

# Glad Tidings

*of the Kingdom of God*

1594



***Bridging the Gap - page 3***

***Confident Faith - page 5***

***The 'Uninventable' Jesus - page 14***

[www.gladtidingsmagazine.org](http://www.gladtidingsmagazine.org)

# Glad Tidings

of the Kingdom of God

133<sup>rd</sup> Year

C17

1594



A monthly magazine published by the Christadelphians (brothers and sisters in Christ) and available throughout the world.

Its objectives are – to encourage the study of the Bible as God's inspired message to mankind; to call attention to the Divine offer of forgiveness of sins through Jesus Christ; and to warn men and women that soon Christ will return to Earth as judge and ruler of God's world-wide Kingdom.

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**Publisher:** The Glad Tidings Publishing Association  
*A registered charity – Number 248352*

Bible Talks, Study Classes, Sunday Schools and Youth Clubs are held regularly by Christadelphians worldwide. The address of your nearest group can be obtained either from one of the Glad Tidings Distributors listed above, or from one of the contact addresses listed on the back cover.

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## Acknowledgements

### Photographs:

Cover:  
Under Loughrigg, Cumbria, UK  
*Ken Anderton*

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*Commons*; pg. 6: *NASA*;

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*The version most used in this issue is the New King James Version (NKJV) and other versions are sometimes used.*

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# Bridging the Gap

There is a small town in England called Tadcaster, through which runs the river Wharfe. The river is not huge, but wide enough to need a road bridge to cross it. In fact, the bridge is believed to have been there for some 300 years, and the earliest bridge at this spot was probably built around 1200 AD. None of this is particularly remarkable in this part of the world, but it has given rise to an important local news story.

On 29<sup>th</sup> December 2015, the bridge was partially destroyed in a storm, such that it could not be used. It was more than 12 months before the repairs were completed and the bridge became usable once more. This caused lots of local protest, as traffic had to make a very long detour to get from one side of town to the other.

Local townsfolk, interviewed for news programmes, talked about the community being divided in half. People found life very difficult, for example if they lived on one side and worked on the other; or if they had family on the opposite side; or regularly needed to cross the river in the course of their daily activities.

Where people are divided, be it by a river, train track or ravine, bridges play a vital role in connecting them. This applies in a figurative way to the huge gap between God and mankind.

## The Great Gap

It can be said that God is everything that humans are not. He is the Creator of the universe, the source of life, immortal and invisible. He lives in heaven, and is described as inhabiting the light to which no human can approach.



*Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, to God Who alone is wise, be honour and glory forever and ever. ...Who alone has immortality, dwelling in unapproachable light, Whom no man has seen or can see, to Whom be honour and everlasting power (1 Timothy 1:17; 6:16).*

We read in Titus 1:2 that God cannot lie; and in James 1:13 that He cannot be tempted. He is unchanging (James 1:17; Malachi 3:6).

We know all too well that we are mortal, earthbound and prone to all sorts of temptation and personal failings, however hard we try. Of course, some try harder than others to live good, moral lives, but we all fail to some extent.

We can see this gap very clearly in Genesis chapter 3. Adam and Eve disobeyed God and this is what 'sin' is. Sin separates mankind from God, and is the cause of death (James 1:15). Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden and prevented from returning.

Ever since, men and women have continued to disobey God, whether in big things or small, and the gap remains.

## The 'Bridge'

Bridging the gap requires someone extremely special, a unique individual. Somebody who can have direct connection to God and enter His presence, whilst relating to and being accessible to men and women. The Lord Jesus Christ is this person.

Jesus was born to a human mother, Mary, and shared our nature. He was mortal just like us, and was tempted in just the way we are tempted. As he grew up, he suffered the difficulties of life, and despite his obedience to God, he died a horrible death, dying for us.

*For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but [Jesus] was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin (Hebrews 4:15).*

The key point: in all of this he did NOT sin or disobey God. In fact, he led a sinless life, always obedient to his Father's will. Because of this, God raised him from the dead and made him immortal. Not only that, but Jesus went to heaven afterwards and is there today, literally in the presence of God.

*For Christ has not entered the holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us (Hebrews 9:24).*

Jesus was Son of God and Son of Man; able to sin yet sinless; born mortal but made immortal; lived on earth but now in heaven. We can see why he is the unique person who can bridge the apparently unbridgeable gap between God and mankind. He is described as a priest or mediator, the one who can reconcile the two parties.



Yet it took a life of obedient, dedicated service and the death of this perfect man to bring this about. Think about the great love that God has for His creation, and that Jesus has for his fellow men and women. The 'bridge' was provided at great cost to them both, and is something for which we can be very grateful.

## Using the 'Bridge'

Like any bridge, this provision is only effective to us if we make use of it. We read that Christ suffered "*that he might bring us to God*" (1 Peter 3:18). It is through belief in his work, and baptism as evidence of that belief, that we can be brought near to God. We need to do this if we want Jesus to act as our connection to God.

