

God's World

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1. First Days

REMEMBER THE LAST TIME YOU READ A TERRIFIC BOOK, the sort that you can't put down, or saw a great movie, that kept you on the edge of your seat? It's always the beginning that gets you in a mysterious crime, a wonderful romance, a quirky character. Beginnings (and endings) are almost always the most important parts, whether it be of stories, relationships or plans. Beginnings set the scene and determine the direction, and endings bring those beginnings to a satisfactory completion. The middle may often be the most exciting, but it is the beginning and the end that are the most crucial.

It's just like that with the Bible and the Bible's story. The beginning, those First Days of creation, establishes the foundation upon which everything else depends. It is here that the pattern of the Biblical narrative is set, and it is the beginning that points towards the ultimate fulfilment of God's purposes.

In the First Days, we are introduced to the three main characters in the drama God, the world, and that special part of the world that is somehow like God, humanity. Foundational things about them are set in place. In the First Days, we see God's purposes set out for his world and for humanity, the path and pattern for their inter-relationships, their respective value and dignity. And at the same time, in these First Days, we catch a glimpse not only of how things were and were meant to be, but how in the grace and faithfulness of the Creator God, things will eventually become.

IN THE BEGINNING

The beginning of the Bible is also the beginning of the story, and so it is to the opening chapters of the book of Genesis that we rightly turn to understand the First Days.

Read Genesis 1.1 – 2.25.

GENESIS 1 ¹In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ²the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. ³Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. ⁴And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

⁶And God said, "Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters." ⁷So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. ⁸God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

⁹And God said, "Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear." And it was so. ¹⁰God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. ¹¹Then God said, "Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it." And it was so. ¹²The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good. ¹³And there

was evening and there was morning, the third day.

¹⁴And God said, Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, ¹⁵and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth. And it was so. ¹⁶God made the two great lights the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night and the stars. ¹⁷ God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, ¹⁸ to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. ¹⁹ And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

²⁰ And God said, Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky. ²¹ So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good. ²² God blessed them, saying, Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth. ²³ And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.

⁴ And God said, Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind. And it was so. ²⁵ God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good.

²⁶ Then God said, Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth. ²⁷ So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. ²⁸ God blessed them, and God said to them, Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth. ²⁹ God said, See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. ³⁰ And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food. And it was so. ³¹ God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

¹ Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. ² And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. ³ So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation. ⁴ These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created. In the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens, ⁵ when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up for the LORD God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; ⁶ but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground ⁷ then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the

man became a living being. ⁸ And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. ⁹ Out of the ground the LORD God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

¹⁰ A river flows out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it divides and becomes four branches. ¹¹ The name of the first is Pishon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold; ¹² and the gold of that land is good; bdellium and onyx stone are there. ¹³ The name of the second river is Gihon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Cush. ¹⁴ The name of the third river is Tigris, which flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.

¹⁵ The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. ¹⁶ And the LORD God commanded the man, You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; ¹⁷ but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.

¹⁸ Then the LORD God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner. ¹⁹ So out of the ground the LORD God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. ²⁰ The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. ²¹ So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. ²² And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. ²³ Then the man said, This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken. ²⁴ Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. ²⁵ And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.

Who are the main characters in this narrative, and how would you define their relationships?

What privileges and responsibilities are given to the man and the woman, and what does that say about God's purposes for humanity and the world?

This is a wonderfully poetic and highly structured account, and it makes little sense to seek from it answers to questions it's not asking. There are no scientific pretensions here and the issues of big bang and biological origins are not on the agenda; there is not even history, in the sense of any attempt to

calculate the ages and time-frames of various events. But there is truth, truth powerfully communicated. One of the most effective tools for political communication, for example, is the cartoon, where very sharp points can be made with a few strokes of a pen. A cartoon is not a photograph, nor is it a paragraph, and in fact, is all the more powerful because it speaks in its own way.

These first few chapters of Genesis are a bit like that, powerfully true, without claiming to be rigorous science or researched history. In this account, God makes things so by the speaking of a word, magnificent in his authority. First he establishes the three great realms in the first three days (the heavens where the lights dwell, the sky and the waters, and the dry land); in the following three days he fills those realms with his creatures (the stars and especially the sun and the moon, the fish and the birds, and the land dwelling creatures including humankind). The result is excellent (and indeed, it was very good); the power is straightforward and honourable. And there are three crucial points that are clear from this effortless creative work.

- a. **God is the source of all that is:** the fundamental Christian conviction is that there are really only two sorts of things, God and everything else and God created everything else out of nothing.

Read 1 Corinthians 8.4-6.

1 CORINTHIANS 8 ⁴Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that no idol in the world really exists, and that there is no God but one. ⁵ Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth as in fact there are many gods and many lords ⁶ yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

What are the basic elements of reality outlined in this passage?

And so, what does Paul say about the purpose of humanity?

God is the unrivalled Lord of all that is, because he is the unique source of all that is. As such he has ownership and authority over the world and everyone in it. This is entirely familiar pattern to us a friend of mine is an artist, perhaps the profession closest in kind to the Creator God. Seemingly without too much effort, and with a few flicks of the wrist, she makes pictures and images come to life, mixing colours and shapes in a beautiful way. She owns those pictures, and takes rightful pride in them. For someone else to claim them as their own work would be a serious injustice. At the same time, for those pictures to hang in, and bring glory to, another house, would also be wrong. That's the sort of pattern we see here as the first truth of the Genesis story. God is the great artist. He makes

everything, not by bringing together already existing materials like paint and canvas, but from absolute scratch, by the sheer power of his will. And therefore everything that he has made is his, it belongs to him by right, by right of creation. What is so wonderful about this is that God's creations are not only objects, like paintings and sculptures; God's creatures include human beings, in all their magnificent variety, including you and me. What's more, there is a flip side to this. It also means that our creator God is the only worthy object of our worship, the only one to whom we should give ultimate love and loyalty, the only one to whom we should bring glory.

Think about another implication of this. A little while ago, I was speaking to someone about God, and he said to me that he had nothing to do with God, and that they had come to a mutually satisfactory arrangement – he left God alone and God left him alone, there was simply no relationship. Actually, that's dead wrong. God has everything to do with my friend, and never leaves him alone, precisely in the sense that God is his creator and therefore also his sustainer. In fact, everyone and everything has a relationship with this Lord, whether or not they like or recognise it – the relationship of being a creature. Everyone and everything has been brought into existence and is sustained in existence by this Lord.

This sequence of thought has one final step to go. If it's true that God has made each and every one of us; and if it's true therefore that each and every one of us has a relationship with God, then we can say one more thing. Right here we have an answer to one of the biggest questions of all – what is the meaning of life, where can fulfilment and satisfaction be found? And the answer is that it is in relationship with this creator Lord that creatures find fulfilment and joy. He has made us, he sustains us, and it is as we are connected to him that we experience the satisfaction for which our souls thirst. On the other hand, the attempt to reject this relationship is the essence of what the Bible calls sin.

One common alternative to this Biblical presentation is a point of view that is known as dualism – that is, the idea that there was some other 'stuff' alongside God from eternity, 'stuff' which was not created by God. Often this 'stuff' is held to be bad in some way, evil. One of the most influential philosophers in the world, Plato, seems to have held just this view. We see it in the common logo of yin and yang; by means of a simple picture, a big idea is communicated, that somehow the black and the white are both necessary for the whole, that they define each other and in a sense complement each other. From this perspective, God created the world, not out of nothing, but out of this 'stuff', in the same way that humans create, bringing together pre-existing materials.

However, there are two serious objections to this. The first is intuitive. You see, the dire consequence of this view is that evil is eternal, existing along with God for all time. It is neither subject to God, nor able to be defeated by God. In other words, there can be no ultimate hope on this un-Biblical view, which is so contrary to our best intuitions about the way the world ought to be. But there is a second objection to dualism as well. Our best scientific knowledge indicates that the world in fact is not eternal, but came into existence, in what we call the Big Bang. This event is what is known as 'absolute singularity', an entirely unique and non-repeatable event, where all matter, time and space came into existence. Interestingly, it was atheist scholars who sought vigorously to oppose the evidence of the Big Bang when the theory was being developed, since they understood that if the universe had a beginning, it was therefore not eternal but rather must have had a cause, and the only logical cause would be God.

The truth is that there are only two sorts of things, God and everything else – and God made everything else out of nothing. And that means that evil is not part of the way things have always been; and even more importantly, therefore, evil need not be part of the way things will always be.

- b. **The creation is dependent, and yet real and good:** the second crucial thing that is affirmed by the Biblical picture of creation is a function of the first – all that God has created is utterly dependent upon Him for its existence and life. It is distinct from God, and of a different order of being from God, in that it is dependent. However, crucially, this dependence relationship is not bad; rather it is good, precisely because creation gains its existence from the good God.

Read 1 Timothy 4.1-5.

1 TIMOTHY 4 ¹Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will renounce the faith by paying attention to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, ²through the hypocrisy of liars whose consciences are seared with a hot iron. ³They forbid marriage and demand abstinence from foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. ⁴For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, provided it is received with thanksgiving; ⁵for it is sanctified by God's word and by prayer.

What is the deceit that Paul is combating in this passage?

What is Paul's response to this deceit?

The Christian understanding of the First Days means that God is not the only thing that exists. This is not as silly as it sounds. As it turns out, a significant aspect of many Eastern religions is that there really is only one thing, god, the great ocean of being, the One, and that all the different bits of the world are in some sense part of, or emanations from, this god. On this view, the problems in the world stem from the way that people constantly emphasise and act on their difference from others, rather than their fundamental unity and identity with others. At one level, it is an attractive view – if you've ever been bushwalking, and come to the end of long climb, and looked back down a long, magnificent tree-covered valley, you may well have had the sense of being one with nature. In so far as it goes, that is a Christian feeling, recognising that both that valley and I are creatures of God. But the Eastern religions go one step further, and say that this unity-of-being is itself divine, and therefore I gain my value from partaking of this divine spirit. Shirley MacLean, an actress-turned-pop-philosopher famously once declared, 'I am god', and it was precisely this view that she was expressing – not that she herself created the universe, but that at the core of her being was the divine spark, a little bit of the shared being god. Of course, it's clear where this idea leads – to worship each other, or more commonly, to worship oneself is entirely proper, since it is to worship god!

But the Christian understanding of creation shows this to be a tragic cul-de-sac. It is just not the case that God is the only good thing that exists, nor does something have to be the same as God to be

good. God has created a whole world of creatures that are distinct from him and dependent upon him for their life, and this dependence-in-distinction is good. It is not something to be evaded, a slavery to throw off, any more than a yo-yo gains its freedom by cutting its string! It needs the string, and it needs the hand which gives it energy and movement, and that need is not a bad thing, it's just the way things were made.

Three further things follow from this train of thought—first, because God is good, purely good, what (and who) he makes is also fundamentally good and valuable. It may become corrupted, but that does not change the fact that it was made good. As one kid graffitied, “God made me, and God don't make trash!” . Second, it means that creatures are agents—that is, they have real capacities to act in the world. As people who have been made by God, we make choices, and are responsible for those choices, morally responsible. God has not made us robots, nor even as little parts of his own being, but genuinely distinct creatures, who are free to choose how they live in the world which God has made, and answerable to their creator for those choices. And third, echoing a previous point, the fulfillment of creatures is not found in their becoming less creaturely, but rather in embracing that dependence relationship with God in thanks and trust and obedience.

- c. **God creates in freedom and with purpose:** the third crucial thing that follows from the fact that God made us flows from these first two. God created the heavens and the earth not because he had to, as though he were under any compulsion or need, but simply because he wanted to. He created out of his great love, and according to his own good purpose.

Read Psalm 104.

PSALM 104 ¹Bless the LORD, O my soul. O LORD my God, you are very great. You are clothed with honor and majesty, ² wrapped in light as with a garment. You stretch out the heavens like a tent, ³ you set the beams of your chambers on the waters, you make the clouds your chariot, you ride on the wings of the wind, ⁴ you make the winds your messengers, fire and flame your ministers. ⁵ You set the earth on its foundations, so that it shall never be shaken. ⁶ You cover it with the deep as with a garment; the waters stood above the mountains. ⁷ At your rebuke they flee; at the sound of your thunder they take to flight. ⁸ They rose up to the mountains, ran down to the valleys to the place that you appointed for them. ⁹ You set a boundary that they may not pass, so that they might not again cover the earth. ¹⁰ You make springs gush forth in the valleys; they flow between the hills, ¹¹ giving drink to every wild animal; the wild asses quench their thirst. ¹² By the streams the birds of the air have their habitation; they sing among the branches. ¹³ From your lofty abode you water the mountains; the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work. ¹⁴ You cause the grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for people to use, to bring forth food from the earth, ¹⁵ and wine to gladden the human heart, oil to make the face shine, and bread to strengthen the human heart. ¹⁶ The trees of the LORD are watered abundantly, the cedars of Lebanon that he planted. ¹⁷ In them the birds build their nests; the stork has its home in the fir trees. ¹⁸ The high mountains are for the wild goats; the rocks are a refuge for the coney. ¹⁹ You have made the moon to mark the seasons; the sun knows its time for setting. ²⁰ You make darkness, and it is night, when all the animals of the forest come creeping out. ²¹ The young lions roar for their prey, seeking their food from God. ²² When the sun rises, they withdraw and lie down in their dens. ²³ People go out to their work and to their labor until the

evening. ²⁴ O LORD, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures. ²⁵ Yonder is the sea, great and wide, creeping things innumerable are there, living things both small and great. ²⁶ There go the ships, and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it. ²⁷ These all look to you to give them their food in due season; ²⁸ when you give to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are filled with good things. ²⁹ When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. ³⁰ When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground. ³¹ May the glory of the LORD endure forever; may the LORD rejoice in his works ³² who looks on the earth and it trembles, who touches the mountains and they smoke. ³³ I will sing to the LORD as long as I live; I will sing praise to my God while I have being. ³⁴ May my meditation be pleasing to him, for I rejoice in the LORD. ³⁵ Let sinners be consumed from the earth, and let the wicked be no more. Bless the LORD, O my soul. Praise the LORD

Why is God said to have created in this wonderfully rich Psalm?

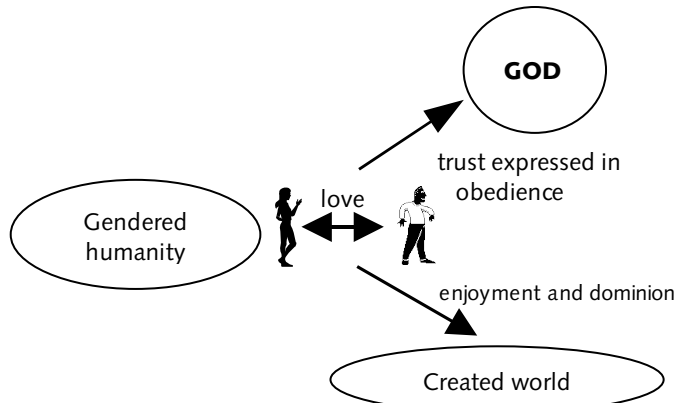
What is included in God's great work of creation? How does the Psalm picture God's involvement in his creation?

It is persons who act deliberately and on the basis of love. A popular view of God is that he is some kind of force, perhaps like gravity, that has a vague influence on our lives, but is basically irrelevant. But love and relationship and jealousy are in the heart of God. He is a profoundly personal reality, with intentions and hopes and disappointments, and so the only adequate kind of response to God is equally a personal response. God's love for us calls for a corresponding love for him in return; God's commitment to us is adequately matched only by a corresponding commitment and loyalty to him. A little while ago I spoke to someone who said they believed all the stuff about God, but didn't practice it. But that's a contradiction in terms to believe in the God who is there, the creator God who made us and everything else, is to know him as wonderfully personal, and to know him is to love him, to respond as personally as his creation of us.

What's more, God is not fickle, here today and gone tomorrow. On the contrary, God remains steadfast in his love and fixed in his purpose. He has not lost control of his world or abandoned his purposes for it, but rather remains determined to see his creation brought to fulfilment. This is what the Christian message is all about. Therefore, the completion of God's work of creation, what Christians call redemption, will include the whole created order, rather than destroy or replace it. It is this hope which gives meaning and direction to our lives and all life.

GOD, HUMANITY AND THE WORLD

Each of these players receives sharp definition. Notice that God is transcendent, existing in a different way from everything else while other things are dependent and temporal, God is necessary and eternal. Notice that the world is given the wonderful gift of life, dependent on God and sustained by him. And notice the way in which humanity is given a special place within the creation. On the one



hand, it shares with the world the good dependent reality of being a creature. Human beings were created to live in a trust relationship with God, expressing itself in thankful obedience to Him. At the same time, in distinction from the world, humanity is created in God's image and likeness, ruling and exercising dominion over the rest of creation under God, capable of moral responsibility and

choice. And a crucial part of that task is to multiply, to enjoy the fact that God has made humanity male and female, to unite together in love.

One final thing. Jumping ahead a little, the Christian conviction is that the One who is our Saviour and Redeemer, God in Christ, is none other than the One who is our Creator. This is vital for 2 reasons. First, it means that he has the power to do something about the human condition, and is not himself merely subject to it. Even the most outstanding human leader or teacher is still part of the problem as much as part of the solution, and so in the end might be able to describe the goal of a better world, but can't establish it. And second, it means that our Saviour and Redeemer has the moral authority to save us, and is not just some Clint Eastwood-like brooding stranger who rides unannounced into a town to deal with the bad guys, and then rides out again into the sunset. No, this one is our maker, and saves us out of love for us and commitment to us. Precisely because he is already the Lord upon whom everyone and everything is utterly dependent, he has the right to command us and therefore demand our obedience, and the ability to make and keep promises and therefore expect our trust.

So WHAT?

There are some truths that don't make much difference to you—it's true that it's almost impossible to fold any piece of paper in half more than 10 times (have a try and see for yourself!), but it's completely irrelevant to life. What we have seen in this session is not like that; these are truths that make all the difference in the world.

I guess the most important so what? conclusion is this: it puts the question to you, are you thankful? What we have seen today is that the life that you have is not from yourself, it is a gift, a gift of love. And the only thing that makes sense when you receive a gift of love is to say thanks. I don't think I really got this until I became a parent, which is maybe even closer to the job description of God than an artist. Being a parent involves an unending sequence of gifts of love—so many sleepless nights and bedside songs, so many meals prepared only to be hurled around the room, so many nappies of appalling description to be changed (what a great day it was when I changed my last nappy. I have some friends who recently had a baby, and they invited me to change their baby's nappy—I think they were suffering temporary insanity from sleep deprivation!). The only thing that makes sense from children is to be thankful, deeply in their hearts. There is no point in trying to repay what our parents

give us, they don't do it for that. Thankfulness from the heart is what's right. On the other hand, ingratitude from children to parents who have loved and cared for them is atrocious, there are few things that are worse.

What God has done for you is so much more even than your parents have done for you. He is your creator, he made you down to the finest detail. He is your sustainer, who keeps you blood pumping and your heart beating. And the question is, how thankful are you to this, your Creator God?

We can summarise the key ideas from the Bible on the First Days like this:

This is God's world

God

- made the world
- continues to sustain it

World

- to reflect his power and goodness
- to be a place of life and peace

Humanity

- to enjoy and rule the world
- to thank, obey and trust God

2. Dark Days

OUTRAGE

Mike was one of those personality-plus people, the kind who are always at the center of the group at a party, who always have something interesting and valuable to say, and who seem to have few gaps in their character. He had moved overseas, married and had children, and so I had lost touch with him, until I found out that he had been killed instantly in a car accident on an Italian motorway. Susie had really turned her life around, and after looking like she was heading off the rails in a big way, had managed to pull it together. By the time the cancer was diagnosed, it was already huge, with multiple secondaries, and the life expectancy was given at weeks and months rather than years. James was enjoying life as a student, that is until he came down with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, which drained him of any energy or light in his life. He went into a relationship black hole, where all he could do was suck the vibe out of any situation. It was 10 years before he emerged, but by then he was a different person.

The fact is, this world is very far from the life and peace for which God created it. It may be that you have experienced that up close and personal; or it may be, thank God, that you are relatively untouched by the dark side of life. Either way, pain is never too far from us, and when things go wrong, often the first question that springs to our lips is Why? Partly because we don't understand, and partly because it is not understandable, pain and difficulty and suffering continue to come to us as a shock. There is something profoundly right and Biblical about that shock, and something profoundly wrong and dehumanising when the presence and impact of evil is regarded as normal, as simply one of those things.

This session, we take a look where often the temptation is to shut our eyes and pretend that things are not as bad as we suspect. The fact is that no matter how hard we pretend, or how deeply we try to bury our heads in the sand, each of us knows that this world is not even close to perfect, and desperately needs saving. What's more, that is true of you and me at a personal level as well; we are not even close to perfect, and desperately need saving.

The Bible is ruthlessly honest on this issue, what author C.S. Lewis called, The problem of pain. And it sheets home responsibility for the problem directly to us human beings.

