroaster to whom you listen. It is not Buddha who delivers you; it is his Noble Truths that instruct you. It is not Mohammed who transforms you; it is the beauty of the Koran that woos you.

"By contrast, Jesus did not only teach or expound His message. He was identical with His message...He did not just proclaim the truth. He said, 'I am the truth.' He did not just show a way. He said, 'I am the way.' He did not just open up vistas. He said, 'I am the door.' 'I am the Good Shepherd.' 'I am the resurrection and the life.' 'I am the I AM'" (2000, p. 89).

Jesus did not offer bread to nourish the soul, He said He is the Bread. Jesus wasn't just a teacher of a superior ethic, He was the Way. Jesus didn't just promise eternal life, He said, "I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25).

What becomes clear is that only Jesus is the true Revealer of the true God. There could be no escaping what people saw. God revealed Himself in such a manner that there is no easy way out for any of us. We have to face it squarely—that Jesus was who He said He was and had been sent here by His Father.

There is no such thing as "many roads that lead to God." Jesus declared: "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me" (John 14:6). That is why Peter could courageously proclaim: "There is no salvation through anyone else; in all the world no other name has been granted to mankind by which we can be saved" (Acts 4:12, REB).

God's purpose from the beginning

God's plan for "bringing many sons to glory" (Hebrews 2:10) includes the reconciling of humanity to Himself through Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 5:18-19). Why do we need that reconciliation? Isaiah 59:1-2 tells us: "Surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear" (NIV).

Our sins have cut us off from God. Paul speaks of us as enemies in need of reconciliation with Him—a reconciliation that comes through Jesus Christ's sacrifice. "While we were enemies, we

were reconciled
to God through the death of his Son" (Romans 5:10, NRSV).

Peter says this death "was foreordained before the foundation of the world" (1 Peter 1:20), and John speaks of Jesus as "the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world" (Revelation 13:8). The coming of a Messiah to be a saving sacrifice was in the planning from before the beginning of this present world.

Our first human parents Adam and Eve sinned. And all humanity has followed suit. Yet God would erase the enmity in the minds of human beings toward Himself by demonstrating His love toward them all through the only convincing way possible—the very Creator Himself would come to earth and sacrifice His life for them (John 3:16-17).

The dynamic of Christ's sacrifice

God had to ensure that human beings, whom God intended to become children in His divine family (2 Corinthians 6:18), would never turn against Him at any point in the future.

Since the first man and woman disobeyed God and chose to follow Satan, how would God ensure this would never happen again? How could God bring them to the point that they would never turn against Him? How would He win their complete trust?

The plan for the Word to become a human being and surrender His life for all humanity would establish God's love without question.

The sacrifice of Christ was not only for the payment of sins, but would forever be a witness to God's love (John 3:16-17). God would have a relationship with His children who would be in the relationship because they wanted to be there. It would be a relationship of complete trust.

It is obvious that the first human beings did not really know their God and their Creator. Just before Jesus was arrested and killed, He emphatically declared to His disciples, "From now on you know Him and have seen Him" (John 14:7).

The statement Jesus made in His final prayer now comes into its own: "And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent" (John 17:3). His sacrifice would be the final witness, the ultimate statement, of the love God the Father and Jesus Christ had for mankind. The disciples would soon know God in the most profound way and come to the most profound of realizations. "God is love," is the way the apostle John expressed it (1 John 4:8, 16).

A lesson in the greatest love

When you come to know, as the disciples did, the real Jesus and the real story, it makes all the difference in the world.

This demonstration of love was so powerful. Do we grasp it? "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have

everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved" (John 3:16-17).

Those who have not experienced love from those who should have given it, namely parents or other family members, often have a difficult time loving others. Without the example of love from others, we would not know love. Love is something that cannot be explained to us; we simply have to experience it firsthand. We don't know how to love until it is shown to us first.

Without experiencing the goodness of others, we have no compelling reason to do what is right. Without experiencing the love of God expressed in the death of Christ, we would have no compelling reason to love others. Without coming to the realization that God died for each of us personally and individually, we could not be convicted of our personal sins to the point we would never want to sin again.

God the Father and Jesus Christ knew just how to go about accomplishing Their plan to bring children into Their divine family—children who would always want to remain in this sacred and loving family relationship. For Jesus—who was the Creator of everything and who had lived for all eternity—to live as a mortal and among mortals and then die for them so that they might have eternal life also, can be nothing less than godlike.