The rewards are wonderful. We can have an active relationship with God, providing perspective and confidence in life today. Even more, it makes the future bright, with the prospect of a direct relationship with God, as foretold about His future kingdom:

*Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God (Revelation 21:3).*

**Editor**

# Confident Faith

We all have faith. Not everybody recognises this, but it's true. We can't exist without faith.

When you go out in the morning, you have faith that the bus will turn up, or the car will start. You have faith that the shops will be open. If you had no faith, you wouldn't bother getting out of bed.

Of course, your faith is based on facts – it's not blind faith. Suppose you want to go into town. You could sit down by the side of a random road and wait for the right bus to come along – that would be blind faith. You'd probably be waiting for a long time. Or you could look at the timetable to check where and when the bus goes, then wait at the bus stop at the right time – that's faith based on facts. And that way you'd be much more likely to get to town.

The point is, as you stand and wait at the bus stop you don't know for certain that the bus will turn up, but you have faith that it will, based on your knowledge of the facts.



The Christian life is also a life of faith. This is not blind faith, but confident faith based on knowledge and experience.



## Christian Faith

A friend once said to me, “I wish I had your faith!” This was a very sad thing to say – it implied that my faith was somehow out of reach for him. That's not true. I think what he really meant was, “I'd like to have your faith but I'm not prepared to give it a go.”

Faith in God is not difficult to achieve. The apostle Paul puts it succinctly:

*Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God (Romans 10:17).*

That's all there is to it! Read the Bible with an open mind and a teachable attitude. God's word will then do its job and it will instil faith. It may not happen overnight, but it will happen. Here are three ways in which it can do this:

### **1 – Fulfilled Prophecy**

*“You are My witnesses”, says the LORD, “and My servant whom I have chosen. That you may know and believe Me, and understand that I am He. Before me there was no God formed, nor shall there be after Me” (Isaiah 43:10).*

In this chapter God is talking to the people of Israel. He is saying, if you

want evidence of My existence just look at yourselves!

Whatever you think of the Jews, you cannot deny that they are a remarkable people with a remarkable history. The Bible is largely concerned with the story of the Jews, from its beginning with Abraham 4,000 years ago, right through to a time that's still future to us. It tells us about the blessings that were promised to them; their failings, faithlessness and folly; God's patience and love for them; their disasters and triumphs. We can marvel at the numerous prophecies that God gave concerning them, many of which have been fulfilled in staggering detail, while others are being fulfilled at the moment and some still remain to be fulfilled.



As you read these prophecies and see their fulfilment, it will require an enormous feat of cynicism to deny that you can see God Himself at work. The prophecies concerning the nation of Israel are just some of the amazing prophecies in the Bible which have been fulfilled, and are still being fulfilled.

## **2 – Superhuman Wisdom**

God gave the Jewish nation a law, which we know as the Law of Moses.

It's contained in the books of Exodus through to Deuteronomy. To modern readers, much of the Law of Moses might seem curious at first sight. However, it is increasingly recognised as being far ahead of its time, for example in terms of medical practice, public health and economic legislation. Moses told Israel:

*I have taught you statutes and judgments, just as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should act according to them... Be careful to observe them; for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes, and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people' (Deuteronomy 4:5-6).*

The Law of Moses is just one example of how the Bible contains knowledge about the world and how it works, that was well ahead of its time.

## **3 – Written That You Might Believe**

The Gospel of John has a lot to say about belief – which is another word for faith. John focuses on eight particular miracles of Jesus, which he calls 'signs'. These signs are each accompanied by teaching, and usually John takes pains to point out how the sign made people believe in Jesus. Then towards the end of the Gospel he addresses the reader:

*These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name (John 20:31).*

The miracles Jesus performed were compelling aids to faith, for those who witnessed them. And here we are,

2,000 years later, able to read for ourselves the things that Jesus did and taught, and make up our own minds. Elsewhere in this issue of *Glad Tidings* you can read about the reliability of the Gospel records.

## **Being Certain of Things You Can't See**

Hebrews chapter 11 is often called the 'faith chapter', because it is all about faith – what it is, why it is essential, and how to get it. The chapter starts by explaining this about faith:

*Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen (Hebrews 11:1).*

What exactly does that mean? Another translation puts it: *"Now faith means putting our full confidence in the things we hope for, it means being certain of things we cannot see."*

The chapter goes on to list great men and women of the Bible who lived by faith. Noah believed God when He said He was going to flood the earth, and so he built a massive boat on dry land (no doubt to the derision of his neighbours), and was saved when the Flood washed them away. Abraham left his comfortable life in the civilized city of Ur, in order to become a nomad in the dangerous outback of Canaan, because God made him promises of future blessings and he believed them. Moses turned his back on the life of a prince in Egypt, and instead led the slave-people of Israel to the Promised Land.