Read Genesis 3.1-24

GENESIS 3 ¹Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, Did God say, You shall not eat from any tree in the garden? ²The woman said to the serpent, We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; ³but God said, You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die. ⁴But the serpent said to the woman, You will not die; ⁵for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil. ⁶So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. ⁷Then the eyes

of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

⁸They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. ⁹But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, Where are you? ¹⁰He said, I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself. ¹¹He said, Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat? ¹²The man said, The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate. ¹³Then the LORD God said to the woman, What is this that you have done? The woman said, The serpent tricked me, and I ate. ¹⁴The LORD God said to the serpent, Because you have done this, cursed are you among all animals and among all wild creatures; upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. ¹⁵I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel. ¹⁶To the woman he said, I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you. ¹⁷And to the man he said, Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, You shall not eat of it, cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; ¹⁸thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. ¹⁹By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

²⁰The man named his wife Eve, because she was the mother of all living. ²¹And the LORD God made garments of skins for the man and for his wife, and clothed them. ²²Then the LORD God said, See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever ²³therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. ²⁴He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life.

Make a list of all the ways that Adam and Eve turned away from God.

To what alternatives do they turn as sources of knowledge and fulfilment?

SIN, AND EVIL

From the Bible's point of view, the greatest shock is that there should be Dark Days at all. What God had created was good, and then very good, so that God came to the end of his creating of the heavens and the earth, and rested, not out of exhaustion but out of satisfaction and completion. What's more, the one through whom God created the universe, his own Son, was life, and that life was the light of all people. All that was needful for those first humans was to live in that light as faithful image bearers. His love and provision for them knew no limits. And so it is a shock, an inexplicable outrage, that the first humans should turn on the one who had breathed into them the breath of life and betray the one whose likeness they bore; it just doesn't make sense.

When the Bible depicts this catastrophic initial sin, we see exposed the nature of all sin. As we saw last session, righteousness is all about God, humanity and the world being in right relationship with each other, in peace and love and trust. It makes sense then that sin, as the opposite and denial of righteousness, is best understood as essentially a breach of that rightly ordered matrix of relationships. In particular at its heart sin involves, on the one hand, a turning away from the living and true creator God as the one in whom life and joy is found, and refusing to accord to him his rightful place in our lives as our creator and sustainer and judge; and at the same time, because we humans are created as worshipping beings, there is also a turning to some alternative.

The Bible is aware of two fundamental alternatives, which correspond to the two central ways sin is portrayed. The first alternative is oneself. At one level, this makes sense; once God is rejected, worship finds its home in the next greatest thing, that which bears God's image. This is the sin of pride. Now pride is a tricky subject. It is a different thing from a healthy self-esteem, and we are increasingly aware of the impact on people of having a damaged sense of themselves. Pride on the other hand, consists of placing oneself at the center of life. It is a blend of self-absorption and an over-estimation of one's abilities or worth. It can take obvious form – for example, consider what it takes to write an ad in the personal section of a magazine like this:

Strikingly beautiful: Ivy League graduate. Playful, passionate, perceptive, elegant, bright, articulate original in mind, unique in spirit. I possess a rare balance of beauty and depth, sophistication and earthiness, seriousness and a love of fun. Professionally successful, perfectly capable of being self-sufficient and independent, but I won't be truly content until we find each other. Please reply with a substantial letter describing your background and who you are. Photo essential.¹

Or again, on one occasion after an argument with an employee, Winston Churchill complained that he had been rude; the employee, speaking his mind, replied that Churchill had also been rude. Apparently, Churchill replied after a moment, "But I am a great man!" This is pride on the surface; but there is also pride in a far more subtle form (perhaps if your reaction to those 2 stories was, "That's awful," it's a little closer than you might think!). Subtle pride may be quiet, but it is no less part of a sinful rejection of God and turning inward for that. And it is pride which expresses itself in all the selfish living that drives out love, the kind of life that resorts easily to violence to get one's own way, or to lying to make things smoother, or to finding excuses like skin colour or sexual orientation to hate someone. Pride, as the turning away from God and replacing him with oneself at the center of life, is at the root of so much that is wrong about the world.

¹ New York magazine, 8 June, 1992, p. 111. The illustrations in this section are taken from Cornelius Plantinga's book, *Not the way it's supposed to be: A breviary of sin*, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1995.

The second great alternative to God at the center of life is to turn toward the creation. Human beings are given the task of exercising God's loving authority in the world, receiving from it what they need for life. The material world around us makes a great servant, but a lousy master, and seeking to find life and fulfillment in that creation, perhaps in the abundance of possessions or experiences, taking that which is good by God's grace and using it to replace God, is called in the Bible the sin of idolatry. It expresses itself in a level of devotion to any element of creation, whether that be a person or a thing or a cause or a company, which belongs only to God. We are familiar with instances of a crude idolatry in traditional cultures in scenes of worshipping totem poles. Contemporary idolatry is more sophisticated, but just as twisted—seen for example in an obsession with one's own body, and the kind of dedication to the body-beautiful that fuels the gym and personal trainer industry; or the level of expenditure on home renovation and house-and-garden level home improvements; or even more commonly, a workaholicism that sees people invest more in their careers than in their relationships.

What is at stake here is the issue of the heart. In his book, *The Life of God in the soul of man*, Henry Scougal's made this insightful comment: The worth and excellency of a soul is to be measured by the object of its love. From the perspective of the Bible, the living and true God is alone worthy to be the ultimate object of our soul's love. Anything less than this is sin. Pride is finding in yourself what should only be found in God; idolatry is finding in the world what should only be found in God. These two alternatives are captured in the diagram, where figure 2 is the situation under sin, contrasted with figure 1 from last week, the world the way God created it to be:

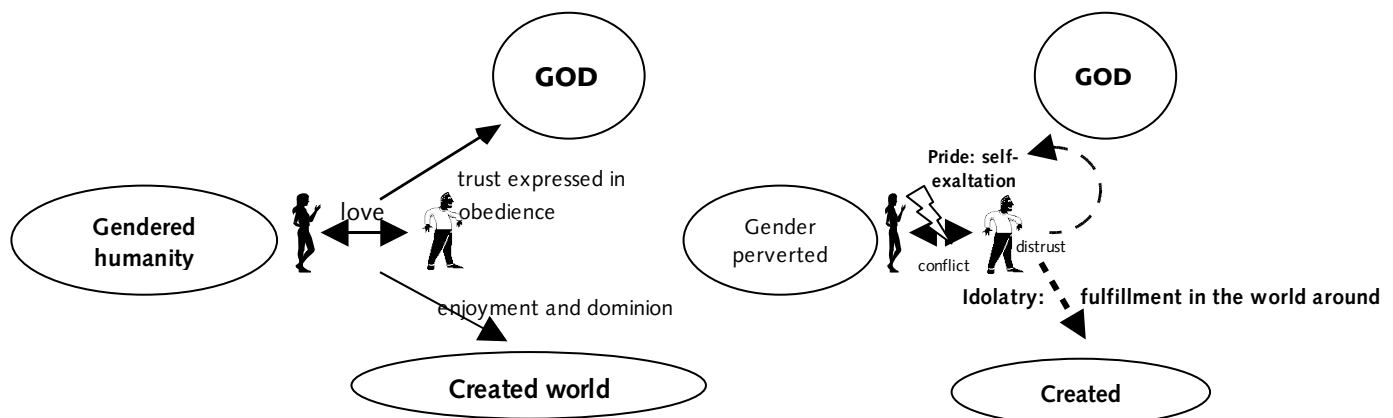


Figure 1

Figure 2

So begins the sad story of sin in the Bible. The Bible describes this catastrophe as falling short, in particular falling short of the glory for which God had created and destined the world. And having fallen short of the glory of God, the LORD God gave them over to the darkness they had embraced, though it gave him no pleasure, and indeed broke his heart. His love for his people was not diminished, but his relationship with them was broken. Where God had said, Let there be light, and it was so, now the first humans had said, Let there be dark, and, because he had given them the power even to rebel, it too became so.

Now read Romans 5.12-21

ROMANS 5 ¹²Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned ¹³sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law. ¹⁴Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who

is a type of the one who was to come.

¹⁵But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man's trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many. ¹⁶And the free gift is not like the effect of the one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification. ¹⁷If, because of the one man's trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.

¹⁸Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. ¹⁹For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous. ²⁰But law came in, with the result that the trespass multiplied; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, ²¹so that, just as sin exercised dominion in death, so grace might also exercise dominion through justification leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Describe how Paul depicts the relationship between humanity and sin.

What were the results of the initial sin for humanity and the world?

That first rebellion was the second-most decisive act in the course of human history, to be matched and overcome only by God's grace-filled response. From it we learn both about the nature of sin and evil, and their effects in the world.

As the story of the Bible unfolds, it becomes clear that there are two aspects to humanity's relationship to sin and Evil. First, when the Bible speaks of sin, we are in the realm of moral and spiritual responsibility, or what can be called **agency**. All people, as descendants of those first humans, unfailingly and wholeheartedly embrace sin, turning from God and towards ourselves or towards the creation. Some do so in an obvious and anti-social way, stealing, hurting, lying. On the whole, we feel reasonably comfortable identifying people who do these things, especially when it causes pain and damage to others, as sinners. Of course, other people live their lives in basically pleasant and even socially acceptable ways, and we have a much harder time understanding how it could be fair to call such people (perhaps even yourself!) sinners. That's where the material we looked at in the first couple of pages is so important. You see, it all depends on the frame of reference. If sin was fundamentally about how we treat other people, and whether they were hurt by us, then it would be unfair, and maybe even just nasty, to call fundamentally pleasant people sinners. But that is not at the heart of sin. Sin is first and foremost about how we treat God, before it's about how we treat others.

In fact, the very way in which we don't include God in our configuration of how we ought to live, the fact that we can feel completely comfortable about treating others well and entirely ignoring Him, is itself the essence of sin. From this perspective, once you include God in the picture, in fact at the center of the picture, it's easy to see how even pleasant people who don't hurt anyone else can be as much sinners as anyone else.

Insofar as we turn away from the God who made us, even if we do it nicely, we are perpetrators of sin, and God's response to sin by moral and spiritual perpetrators is judgment, and especially the judgment of death, which we will discuss below. For the moment, it is important to note that there is another way that the Bible speaks of what has gone wrong in the world, which is the moral flip-side of agency; and that is in terms of **victim-hood**.

The Bible makes it clear that the first sin opened the door to something far bigger than individual acts of rebellion, to a power which is so all-pervasive that it can only be described as the cosmic enemy of God. Sometimes this enemy is depicted as Sin, sometimes as the Evil One or the Devil. This enemy is evil personified, a force or power which stands against God, and under whose power stands the whole world and all human beings. Jesus describes the purpose of his ministry as defeating the power of this "strong man" and plundering his property, thereby freeing those whose lives are held in slavery to him by the fear of death. Humans are perpetrators of sin, yes, but victims also.

Fill out the table by describing how each of the following passages depicts humanity as both agent and victim of sin.

Passage	Agent / perpetrator	Victim
<p>JOHN 8.31-38 □³¹Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; ³²and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free. ³³They answered him, We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, You will be made free ? ³⁴Jesus answered them, Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. ³⁵The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. ³⁶So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed. ³⁷I know that you are descendants of Abraham; yet you look for an opportunity to kill me, because there is no place in you for my word. ³⁸I declare what I have seen in the Father's presence; as for you, you should do what you have heard from the Father.</p>		
<p>EPHESIANS 2.1-3 □¹You were dead through the trespasses and sins ²in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the</p>		

<p>power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. ³All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else.</p>		
<p>HEBREWS 2.14-17 <input type="checkbox"/> ¹⁴Since, 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, ¹⁵and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. ¹⁶For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham. ¹⁷Therefore 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. ¹⁸Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.</p>		

If you have a Bible, you might also like to look up the following verses: Acts 8.22-23, Romans 5.21, Romans 6.6, 15-23, Romans 7.5, 14-24, Romans 8.5-8, 2 Corinthians 4.3-4.

What seems to be the relationship between humanity's agency and victim-hood?

What these verses clearly show is that each of us, as descendants of those first humans, are in some sense born into slavery to sin and evil, and so we are victims. Ever since the first turning away from God (called the fall), humanity has suffered from what one author has described as a necessary moral incapacity. What that means is that however much we humans may try to live a moral life, we are broken and cannot help but sin, we are (as Jesus put it) slaves to sin. Interestingly, our own experience of life frequently testifies to this Biblical truth. It's true that some people have seared their consciences like a steak on a hot-plate, so that they do not feel guilt for the things that they do wrong; but for most, they can relate only too well to the frustration they experience as a result of this inability to do the right thing in a consistent way. Many people are aware that they fail even to live up to their own moral standards. You may have noticed this as you talk to people about their loves and their struggles. Often the response is simply "I can't help it" or "it's not my fault". To some extent, they are right!

And yet at the same time, all people unfailingly and wholeheartedly *embrace* sin, acting truly according to our corrupted nature, turning from God and into ourselves or towards the creation, and so are perpetrators of evil as well; responsible for our own sin and accountable before God. But it's both, and we must hold the two simultaneously – all people are both agents and victims of sin.

Perhaps the situation that is closest to this dual position as victims and perpetrators is addiction. Addicts are in a terrible bind. It feels like a power has a hold of you, in the face of which you feel entirely helpless. There is a way in which you are desperate to break free, but find yourself trapped, enslaved to the power of the addiction which grabs you and throws you around even though you know that you are doing damage to yourself. At the same time, addicts know that they are responsible, they have and continue to make choices, they are decision makers as they continue to feed their addiction; in fact, to take this responsibility away from them is the last step on the path to handing them over utterly to their addiction. And what the Bible says is that we are addicted to sin – it is both a power that holds us mesmerised; and at the same time, a choice we make to be the kind of people we are, and for which we are responsible.

All this has three important implications: first, it means that help can come only from outside. We human beings are fundamentally incapable of dealing with our own situation; we are not part of the solution, we are the problem, we are carriers of the sin-virus in our very nature. And that means even our best efforts and intentions, in education or in political activity and reform or even in sheer moral and spiritual self-help, are themselves tainted with this disease of sin and evil. Put simply, we need saving, and trying to save ourselves is like trying to lift ourselves up by the bootstraps – it just can't work. We need saving, and therefore we need a Saviour.

But second, God's fundamental orientation towards human beings remains that of love for his image bearing creation, and therefore to save them from their slavery, to provide this Saviour. It's interesting to see how most parents respond to kids who become trapped in addiction or substance abuse – there is so much pain, sometimes even the pain of having to do things which the kid regards as hurtful, and yet in the hearts of so many parents, the deep devotion of fierce love remains, despite the hurts. So it is with God.

And third, it means that in an important sense, it is Evil, Sin and their consequence, Death (1 Corinthians 15:25-26) that are the real enemies of God; and therefore it is against these things that his holy wrath and judgement are directed. We will return to this point in our fourth session, but it's important to notice both sides of this reality. God would be less than just (in fact the word we use for it is *corrupt*) if he were to simply turn a blind eye to sin and evil, and not rise up in judgment and fierce anger at the terrible spoiling of his good creation. But at the same time, God's judgement is only secondarily against human beings, and that insofar as they continue to align themselves with Evil. Far from standing over the people he has made with a club, ready to strike anyone who is disobedient, the Creator God is like a patient Father, waiting and waiting for his children to return to him. He is patient even in the face of scoffers who ridicule his justice and doubt that he will in the end do away with evil. It is his desire that none should perish. His judgment will come on those who are disobedient, but only if they refuse to accept his mercy and continue to align themselves with the primary enemies of God.

SIN WHICH LEADS TO DEATH

We have seen that God's good creation, the world he made in love to be a place of life and peace, was hijacked by Sin and Evil, through the turning away from God of the first pair. In their

sin we see the character of all sin, a rejection of God as rightful Lord, and a turning elsewhere for all that God had promised. Further, we have explored the way that this first sin opened the door to a terrible power, which continues to wreak havoc in the world, making slaves of people, much like an addicts enslavement. There is one final piece of the puzzle. Given what we have looked at, it makes sense that the fruit of Sin and Evil, which oppose themselves to God, should be the opposite of the blessing that comes from God, life and peace. And so it is that the world, and the individual worlds of each person, are characterised by death and conflict. We see this at the cosmic level, at the national and international levels, and in the day to day existence of people. Death and conflict are the basic experience of a world where there is something wrong with everything . These then are the Dark Days.

As we think about these issues, there is often a question that nags at us where did evil, the kinds of evil that we see all too frequently, come from, whether that be the natural evil of earthquakes and tsunamis, or the human evil of genocide and grinding poverty? We think somehow that if we can answer the question of the origin of evil, then we might be able to find a solution for evil.

The problem is, the question itself assumes that evil ought to have a rational explanation. And some have been attempted. On one hand, some people suggest that evil has always been there, and is just part of the fabric of the universe; but (as we saw last session) not only does that eliminate all hope from human existence, it does not even square with our best scientific knowledge, which indicates that the world had a definite beginning in time. On the other hand, some people suggest that God himself is actually responsible for the evil in the world, and made things flawed; but again, as we saw last session, the straightforward testimony of the Bible is that God made everything very good . And as a third alternative, some people suggest that evil is neither eternal (option 1) nor created (option 2), but actually an illusion, simply a product of our false desires, such that if we could eliminate our desires then we could eliminate evil; but of course, this is to appallingly ignore the actual experience of evil and suffering in the lives of so many. No; evil is neither eternal, nor is it created, nor is it an illusion the reality to which the Bible bears witness is that it is a non-sense, literally, a thing which has no rational explanation. What's more, it is important that there be no conceivable explanation, neither for that first act of evil, the deliberate and knowing disobedience to the word of God, nor for our subsequent sin-addiction. In fact, to locate an explanation would find a place for sin, a home for it somewhere in the creation, created purely good. Rather, it comes out of the blue , and is catastrophic.

Of course, there must be more, and there is. As we have said, this is not a world abandoned by God, and simply awaiting destruction. God's purpose remains to be Lord of a world which reflects his power and goodness. And in the same vein, his purpose for humanity remains blessing, life and peace. And so it is precisely into this world and to accomplish this purpose that God gave his Son, sent into the heart of our situation, the heart of darkness, to once and for all deal with sin. But more on that next week. For now, we need to ask the question, so what?

So what?

Songwriters are the popular poets of our time, some better than others. Neil Finn's song, *Sinner* on his 1988 album *Try whistling this* is a slow but fierce ballad that sums up the feeling of our culture in regard to the issue of sin: *sinner, there is no such thing*. Maybe he is reacting to a strict religious upbringing, maybe he just wants to feel free (*Under moonlight I stood wild and naked, felt no shame just my spirit awakened*). What's clear is that he sees no use for a

discussion like this about sin.

But the fact is that find sand: insert head has never been a realistic response to real problems, and if there's one thing in all the world that's obvious, it is that sin and Evil are the problem. Humanly and environmentally, we stagger from day to day under the heavy effects of these twin terrorists, and see all too often their harvest of death. The challenge to you as you reflect on this material is whether you will put your hand up as a sinner; see yourself as compromised, as part of the problem, as a one who is both a willing agent and also a helpless victim of sin? And not in the superficial sense of no one's perfect; rather in the substantial sense that no one's even close to perfect, not even with the people they love and care for, let alone the people they are indifferent towards, or worse the people they hate!

No, the fact is that you and I sin, sin badly, sin most importantly by not treating God right, and therefore sin by not treating other people and other parts of the creation right. The question is, will you acknowledge this sin?

We may aptly summarise the teaching of the Bible on the Dark Days of this world, as follows:

But Evil entered God's world

a. First humans

- arrogantly asserted independence from God
- opened the door for Evil

b. Evil

- infects every part of God's world
- leads to death and conflict

c. Every human since

- has bought into Evil by seeking
independence from God
- is enslaved to Evil

3. Jesus, the Saviour of the World

THE OPEN HEART OF GOD

Writing of the depth of feeling possible between lovers, Shakespeare reflected:

*Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove:
O, no! it is an ever-fixed mark,
That looks on tempests, and is never shaken,
It is the star to every wandering bark,
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.*

Sonnet 116

If that is true of human love, it is far more profoundly true of the love which the true and living God has for his creation. For although the original sin had catastrophic consequences, unleashing the power of evil in the world, there is one thing which did not change – God's passionate commitment to his world and his people. A less poetic but even more profound author finds the greatest love of all, not here on earth, but in heaven – In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us (1 John 4.10a). It is the heart of God that is the start of the good news, the good news which undoes the bad news of sin and evil and death.

And as day follows night, so the thought of the Apostle John moves directly to the sending of the Son of God, the Lord Jesus, as the central content of that good news – and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. (1 John 4.10b). One of our conclusions from the last session was that we needed a Saviour, and the Apostle John here testifies precisely to the sending of that Saviour.