The same is true for the Father, who gave up His eternal companion, closer to Him than any human relationship can approach, and allowed Jesus to go through the suffering He did for the sake of all humanity. For both, the sacrifice is unimaginable.

It is unheard of in human experience. Human goodness does not come close. As Paul wrote in Romans 5:7-8: "Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us" (NRSV).

Paul concludes that Christ is "the wisdom of God" (1 Corinthians 1:24) and that the idea of "Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2) is "the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages" (verse 7). God's plan provides a way for our sins to be forgiven, but is also designed so we would not choose the way of sin ever again.

God knew how to solve the problem of sin and predetermined His purpose before the first man ever drew breath.

The Tearing of the Temple Veil

Matthew records several events that took place at Christ's death. One that initially seems insignificant, but was a symbol of major importance, is found in Matthew 27:50-51: "And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, and yielded up His spirit. Then, behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom."

What did this mean, this event that was so important that three of the Gospel writers mentioned it?

The temple was divided into two portions, an outer room called the Holy Place in which a number of priests served, and an inner room called the Most Holy Place or Holy of Holies. This inner room represented God's presence. It was so sacred that the only person allowed in was the high priest, and then only on one day of the year to make atonement for the sins of himself and the people.

This sacred room, the Holy of Holies, was separated from the rest of the temple by an elaborate and beautifully embroidered curtain. According to Jewish descriptions of the temple, this curtain was truly massive—measuring some 30 feet wide, 60 feet high and three inches thick. Its tearing in two from top to bottom at Jesus' death was a shocking and bewildering event! How could God let something like that happen within His temple?

Yet God was not only behind this, He deliberately tore the curtain to make a point—that mankind's sins, which had cut us off from Him (Isaiah 59:2), could now be forgiven through Jesus Christ's shed blood.

Comparing how the high priest had previously only been able to pass through the curtain once a year to offer atonement for sins, Hebrews 10:19-22 explains that a new High Priest, Jesus Christ, through the sacrifice of Himself superseded this ritual for all time and gives mankind direct access to God:

"Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water" (NRSV).

The lesson for us is that, following heartfelt repentance, we can "come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16). Because of Christ's sacrifice, we enjoy direct access to the throne of our merciful, loving Creator. (To learn more, see "Alive Again Today and Forever.")

Alive Again Today and Forever

In an act of supreme sacrifice, Jesus of Nazareth gave His life for all mankind. Yet the grave couldn't hold Him; He rose to life everlasting. What is He like today?

The apostle John was given a vision of the resurrected, glorified Jesus Christ in Revelation 1:12-18: "I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, and among the lampstands was someone 'like a son of man,' dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest.

"His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.

"When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said: 'Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever!'" (NIV).

Jesus now lives forever as an eternal, immortal spirit being. John also tells us that His faithful followers, in the resurrection, will be like Him— "and everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure" (1 John 3:2-3).

Jesus now sits at the right hand of God the Father "with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him" (1 Peter 3:22, NIV). He is the living, active, Head of His Church (Colossians 1:18), and as "the firstborn among many brethren" (Romans 8:29) He continually helps bring others to salvation in God's family.

How is He serving His brothers and sisters on earth? Remember that Christ is the Mediator between God and man (1 Timothy 2:5). One of the major themes of the book of Hebrews is to show how Christ carries out His sacred role as our High Priest (to learn more, see "The Tearing of the Temple Veil.").

Sin has seriously damaged the human race. "Sin is the transgression of the law" (1 John 3:4, KJV). Sin separates us from God (Isaiah 59:1-2) and threatens our eternal reward. It is the implacable enemy of every human being and must be conquered. This is not easy and never has been.

But Christ knows what it is like to have human nature, to be tempted to sin, to be tempted to transgress God's spiritual law. "For in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted" (Hebrews 2:18).

Christ did whatever was necessary to resist the pulls of the flesh and temptations to sin. He never underestimated them. He prayed and fasted, but mostly He continually relied on and looked to the Father for help.

By never once transgressing God's law, "He condemned sin in the flesh" (Romans 8:3). In contrast, sin has tainted us, and one of our major goals as Christians is to learn to overcome its

entanglements. Yet we cannot do this apart from our Savior, who told us, "Without Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5).

Notice Hebrews 4:14-16: "Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession ['profession,' KJV]. For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

Christ is the author and captain of our salvation. "Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession [with the Father] for them" (Hebrews 7:25). Christ sits at the Father's right hand "to appear in the presence of God for us" (Hebrews 9:24).