Now, human salvation is a mighty work, yet the outcome of this sending of Jesus, God's Son is even greater than St John describes here. As we saw last time, our need for salvation is part of an even bigger catastrophe – the hijacking of God's world by sin and Evil and death, ruining God's gracious and righteous purposes for life and peace. And even deeper than this, the heart of the issue is the dreadful displacement of God from his rightful place at the centre of our lives and all life, He who is the giver of life. In other words, as we explore the contours of the career of Jesus, sent by God, we will need to keep one eye on his impact for us and for our salvation, wiping away the problem; and another eye his positive work of establishing the solution, the loving Lordship of the Creator, what Jesus called the Kingdom of God.

One final point about the origin of this gospel/good news. Mirroring the Father's love for his world, Jesus' time amongst us – and especially his death and resurrection – was not only obedience to the Father, but also a consequence of his own willing decision. It was a free gift of grace, out of love for the world. At one point, he said that it was he who laid down his life, not another who took it from him, and certainly he seems very determined to bring on the confrontation that led to his death. One of his biographers, Luke, commented that he set his face towards Jerusalem, knowing that what lay ahead was great suffering, rejection by the elders, chief priests and scribes, and death. Whatever we might think of the career moves that

Jesus made, it was he who made them, deliberately, lovingly, graciously.

THE WAR OF THE WORLDS

How then does the Bible explain the saving significance of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus? First, the biggest picture of them all!

Read Romans 5.12-21.

Rom. 5:12 Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned 13 sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law. 14 Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come.

15 But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man's trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many. 16 And the free gift is not like the effect of the one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification. 17 If, because of the one man's trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.

Rom. 5:18 Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. 19 For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous. 20 But law came in, with the result that the trespass multiplied; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, 21 so that, just as sin exercised dominion in death, so grace might also exercise dominion through justification leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord

This is a dense passage in its details, but the basic picture is a clear comparison. Who reigns in the world as a result of 'the one man's sin', and what are the consequences of this?

Who reigns in the world as a result of 'the one man's act of righteousness', and what are the consequences of this?

The first thing to say concerns the scope of this gospel. It is truly cosmic in scale, and is fundamentally about authority – who or what will have and exercise authority (or as the Apostle Paul puts it, “dominion”) in this world? We saw that the nature of sin is the rejection of the loving, rightful authority of God. And therefore the disobedience of the first humans left humanity and the world in a deep chasm, where sin and death and condemnation reign or have universal and terrible dominion; nothing and

no-one is unaffected.

That's where we finished last week, looking at the Dark Days. The mission of Christ, as it is presented in this section of Paul's letter to the Romans, was nothing less than to undo the damage done, to break the reign of evil in the world and to free the creation by a 'super-abounding' act of righteousness. By this work of Christ, grace and life and justification now 'reign'; and that 'act of righteousness' consists in the whole matrix of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Notice the little phrase in verse 6, "following many trespasses". That's an important clue that the achievement of Jesus is not to scrap what God had made and start again. Rather, it is to go into the very heart of the problem, where trespasses have multiplied like an out-of-control virus, and to deal with the problem from within, utterly and completely.

But unscrambling the egg is always a challenge - it's far harder to undo something gone wrong, than it is to do something wrong in the first place. How does Jesus bring about the reign of life and peace? To answer that question, we need to go back to the beginning, all the way!

Life lived right

Tracing out a family tree is a popular hobby amongst people as they get older. Perhaps it's because they understand that who they are, and the kind of life that they have lived, has often been shaped to a fair degree by their family background. However, even when that's taken into account, their life begins when they are born, and is not passed down to them from someone else. The history of Jesus, however, begins not with his birth at Bethlehem on the first Christmas day. The only realistic assessment of Jesus is that he is the Son of God, who (as the Apostle John puts it in the opening chapter of his gospel) "in the beginning was with God and was God ... and who became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1.1, 14). This God/man truly was divine, so that all that can be said of the God the Father can be said of him. In other words, there is no remainder, some extra bit of glory or authority that God the Father has and which Jesus doesn't. And at the same time, and without compromising that divinity, Jesus was also truly human. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews puts it emphatically - Jesus shared flesh and blood, like his brothers and sisters in every respect (Hebrews 2.14, 17), yet without sin (Hebrews 4.15). And the divine/human life Jesus lived was full of grace and truth, life lived the way it was meant to be lived, in thankful obedience to and trust in his Heavenly Father, always preferring his Father's will to his own.

This is the right context to properly understand the teaching of Jesus. Some are happy to recognise in Jesus a fine, even the greatest, moral and spiritual teacher, but

are reluctant to acknowledge that he is anything more than a human being. However, this just won't work. His teaching and his understanding of himself as uniquely God's own Son simply go hand in hand. To take away either aspect deflates the other of all its power. For example, the Jesus who taught "in everything do to others as you would have them do to you" (Matthew 7.12) is the same Jesus who said a couple of chapters later, "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); or again, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations ..." (Matthew 27.18). In other words, the power and the insight of the teaching of Jesus is a direct function of the identity of Jesus as God's Son.

C.S. Lewis, the English author of the Narnia series, put it sharply in his book *Mere Christianity*:

A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic – on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg – or else he would be the Devil of Hell. 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 patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.

What that means is that this lived life of righteousness in words and deeds, obedient in every regard and resisting real temptation, was not merely incidental, as though the real issue was to get on and die. Nor was it merely a pre-requisite, as though the cosmic calculus simply required a perfect specimen to pay the price for our redemption and so Jesus did the minimum amount of time. Rather Jesus' life, where words and deeds went hand in hand, was the first strokes of the brush, the initial cuts of the sculpture, carving out a new way of being human. His life was a new way of being a child of God, the starting point for the reign of grace. And what was begun in his life was brought to its climax in his death, and its completion in his resurrection.

Death on the cross

One Christian writer has spoken of Jesus' death in this way: "That Christ died is history; that Christ died *for us* is the gospel!" Every day, thousands and thousands of people die, and most of the time, they don't die for the sake of anything or anyone – they just die, as the terrible power of Death chalks up another victory. The Christian conviction about Jesus is that his death was different.

The idea of someone dying *for others* is not so strange. In his book, *The First Day of the Somme*, Martin Middlebrook recounts the heroic actions of one man who gave his life for others:

“In Thiepval Wood, Billy McFadzean and his fellow bombers were making their final preparations in a short, very narrow assembly trench. Boxes of grenades had been opened and the bombs were being distributed. Shells were falling here and there in the wood as the Germans searched for likely targets in the Ulster Division positions. The shelling had not yet stripped all the foliage from the trees and the bright, early morning sun threw dappled shadows over the Belfast men as they worked. Suddenly a box of grenades fell to the floor of the trench. No one seems to know how it happened; perhaps an explosion, closer than the rest dislodged it; perhaps it was just knocked over in the cramped trench. But the fall had knocked the pins out of two grenades. In four seconds they would explode. In that crowded, enclosed space the effect would be disastrous. While some stared in horror at the small metal objects McFadzean pushed himself forward and threw his body over the grenades. A moment later the live grenades exploded and Billy McFadzean was dead. In giving his own life, he had saved his friends, for only one other man in the trenches was slightly hurt. The shocked Ulstermen laid the shattered body carefully aside, hoping that someone would be able to bury it later, then they finished sharing out the grenades and waited sadly for the battle to begin.”

The death of Jesus was like this, in that **it had profound effects on others**. His death was not just one of those things, meaningless, the sad, final extinguishing of his life — no, his death was for something, or rather for someone(s), namely, for us. The Bible repeatedly describes Jesus as our representative and substitute in death, on our behalf and in our place — to take one typical example, he loved us and gave himself up for us (Ephesians 5.2). There are 2 key aspects to this death of Jesus for us .

a) Guilty agents reconciled: Jesus’ death was a death for sin, and human involvement with it and guilt in it. This is Jesus dealing with the agency side of sin, as discussed last chapter.

Fill out the table by describing how the following passages depicts the death of Jesus as reconciling guilty agents by taking their place under judgment.

Passage	How is Jesus' death understood?
<p>2 Corinthians 5.14–15, 18–21</p> <p><u>2 Cor 5.14</u> For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. <u>15</u> And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them ... <u>18</u> All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; <u>19</u> that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. <u>20</u> So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. <u>21</u> For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might</p>	
<p>become the righteousness of God.</p>	
<p>Colossians 1.19–22</p> <p><u>Colossians 1.19</u> For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, <u>20</u> and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. <u>21</u> And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, <u>22</u> he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him.</p>	
<p>1 Peter 2.22–25</p> <p><u>1 Peter 2.22</u> “He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.” <u>23</u> When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. <u>24</u> He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. <u>25</u> For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.</p>	

Guilt, real guilt, guilt lying heavily on the conscience, is a terrible thing. Of course, there is a such a thing as false guilt, felling guilty about things which aren't really

wrong at all – eating too much ice cream might be indulgent, but it is hardly a matter for guilt! But real guilt matters. Jim thought of himself as a regular enough sort of bloke; he wasn't the sharpest tool in the shed, but then again, he wasn't too bad either. That is until one night at a party he got talking with a girl he had met a few times; they seemed to be getting on, and so he got bolder and bolder, especially as the empty glasses beside him multiplied. However, it was clear the girl was not interested in taking their relationship any further. And so Jim did something he never thought he was capable of – he tried to force himself on the girl. Fortunately, they were interrupted, and she was able to escape, but the deed had been done, in his mind and intention, if not in execution. When Jim came to talk with me, the guilt in him was almost palpable. It weighed him down terribly, he couldn't eat, he wasn't sleeping, and concentrating on anything was completely beyond him. What can deal with guilt?

The fact is that guilt is almost like a debt – it stands against you, on your record, until it is erased. And to erase the debt of sin, both sides of the problem need to be wiped away – the problem as it is from God's side, his rightful anger at the wrong that has been done to him, by those who should have lived their lives in thankful obedience to him. And at the same time, the problem from our side, that we have failed, and need to find a way to make the wrong right. And the Bible speaks about the crucifixion in precisely both these terms.

On one hand, Jesus' death was him bearing the punishment that we deserve for our sin. We see this in the first of the Bible quotes, where the Apostle Paul says that our trespasses (another word for 'sins') were not counted against us, and later provides the explanation, namely that for our sake, God "made him who knew no sin (in other words, Jesus) to be sin". The meaning of this is clear – our trespasses are not counted against us, because they are counted against Jesus! What's more, this is not reluctant or unwilling on the part of Jesus, it is the outcome of his love for us all. Or again, the Apostle Peter writes that "Jesus bore our sins in his body on the cross", and the thought here is that Jesus took upon himself the consequences and responsibility for our sins, or in other words the judgment and wrath of God which we deserve. As North American author Jim Packer put it, "Jesus Christ ... took our place under judgment, and received in his own personal experience all the dimensions of the death that was our sentence, whatever these were, so laying the foundation for our pardon and immunity."

At the same time, Jesus' death is understood as a sacrifice for sin, and in particular a sacrifice which makes atonement. Atonement means "making amends, blotting out the offence, and giving satisfaction for wrong done; thus reconciling to oneself the alienated other and restoring the disrupted relationship." The background for the

thought that Jesus' death was a sacrifice for sin is in the Old Testament, where an elaborate system of animal sacrifices is described. Particularly important was the blood of the animal, representing its very life, which in dramatic fashion was sprinkled around during the sacrifice ceremony. We see this aspect of sacrifice applied to Jesus' death in the middle of the three passages above, where Paul says that God has brought peace (reconciliation, at-one-ment) through the *blood* of Jesus' cross.

The question then is, how does a sacrifice make amends, make at-one-ment between estranged parties? Well, when wrongdoing interrupts a relationship, the natural desire is to try to make it up to the other person, often at cost to yourself, either by the expensive nature of the gift, or the serious effort that is required. This happens all the time, whether the 'making up gift' is a box of chocolates and a bunch of flowers, or something more substantial. But the fact is that we can never 'make it up to God', our best efforts are always tainted. Jesus' death, however, is the ultimate 'sacrifice' - he offered himself to God for us. He paid the supreme cost, which 'makes up' for the breach of the relationship, reconciling humanity and God.

Helpless victims rescued: At the same time, the cross also deals with the victim side of the equation. Recall from last week that the Bible pictures Sin/Evil as a cosmic power, the great enemy of God, personified in the Evil One, the Devil. And in the face of this terrible spiritual power, we humans are helpless victims, held in a slavery from which we cannot escape by ourselves. Hence our need for a Saviour, someone to rescue us.

Read John 12.31-33 and Colossians 2.13-15

In each passage, how is the death/resurrection of Jesus understood?

John 12.31 Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. 32 And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." 33 He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

Colossians 2.13 And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, 14 erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross. 15 He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it.

How does this action of Jesus solve the problem of sin and evil?

Here Jesus' death is described in terms of freeing us to be the people we were created to be, women and men who live their lives in freedom and joy, trusting and living for the Creator God who made us. And the way that this is done is by defeating a terrible power which holds us captive. On the cross, Jesus looks like he hangs in abject failure and defeat; but the reality is far different. In fact, the cross constitutes a great victory. On the cross, Jesus drives out the ruler of the world, the one to whom we are enslaved. Elsewhere in the New Testament, this truth is put in terms of evil being condemned in his body, and as Jesus rescuing us from the dominion of darkness.

How are we to understand this victory over Evil? One helpful way to come to grips with this idea is as a 'moral victory'. A moral victory is the kind of victory which sometimes looks like defeat, but where the real test is a test of character, and in particular whether a person will choose the easy way to apparent success, or the harder way, which is in fact real victory. It's like that with Jesus. At the cross, Jesus encountered the full brunt of the forces of evil. We see it in the way the events unfolded - falsely accused, unjustly tried before a hopelessly biased court, barbarically tortured and brutally executed. And that was just at the physical level. In fact, the spiritual trial, as Jesus took into himself the pain of abandonment by his friends, rejection by his enemies, even forsaken by God (remember his piercing cry on the cross - "my God, my God, why have you forsaken me") was far deeper than the physical agony, horrendous though that was.

And the victory is precisely that Jesus chose not to repay evil for evil, or abuse for abuse; on the contrary, he repaid with a blessing (again, remember Jesus prayer - "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do."). In other words, he did not enter into the pattern of the evil being perpetrated against him, fighting fire with fire, threatening when he suffered, lashing out and so sending the cycle of violence one further spiral down towards hell. That is what we see in so many of the long term armed conflicts in the world - Palestine, Northern Ireland, Bosnia, as each attempt to settle the score simply adds to the body count and the hatred. Instead, Jesus chose another path, the path of victory over Evil; he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. In this way, he was not overcome by evil, but overcame evil with good.

Rising to new life!

Of course, the cross is incomplete without the resurrection...

Read 1 Corinthians 15.17-22

1 Corinthians 15.17 If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. 18 Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. 19 If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. 20 But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. 21 For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; 22 for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.

How does Paul describe the place of the resurrection in the salvation that Jesus wins?

Jesus' resurrection is much more than simply the mopping up after the job has been done, it is an essential part of his achievement. The Apostle Paul puts it bluntly: "if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins" (1 Corinthians 15.17). In other words, the resurrection is not just fact, it is act.

The New Testament writers are entirely bold about what the resurrection achieves. It constitutes the enthronement of Jesus, his elevation to a position of leadership and authority that is parallel to God's own position. The word that is used to capture the significance of this position is 'Lord'. It carries a double meaning. Firstly, it is a word that drips with unlimited, rightful, loving authority. Jesus himself said after his resurrection that "all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matthew 28.18). In the first Christian sermon ever preached, right in front of the temple in Jerusalem which was the scene of so much trouble for Jesus, the Apostle Peter says that "this Jesus God raised up ... Therefore let the entire house of Israel know that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified". And the Apostle Paul trumpets the fact that by raising him from the dead, God has highly exalted Jesus "and gave him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2.9-11). And secondly, 'Lord' in fact carries with it even more than the idea of power. It is nothing less than the name of God himself. Importantly, in the last Bible reference, Paul is himself quoting from the Old Testament, from the book of Isaiah, where God says: "Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth. For I am God and there

is no other. By myself I have sworn, from my mouth has gone forth in righteousness a word that shall not return: 'To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear.' Only in the LORD, it shall be said of me, are righteousness and strength." In other words, by quoting these verses, the Apostle Paul is saying that what God announced in Isaiah has been fulfilled in Jesus – Jesus is the one who bears the name 'Lord', and to whom universal recognition is due – and, most importantly, this has happened by resurrection.

What the resurrection means is that Jesus is alive now, and not just alive, Lord. The power of life in him was indestructible, not even death could hold him down. And so on that third day, he crashed through death, not to return to a life still lived in the shadow of the grave, but life lived the other side of death, life without limit, life the way God had meant it to be lived. And that life has not ceased for Jesus. One of the things that Christians have said to each other in church services for centuries is: "Christ is risen. He is risen indeed", and the present tense of that phrase says it all! He still is risen; he is currently Lord, the one who has universal authority and who deserves universal loyalty.

Another way to put this is to see Jesus as the beginning of God's future. God's fixed and faithful purpose to make an end of all that destroys and defaces life has been implemented in one place already – in the person of Jesus himself. He is the 'first-fruits', the Apostle Paul says, that early fruit of the harvest which is both precious itself and which guarantees that the rest of the harvest is on its way. In the resurrection of Jesus, God's future has arrived, and even if we ourselves are still part of the rest of the harvest, yet to come to fruition, we need have no doubts, for it has already begun. Jesus has been raised the first member of a renewed humanity, and Lord of a renewed world.

So many of the movies we watch are in the 'courageous hero saves innocent people and defeats the bad guys' mould. One of the classic figures of this sort of movie has often been played by Clint Eastwood in Westerns. He rides into town, a stranger without a past, works heroically and even sacrificially to save the town from the guns of the oppressors, and then rides out, leaving gasping but thankful townsfolk in his wake. Jesus too is a Saviour, but a very different sort of Saviour, in at least 2 ways. On the one hand, he doesn't come to us as a stranger, but rather comes to his own Creation, as the one through whom the Father has created everyone and everything. And second, he doesn't just float in and float out; he enters the very heart and soul of our situation, and effects it directly and personally. Rather than simply riding off into the distance for us to get on with our lives as best we can, Jesus re-orders things around his ongoing and loving presence and Lordship.

Complete yet incomplete

Jesus spoke in such wonderfully extravagant terms: “Take courage – I have overcome the world”. Yes, that is true of course, and yet, in so many ways the world seems quite capable of carrying on without noticing. Not that nothing is different – as we’ve seen, in Jesus himself, and particularly his resurrected body, there is one part of the world that has been entirely renewed and restored, now utterly free even from the possibility of sin and death – “death no longer has dominion over him” (Romans 6.9). Over us, however, death still wins terrible victories, and inflicts deep scars. And so, from one perspective, being a Christian is characterised by waiting – waiting for the completion of what is already in principle (that is, in Jesus) completed – the fulfilment of God’s great purposes, the redemption of the world.

So what?

The relevance of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus to us is simply this: will we see Jesus as the solution to our problem, one who saves us from the greatest of all enemies, from death itself, the consequence of our sin.

We are offered solutions all the time. Solutions to our financial troubles, solutions to our weight problems, solutions to the destruction of the environment. After a while, we can find ourselves thinking that none of the solutions we are offered really work, they are all just offers too good to be refused, which is exactly why they should be refused!

Last session we saw that our deepest problem, far deeper than wallets, waistlines and whales, is sin, and its inevitable, terrible consequence, death. It’s a problem that is so terrifying, we spend a good portion of time doing our very best not to think about it, and instead focussing on the problems we see as more manageable. But what if there were a solution that was as big and powerful and deep as the problem itself? What if there was a Saviour who dealt with sin and death? Dealt with sin by bearing it, bearing it away from us, bearing it to hell? What if there was a Saviour who dealt with death, by entering into death, and then breathtakingly, breaking through it?

This then is the challenge of Jesus. He claims to be, and speaks and acts as if he is, a Saviour who does precisely these things. Of course, it might turn out to be yet another easy fix that doesn’t really fix anything – that’s why the evidence matters so much. And so, you’ll find in the Appendix section a careful laying out of the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus. No resurrection, no Saviour, just another failed messiah,

just another guru encouraging you to lift yourself up by your own bootstraps.

But if Jesus did rise – as the evidence overwhelmingly indicates – then everything changes. He really is the saviour. The only question left is – will you recognise him as your Saviour?

We can summarise the key ideas from the Bible on 'Jesus' like this:

*Out of his great love, God sent
his Son Jesus to defeat Evil and
renew the world...*

a. Lived

- thanking, obeying and trusting his Father

b. Died

- as a sacrifice for our involvement with Evil
- rescuing us from our enslavement to Evil

c. Raised

- as the first of a renewed humanity
- as Lord of a renewed world

4. Day of Judgment, Day of Joy

THE SCANDAL AND NECESSITY OF JUDGMENT

It's one of those scenes that remains in the memory, permanently etched into the mind. The rape and murder had been particularly brutal and pitiless. She was young, and there had been four of them, and she never stood a chance. The police investigation was surprisingly quick, but there was nothing surprising about the level of media attention that the trial received – it was saturation. The day that the verdict was delivered, and then the sentence read out, arrived, and that is the scene that lives on. Outside the courtroom were dozens, perhaps hundreds of people, angry, outraged, insistent. They were utterly determined that justice be done, that judgment be delivered. It was written all over their faces, as the nightly news cameras panned back and forth throughout the seething, protesting crowd. As the guilty verdict was announced, and then the defendants were led out to the waiting cars, there was a near riot. This was a group of people who wanted, who needed, judgment.

We have something of a love / hate relationship with the idea of judgment. On the one hand, there are times, like that crowd outside the court, when we recognise that judgment is the morally necessary and only satisfying outcome. We clamour for it. There are many proverbial sayings that speak of this need for justice – justice must be done, and be seen to be done; justice delayed is justice denied and so on. But on the other hand, perhaps the most hated claim made by Christians (echoing Jesus and the Apostles), is that God judges the living and the dead, and that some will fail that judgment. In movies and books, when God's judgment is portrayed it is almost always simply ridiculed. God is depicted as a cosmic dictator delighting to consign people, for completely trivial reasons, to an eternity of misery. The sense of outrage and indignation against this judgment is almost palpable. It is therefore critically important that as we discuss this aspect of the Christian faith, we do so carefully and accurately.

One of the most surprising things about this issue is that in the New Testament, the day of judgment is regarded, at least in part, as a day of great joy. It is something for which Christians wait longingly and pray fervently. In fact, the most well known prayer in the world, the Lord's Prayer, has at its heart the deep desire for the day of judgment – “your Kingdom come, your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven” is really a prayer that the day of judgment would arrive, and arrive soon! How can that be? Well, it all depends on the perspective. If what we have seen so far is true – that this is God's world, a good world, but a good world gone horribly wrong, infected and stained by sin and Evil through and through, but a world to which God remains utterly faithful and so has sent his own Son to restore and redeem – then praying for the day of judgment

makes perfect sense.

From a Christian point of view, then, there are two aspects to this understanding of the day of judgment as a day of joy: 1) First, it is only rightly understood when it is seen as the completion of God's great 'restoration project' in Jesus Christ; in other words, the judgment of God is not at the other end of the spectrum to salvation, it is the completion of that salvation. Judgment is not the thing from which we are saved; it is the means by which we are saved finally. And that alone would be a reason for joy. 2) But second, the day of judgment will be a day of vindication; that is, it will be the moment when Jesus is shown to have been right all along, the one who has spoken the truth and lived the truth, who reveals God to us, who died for us, and who was raised again. In other words, on that day Jesus will be seen by all to be Lord of heaven and earth. And so the day of judgment is also a day of vindication for those who have put their faith in him, and that in trusting Jesus, they have honoured God. It is for these reasons that it makes sense for Christians to be unashamedly positive about the judgment.

A JOB TO FINISH

In the last chapter, we discussed the great achievement accomplished by Jesus' life, death and resurrection. We saw that the heart of the Christian announcement is that in Jesus himself, and particularly in his resurrected body, there is now one part of the universe that has been entirely renewed and restored. Yet at the same time, it's perfectly apparent that there remains a job to finish. The world continues to be characterised by death and conflict; humanity for the most part continues to seek life independently from God.

Read Romans 8.18-25.

Rom. 8:18 I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. 19 For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; 20 for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope 21 that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. 22 We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; 23 and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. 24 For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? 25 But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

How does Paul describe the situation the world is in now?

What are creation and God's children waiting for? Why (i.e. what will be different)?

The comparison Paul makes is important; if God remained committed to the world despite its initial rebellion, and sent his Son to save it, much more surely now is God committed to renewing the world in its entirety (for this 'how much more' logic, see Romans 5.8–10), and so he will finish the work he has begun. As we saw last time, Jesus is spoken of in the New Testament as the first fruits of the harvest, that portion of redemption which indicates and guarantees what is yet to come. Although I suspect it sounds strange to people today (after all, 2000 years seems a lengthy wait), at the right time Jesus will return to finish what he has started!

CHRIST WILL COME AGAIN

Of course, this is a hard claim to swallow – a man who lived 2 millennia ago, will somehow return to us! All sorts of questions spring to mind: how will he travel, by space ship? And where is he now, what planet is he on? In fact, a cheeky sceptic might even ask, what planet are Christians on to believe this?

But again, if we have understood the plan and purpose of God correctly in our previous sessions, then it actually makes good sense. That is, if it really is true that Jesus is God's Son, whose mission it was all along to do God's great work; and if it really is true that God's great work is not just what we would call a small, 'private' spiritual thing (showing people how to live their lives, and perhaps helping them to get to 'heaven'), but is actually a huge 'public' cosmic thing (putting the world to rights, transforming and renewing it so that it becomes, as one Bible writer put it, a place where 'righteousness is at home'); and most importantly, if it really is true that Jesus rose from the dead, that he crashed through death and so constitutes in himself the way of life - if all these things are true, then it makes perfect sense to keep watch for Jesus, just like he said in so many of his parables, looking for his return.

Read Acts 1.10–11, Philippians 3.20–21 and 1 Thessalonians 4.15–16

In each passage, how is the return of Jesus described, and what will its impact be?

Acts 1.10 While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. 11 They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

Philippians 3.20 But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. 21 He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself.

1 Thessalonians 4.15 For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. 16 For the Lord himself, with a cry of command,

with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first.

When Jesus returns, four crucial things will take place:

A. Jesus will be revealed as Lord

As we have seen, the basic Christian conviction is that Jesus is Lord through resurrection. This is true right now, even though it is a Lordship that is hidden, and therefore ignored and opposed by many. It is for that reason that the Bible speaks of Christians affirming this Lordship of Jesus by faith, for the moment. However, there will come a day, when Jesus returns, when what is known by faith, we will know by sight when this fact, presently hidden, is revealed.

Read Colossians 3.1–4, 1 Peter 1.6–7, 13; 4.12–13 and 1 John 3.1–2

In each passage, what does it mean for Jesus to be revealed?

Col. 3.1 So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. 2 Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, 3 for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. 4 When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.

1 Peter 1.6 In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, 7 so that the genuineness of your faith — being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire — may be found to result in praise and glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed ... 13 Therefore prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed ... 4.12 Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. 13 But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed.

1 John 3.1–2 See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. 2 Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.

It is important that the New Testament speaks about the 'second coming' of Jesus as him being revealed. In doing so, it emphasises the fact that in one sense, Jesus' return is not to do a new

thing, but the completion of an old thing; or another way to put this would be to say that the return of Jesus makes public what is already true, but is only accepted by some. The really decisive thing about Jesus has already been accomplished – his death on the cross washing away our guilt and defeating those terrible enemies of humanity, sin and Evil and death; and his resurrection to new life. What’s left to happen is for this to be revealed publicly. Then, truly, every one will know the truth about Jesus and his mission for the world.

B. The general resurrection of all people

The second essential thing that will occur at the return of Jesus is the resurrection of all people. That is, that all people who have died will be raised from death.

Read John 5.25–29

John 5:25 “Very truly, I tell you, the hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. 26 For just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself; 27 and he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man. 28 Do not be astonished at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice 29 and will come out — those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.

What is the ‘hour that is coming, and is now here’? What is the hour that is coming, that is not yet here?

Who will be raised from the dead, and what happens after that?

It seems almost a universal human intuition that when we die, our lives are not simply extinguished like a spent fire-cracker, but that in some sense we continue to exist in a ‘life after death’. In fact, there are many people who report so called ‘near-death experiences’ who speak of something like this life after death. Of course, it is neither intuition nor the vague experiences of people who have come close to dying that form the basis of the belief that all people will be resurrected from death; rather, it is the fact that it has already started to happen – started, of course, with the resurrection of Jesus himself.

It is therefore from Jesus’ own resurrection that we take our clues as to what resurrection might mean for us. And the key is that when Jesus speaks of resurrection, both his own and ours, he has much more in mind than some shadowy ‘life after death’. One way to put it, in the words of British author Tom Wright, would be to say that resurrection refers to life after ‘life after death’! In other

words, although it's true that we continue to exist in some form as souls after we die, that is not the most important thing. The really big issue is that when Jesus returns, we will all be raised bodily, our souls and bodies re-united, just like Jesus was.

Now this turns out to be very important. It means that what Christians look forward to and hope for is much, much more than 'going to heaven when we die'. I suspect that is an idea that has more to do with Greek philosophy than Christian teaching. No, we hope not so much to go to heaven when we die, but to be resurrected from death when Jesus returns, resurrected to life again in the body, resurrected to enjoy God's world the way it was meant to be!

C. The judgment of all people

Resurrection for all people sounds good, and it is. But there is another important point to get clear - this resurrection of all is so that all people will appear before the judgment seat of Christ.

Read 2 Corinthians 5.9–10, Romans 2.6–11 and Romans 14 10–12

2 Corinthians 5.9 ... we make it our aim to please him. 10 For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil.

Romans 2.6 For he will repay according to each one's deeds: 7 to those who by patiently doing good seek for glory and honour and immortality, he will give eternal life; 8 while for those who are self-seeking and who obey not the truth but wickedness, there will be wrath and fury. 9 There will be anguish and distress for everyone who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, 10 but glory and honour and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. 11 For God shows no partiality.

Romans 14.10 Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. 11 For it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God." 12 So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

Who is judged and who judges?

What is the basis of the judgment? (PS. Another way to think about this would be to ask how Jesus describes what 'doing good' means, for example in his explanation of the great commandment?)

Judgment is the third crucial thing that will happen when Jesus returns. Of course, the most important thing about judgment is that it be fair and just. That's why the Bible repeatedly emphasises 3 things about this judgment.

First, the doer of this judgment is fair and just. The Bible is clear that the one who does the judging is someone who is entirely qualified to do so – Jesus. It is, as the Apostle Paul puts it, before his judgment seat that we must appear. And of all people, Jesus is the one who has the wisdom and credibility to judge rightly. He knows when to be strict and when to be lenient, he knows how to show mercy and how to be fierce in the face of evil. And he has been through it all himself – he himself has been judged, badly and unfairly, and suffered the dreadful consequences of a miscarriage of justice. So we can be confident that he will judge justly.

Second, the extent of this judgment is fair and just: no one is exempt from judgment. All people are examined, and there are no favourites, no partiality is shown, no back doors into the presence of God. Jesus is not corrupt, as if he favours his friends!

Finally, the basis of this judgment is fair and just: it is on the basis of “what has been done in the body, whether good or evil” (2 Corinthians 5.10). In other words, what is judged is the way that we have lived our lives. This is not in any way a contradiction of the central Christian teaching we looked at last session, that we are saved through Jesus (and in particular, his death and resurrection), and not by our own moral goodness. The Bible calls this free salvation which God gives us in his Son, ‘grace’. And the point is that the salvation which is by grace will always show itself in a pattern of life that is pleasing to the Lord Jesus. That's what it is to be a Christian – to be saved by the Lord Jesus and so to live your life for the Lord Jesus. It is the reality of this relationship of obedient trust that is the subject of the judgment. There is an important implication of this – it entirely excludes the possibility of what might be called the ‘unchanged Christian’, someone who abuses the grace and mercy of God, sinning to their heart's content and getting away with it! Jesus told a story about people like that, who come to him on the day of judgment and speak of their extensive religious experience, and what they hear said to them is ‘I never knew you’, precisely because only the one who does the will of the Father in heaven will enter the kingdom of heaven – in other words, they too will be judged!

For those, then, who have honoured God in their lives, who have thanked him for the benefits they have received at his hands, who have sought to live aligned with him in thankful obedience and trust, and who have sought to love God and to love their neighbours as themselves, they will receive “commendation from God” (1 Corinthians 4.5) and be welcomed into the life of the age to come. What we do in this life echoes into eternity! Sometimes people call this ‘heaven’, and in a sense this is right. Strictly speaking, heaven is the place where God is, and for those who are judged to have lived well, they will be with God and so ‘in heaven’. However, the problem with the phrase ‘in heaven’ is that it sounds like souls floating around singing hymns to harp music!

Whereas, as we've seen, it is as resurrected people that we are judged, and it is as resurrected people that we enjoy the life of the age to come. As we'll see in our next section, that life is far from 'floaty'!

On the other hand, those who have failed to honour God in their lives, who have persisted in turning from him, and who keep pretending they can live their lives asserting their independence from him in trespasses and sins, will be condemned in the judgment. We saw in the second chapter that this turning away from God inevitably involves a turning to something else, either oneself in pride, or some element of the created order in idolatry. And neither pride nor idolatry have any place in the kingdom of God, since they seek to reject and replace God the king. This is the terrible reality of hell. Importantly, it was Jesus who spoke more of hell than any other figure in the Bible. It may be that we don't like to hear about it, but that doesn't make it any less true. As writer Flannery O'Connor put it, Truth does not change according to our ability to stomach it. Jesus spoke in this way, like everything he did, because he loved us. After all, if you knew someone was in terrible danger and there is no danger more terrible than hell! wouldn't you do everything you could to warn them of that danger!? That's not scare tactics, it's love!

The Bible writers stretch the capacity of language to breaking point when they seek to describe hell. Three main images for it are used. On the one hand, hell is spoken of as a separation from God, and therefore from everything good that God provides, life and love and beauty. At the same time, hell is spoken of as a terrible, endless torment, an experience so terrible that you would do anything to avoid it - it was Jesus who used this idea most frequently. As well, hell is spoken about simply as death and destruction. How these all fit together is not clear; trying to describe something that has never been experienced never is! However, one thing that is clear, as Jesus put it, is 'what would it profit someone to gain the whole world' but to forfeit their life in hell?

One final thing - this judgment, and in particular the condemnation of those who have not lived their lives loving God and loving their neighbour, is all part of a much bigger picture - the final destruction of all that is Evil, and the final restoration of the world to the life and peace for which it was created.

D. World renewed and evil brought to nothing

The fourth vital thing that will happen when Jesus returns is that God's purposes for the whole world will finally be fulfilled. We saw towards the start of the chapter how the Apostle Paul described this great hope for relief from what he called the 'sufferings of this present time' - it's like labour pains. Now, describing childbirth is something best done only by those who have experienced it, and anything else is likely to be seen as rash words from someone who doesn't know what they're talking about! Nonetheless, the point that Paul is making is crystal clear. Some pain is terrible and meaningless, like the pain of a car accident. But some pain is terrible but not meaningless, having within it the hope of a magnificent outcome. Labour pains are like that, terrible in a way that can hardly be imagined by someone who hasn't gone through it, and yet at the same time, headed somewhere, directed towards an outcome which has great joy.

And Paul says, that's a bit like this world. Although the world is currently in the grip of destructive forces, subject to the decay and disintegration that we see all around us, that is not the final word. When Jesus returns, the world itself will be transformed, set free from its bondage, and will obtain the same glorious freedom that Christians also look forward to.

Quite what the nature of this transformation will be, we are not told. Imagine a world without earthquakes and tsunamis, droughts and floods, disease or cancer, need or scarcity, violence or hatred. And yet even as we start to let our imaginations go a little, we realise that this is primarily negative. As well as that, imagine a world that is full of peace, the genuine peace of mutual love and care; imagine a world where the most precious things we know now are the most common things then – this is the point of the Bible at one point describing how the streets will be paved with gold! Imagine a world where truth was normal and beauty was deep and substantial instead of shallow and airbrushed, as it is so often now.

In the end, of course, words fail us, and as we did when we were thinking about the resurrection of all people, we need to learn from the resurrection of Jesus. Again, it's important to remember the fact that Jesus was raised with a transformed physical body. There were some things that were recognisably the same – such as the marks in his hands and feet from his wounds; and yet at the same time, there was a remarkable change, so that he seemed far less bound by what we call the ordinary laws of nature – perhaps in the age to come, even they will be transformed as well! In one place, the Apostle Paul parallels this continuity/ discontinuity to a seed which is sown and the tree which results – the same and yet different, all at the same time (see 1 Corinthians 15.42-44 for Paul's use of this image).

The thing that makes all this possible is that evil itself will finally and utterly be destroyed and brought to nothing.

Read 1 Corinthians 15.20-28.

1Cor. 15:20 But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. 21 For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; 22 for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. 23 But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. 24 Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. 25 For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. 26 The last enemy to be destroyed is death. 27 For "God has put all things in subjection under his feet." But when it says, "All things are put in subjection," it is plain that this does not include the one who put all things in subjection under him. 28 When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to the one who put all things in subjection under him, so that God may be all in all.

What does Paul say will happen at 'the end'?

What end result will God achieve through these events?

In a sense, we've come full circle at this point in our study. The picture is stark: Jesus has been raised, and is therefore now the Lord, the one who reigns in the position of authority. But the job is not yet finished - there are still enemies, what the Apostle Paul calls 'rulers and authorities and powers'. In other words, the enemies that Paul has in mind are not people - people are those for whom Christ died to save - but spiritual enemies that oppress and corrupt. And the last enemy to be destroyed is death, that great enemy, the enemy which makes a mockery of all we hope and achieve. And so the day of judgment, 'the end', is the day when at last all these enemies, and especially the enemy which is death, are destroyed once and for all, and the whole of creation is set free. And when that happens, the only way to describe it is to say that God will be all in all. In other words, there will be no thing and no person who does not fully and entirely reflect the glory of God for which we were created; and there will be no place or aspect of creation that is not fully receptive to the loving presence and Lordship of God.

No wonder the day of judgment is a day of joy!

So WHAT?

I was reading recently about school system in the United States that had a program to help children keep up with their school work during stays in the city's hospitals. One day a teacher who was assigned to the program received a routine call asking her to visit a particular child. She took the child's name and room number and talked briefly with the child's regular class teacher. "We're studying nouns and adverbs in his class now," the regular teacher said, "and I'd be grateful if you could help him understand them so he doesn't fall too far behind."

The hospital program teacher went to see the boy that afternoon. No one had mentioned to her that the boy had been badly burned and was in great pain. Upset at the sight of the boy, she stammered as she told him, "I've been sent by your school to help you with nouns and adverbs. When she left she felt she hadn't accomplished much.

But the next day, a nurse asked her, "What did you do to that boy?" The teacher felt she must have done something wrong and began to apologize. "No, no," said the nurse. "You don't know what I mean. We've been worried about that little boy, but ever since yesterday, his whole attitude has changed. He's fighting back, responding to treatment. It's as though he's decided to live."

Two weeks later the boy explained that he had completely given up hope until the teacher arrived. Everything changed when he came to a simple realization. He expressed it this way: "They would-

n't send a teacher to work on nouns and adverbs with a dying boy, would they?"

Victor Frankle was a survivor of the Nazi death camp system, and later went on to become a world renowned psychologist and psychotherapist. It was his experience in the concentration camp that taught him about the power of hope. Those who survived were the ones who maintained hope, without it, they were lost. Here is how Frankle puts it:

The prisoner who had lost faith in the future - his future - was doomed. With his loss of belief in the future, he also lost his spiritual hold; he let himself decline and became subject to mental and physical decay. Usually this happened quite suddenly, in the form of a crisis, the symptoms of which were familiar to the experienced camp inmate. We all feared this moment - not for ourselves, which would have been pointless, but for our friends. Usually it began with the prisoner refusing one morning to get dressed and wash or to go out on the parade grounds. No entreaties, no blows, no threats had any effect. He just lay there, hardly moving. If this crisis was brought about by an illness, he refused to be taken to the sick-bay or to do anything to help himself. He simply gave up. There he remained, lying in his own excreta, and nothing bothered him any more.

Frankle concludes this in regard to the significance of hope for a healthy life:

It is a peculiarity of man that he can only live by looking to the future. And this is his salvation in the most difficult moments of his existence, although he sometimes has to force his mind to the task. Any attempt to restore a man's inner strength in the camp had first to succeed in showing him some future goal. Nietzsche's words, "He who has a why to live for can bear with almost any how," are true. Whenever there was an opportunity for it, one had to give them a why - an aim - for their lives, in order to strengthen them to bear the terrible how of their existence. Woe to him who saw no more sense in his life, no aim, no purpose, and therefore no point in carrying on. He was soon lost. The typical reply with which such a man rejected all encouraging arguments was, "I have nothing to expect from life any more." What sort of answer can one give to that?

We live in a world that easily tends towards hopelessness. There is so much that is wrong and so little that seems able to be done about it. Sometimes this hopelessness takes the form of the extreme despair as described by Frankle. At other times, the response that is made is to create for ourselves little hopes, local hopes, hopes that don't demand too much from us, or promise too much for us. Mostly, these end up being a bit like the experience of eating Fairy Floss - sweet at the time, but fundamentally lacking substance!

The fact is, however, that hope is vital for life, it is part of our very constitution as human beings, embedded in the way we are made. One of the glories of the Bible is that we are given a new name for God after Jesus has completed his mission - he is named the God of hope. God is never called the 'God of law', or the 'God of demand'; but he is the God of hope.