Paul says that, through the indwelling of God's Spirit, Jesus lives again within converted Christians (Galatians 2:20), empowering us to live a new, godly life patterned after His life. Through His sacrifice and living again within us, we can be redeemed "from every lawless deed" and purified as "His own special people, zealous for good works" (Titus 2:14).

Your Date With Destiny: Meeting the Real Jesus

Misunderstanding Jesus' expectations of His followers is one of the biggest tragedies of all. Mistakenly assuming that Jesus paid the penalty for our sins so we can now do whatever we want, many have a mental picture of Jesus as a quiet, docile, loving Being handing out eternal life to anyone who will simply acknowledge Him as Lord and Savior. Many believe there are many roads to God and a joyful afterlife.

The Bible reveals that we each have a date with destiny when we will face Jesus and give account of our actions. Surprisingly, the way Jesus will appear when He returns and the criteria He will use in determining who will be in His Kingdom are quite different from what most people have been led to believe. Similar to the confusion surrounding Jesus' first coming, misunderstanding is rampant regarding His return. What is the truth—the real story—about His return?

Why will Christ come a second time?

Jesus is pictured in the book of Revelation as the resurrected Savior, the Messiah who is preparing to return to earth a second time. "I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore" (Revelation 1:18).

But how is He coming, and why? In Matthew 24 He gives us the sobering answer. Responding to the disciples' question, about the time of His return and the end of this age of man, Jesus laid out a frightening scenario that includes widespread religious deception, warfare, famines and devastating natural disasters. "All these," He told them, "are the beginning of birth pains" that will usher in this new age to begin at His return (verse 8, NIV).

At what point will He intervene? At the point that mankind faces annihilation. "It will be a time of great distress, such as there has never been before since the beginning of the world, and will never be again. If that time of troubles were not cut short, no living thing could survive; but for the sake of God's chosen it will be cut short" (verses 21-22, REB).

Why must Jesus Christ return? Conditions will have grown so terrible, so life-threatening, that human life will be in danger of extinction. He came to earth the first time to save us from our sins. He will come a second time to save us from ourselves.

Initially at least, it will not be a pretty sight. Revelation 6:16-17 describes Him as coming in wrath because of mankind's continued refusal to obey His laws and the world's continual slide into evil and self-destructiveness. His return is announced with the sounding of trumpets ushering in monumental calamities on the earth (chapters 8 and 9). Yet in all of this it is His great concern for mankind that leads to this righteous anger.

Jesus is pictured as the One who is returning to rule the nations of the entire earth (Revelation 11:15). He will not accept resistance from anyone who opposes His righteous rule and will make

war with the nations and the leaders who oppose Him (Revelation 19:15). He punishes and takes charge for our own good—to bring peace to a world bent on destruction.

This is perhaps the most important picture of Jesus in the Bible, because this is the Jesus Christ the entire world will meet sometime in the coming years—perhaps in the not-too-distant future.

From these prophecies it becomes clear that Jesus didn't die for us to have our own way. "He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow" (Philippians 2:8-10).

Jesus will take His rightful place as ruler of the earth, as the saving Messiah, when He returns. Where will you find yourself at that point?

Are we missing something?

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, many have the idea that Jesus died for us to eliminate any requirement that we obey God—and that a gentle, docile Jesus will admit us into His eternal presence if we will only acknowledge Him as our Savior, regardless of any way we would choose to live.

But to believe these things is to believe in a false Jesus and to completely miss the point of His promised second coming. He must return precisely because we will have followed the path of doing whatever we want and rejecting God's laws—and that path ends at the point of global extinction.

Which path will you choose? It's true that Christ's sacrifice demonstrated God's love, and nothing could be a more powerful demonstration of that love. But is that all there is to the story? Is Christianity a matter of only what Jesus has done for us? Or are we willing to follow Jesus by doing what He commanded and following His example?

Are we going to simply believe in Him, or will we believe His message too? There is a major difference. He preached the gospel of the Kingdom of God, the world-ruling Kingdom He will establish at His return. Are you preparing to be in the Kingdom of God? Do you really grasp that the Kingdom of God is a literal kingdom that will rule over all the earth and, in an ultimate sense, will extend throughout all infinity for eternity?

Jesus explained the laws of the Kingdom of God in His Sermon on the Mount. These are magnifications of the same laws He gave at Sinai, laws that He lived perfectly throughout His entire life. And Jesus said that if a person diminishes them in the least way, that person himself will be regarded as least (Matthew 5:19). Yet, tragically, the majority of those who claim to follow Jesus dismiss His clear statements on this important issue.