The key question that the return of Jesus puts to us is this: will you see in him the hope for your life? Not hope in the sense that you might hope one day to travel the world, or win the lottery or

hit a hole in one. Rather, hope in the ultimate sense, hope for a rich, meaningful life, clear in your conscience because Jesus has stood in your place, bearing the consequences of your sin and offering the sacrifice that you ought. And at the same time, and just as importantly, hope even in the face of death, that great enemy that ruins everything.

The hope that is found in Jesus is powerful enough even for these things!

We might summarise the key ideas from the Bible on the 'Last Day' like this:

Jesus will return to complete God's renewing work...

a. Jesus

- revealed as Lord

b. World

- Evil brought to nothing
- renewed in life and peace

c. Humanity

- all raised and judged
- those who turned to God receive life
- those who asserted independence
from God receive condemnation

5. As long as it is called Today

RESPONDING TO THE GOSPEL OF GOD

Mostly, what we do with news, the kinds of things we see on TV and read in newspapers, is hear it, perhaps mentally file it, but mostly forget it. Rarely does it make a significant impact on our lives. It adds to our store of knowledge, but not much more. This is especially the case as the information age gathers more and more pace, with a virtually unlimited quantity of 'news' accessible at the press of a keystroke. One contemporary commentator has suggested that this information overload increasingly drives us to be LIAR's - that is, people who have a Low Information to Action Ratio! There is another term, 'compassion fatigue' that captures something of the burnout we can feel in light of the barrage of information.

And there is a danger that the 'good news', the Christian gospel, can have the same effect for us - that we understand the facts about Jesus, what he has done and will do, and his place in God's purposes for the world and humanity, and simply leave it at that. But is it possible to really grasp the Christian gospel, and be un-changed? The answer to that really lies in the nature of the Christian message itself, and especially how it differs from all other religions.

Most religions really fall into the category of a philosophy. That is, they are theories about the way life is, and therefore the way we should live if we want to live well. For the most part, they consist of collections of suggested timeless truths, such as 'desire' being the cause of suffering, or 'karma' as the way to understand the things that happen in our lives. Now, the fact that most religion is a form of philosophy is not a big deal in itself - it's just that the kinds of reasons that can be given in support of a particular philosophy are often hard to decide about one way or the other.

But it's at precisely this point that Christianity is so very different from all other religions. Christianity falls under the category, not of philosophy, but of history. That is, it is not primarily about ideas, which need to be argued about, but about events that need to be heard about. It is for this reason that Christianity has often been described as 'an historical religion'. The Christian message really is an announcement; that is, it reports what is best described as an achievement, something that has been done in a specific time and place, which was witnessed by specific people who announced the things that had happened.

You can see how different this is from a philosophy, or a set of timeless truths - philosophy and timeless truths don't in themselves do anything, they seek to educate people so that they will do something. There is no achievement internal to timeless truths, they leave the achievement for the

devotees of the truths or philosophy.

Christianity on the other hand, is all about the fact that God himself has done what we couldn't do. That in the realm of objective history, God entered our world in the person of his Son Jesus and did the job. And there is all the difference in the world between a religion which fundamentally says 'Do!', and Christianity which fundamentally says, 'Done!'

Read Acts 2.22-39.

Acts 2:22 “You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know — 23 this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. 24 But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power.

25 For David says concerning him, ‘I saw the Lord always before me, for he is at my right hand so that I will not be shaken; 26 therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced; moreover my flesh will live in hope. 27 For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One experience corruption. 28 You have made known to me the ways of life; you will make me full of gladness with your presence.’ 29 “Fellow Israelites, I may say to you confidently of our ancestor David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. 30 Since he was a prophet, he knew that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would put one of his descendants on his throne. 31 Foreseeing this, David spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, saying, ‘He was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh experience corruption.’ 32 This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses. 33 Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear. 34 For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says, ‘The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at my right hand, 35 until I make your enemies your footstool.” ’ 36 Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.”

37 Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, “Brothers, what should we do?”

What is the message that Peter announces?

Why do the people call out in v.37 ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’

This understanding of the Christian message as the announcement of an historical achievement rather than a suggestion of a philosophical truth is reflected in the term ‘gospel’. The word itself is so familiar, even in the media, that we can sometimes miss its significance. What’s interesting is that, although now it’s basically a religious word, its original meaning wasn’t specifically religious at all. In fact, in the Greek world where it was originally used, it was (as historian Tom Wright puts it), “a technical term for ‘news of victory’. More specifically, it referred to the announcement

of the birth or accession by an emperor ... the coming of a new ruler meant the promise of peace, a new start for the world."

When the Old Testament (originally written in Hebrew) was translated into Greek, there were some key sections which used this word for 'gospel'. One of the highlights of the Old Testament is the book of Isaiah, which points forward to a time when God will rescue his people from the terrible exile into which they had been taken, and restore things to the way they should be. So, for example, in Isaiah 40.9 we read:

'Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings [literally 'O Zion, gospeller']; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings [literally, 'O Jerusalem, gospeller'], lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!"'

and again in Isaiah 52.7:

'How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger [literally 'gospeller'] who announces peace, who brings good news [literally 'gospels'], who announces salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns."'

Often, the word for 'gospel' is translated as 'good news' (as in the Good News Bible), but that is really far too thin. What is clear from these passages is that it is not simply any old good news that is in view, but the quite specific good news that God is coming to rescue his people, to save them from, and defeat, their enemies, and establish his reign. In other words, the 'gospel' is about God's great victory.

And that is precisely what we have seen. The gospel is the announcement of the kingdom of God. Though there has been a catastrophic coup by Evil in God's good world, which we humans opened the door to and in which we have willingly participated, God has remained committed to his world. In the person of his Son Jesus who is Lord, he has and is defeating evil, and is establishing his reign, restoring life and peace to the world. And the point is, this gospel is a matter of history, the historical facts of the death and resurrection of Jesus, not of philosophy.

What implication does the announcement of these historical facts have for us today? Well, imagine you are in one of those countries that seems to regularly suffer the crisis of a military coup. One or more of the high ranking officers in the army has overthrown the proper authorities and established his own military government. It is a harsh dictatorship, and the effects of it are felt even by you and your family, in a village far away from where the action has taken place in the city. Many parts of your life are impacted – you pay more taxes, you have to comply with a strict curfew, you are required to swear loyalty to the new regime and so on. But then some 'good news' (you might even call it a 'gospel'!) comes through – the leaders of the coup have been overthrown, and rightful authority has been restored. What would your response be to that announcement? The only thing that makes sense to do, in light of the achievement by the rescuers, is to recognise what has happened, give thanks for it and act accordingly – that you have been freed, to rejoice that the coup has been put down, and so you no longer need to keep doing the things that were

imposed by the rebel government. Of course, you'd want to make sure of your facts, and be confident that you weren't just hearing the hopeful rumours of ill-informed gossip. But, what's clear is that there's no particular philosophy at stake here – once you had confirmed that it was true, you'd simply acknowledge the facts, rejoice in them, and re-order your life around the rightful government with proper loyalty. The crazy thing to do would be to stay acting as if nothing had changed, and keep sending your oppressive taxes away and obeying the no-longer enforced curfew!

Well, it's a bit like that with the gospel of Jesus Christ. A great rescue has taken place, the most important victory ever has been achieved, the victory over death. There is a new king in town, a new Lord, whose authority is rightful, full of goodness and justice. It is a rightful authority because it is the authority of the one who made us for life and peace, and who knows how life is best lived. The only thing that makes sense now is to recognise this fact and act accordingly, to re-order your life around this one who is Lord. In particular, this means obeying God's command to turn away from sin and Evil and turn to God, entrusting yourself to the saving authority of his Son Jesus and seeking mercy from him; and therefore receiving from him the gifts that he gives, the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit, holding on to the hope of eternal life.

Of course, the command to turn the orientation of your life around, and the gifts that Jesus gives are directly related to the kind of authority that Jesus has. Because the authority of Jesus is the authority of God, and not just of government, it impacts on literally every area and aspect of life. As Lord, Jesus has authority both to command obedience and to judge disobedience. As the Lord who has defeated sin and Evil, he has authority to forgive sins, including the authority to define what sin is in the first place. As the Lord who has triumphed over death in his resurrection, he has authority to give the gift of new life.

THE LORD COMMANDS

Most of us are not terribly good at receiving commands. Who hasn't had the experience of being at the mercy of an official or bureaucrat with far too much power in one specific sphere of influence, and finding yourself in a losing battle of wills? Or being under the authority of a boss who tells you what you know perfectly well how to do, and that in fact you could do better than the boss anyway? Or perhaps most commonly of all, we hate those commanding signs on the side of the road with a number inside a circle – they seem so ridiculously small, and we are sure that we can drive in complete safety at a far higher speed!?

I suspect that our squirming when we are commanded is at least partly because we are rarely convinced of the motives of those who issue commands to us. We wonder whether the command is more for their own good than for ours! But what if there was no doubt that the commands were good because the one who was doing the commanding was utterly good? What if we could be sure

that in obeying the commands, we were securing our lives, rather than giving life up? What if it was clear that obedience to the commands was the best thing that you could ever do?

Fill out the table by describing how the authors describe the right response to the reality that Jesus is Lord?

Passage	How should we respond?
<p>Acts 26.15–18</p> <p><u>Acts 26.15</u> [This is halfway through a speech that the Apostle Paul is making, describing his encounter with the resurrected Jesus] I asked, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ The Lord answered, ‘I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. <u>16</u> But get up and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you to serve and testify to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you. <u>17</u> I will rescue you from your people and from the Gentiles — to whom I am sending you <u>18</u> to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.’</p>	
<p>Philippians 2.9–11</p> <p><u>Phil. 2:9</u> Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, <u>10</u> so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, <u>11</u> and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.</p>	
<p>1 Thessalonians 1.8–10</p> <p><u>1 Thessalonians 1.8</u> For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it. <u>9</u> For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, <u>10</u> and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead — Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.</p>	

Because Jesus’ Lordship is a victory over Evil, as we have seen in previous chapters, his command is a command to turn from Evil.

This is hardly an unreasonable, or even undesirable thing! Evil has a terrible way of turning on it’s servants, trapping them in deeper and deeper mess. Selfishness simply breeds more and more

selfishness; a lie, once begun, often snowballs into more and more lies. To turn from these things, selfishness and deceit and hatefulness and violence, is actually the best thing that you can possibly do! In that people have aligned themselves with Evil, so they need to hear the Lord's command to repent from Evil; that is, to turn from this alignment, and realign themselves to the will and ways of God.

This turning away from sin and Evil is first and foremost a change of loyalty. Remember how we saw that the basic alternatives to God for the fundamental orientation of our lives are ourselves (called pride) or some other object or cause (called idolatry). To turn way from sin is to set our wills and the direction of our hearts no longer towards pride or idolatry. Of course, this is not just a once for all turning, a single act which is then unrelated to the rest of life. Although, it will be a decisive and defining point, this turning will include an ongoing commitment to put away from you those decisions, behaviours, patterns and habits which are consistent with and give expression to pride or idolatry, and instead to walk in the footsteps of Christ.

Further, as there is a command to 'turn away', so there is always a command to 'turn to', a turning to God in the name (that is the authority) of Jesus, and seek his mercy. In one sense it is a strange thing to command people to seek mercy - and yet, God's commands are always full of grace. We seek mercy because we have sinned, and mercy is our greatest need. But there is something more than just pragmatics at stake here - turning to God is not only the most needful thing, it is also the right thing. He is the source of our life; he is destiny of the universe; it is simply the right thing to have God at the center of life!

Here is the right place for understanding living a good, moral life. It's astonishing how often people misunderstand this. So often people say that because they have lived a good life, perhaps following the 10 commandments, therefore they are right with God. But this puts the cart before the horse, and result is a spiritual train wreck! This approach leads straight to pride ('I'm good enough for God, why wouldn't I be'); but even worse, it renders the death of Jesus nothing more than a tragic irrelevance, or at best some kind of foolish example. No, the order or events is all important - first we find mercy in Christ; then, as we have turned to Christ, so we live our lives walking in his footsteps.

In this way, the truth is full of grace. On the one hand, God reaches out to us even when we have no interest in him; he is faithful to his creation even when we are faithless to him. And his love and salvation are in no way a product of our goodness or worthiness, in fact quite the opposite. On the other hand, since being a Christian is all about taking oneself or any other project out of the center, and putting God in the center, that new fundamental loyalty will spill over into every aspect of life. No part will be untouched - our character as well as our decisions; our thoughts as well as our deeds and words; the way we use our time, money and possessions; the way we approach people who are kind to us, as well as the way we approach people who hurt us.

Look at how the Apostle Paul put it in one of his letters, to the Colossian Christians:

Col. 3:5 Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). 6 On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient. 7 These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life. 8 But now you must get rid of all such things – anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. 9 Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices 10 and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. 11 In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!

12 As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. 13 Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. 14 Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. 15 And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. 16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. 17 And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

This is a thrilling vision of what it is to be a turned-around person. God at the center, and self in the position of service, means that life is lived at its best and purest. Notice the commands to put off those things that are destructive of love – sexual immorality, and the thing which gives birth to it, lustful passion; but also anger, in both its physical and violent expressions, and its verbal and psychological expressions. And especially that thing which is most corrosive of love – slipperiness with the truth!

And at the same time, there is the command to put on those virtues and behaviours which are in harmony with the character of God – a basic gentleness and care in dealing with others; a willingness to get past the small things (forbearance) and the big things (forgiveness) that are done to us and which hurt us. To surround every aspect of life with love, because above all things God is love. But of course, this is never divorced from truth, since as love, God is also truth, and so the word of Christ, preserved from us in the Scriptures and the apostolic testimony, are to be the strong foundation for our lives in God. And in living this way, every moment is dignified, every conversation, every interaction, every thought and word and deed, can be done in the name of the Lord Jesus – that is, done in the way that he would do it, done to faithfully reflect the way he has dealt with us!

Another thing thing. It s very important to see that this life of obedience to the command of Christ is lived out in the context of the Christian community. And that means church.

Again, we need to be careful to get this right. Going to church services, simply turning up on a Sunday to participate in a public ritual, doesn t make a person a Christian. The Christian life is lived personally, in that each person needs to hear the call of the Lord Jesus to turn his or her life around, and respond for themselves; no one else can do that for them.

But personally does not mean privately. One of the primary images for God in the Bible is that of Father this is how Jesus taught his disciples to speak to God Our Father in heaven . The thing is, if we each have God as our heavenly Father, that makes us brothers and sisters to each other, siblings by adoption. And in a sense, that s the case whether we like it or not. To be brought into close and right relationship with God is to be brought into close and right relationship with other Christians, and that needs to find expression by committed involvement in a Christian community, that is, in a church. In other words, the Christian life is personal but not individualistic. But again, the order is important it s not that being part of a church makes you a Christian; rather, being a Christian means that you will be part of a church!

One final thing. This life of putting away that which is destructive of human fulfilment and community, and cultivating those virtues and habits which promote life and love is not to be inward looking. The Apostle Paul says in his letter to the churches of Galatia: So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith . In other words, although the Christian life is focussed on the church, it is not limited to the church. Here is the basis for the almost limitless works of social welfare, compassion and philanthropy that have characterised Christians throughout the ages.

This is the rich, full life of repentance – a decisive turning around, which results in an entire life turned around. But the loving Lordship of Jesus is even better than this, for just as the Lord commands, so he also gives.

The Lord gives

God s way with us is always to give. He has given us his only Son, the one in whom sin and death have been defeated. Even his command to turn from sin and turn towards him is a gift, since it is for our life and well being. But this is not the end of the gifts of God. Rather than issue instructions and simply leave us to see how we go, God adds to his gracious commands even the strength to obey them and the sure and confident hope that when Christ returns we will be perfected in a way that we only dimly imagine now.

What gifts are given to those who obey God’s command to turn from Evil and seek mercy in Jesus?

Passage	How should we respond?
<p>Acts 2.37–39</p> <p><u>Acts 2:37</u> Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, “Brothers, what should we do?” <u>38</u> Peter said to them, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. <u>39</u> For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.”</p>	
<p>Acts 5.29–32</p> <p><u>Acts 5:29</u> But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than any human authority. <u>30</u> The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. <u>31</u> God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. <u>32</u> And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.”</p>	
<p>Ephesians 1.3–13</p> <p><u>Eph. 1:3</u> Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, <u>4</u> just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. <u>5</u> He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, <u>6</u> to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. <u>7</u> In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace <u>8</u> that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight <u>9</u> he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, <u>10</u> as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. <u>11</u> In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, <u>12</u> so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. <u>13</u> In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit;</p>	

The second gift is like the first: the gift of the Holy Spirit, the very presence and power of God at work in our lives. God does not and will not simply abandon his re-created people to their own best efforts, but rather grants to those who believe the gift of his own power in their lives. Sometimes this takes very dramatic form. I have seen people leave their substance abuse, or their immoral relationship in a single moment, freed by the power of God. But more often, the work of the Spirit in the life of the Christian is much plainer, simply empowering the believer to keep cultivating that character and making those decisions which reflect the character and priorities of Jesus, in all the ordinary business of life. But the fact that it is undramatic ought not to trick us into thinking it is any less impressive. A life turned over to the consistent pattern of Christ is a miraculous thing. One remarkable way that the New Testament speaks about this is to draw a link between the power that God grants to his people to live for him, and the immeasurable greatness of God's power, and in particular the same power with which he raised Jesus from the dead. And of course, that makes sense, since it is nothing short of a raised-from-death life that God invites us into. In the First Days, God's good intention for humanity was to enjoy the world, living in thankful obedience and trust. Through the Holy Spirit, God empowers his people to live as he intended. It won't be a perfect correspondence to Christ; but it will be real.

These two gifts are for right here and right now; the third promise is for the future, and gives us hope here and now, especially when the awful reality of this present evil age presses itself upon us. That promise is that we ourselves will be raised from the dead, just as our Lord has been. We saw previously how the resurrected Jesus is referred to as the 'firstfruits', and the way that the fact that he has gone ahead is the guarantee that we will follow him in resurrection. It is one of those key moments of adult maturity to really grasp for the first time that I am mortal, and to face the reality of my own death. With this promise of Jesus, backed by his own resurrection experience, we can look death square in the eye, and know that connected to Jesus, death will not be the last word hanging over us. The last word, or rather the first word of what Jesus called eternal life, will be from Jesus, our Lord and Saviour – "well done, good and faithful servant!"

So what?

We have come on a long journey!

We have visited the heights of God's glorious intention for his creation, to be a place of life and peace. We have plumbed the depths of Evil, the rejection of God, and of human participation in it so that each one of us stands as both a guilty perpetrator as well as a helpless victim, above all things in need of a Saviour. We have exulted in the breadth of God's loving grace for his sin-stained world, and seen how Jesus is so much more than a teacher, an example, a guru – he is the Son of God, the crucified and risen One, the Saviour we so desperately need. We have seen the length of God's patience, that he fixedly intends to finish the job that he has begun, to put all things right and to establish the universe again under his loving and righteous rule. And in this chapter we have seen that the one thing that is impossible having seen all this is to be unchanged by it. The

only reasonable response is to do as Jesus instructed to repent, turn your life around so that Jesus is at the center, he is the one who fills your frame of reference, you march to the beat of his drum. And to believe, to entrust yourself, your future, your conscience, your values and your soul to him, to be led and guided by the Master, who knows all there is to know about life and death, from first hand and divine experience!

If the question is So what? , the answer is clear.

Will you become a Christian, pray to God the Father now and ask for the gifts he gives in his Son, Jesus?

We might summarise the key ideas from the Bible on the challenge of 'Today' like this:

Therefore, today is a day of hope...

a. Jesus

- as Lord, has authority to forgive and give new life

b. All commanded

- to turn from Evil
- to seek God's mercy in Jesus

c. God's gifts

- forgiveness for involvement with evil
- the Holy Spirit to strengthen you for a life of thankful obedience to Jesus as Lord
- a resurrection like Jesus' on the last day

Appendix 1. The Resurrection of Jesus

Why does it matter?

Admitting potential weaknesses in a discussion, especially when it is heated, is not generally regarded as a strong tactic; which is what makes it all the more interesting and important that the Apostle Paul could write to this the Christian church in Corinth, who were causing him all sorts of worries:

1 Cor 15.17 If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. 18 Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. 19 If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

Remarkably, Paul opens up the door and looks at the possibility that the Christian faith is just a big mistake, one that leaves Christians as the most pitiful creatures on the planet. What might make that the case? The Apostle's answer is, if Christ has not been raised! In other words, if Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified under Pontius Pilate, died and was buried, simply stayed dead like everyone else, then Christianity would become the biggest hoax ever perpetrated on the human race. The claim of Jesus to have delivered us from our sins would be in tatters, a cruel joke. And even worse, those who have put their eternal destiny in the hands of Jesus, hoping that from him they might receive eternal life, would instead be lost, merely rotting corpses in the ground, without life and without future.

It's worth reflecting on why that is the case. After all, wouldn't there still be religious value in the things that Jesus said and did, even if he was not raised from the dead? The answer to that question all depends on how we understand who Jesus was and what he saw his mission to be. If Jesus was primarily a teacher of moral and spiritual truths, then of course his teaching would live on regardless of his death, and certainly regardless of his resurrection. Or again, if Jesus primarily saw himself as an example for people of how to live the truly human life, worshipping God and serving humanity, then again, that example would continue to inspire people whether he was dead or alive.

But, it is altogether different if Jesus saw himself not merely a teacher or an example, but claimed to be the Saviour of the world, the one in and through whom God was redeeming the world, and saving it from the terrible powers of Evil and death. In that case, a dead Saviour is a failed Saviour, since it is hardly possible that he could save us from death if he himself was defeated by death! Of course, this is precisely how Jesus saw himself, everything he said and everything he did, in his life and most importantly in his death, drips with this conviction.

And what that means, then, is that everything hinges on the resurrection. The Apostle Paul was

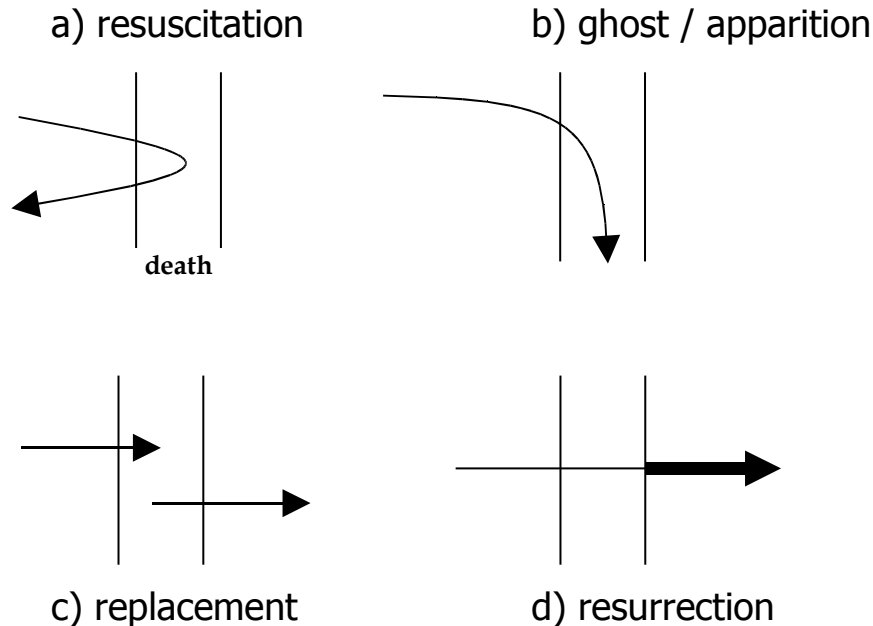
not overstating it when he said that if Jesus is still in the grave, if it were possible to make that particular archaeological find – the full tomb with the clean bones of Jesus – then Christianity would collapse like a sack of hot air. But the flip side is also true. If Jesus is nothing without the resurrection, then he is everything with the resurrection, not because resurrection is a neat party trick, but because it confirms his status as so much more than a good moral teacher or fine religious example. It provides the best reason in the world for seeing him as the Saviour he claimed to be; and if that’s true, then the only thing that makes sense is to declare, as one of his first disciples did upon seeing him for the first time after the resurrection, “My Lord and my God!”

How then are we to understand the resurrection, and what is the evidence that it really happened?

What is being claimed

The first thing to explore is exactly what we’re talking about when we read of Jesus being raised from the dead.

What happened to Jesus after he died? There are three inadequate ways to answer that question, represented by the first 3 diagrams below.



- a) On one hand, we can see what happened to Jesus as a resuscitation (**figure a**), what you might call ‘an ordinary’ resurrection, if there is such a thing! Actually, there were a number of people that Jesus raised from the dead like this; for example, his friend Lazarus, and the son of a widow who lived in the town of Nain. The thing about this kind of ‘ordinary resurrection’ was that in due course, those people died again, presumably of natural causes

in old age. In other words, this constitutes only a temporary victory over death, delaying what is otherwise inevitable. However, Jesus' resurrection was different. His resurrection was the defeat of death, not the delay of death – as the Apostle Paul put it in his letter to the Romans, “Death no longer has dominion over him”. No, the resuscitation view of Jesus' death leaves the fundamental structure of things unchanged, and Jesus simply buried somewhere else some years down the track.

- b) Another view that has been aired from time to time is that Jesus' resurrection was a purely spiritual event. In other words, when the Bible says that Jesus was raised from the dead, what it meant was that, from the dead, Jesus (or perhaps Jesus' memory or power) appeared to his disciples as an overwhelming presence, as some sort of ghost or apparition (**figure b**). On this view, of course, if the disciples had gone to the tomb, they would have found his body lying there just as when the opening to the tomb had been covered over.

John Spong, a well known figure in the United States, understands the resurrection in this way, as something happening that is more happening to the disciples than to Jesus, who remains fundamentally undisturbed – *“Simon saw the meaning of the crucifixion that morning as he had never before seen it, and Simon felt himself to be embraced even with his doubts, his fears, his denials in a way that he had never before been embraced. That was the dawn of Easter in human history. It would be fair to say that in that moment Simon felt resurrected. The clouds of his grief, confusion, and depression vanished from his mind, and in that moment he knew Jesus was part of the very essence of God, and at that moment Simon saw Jesus alive. (Resurrection: Myth or Reality, p. 255)*

However, this is simply a confusion of categories. The early disciples knew about these sorts of visions and experiences. Some time after Jesus was crucified, the Apostle Peter was arrested and jailed as part of a persecution by the king of Judea, Herod Agrippa. However, he escaped, and returned to his friends who were gathered at the house of Mary, the mother of Mark. In a comic scene, while they are praying for him inside, Peter is outside knocking at the door, which is answered by one of the maids of the house, Rhonda. When she recognises his voice, rather than opening the door, she runs inside and tells the group that Peter is at the door. They think she is crazy, and when she insists, they suggest that perhaps it is his angel; in other words, that Peter has been killed, and is appearing from the dead as a ghost or apparition. The point is that the one thing they did not, and would not, call such an event is a resurrection – a resurrection is simply a different thing from a disembodied spirit. NT Wright, one of the foremost historians of the resurrection of Jesus explains: *“Resurrection meant embodiment; ... “Resurrection” was not a term for “life after death” in general. It always meant re-embodiment. [...] However strong the disciple's sense may have been that Jesus had been vindicated, that they had been forgiven, or whatever, they still would not have said he was raised from the dead. [...] something remarkable happened to the body of Jesus. What's more, re-embodiment is exactly what we see described in Jesus post-resurrection encounters with his disciples (which we will look at in more details later) – Jesus eats food, the disciples touch Jesus, he walks and talks and makes sounds with a voice box and so on.*

In other words, resurrection simply cannot refer to a visit from the world of the dead of someone safe in the hands of God.

- c) Another suggestion for the meaning of the resurrection which is closer to the mark, but still inadequate, is that Jesus was raised bodily from the dead, but with an entirely new and different body that has no relation to his earthly body; in other words, he received a replacement body from God (**figure c**) such that the original tomb is still full of the bones of Jesus. However, there are two problems with this. The first is that the consistent, repeatedly evidenced fact is that the tomb was empty, so that the body in which Jesus emerged from the tomb was continuous with the body that went into it. Second, and more deeply, if Jesus emerged from the tomb with an entirely new body, the implication is that the future God has for his world is to discard it and replace it with a new one, just as Jesus' earthly body was discarded and replaced. In that case, ultimately Evil has won the victory, since it has driven an immovable wedge of sin between God and his world. However Jesus came not to destroy the world, but to save it!
- d) No, the Biblical claim of resurrection is that Jesus was raised from the dead in a transformed bodily manner, or what NT Wright has termed 'transphysical'. In other words, it is the same person that emerged from the tomb as went into the tomb, the same individual. And what's more, his body was not discarded, but rather transformed, redeemed from the decay and stench of death as the rest of the created order will be redeemed. Such a 'transphysical' understanding of the resurrection is the only view that does justice to the evidence, and in particular the consistent testimony of the eye witnesses that the tomb was in fact empty.

Having clarified what is meant by the claim of resurrection, what then is the historical evidence for such a claim?

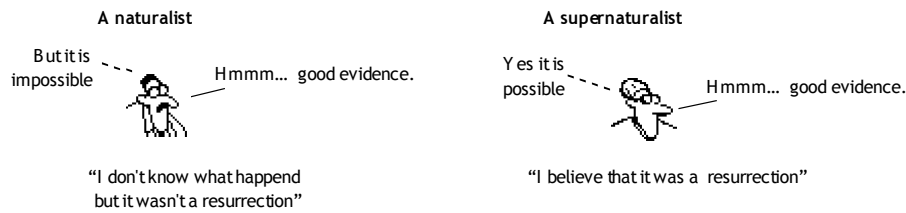
So, what's the evidence?

Before outlining the three strands of historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus, it's worth pausing and getting clear what can legitimately be asked of the evidence. As we will see, it is very strong, in fact compelling, but it is not, and cannot be what could be called 'scientific proof'. In the first place, that's not how history works anyway – science is based on repeated experiments which provide testable predictions, and although history repeats itself metaphorically, it can't be done in a laboratory! What's more, with something like the resurrection, a remarkable claim under any circumstances, the crucial issue will be the background beliefs and presuppositions a person brings to the evidence.

What I mean is this. If a person has a set of naturalist presuppositions – say, for example, that all events are explainable by science, that we live in a closed universe where there is no God and therefore there are no miracles – then such a person will look at the evidence, recognise that it is substantial, that the case made is a good one, but in the end, precisely because of those naturalist presuppositions that such a thing is impossible, will conclude that perhaps she doesn't know what happened, but one thing it can't be is a resurrection.

On the other hand, if a person brings to the evidence supernaturalist beliefs and presuppositions – say, for example, that there is a God who can intervene in history in such a way that miracles are possible – then such a person will look at the same evidence, with the same degree of critical inquiry, but because she believes that it is possible, may well conclude that yes, the evidence justifies the claim that Jesus rose from the dead. We

can see our two friends below!



Philosopher and historian William Lane Craig makes the point this way:

"I would argue that the hypothesis that God raised Jesus from the dead is not at all improbable. In fact, based on the evidence, it's the best explanation for what happened. What is improbable is the hypothesis that Jesus rose naturally from the dead. That, I would agree, is outlandish. Any hypothesis would be more probable than saying that the corpse of Jesus spontaneously came back to life. But the hypothesis that God raised Jesus from the dead doesn't contradict science or any known facts of experience. All it requires is the hypothesis that God exists, and I think there are good independent reasons for believing that he does. As long as the evidence of God is even possible, it's possible that he acted in history by raising Jesus from the dead."

The point is, the same evidence can be evaluated with the same historically responsible approach, and yet result in two different conclusions, since it is interpreted through the grid of different presuppositions. In a sense then, the first question to ask as we come to the evidence for the resurrection is: what are my presuppositions? What kind of evidence would it take to persuade me that Jesus rose from the dead? Am I really open to such a thing, though of course it would take a lot to convince me? Or have I already in effect made up my mind before judging the evidence, since 'I just know that these sorts of things can't happen'?

With the issue presuppositions on the table, then, what are the facts that need to be taken into account? There are three inter-related strands of evidence.

a) the empty tomb

That Jesus was crucified during the years (AD 26-36) that Pontius Pilate was 'procurator' (governor of a province of the Roman Empire) is one of the most secure facts of ancient history. What happened next?

Well, of course, the first thing to say is that he died. Although this seems too obvious to be worth pausing over, from time to time the suggestion has been made that Jesus didn't actually die. One version of this is the so-called 'swoon theory', which is put forward in the 1982 book by Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh and Henry Lincoln, *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* (incidentally, this book is suggested as the source book for much of Dan Brown's, *The Da Vinci Code*), and also by Barbara Thiering in her book *Jesus and the Riddle of the Dead Sea Scrolls*. According to this theory, Jesus only fainted (or swooned) on the cross, but the Roman guards who were in attendance mistook this for death, took his body from the cross, after which he was laid in the tomb. However, from there he recovered, freed himself from his grave clothes, removed the tombstone, overpowered the Roman guards, and walked away to live happily (or otherwise) ever after! The holes in this suggestion are so massive that it demonstrates sadly the lengths to which people will go to avoid the obvious. Not only is it fanciful to imagine that the expert Roman executioners, along with Jewish enemies baying for his blood, were so incompetent as to wrongly think Jesus had died; even more ludicrous

is the thought that after the ordeal of being scourged, beaten, and crucified, Jesus made a remarkable recovery and walked away from the tomb, after several days of no food or even water! As the authors of *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, acknowledged, “We could not – and still cannot – prove the accuracy of our conclusion.” That’s an understatement!

Another interesting example of the view that Jesus didn’t die is the Muslim proposal that he simply swapped with someone on his way to the cross. However, this is based simply on a religious conviction, and not on historical evidence at all – simply the idea that God could not allow one of his prophets to be crucified, and so it must not have happened! Of course, this is to put the cart before the horse! There is another way to read the evidence; namely, that precisely because Jesus did die in this way, what it means to be a prophet, or even the Son of God, needs to be radically re-interpreted in the light of the actual events of Jesus life and death.

The starting point then is that Jesus died on that Roman cross. The next element in the drama is that he was buried in a tomb owned by a man called Joseph, who was from a town called Arimathea. Although it was common to leave the corpses of crucified people to rot on the cross, this was not always the case, and there are 2 factors which explain why almost all scholars agree the Jesus’ burial is virtually certain. The first is the unanimous testimony of the writers of the Gospels that Joseph of Arimathea asked for the body of Jesus. Interestingly, it is acknowledged by the authors of the Gospels that Joseph was a member of the very Council that condemned Jesus, called the Sanhedrin, a kind of Jewish Supreme Court made up of 70 men. However, it’s also noted that Joseph was not present when that decision was made. The point is that it’s very unlikely such an account, whereby Jesus was given an honourable burial by someone presumed to be his enemy, would be made up. The fact is that the Sanhedrin were well-known public figures, and the risk of exposure from making up such a story would be too great. But there is a second piece of evidence, as well. In his first letter to the church in Corinth, the Apostle Paul quotes what scholars agree is an early Christian statement of faith, or creed; in describing it he uses a semi-technical term for it, as that which was ‘handed on’ to him, and which he in turn ‘handed on’ to the Christians in Corinth. Paul probably received this creed no later than AD 36, on his first visit to Jerusalem, in other words within 5 years of Jesus death. The creed itself is a 4 line summary of the events narrated in the gospels, and corresponds exactly:

1Cor. 15:3 For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received:
that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures,
4 and that he was buried,
and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures,
5 and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.

This is very early evidence indeed for the burial of Jesus, and for these two reasons (among others), the vast majority of scholars accept the historical reliability of Jesus’ burial. In the words of Cambridge academic, J.A.T. Robinson, “the honourable burial of Jesus is one of the earliest and best attested facts that we have about the historical Jesus.”

The next recorded piece of the puzzle is that the tomb in which Jesus was buried was visited by a small groups of women followers of Jesus early on the Sunday morning following his crucifixion, and they find that the tomb is empty. In itself, this is not so remarkable, and is capable of several explanations. (However, as we've seen, it is essential to the claim that Jesus rose from the dead, since by definition, 'resurrection' meant bodily resurrection, and a bodily resurrection would be impossible without an empty tomb!).

There are several reasons to accept the historical reliability of the account of the empty tomb. The first is that it is part of the very earliest Christian writing about Jesus, and not a later addition. Not only does Paul include burial and resurrection in his 4 line reporting of what was 'handed onto' him, that very early creed which necessarily implies an empty tomb; as well, the Gospel of Mark, which most scholars agree was the first of the gospels to be written, also includes the discovery of the empty tomb as part of a single continuous narrative with the crucifixion. In particular, there are a couple of factors that indicate that Mark (or the source from which he is quoting) is very early. One hint is that he never names the High Priest, but rather simply refers to him by title, assuming that he and his readers would know who he is referring to, much the same way as if I simply spoke the Prime Minister; the High priest at the time of Jesus, Caiaphas, held office from AD 18-37, which means that at the latest, Mark's account (or his source) dates to within a half-decade of the death of Jesus. As well, Mark records that the empty tomb was discovered on 'the first day of the week'. What's important about that is that very soon afterwards, the way the earliest church came to refer to the day of resurrection was 'the third day'. That Mark uses the older terminology of 'the first day of the week' confirms the very reporting of the tomb being empty - it simply is a not a later fabrication!

Second, the accounts of the empty tomb are straightforward and without legendary development. In this regard, it's interesting to contrast the accounts of the gospels with what are clearly much later versions, not by someone from Jesus' immediate group. In the so-called *Gospel of Peter*, written in the second century, the tomb is not only surrounded by Roman guards but also by all the Jewish Pharisees and elders, as well as a great multitude from all the surrounding countryside who have come to watch the resurrection. Suddenly, in the night there rings out a loud voice in heaven, and two men descend from heaven to the tomb. The stone over the door rolls back by itself, and they go into the tomb. Then three men come out of the tomb, two of them holding up the third man. The heads of the two men reach up into the clouds, but the head of the third man reaches up beyond the clouds. Then a cross comes out of the tomb, and a voice from heaven asks, "Have you preached to them that sleep?" And the cross answers, "Yes." In another forgery called the *Ascension of Isaiah*, Jesus comes out of the tomb sitting on the shoulders of the angels Michael and Gabriel! This is how legends look; they are coloured by theological and other developments. By contrast, the accounts in the gospels are a simple and straightforward report of what happened.

Third, the tomb was discovered by women. The significance of this is highlighted by the fact that

in 1st century Jewish society, women were not regarded as competent legal witnesses, and weren't permitted to testify in a court of law. In other words, it's very unlikely that if the disciples wanted to invent a story about the empty tomb, they would write the story and have women as the discoverers and principle legal witnesses.

And fourth, the earliest Jewish propaganda against the Christians presupposes the empty tomb. In a fascinating passage which gives insight into the political manoeuvring that went on, we see the earliest Christian attempt to refute Jewish propaganda against the Christian proclamation of the resurrection.

Matt. 28:11 While they were going, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests everything that had happened. 12 After the priests had assembled with the elders, they devised a plan to give a large sum of money to the soldiers, 13 telling them, "You must say, 'His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.' 14 If this comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble." 15 So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story is still told among the Jews to this day.

What's significant about this is that in response to the proclamation by the disciples that Jesus had been raised from the dead, the Jews don't say, 'these people are fools, the body is still where it was laid'. Rather, they try to bribe the soldiers into making the potentially life threatening admission that they were asleep and the disciples stole the body - life threatening since this kind of dereliction of duty was punishable by death! The point is, they don't deny the empty tomb, they acknowledge it and try to fabricate an alternative explanation!

It's for these reasons that most students of the period and of the New Testament hold to the historical accuracy of the biblical reports of the empty tomb.

In itself, however, an empty tomb doesn't mean that Jesus was raised from the dead. There are a number of potential explanations for an empty tomb, and many have been suggested. What's significant is that none are convincing.

So, for example, some have suggested an early conspiracy theory for the empty tomb, namely that Jesus' disciples stole the body and thereby faked the resurrection. As it turns out, no modern scholar would defend such a theory today, and for good reason. The fact is that most of the disciples later were executed for their faith in the resurrected Jesus, so whatever they were, they were sincere, not fraudsters. The only place this theory is even suggested now is at a popular, prejudiced level. Another suggestion can be equally easily dismissed, and that is that Jesus didn't really die, but that he only swooned, and after later recovering in the tomb, escaped to convince his disciples that he had been raised from the dead. Not only is this medically impossible, as discussed above, but it is hardly likely that Jesus appearing half dead and in dire need of medical attention would have evoked their worship of him as the risen Son of God! Even more desperate is the suggestion, first proposed in the early 20th century, that there was an empty tomb, but that it was the wrong tomb! In other words, this theory suggests that the women got lost, found an

empty tomb and wrongly reported that it was Jesus tomb, and that no one else bothered to verify what they said, neither the other disciples, nor even the enemies of Jesus! It may just be that a theory like that takes even more faith than believing that Jesus was raised from the dead!

The fact is that the empty tomb is very reliably attested from a serious historical perspective, and that the alternative explanations simply don't fit with the facts. But even that doesn't necessarily mean a resurrection had taken place – it could simply be a mystery and a tragedy! However, when added to the second line of argument, the case becomes compelling.

b) appearances

The early 'creed' that the Apostle Paul re-stated to the Christians in Corinth, and which we looked at in the last section, continues on as follows:

... ⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. ⁶ Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. ⁸ Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

This is a remarkable claim. Here is someone who was personally connected with the first disciples, and he reports that they actually saw Jesus alive; in fact, he says that he also saw Jesus after his death, alive and well. What are we to make of this report?