It seems that the teachings of Christianity, from the time after the apostles passed from the scene, have focused on the appealing idea of One who loves you, forgives you, comforts you and accepts you. But few have explained that Jesus requires His followers to obey the Father's commandments, both for their own good and for the benefit and blessing of all those around them (1 John 2:3-6; 5:3).

If you don't understand God's commandments, you don't understand sin, because sin is the breaking of God's law (1 John 3:4). And if you don't understand what sin is, then how can you repent? Without repentance—turning from living your own way of life to God's way of life—how can you truly accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior?

Jesus didn't die so we can feel better about ourselves. Jesus died to pay the penalty for the sins you and I committed. If we return to a life of sin after knowing these things, we "crucify again...the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame" (Hebrews 6:6). Why would we despise His sacrifice and put Him to death all over again?

What does He expect?

In Luke 6:46 Jesus asks a question we should all seriously consider: "Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?" (NIV).

It isn't enough to simply call Jesus "Lord" or accept Him as such. As Jesus Himself explained in Matthew 7:21, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven." Entering God's Kingdom requires living according to God's will. Nothing else will do.

He continues in verses 22-23: "Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'"

What laws could He be talking about? The same laws He kept perfectly. The same laws He, as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, revealed to Moses. The same laws He will institute to govern all of humanity in His Kingdom. He will never give His wonderful gift of eternal life to those who, by returning to sin, "crucify again...the Son of God"!

Clearly Jesus fully expects us to turn from sin and begin to obey His Father's commandments, the perfect "law of liberty" that sets us free from the suffering and death that sin brings (James 1:25; 2:12).

An abundant, fulfilling life

It's tragic that submission to God's laws is called "bondage" by so many—including, ironically, many supposedly Christian religious teachers. The apostle John plainly tells us that such teachers are wrong. "This is the love of God, that we keep His commandments," wrote John. "And His commandments are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3).

Jesus Christ understood that living according to God's revealed way of life is the key to a successful, happy, fulfilling life. "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full," He said (John 10:10, NIV).

He says to those who would follow Him, "Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My

burden is light" (Matthew 11:29-30). What the world sees as bondage is actually true freedom and happiness in Christ. This is what God promises those who follow the real Jesus and His true teachings.

But that path isn't easy to find, and you alone can make the choice to follow it. "Enter by the narrow gate," He tells us, "for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it." He instructs us to not take the easy route most of humanity chooses. "Narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it" (Matthew 7:13-14). If you make a decision to turn to Jesus, let it be done with the real Jesus Christ and His real story in mind. He is a king. He is worthy to rule the entire earth, and He will rule.

He is the earth's Maker and the Creator of life itself. He took complete responsibility for His Creation by coming to earth to demonstrate His good intentions toward us and with faithful adherence to the will of God to die for us. He will not fail to complete His mission to establish His Kingdom of peace over the whole earth.

So if you accept Him, remember—you accept Him as King and Ruler of your life now. He is the One you serve now, and the One you will serve forever.

'Even So, Come, Lord Jesus!'

Terror of all kinds fills our world today. Suicide bombers, anthrax, radioactive "dirty" bombs, killer epidemics, kidnappings, gangs, rapes, murders, wars.

Everywhere we look, the trend is downward. Man's inhumanity to his fellow man is growing worse, and even the most optimistic can find it harder to fight the feelings of foreboding that our world is on a course of self-destruction.

Jesus Christ looked down through history and foretold this spiral of sorrows leading to an unprecedented time of trouble to occur before His return (Matthew 24:7-8, 21). Our spiritual Savior also promised to save humanity from total annihilation by His glorious coming (Matthew 24:22, 30).

As King of Kings He will set up God's wonderful, righteous Kingdom (Revelation 11:15.

This is the time God's people through the ages have longed and prayed for: "Your kingdom come" (Matthew 6:10).

John, an apostle of deep love and compassion, was given a wonderful vision of a time beyond all the troubles, plagues and war necessitated by man's unrepentant evil—the time when God will wipe away all tears, when there will be no more sorrow or crying (Revelation 21:4).

At the end of the last chapter of the last book of the Bible, three times John recorded Christ's wonderful promise: "I am coming quickly" (Revelation 22:7, 12, 20). In verse 20 John, and all Christians, respond with deep yearning: "Even so, come, Lord Jesus!"