We have no account in the gospels of Jesus' appearance to Peter ('Cephas' is the Aramaic form of the name 'Peter', whose given name was Simon Peter), although Paul met with Peter in Jerusalem a few years after the crucifixion, and hence would have heard of this event from the horses mouth! In addition, Luke mentions the incident at the close of his gospel (Luke 24.34). On the other hand, the appearance to the twelve disciples is the best-attested resurrection appearance of Jesus, with independent accounts of it in Luke 24.36–42 and John 20.19–20. The thing that stands out about these accounts is the very physical nature of the interactions Jesus had with his disciples – he ate with them, and they touched him. This confirms two things – that Jesus was raised bodily, and that it was the same Jesus who had been crucified. In other words, this is neither a ghost nor a case of mistaken identity.

It is the third on the list of appearances that is most shocking, namely to "500 brothers and sisters at one time". Most likely these were believers in Jesus from the north, in Galilee, which might explain why there is no mention of this in the gospels, where the focus is on Jerusalem. What's particularly interesting is that Paul knew some of them personally. The significance of this large-group appearance is outlined by the great Cambridge University scholar, C.H. Dodd as follows: "There can hardly be any purpose in mentioning the fact that most of the 500 are still alive, unless Paul is saying in effect, 'The witnesses are there to be questioned.'" The point is that Paul is highly unlikely to have written this if the event had never taken place and there were no witnesses.

The interesting thing about the appearance to James (who was Jesus' brother) is that throughout Jesus' life, his brothers were quite hostile to his claim to be the Messiah - not entirely unpredictable, given how families operate! It is surprising, then, that James emerges in the early church, not only as a disciple of Jesus, but as a leader of the Christian movement in Jerusalem, and who was later stoned to death by the Jewish hierarchy. Of course it's not proof, but it is entirely consistent with such a remarkable transformation that Jesus had appeared to his brother, thus convincing James of his Messianic status.

Jesus is recorded appearing to his disciples a number of times, although it is not clear which of them is in view in the next element of the creed. Finally, Paul refers to his own experience of meeting Jesus, a remarkable encounter that entirely transformed his life, and led him from being a persecutor of the Christian church, to an Apostle of the Lord Jesus.

The point is clear: the record of numerous occasions on which Jesus appeared to various groups is embedded in the documents of early Christianity. The question is, what can explain these accounts? One answer that has been given is that the appearances didn't really happen at all, but rather they are legends. In other words, for some reason, there began some rumours about Jesus having risen from the dead, which were told and retold, and which gradually accumulated more and more detail, until they emerge in the form we find them in this creed. However, this is unlikely in the extreme. On the one hand, The fact that the early Christians were very careful about including in their records of Jesus only what was reliable, and (importantly) excluding what was unsubstantiated legend, along with the fact that the claims were obviously testable, since some of the claimed eye-witnesses were alive, should make us wary of attributing this to legend. Fatal to the theory, though is the fact that there was simply insufficient time for such legends to accumulate. Julius Muller puts the difficulty in this way:

Most decidedly must a considerable interval of time be required for such a complete transformation of a whole history by popular tradition, where the series of legends are formed in the same territory where the heroes actually lived and wrought. Here (i.e. in relation to Jesus) one cannot imagine how such a series of legends could arise in an historical age, obtain universal respect and supplant the historical recollection of the true character and connection of their heroes' lives in the mind of the community, if eye witnesses were still at hand, who could be questioned respecting the truth of the recorded marvels.

Professor A.N. Sherwin-White, the highly respected historian of Greek and Roman times, adds that for the gospels to be legends, the rate of accumulation of those legendary elements would have to be "unbelievable".

Another suggested explanation of the appearances is that they did happen, but that they were merely psychological in nature, a kind of extended mass hallucination on the part of the disciples, perhaps brought on by their extreme grief and loss. However, there are again such overwhelming reasons opposed to this explanation, that it looks like a clutching at straws. The records indicate

that Jesus did not just appear to one person but to many; not just once, but many times; not just in one place, but in many; not just to individuals but to groups; and not just to believers, but to unbelievers as well. Hallucinations just cannot plausibly account for these claims. What's more, the accounts of the appearances often include very physical events, eating together, touching and so on, which are unlikely to be the subject of hallucinations.

c) the transformation of the disciples

At the foot of the cross, the disciples were a defeated, pathetic bunch, barely coherent as a group at all. Within weeks of that event, they were taking Jerusalem by storm, with 3000 Jews converted to belief in Jesus, and within months, perhaps 10% of the entire city having become Christian. The historian always asks, 'why?' What could account for this utter transformation?

Those earliest disciples had a clear answer, one on which they staked their lives - Jesus had been raised from the dead, indeed had defeated death itself, and therefore was the living and loving Lord whose authority and saving power needed to be proclaimed to the all the earth. And the question is, why did they proclaim this?

It's here that the previous two points, regarding the empty tomb and the appearances, gain their significance. They constitute together what can be called necessary and sufficient conditions for exactly this belief on the part of the disciples. Both are necessary - an empty tomb without appearances is simply a sad mystery, but by no means does it indicate resurrection; appearances without an empty tomb are unusual, but again, could not and would not indicate resurrection. Both together, however, constitute the necessary and also the sufficient basis for the disciples' belief that Jesus had been raised from the dead.

As Cambridge University scholar, CFD Moule concludes:

If the coming into existence of the Nazarenes (i.e. the early Christians, called this because Jesus was from Nazareth), a phenomenon undeniably attested by the New Testament (i.e. the fact that we have such a thing as the New Testament indicates that this group did exist) rips a great hole in history, a hole the size and shape of the resurrection, what does the secular historian propose to stop it up with? ... the birth and rapid rise of the Christian church ... remain an unsolved enigma for any historian who refuses to take seriously the only explanation offered by the Church itself.

CONCLUSION

Some years ago, a friend of mine had become completely disillusioned about being a Christian. He felt used, burnt out, and fed up. He went away for a long weekend, determined to party long and hard and forget about the whole religion thing.

However, as he drove along, planning his days of fun without having to bother about Jesus, he realised he couldn't do it. Much to his own surprise, it occurred to him that whether or not he felt

good about being a Christian wasn't really the issue. The fact was that Jesus had been raised from the dead, and that changes things; in fact, that changes everything.

“Jesus rose from the dead, and that changes everything.” That's a tidy way to summarise what we've looked at and how it ties in with the all we've investigated about the Christian gospel. If God's great purpose in Jesus is to overthrow the terrible reign of Sin and Evil, and their inevitable consequence, death, then that puts the resurrection of Jesus right at the very core of Christianity. No resurrection, and there is no good news to tell, no gospel to announce, simply another victim for death to chalk up victory over. But if Jesus did rise from the dead, then that changes everything. Suddenly there is one in whom ultimate hope and trust can be placed, as the Saviour who has overcome death, and who has the authority to offer life, life to the full, life that can't be destroyed by death.

That makes it all the more important to do the historical work, and understand the basis for this claim of a man raised by God from the dead. But understanding is only the first step. Understanding without commitment, without connection to this one who has power over death, is just an interesting academic exercise. Ultimately, understanding needs to blossom into genuine personal trust.

P.S. DO THE ACCOUNTS FIT TOGETHER?

If you carefully read the accounts of the events surrounding Jesus' resurrection, you will notice that they differ in some of the details. Some have drawn the conclusion from this fact that the gospel records are contradictory, and therefore not to be trusted.

However, two things need to be said. The fact that these accounts differ in details is not at all surprising; in fact, it actually strengthens the case for seeing the gospels as accurate records of eye-witness accounts, rather than the cleaned up propaganda of people who were fabricating a story. As NT Wright puts “it the very discrepancies read like eyewitness reports of the same, confused swift and frightening events.”

But second, a discrepancy is a very different thing from a contradiction. Actually, it's quite hard to show that there is a contradiction in an historical account of an event. The different records need to be asserting actually incompatible things about the same people or activities at the same time and in the same place.

In fact, the gospel accounts of Jesus' resurrection, though exhibiting some relatively small discrepancies, are not contradictory. Below is a table and then a chronology to help you if you want to work through this issue in detail. They show first the ways in which the resurrection narratives differ from one another, and then how they can fit together in their differences

Table 1: The gospel accounts of the events around Jesus' resurrection

In this table, normal text is used to indicate those events where the gospel accounts agree, and italics are used to indicate where there are differences.

	Matthew 28	Mark 16	Luke 24	John 20–21
1.	Towards the dawn of the first day	When Sabbath was over	On the first day of the week	Early on the first day of the week
2.	Mary Magdalene, and the other Mary	Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and <i>Salome</i>	Mary Magdalene, <i>Joanna</i> , Mary the mother of James	Mary Magdalene (<i>alone</i>)
3.	<i>to see the tomb</i>	<i>to anoint Jesus</i>	<i>taking spices</i>	
4.	an earthquake and an angel rolled stone away	found the stone already rolled back	found the stone rolled away	found the stone removed
5.	<i>an angel</i>	<i>a young man</i>	<i>two men</i>	<i>two angels</i>
6.	<i>the guards fall down</i>			
7.		they enter the tomb	went in but no body	
8.	"He is not here for he has been raised, as he said"	"He has been raised he is not here."	"Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but risen"	
9.	"Go tell his disciples, he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him"	"Go tell his disciples <i>and Peter</i> that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him"		
10.	They left with fear <i>and great joy</i> <i>They ran to tell the disciples</i>	They went out and fled, for terror and <i>amazement</i> had seized them <i>They said nothing to anyone; they were afraid</i>	They returned from the tomb <i>They told all this to the eleven and all the rest who don't believe.</i>	<i>Mary runs to tell Peter and the other disciple</i>
11.	<i>Jesus meets the two women.</i>			
12.				<i>Peter and the beloved disciple enter the tomb and go home.</i>
13.				<i>Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene who tells the disciples.</i>
14.			<i>Jesus joins 2 disciples near Emmaus. Back in Jerusalem they hear of appearance to Peter.</i>	
15.			Jesus appears to the eleven in Jerusalem	Jesus appears to the eleven in Jerusalem
16.				<i>A week later Jesus appears again to the eleven in Jerusalem with Thomas</i>
17.				<i>Jesus appears by the Sea of Tiberius in Galilee.</i>

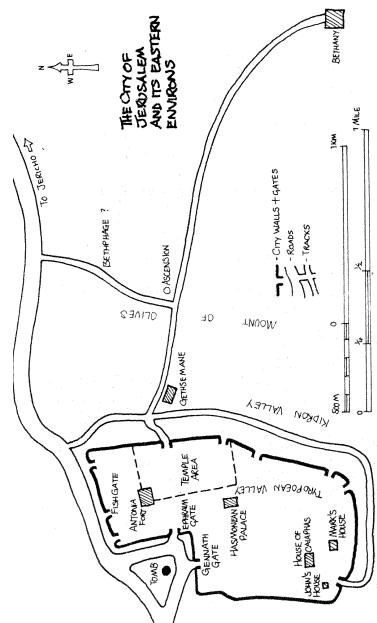
Adapted from G.E. Ladd *I believe in the Resurrection of Jesus* (1975) p.80–82

Putting it together

Below is a possible chronology for the events of the ‘weekend that shook the world’, including in italics the biblical book that refers to them!

A key assumption is that some people are at Bethany outside the city and that others are at John's house in Jerusalem.

1. On Sunday some women to the tomb very early. They see the grave open. *Mark/ Matthew /Luke /John*
 Mary Magdalene runs back to tell the Peter and John *John*
 The rest of the women go into the tomb and see the angels. They rush back to the disciples at John's house. *Mark / Matthew / Luke*
2. Meanwhile Peter and John, followed by Mary Magdalene go to the tomb, but do not meet the others. Peter and John look in and return home. Mary Magdalene remains behind. Jesus appears to her. She returns to John's house. *John*
3. Other women set out to tell the other disciples in Bethany and Jesus appears to them on the road. *Matthew*
4. Later that day Jesus appears to Cleopas and friend on the road to Emmaus. *Luke* Sometime that day Jesus appears to Peter, though the details are never given. *Luke / Paul.*
5. During that evening Jesus appears to the disciples gathered together. *Luke/John/Paul*
6. A week later Jesus appears to the "Twelve" again, this time with Thomas present. *John*
7. Then in the next week the disciples returned to Galilee. Jesus appears to them while they are fishing and eats breakfast with them. *John*
8. Sometime later Jesus appears to a special large gathering on a mountain in Galilee where he recommissions them. *Matthew*
9. Sometime in Galilee Jesus appears to his unbelieving brother James. *Paul*
10. Back in Jerusalem Jesus appears to "the twelve" in John's house, tells them to stay in Jerusalem until they are "clothed with power from on high." He leads them to the Mount of Olives *Luke* There Jesus ascends and is hidden by clouds. *Acts*



←= This way up!

Adapted from John Wenham, *Easter Enigma*

Appendix 2. The Existence of God

Included below is a transcript of the opening speech of a debate on the existence of God between Dr William Lane Craig and Dr Edwin Curley. Dr Craig also debated well known atheist radio personality Phillip Adams at Sydney University in 2002 along the same lines. Dr Craig is among the world's foremost defenders of the Christian faith at an academic level. His work is highly readable, and he has written extensively on a whole variety of topics related to the veracity of Christian claims. Much of his work (including the full transcript of the debate) is available online at <http://www.leaderu.com/offices/billcraig/menus/index.html>

The Craig-Curley Debate: The Existence of the Christian God

Dr. William Lane Craig

William Lane Craig is Research Professor of Philosophy at Talbot School of Theology in La Mirada, California. He lives in Atlanta, Georgia, with his wife Jan and their two teenage children Charity and John. At the age of sixteen as a junior in high school, he first heard the message of the Christian gospel and yielded his life to Christ. Dr. Craig pursued his undergraduate studies at Wheaton College (B.A. 1971) and graduate studies at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (M.A. 1974; M.A. 1975), the University of Birmingham (England) (Ph.D. 1977), and the University of Munich (Germany) (D.Theol. 1984). From 1980-86 he taught Philosophy of Religion at Trinity, during which time he and Jan started their family. In 1987 they moved to Brussels, Belgium, where Dr. Craig pursued research at the University of Louvain until 1994.

Dr. Craig's Opening Statement

1. Good Evening! I want to begin by thanking MC-Grads for inviting me to participate in tonight's debate. And I want to say what a privilege it is to be debating so eminent a scholar as Professor Curley. When I was a doctoral student writing my dissertation on the cosmological argument for God's existence, Dr. Curley's work on the famous philosopher Benedict de Spinoza was a valuable resource to me in trying to analyze Spinoza's own argument for God. So it's a genuine honor to be sharing the podium with Dr. Curley tonight.

2. Now in tonight's debate it seems that there are two basic questions that we need to ask ourselves: (I.) Are there any good reasons to think that God does not exist?

And

(II.): Are there good reasons to think that God does exist?

3. Now with respect to the first question, I'll leave it up to Dr. Curley to present the reasons why he thinks that God does not exist. Atheist philosophers have tried for centuries to disprove the existence of God. But no one has ever been able to come up with a convincing argument. So rather than attack straw men at this point, I'll just wait to hear Professor Curley's answer to the following question: What good reasons are there to think that God does not exist?

4. So let's move on, then, to that second question: Are there good reasons to think that God does exist? Tonight I'm going to present five reasons why I think that God exists. Whole books have been written on each one of these, so all I can present here is a brief sketch of each argument and then go into more detail as Dr. Curley responds to them. [1](#) These reasons are independent of one another, so that if even one of them is sound, it furnishes good grounds for believing that God exists. Taken together, they constitute a powerful cumulative case that God exists.

5. **1:** *God makes sense of the origin of the universe.* Have you ever asked yourself where the universe came from? Why everything exists instead of just nothing? Typically atheists have said that the universe is eternal, and that's all. But surely this doesn't make sense. Just think about it for a minute. If the universe never began to exist, then that means that the number of events in the past history of the universe is infinite. But mathematicians recognize that the idea of an actually infinite number of things leads to self-contradictions. For example, what is infinity minus infinity? Well, mathematically, you get self-contradictory answers. This shows that infinity is just an idea in your mind, not something that exists in reality. David Hilbert, perhaps the greatest mathematician of this century states, "The infinite is nowhere to be found in reality. It neither exists in nature nor provides a legitimate basis for rational thought. The role that remains for the infinite to play is solely that of an idea." [2](#)

But that entails that since past events are not just ideas, but are real, the number of past events must be finite. Therefore, the series of past events can't just go back forever. Rather the universe must have begun to exist.

6. This conclusion has been confirmed by remarkable discoveries in astronomy and astrophysics. The astrophysical evidence indicates that the universe began to exist in a great explosion called the "Big Bang" about 15 billion years ago. Physical space and time were created in that event, as well as all the matter and energy in the universe. Therefore, as Cambridge astronomer Fred Hoyle points out, the Big Bang Theory requires the creation of the universe from nothing. This is because, as you go back in time, you reach a point in time at which, in Hoyle's words, the universe was "shrunk down to nothing at all." [3](#) Thus, what the Big Bang model requires is that the universe began to exist and was created out of nothing.

7. Now this tends to be very awkward for the atheist. For as Anthony Kenny of Oxford University urges, "A proponent of the Big Bang theory, at least if he is an atheist, must believe that the universe came from nothing and by nothing." [4](#)

8. But surely that doesn't make sense! Out of nothing, nothing comes. So why does the universe exist instead of just nothing? Where did it come from? There must have been a cause which brought the universe into being. And from the very nature of the case, this cause must be an uncaused, changeless, timeless, and immaterial being which created the universe. It must be uncaused because there cannot be an infinite regress of causes. It must be timeless and therefore changeless—at least without the universe—because it created time. Because it also created space, it must transcend space as well and therefore be immaterial, not physical.

9. Moreover, I would argue, it must also be personal. For how else could a timeless cause give rise to a temporal effect like the universe? If the cause were an impersonal set of sufficient conditions, then the cause could never exist without the effect. If the sufficient conditions were timelessly present, then the effect would be timelessly present as well. The only way for the cause to be timeless but for the effect to begin in time is if the cause is a personal agent who freely chooses to create an effect in time without any prior determining conditions. And, thus, we are brought, not merely to the transcendent cause of the universe, but to its personal Creator.

10. Isn't it incredible that the Big Bang theory thus fits in with what the Christian theist has always believed: that in the beginning God created the universe? Now I put it to you, which do you think makes more sense: that the Christian theist is right or that the universe just popped into being, uncaused, out of nothing? I, at least, have no trouble assessing these alternatives.

11. **2:** *God makes sense of the complex order in the universe.* During the last 30 years, scientists have discovered that the existence of intelligent life depends upon a delicate and complex balance of initial conditions simply given in the Big Bang itself. We now know that life-prohibiting universes are vastly more probable than any life-permitting universe like ours. How much more probable?

12. Well, the answer is that the chances that the universe should be life-permitting are so infinitesimal as to be incomprehensible and incalculable. For example, Stephen Hawking has estimated that if the rate of the universe's expansion one second after the Big Bang had been smaller by even one part in a hundred thousand million million, the universe would have re-collapsed into a hot fireball.^{5} P.C.W. Davies has calculated that the odds against the initial conditions being suitable for star formation (without which planets could not exist) is one followed by a thousand billion billion zeroes, at least.^{6} [He also] estimates that a change in the strength of gravity or of the weak force by only one part in 10 raised to the 100th power would have prevented a life-permitting universe.^{7} There are around 50 such constants and quantities present in the Big Bang which must be fine-tuned in this way if the universe is to permit life. And it's not just each quantity which must be finely tuned; their ratios to each other must also be exquisitely finely tuned. So improbability is multiplied by improbability by improbability until our minds are reeling in incomprehensible numbers.

13. There is no physical reason why these constants and quantities should possess the values they do. The one-time agnostic physicist P.C. W. Davies comments, "Through my scientific work I have come to believe more and more strongly that the physical universe is put together with an ingenuity so astonishing that I cannot accept it merely as a brute fact."^{8} Similarly, Fred Hoyle remarks, "A common sense interpretation of the facts suggests that a super-intellect has monkeyed with physics."^{9} Robert Jastrow, the head of NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies, calls this the most powerful evidence for the existence of God ever to come out of science.^{10}

14. So, once again, the view that Christian theists have always held, that there is an intelligent Designer of the universe, seems to make much more sense than the atheistic interpretation that the universe, when it popped into being, uncaused, out of nothing, just happened to be, by chance, fine-tuned for intelligent life with an incomprehensible precision and delicacy.

15. **3:** *God makes sense of objective moral values in the world.* If God does not exist, then objective moral values do not exist. Many theists and atheists alike concur on this point. For example, the late J. L. Mackie of Oxford University, one of the most influential atheists of our time, admitted: "If...there are...objective values, they make the existence of a god more probable than it would have been without them. Thus, we have a defensible argument from morality to the existence of God."^{11} But in order to avoid God's existence, Mackie therefore denied that objective moral values exist. He wrote, "It is easy to explain this moral sense as a natural product of biological and social evolution."^{12}

16. Professor Michael Ruse, a philosopher of science at the University of Guelph, agrees. He explains:

Morality is a biological adaptation no less than are hands and feet and teeth. Considered as a rationally justifiable set of claims about an objective something, ethics is illusory. I appreciate that

when somebody says, 'Love thy neighbor as thyself,' they think they are referring above and beyond themselves. Nevertheless, such reference is truly without foundation. Morality is just an aid to survival and reproduction...and any deeper meaning is illusory. {13}

Friedrich Nietzsche, the great atheist of the last century who proclaimed the death of God, understood that the death of God meant the destruction of all meaning and value in life.

I think that Friedrich Nietzsche was right.

17. But we've got to be very careful here. The question here is *not*: Must we believe in God in order to live moral lives? I'm not claiming that we must. *Nor* is the question: can we recognize objective moral values without believing in God? I think we can.

18. Rather the question is: If God does not exist, do objective moral values exist? Like Mackie and Ruse, I just don't see any reason to think that in the absence of God, the morality evolved by *homo sapiens* is objective. After all, if there is no God, then what's so special about human beings? They're just accidental by-products of nature which have evolved relatively recently on an infinitesimal speck of dust lost somewhere in a hostile and mindless universe and which are doomed to perish individually and collectively in a relatively short time. On the atheistic view, some action, say, rape, may not be socially advantageous, and so in the course of human development has become taboo. But that does absolutely nothing to prove that rape is really wrong. On the atheistic view, there's nothing really *wrong* with your raping someone. Thus, without God there is no absolute right and wrong which imposes itself on our conscience.

19. But the problem is that objective moral values *do* exist, and deep down we all know it. There's no more reason to deny the objective reality of moral values than the objective reality of the physical world. Actions like rape, torture, and child abuse aren't just socially unacceptable behavior—they're moral abominations. Some things, at least, are really wrong. Similarly, love, equality, and self-sacrifice are really good. But if objective values cannot exist without God, and objective values do exist, then it follows logically and inescapably that God exists.

20. 4: *God makes sense of the historical facts concerning the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.* The historical person, Jesus of Nazareth, was a remarkable individual. New Testament critics have reached something of a consensus that the historical Jesus came on the scene with an unprecedented sense of divine authority, the authority to stand and speak in God's place. That's why the Jewish leadership instigated his crucifixion for the charge of blasphemy. He claimed that in himself the Kingdom of God had come, and as visible demonstrations of this fact, he carried out a ministry of miracle-working and exorcisms. But the supreme confirmation of his claim was his resurrection from the dead. If Jesus did rise from the dead, then it would seem that we have a divine miracle on our hands and, thus, evidence for the existence of God.

21. Now most people would think that the resurrection of Jesus is just something you believe in by faith or not. But, in fact, there are three established facts, recognized by the majority of New Testament historians today, which I believe support the resurrection of Jesus: the empty tomb; Jesus' post-mortem appearances; and the origin of the disciples' belief in his resurrection. Let me say a word about each one of these.

22. Fact # 1: *On the Sunday following his crucifixion, Jesus' tomb was found empty by a group of his women followers.* According to Jacob Kremer, an Austrian scholar who has specialized in the study of the resurrection, "By far most scholars hold firmly to the reliability of the Biblical statements about the empty tomb." {14} According to the New Testament critic, D.H. van Daalen, it is extremely difficult to object to the empty tomb on historical grounds; those who deny it do so on

the basis of theological or philosophical assumptions.

23. Fact # 2: *On separate occasions different individuals and groups saw appearances of Jesus alive after his death.* According to the prominent, skeptical German New Testament critic Gerd Ludemann, "It may be taken as historically certain that...the disciples had experiences after Jesus' death in which Jesus appeared to them as the risen Christ." [\[15\]](#) These appearances were witnessed not only by believers, but also by unbelievers, skeptics, and even enemies.

24. Fact # 3: *The original disciples suddenly came to believe in the resurrection of Jesus despite having every predisposition to the contrary.* Jews had no belief in a dying, much less a rising, Messiah, and Jewish beliefs about the afterlife precluded anyone's rising from the dead prior to the end of the world. Luke Johnson, a New Testament scholar at Emory University, muses, "Some sort of powerful, transformative experience is required to generate the sort of movement earliest Christianity was..." [\[16\]](#) N. T. Wright, an eminent British scholar, concludes, "That is why, as an historian, I cannot explain the rise of early Christianity unless Jesus rose again, leaving an empty tomb behind him." [\[17\]](#)

25. Therefore, it seems to me, the Christian is amply justified in believing that Jesus rose from the dead and was who he claimed to be. But that entails that God exists.

26 5: *God can be immediately known and experienced.* This isn't really an argument for God's existence; rather it's the claim that you can know God exists wholly apart from arguments simply by immediately experiencing Him. This was the way people in the Bible knew God, as Professor John Hick explains:

God was known to them as a dynamic will interacting with their own wills, a sheer given reality, as inescapably to be reckoned with as a destructive storm and life-giving sunshine...To them God was not...an idea adopted by the mind, but an experiential reality which gave significance to their lives. [\[18\]](#)

Now if this is so, then there's a danger that proofs for God could actually distract our attention from God Himself. If you're sincerely seeking God, then God will make His existence evident to you. The Bible promises, "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you" (James 4. 8). We mustn't so concentrate on the proofs that we fail to hear the inner voice of God speaking to our own heart. For those who listen, God becomes an immediate reality in their lives.

27. So, in conclusion, we've yet to see any arguments to show that God does not exist, and we *have* seen five reasons to think that God does exist. And, therefore, I think that theism is the more plausible world-view.

Endnotes

[\[1\]](#) For a popular presentation of these arguments and responses to typical objections, see my booklet "God, Are you There?" (Atlanta: RZIM, 1999).

[\[2\]](#) David Hilbert, "On the Infinite," in *Philosophy of Mathematics*, ed. with an Introduction by Paul Benacerraf and Hillary Putnam (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1964), pp. 139, 141.

[\[3\]](#) Fred Hoyle, *Astronomy and Cosmology* (San Francisco: W.H. Freeman, 1975), p. 658.

[\[4\]](#) Anthony Kenny, *The Five Ways: St. Thomas Aquinas' Proofs of God's Existence* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p. 66.

[\[5\]](#) Stephen W. Hawking, *A Brief History of Time* (New York: Bantam Books, 1988), p. 123.

[\[6\]](#) P. C. W. Davies, *Other Worlds* (London: Dent, 1980), pp. 160, 161, 168, 169.

[\[7\]](#) P. C. W. Davies, "The Anthropic Principle," in *Particle and Nuclear Physics* 10 (1983): 28.

[\[8\]](#) Paul Davies, *The Mind of God* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), p. 169.

[\[9\]](#) Fred Hoyle, "The Universe: Past and Present Reflections," *Engineering and Science* (November, 1981), p. 12.

[\[10\]](#) Robert Jastrow, "The Astronomer and God," in *The Intellectuals Speak Out About God*, ed. Roy Abraham Varghese (Chicago: Regenery Gateway, 1984), p. 22.

[\[11\]](#) L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), pp. 115, 116.

[\[12\]](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 117, 118.

[\[13\]](#) Michael Ruse, "Evolutionary Theory and Christian Ethics," in *The Darwinian Paradigm* (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 262, 269.

[\[14\]](#) Jacob Kremer, *Die Osterevangelien: Geschichten um Geschichte* (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1977), pp. 49, 50.

[\[15\]](#) Gerd Ludemann, *What Really Happened to Jesus?*, trans. John Bowden (Louisville, Kent.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), p. 8.

[\[16\]](#) Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1996), p. 136.

[\[17\]](#) N. T. Wright, "The New Unimproved Jesus," *Christianity Today* (September 13, 1993), p. 26.

[\[18\]](#) John Hick, Introduction, in *The Existence of God*, ed. with an Introduction by John Hick, Problems of Philosophy Series (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1964), pp. 13, 14.

Appendix 3. How reliable is the Bible?

THE BASIC APPROACH TO THE ISSUE

The most important thing in discussing issues to do with the Bible is to get the order right. The end point is coming to regard the Bible as the authoritative, reliable Word of God; a Christian does this because they have already come to put their trust in Jesus as their Lord, and part of their living under the Lordship of Jesus is trusting him with respect to the Scriptures. In other words, Christians believe the Bible as the Word of God, the supreme authority in all matters of faith and conduct, because we believe in Jesus, not the other way around.

But then the question comes: how do you know what Jesus said about the Bible? Isn't it only from the Bible that we have that sort of information, and therefore isn't the argument circular? It is a good question, and there is a good answer to it. The answer is based on the crucial distinction between regarding the Bible as historically reliable, and regarding the Bible as spiritually/theologically reliable. Regarding the Bible as historically reliable is a question of history, not of faith. The normal rules of history apply, as they do to any ancient document, and it is according to those rules that the claim of the New Testament Gospels to accurately preserve the words and deeds of Jesus must be tested. Once that question of history is decided, a person will then make their response to Jesus, and if that response is to believe his words and trust his deeds, then the package will include trusting the Bible..²

Accordingly, when launching into a discussion about the Bible, it is important to decide whether what is at stake is the religious or the historical reliability of the Bible. Any question about the **religious** status of the Bible will be answered from the Christian point of view in terms of Jesus ('Why do you believe the Bible is the Word of God?' 'Because Jesus endorsed it as such, and I trust that Jesus knows more about what God thinks and wants than I do – don't you?'). This keeps these sorts of questions about the Bible focused on the main issue, Jesus. On the other hand, with regard to the **historical** status of the Bible, it is crucial to recognise that any question on this issue needs to be addressed in historical terms. And the fact is that quite apart from commitments of faith, there are good reasons to believe the Bible, and especially the gospels as historically accurate, reliably bringing us the actual words and deeds of Jesus.

One of the problems in talking about the Bible is that so often people have little real first hand experience of the Bible as an adult. An important task, then, is to deal with the issue in concrete, rather than abstract and theoretical, terms. The first two sub-questions we are going to deal with do this.

² It is important to recognise that this gives us an approach to the Old Testament, as well as the New. That is, once we know what Jesus said (Gospels historically reliable) and we trust in Jesus (faith commitment), then we will accept his view of the Old Testament, which is that it was Holy Scripture, the Word of God. See Matthew 22.31–32, where Jesus quotes Exodus 3.6, and many more such examples. See "Jesus' view of the Old Testament", in John Wenham's book, *Christ and the Bible: What was Jesus' View of Scripture*, Eagle: Surrey, 1993.

Why were the New Testament documents produced anyway?

For some religions, their scriptures appeared literally from heaven, or were dictated directly by God. This is not the claim of the New Testament. The 27 documents that make up the New Testament are quite self consciously human works responding to human needs. They came about as follows.

Originally, the early Christian movement had no Scriptures specific to it; of course they regarded what Christians call the Old Testament as Scripture, as Jesus had done, but essentially their faith found its basis in the testimony of those who were eye witnesses of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, the original disciples or Apostles. They had been commissioned by Jesus, authorised to speak on his behalf, and were charged with the responsibility to take his message to all people. And this they did, slowly at first, but with increasing geographical spread. As they wandered across the Roman empire, they left behind groups of Christians and an oral tradition; stories, told and retold, of Jesus life and works.

As those first Christian communities grew, they would from time to time run into problems – persecution from outside, defection or betrayal from inside. And so the apostles would write to them, seeking to encourage or correct as appropriate. The first New Testament documents written, then, were the letters or epistles, quite a number by Paul, some by John, a couple by Peter and even an anonymous one. Early Christians made copies of these letters, and gave them to one another, and so they circulated around.

As the first generation of Christians grew old, and the apostles approached death, the need arose for an authoritative preservation of their testimony to Christ. Hence the Gospels were written, some by Apostles themselves (Matthew, John), other by their associates (Mark, Luke – see Luke 1.1–4 for his reasons for writing). Hence the gospels were written second.³

Which were included as binding for Christians, and why?

However, the 27 documents we have in our Bibles were not the only letters Christians wrote to each other, nor the only letters claiming spiritual authority. From the earliest years, the church had to decide which of those claims to accept, and which documents could be relied upon as truly representing Christ and his Apostolic testimony.

The process of finally deciding took many years, but three criteria were applied. First, was a document associated with Apostolic authorship? If there was no connection to an Apostle, a document may have been seen as helpful instruction, but of a totally different order of authority from Scrip-

³ See the chapter, “The Four Gospels” in Paul Barnett’s book, *Jesus and the Rise of Early Christianity: A History of New Testament Times*, InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove, 1999, pp. 376–399 for the interesting suggestion that the four gospels derive from the four mission centers of the early church: Jerusalem, led by James (Matthew’s gospel; see Acts 12.17, 15.13–21); Peter (Mark’s gospel); Paul (Luke’s gospel); and John (John’s gospel).

ture. Second, how widely had a document been accepted by the earliest Christian communities? Where there were disputes about the status of a document, such as one church regarding it is inauthentic, then it was less likely to be accepted. And third, did it conform in teaching to the earliest statement of Christian faith, known as the Rule of Faith, and the teaching of other documents already counted as Scripture? Since God would not contradict himself, it was clear that any document that held contrary teachings or instructions to clearly received Scripture could not be the Word of God.

The key point here is that the early Christians were by no means naïve. They had to fight bravely against many who would do them harm, and so were exceedingly careful and conservative in what they accepted as the authoritative word of God.

How confident can we be that they were historically reliable?

So Jesus’ authorised Apostles, most of whom who were eye-witnesses to his life, death and resurrection, recorded their testimony and wrote letters of instruction and encouragement to the first Christian communities, and these documents were carefully collected together in what we now call the New Testament. So far so good. The next question is an important one: ‘Well sure, the documents in the New Testament might have come from Apostles and so on, but what makes you think they are historically reliable? How do you know they didn’t just make up this stuff about Jesus?’

We can assess the historical veracity of the New Testament documents by using generally accepted “Criteria of Authenticity” that apply to any ancient text. There are four:

1. **External evidence:** although this is not detailed, it is supportive of the accuracy of the NT.⁴

S ource	Author and work	D ate	External evidence
Jewish	Josephus <i>Jewish Antiquities</i>	AD 92	Jesus was called “the Christ” He was the founder of the Christians He was crucified under Pontius Pilate There was a belief that he rose from the dead James was Jesus’ brother
	Rabbi Eliezer	AD 95	Christianity was a world wide movement by AD 70
Roman	Pliny <i>Letter to the Emperor Trajan</i>	AD 112	Jesus’ followers were called “Christians” These followers worship Jesus as “God”
	Tacitus <i>Annals of Imperial Rome</i>	AD 112	Jesus was executed in Judea during the period when: •Tiberius was emperor (AD 14–37) and •Pontius Pilate was governor (AD 26–36) The movement spread from Judea to Rome

⁴ Summarised from Paul Barnett, *Is the New Testament History?*, pp. 16–32.

Suetonius
Life of Claudius
Life of Nero

AD 120

Claudius expelled Jews from Rome after constant disturbances on account of “Chrestus” (AD 49)
Christians existed in Rome at the time of Nero and were persecuted by him (AD 66)

2. **Multiple independent sources:** the number of authors contributing to the NT compares favourably to literature about other great figures (eg. Alexander the Great). There are no less than nine or ten early authors, most writing independently of each other.
 - There are at least two independent eyewitnesses who wrote gospels: Mark and John.
 - Paul’s letters and Acts are two independent sources for cross checking the accounts of the leadership of the Jerusalem church and the historic spread of Christianity out of Judaism to the nations.
 - Paul appeals to his readers in 1 Corinthians 15 to check what he is saying with other surviving eyewitnesses.

3. **Appropriately synchronous contexts** (ie. the NT documents should have background detail that fits with the times and the locations that it is dealing with). In addition, the time lapse from Jesus life in Palestine until the literature about it was written (less than 60 years) was short when compared to other great figures: for the Roman emperor Tiberius 100–200 years, or for Alexander the Great 400 years.⁵
 - **Clear social contexts** that fit Jesus’ era that are not replicated later in the history of Christianity eg. agrarian and village backgrounds to events rather than urban backgrounds (later Christianity was primarily an urban phenomenon).
 - **Dissimilarity** of Jesus’ teaching from what later Christians believed eg. Jesus’ habit of associating with ‘sinners’.
 - Events that reflect genuine discussion going on in **Judaism** in the first century AD.
 - **Aramaic background** (Aramaic was the first language spoken by most Jews in Palestine).

4. **Embarrassment:** when Jesus makes a prophecy that is apparently unfulfilled, or where social norms are not followed eg. a woman, Mary Magdalene, was the first witness of the resurrection, and yet the testimony of woman was not legally admissible at the time – in other words, this is not something that you would make up.

In other words, though there are no knockdown arguments for the historical reliability of the New Testament documents, we are a long way from simply taking them ‘on faith’. When doing the ordinary work of an ancient historian evaluating the accuracy of different documents, the New Testament stacks up very well.

At the same time, there is an important rider. It is actually quite difficult to approach these sorts of questions entirely objectively. People are often deeply affected by their own presuppositions, and

⁵ Paul Barnett, *Is the New Testament History?*, pp. 40–41.

this is especially the case with respect to Jesus’ miracles. If a person comes to the issue with the presupposition that miracles don’t and can’t happen, and that we live in a closed universe with no God, then they will believe almost anything else rather than the records of the miracles in the Bible, no matter how good are the historical arguments. But the point is that that is an assumption, a faith commitment, as much as any other faith commitment. Having uncovered this faith commitment, the question becomes why hold this view, and on what basis.

What about the process of transmission – we don’t have the original monographs?

The final question runs along these lines: “It’s all well and good to tell me how the original New testament documents came about, and to argue that they are historically reliable; but we don’t have the originals, and what we do have are hopelessly corrupted and changed!”

Again, this is an important issue, and certainly not one that has been ignored by ancient historians. Almost any ancient historical documents exists in our day in multiple copies, and since there were no photocopiers back then, it was all done by hand, with the resulting possibility of scribal error. The discipline which works at recovering as closely as possible the original text is known as textual criticism. It is a whole academic field of study in its own right, with time tested rules and approaches.

There were a number of features of the early history of Christianity that have helped in accurate transmission:

- The rapid spread of Christianity in the Hellenic (Greek speaking) world meant that there was a short time period in which corruption could occur.
- The need for manuscripts for reading in church meant that many copies of documents were made.

The survival of many of these manuscripts means we have many copies, relatively close in time to the originals. This table compares the New Testament with other typical ancient texts that are regarded as historically reliable.⁶

Author or text	When written	Earliest extant copy	Time span (approx. years)	Number of ancient copies
Caesar	100–44 BC	AD 900	1000	10
Aristotle	384–322 BC	AD 100	400	49
Homer’s <i>Iliad</i>	900 BC	400 BC	500	643
NT portions	AD 50–100	AD 125	50	>5,000

One particularly impressive document, known as Codex Sinaiticus, is a *complete* fourth century (ie. AD 301–400) copy of the New Testament.

⁶ Summarized from Josh McDowell, *Evidence that demands a verdict*, Here’s Life Publishers Inc., 1979, p. 42.

There are a number of other factors also assist us in assessing the NT's reliability:

- The early spread into the Latin, Syriac and Coptic (Egyptian) speaking areas means that there are early translations from c. 150 AD giving us insight into early originals.

- From the end of the New Testament period (c. 95 AD) there is an unbroken and growing stream of Christian literature that quotes from the New Testament documents, thus establishing its prior existence.

All these factors mean, "today we are able scientifically to reconstruct, almost to perfection, the text of the scrolls of the New Testament as they were originally written."⁷

Conclusion – where this all gets you

In conclusion, it is worth asking the question, where does all this information get you?

In part, it means that you can feel confident. There really are good reasons for accepting the historical reliability of the gospels, and that means we have reliable access to the person of Jesus, who urges us to put our faith in him, and therefore receive the Bible not just as historically, but also as spiritually reliable.

There is a fairly widespread prejudice against the reliability of the Bible, with comments like, "The Bible is just full of contradictions!" As it turns out, often this kind of objection has no, or very little, basis, and can be fairly easily dealt with. Sometimes, it's even worth gently challenging this prejudice, even in oneself. If you think the Bible is full of contradictions, it's worth challenging yourself to find 3, to read (say) a gospel and see what appears contradictory. A first hand knowledge with the Bible, 'reading it for yourself', is vital.

The great 19th century Baptist pastor and leader, Charles Spurgeon was once challenged to defend the Bible. "Defend the Bible", he replied. "I'd rather defend a lion!" Spurgeon's instinct here is exactly right. The Word of God brings it's own conviction. When actually engaged with, and when illuminated by their ultimate Author, the Living and True God, the Scriptures are quite able to defend themselves, and serve unfailingly, as they claim, to make people "wise for salvation".

Further reading

There is a wealth of outstanding books and articles by renowned scholars on this subject now. If you would like to read further, the books referred to in the footnotes would be the best place to start.

⁷ Paul Barnett, *Is the New Testament History?*, Hodder and Stoughton, 1986, p. 165.