What marked out these special people was that they looked beyond the everyday, the things that preoccupied everyone else. They listened to

God, believed Him, and did extraordinary things. The attitude of faith is summed up by Paul:

*We do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal (2 Corinthians 4:18).*

Christians live by faith. They follow Jesus' instruction, "Seek first the Kingdom of God" (*Matthew 6:33*). The things they believe and the things they do might make little sense to people who don't share that faith – but it's always been that way!

## **Waiting for the Bus**

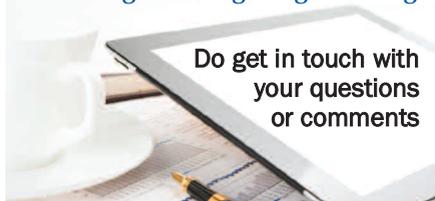
The Christian's faith is not blind faith; it's based on reason and gives great cause for excitement. The Bible provides ample reason for faith.

Imagine you're walking down the street and you see a group of people waiting at a bus stop. You can't see a bus, but that doesn't mean that it isn't coming. It means they've looked at the timetable and they know what they're waiting for. They are acting in faith.

Imagine that this particular group of people is very happy and excited. Wouldn't you stop to see what they are so excited about?

**Chris Parkin**

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# **The High Priest Who Died for Us**

In the first two instalments, we considered the nature and status of Jesus Christ, as well as how he is portrayed across the Old and New Testaments. In this section, we consider the principles around his death as a sacrifice, and his role as High Priest.

## **A Representative Sacrifice**

Jesus' death was representative, meaning that he did not die instead of us, as though acting as a substitute for sinners. Sinners, and that includes all of us, still die. The only hope of life after death is by resurrection when Christ returns to earth.

The idea of taking an innocent person's life so that the guilty can go free would be a difficult moral concept. Indeed, for the idea of substitution to be correct, Jesus should have remained dead for the price to be paid. His death alone would have sufficed for the salvation of mankind. His resurrection wouldn't have been necessary; nor would it have been morally valid. But he did not remain dead; he was raised to life. What's more, the Bible teaches that his resurrection is as important for our salvation as is his death.

Because Jesus Christ died for us, as our representative, the Bible stresses the extreme importance of his resurrection for our salvation and for God's plan to come to fruition. Peter taught this as he and the other followers of Jesus began their mission, shortly after his resurrection and ascension to heaven:

*[Jesus] whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that he should be held by it (Acts 2:24).*

Later, Peter wrote:

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead (1 Peter 1:3).*

Another writer, Paul, also emphasised this important truth:

*Jesus our Lord... was delivered up because of our offenses, and was raised because of our justification (Romans 4:24-25).*

*If, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by his life (Romans 5:10).* That is, by his resurrected life.

*If Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins! Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable. But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep (1 Corinthians 15:17-20).*

If Jesus died as a substitute for us, the Bible would have had no need to



stress the crucial importance of his resurrection. Yet we read clearly that if Christ had not been raised from the dead, even those who believed and trusted in him would have perished without hope.

His being raised from the dead is as essential for our salvation as was his death. Christ's resurrection gives us the hope of being raised from the dead at his second coming, following the pattern of his resurrection.

## **Our High Priest**

The background to our Lord Jesus Christ's high priesthood goes right back to Genesis and a king named Melchizedek, who was also a priest and who Abraham met in Jerusalem.

*Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was the priest of God Most High. And he blessed him and said: "Blessed be Abram of God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth; And blessed be God Most High, Who has delivered your enemies into your hand" (Genesis 14:18-20).*

This event is referred to in Psalm 110, which is quoted in the New Testament when explaining that Jesus is the Messiah. Indeed, Jesus himself refers to the Psalm in Matthew 22:44.

Hebrews chapters 5, 6 and 7 describe Jesus' role as our High Priest in some detail, using the words of the same Psalm:

*You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek (Hebrews 5:6).*

As a priest, he is our mediator at God's right hand in heaven. We have access in our prayers to God through him. This means that we do not need any other priest or mediator. This unequivocal statement was written in the context of prayer and intercession:

*For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus (1 Timothy 2:5).*

Through the work of Jesus as our High Priest, believers can approach God and be heard in prayer:

*Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which he consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, his flesh, and having a High Priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful (Hebrews 10:19-23).*

This is a remarkable provision, made by God and carried out by Jesus. It is open to all of us if we will accept it.

**Mark Sawyer**

# The Ten Commandments in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century - 6

## Taking What is Not Yours

### **The Seventh Commandment: You Shall Not Commit Adultery**

What exactly is adultery? It means having sexual relations with someone who is married to someone else. In ancient times this also included a man or woman who was engaged to be married, because that promise was as binding as the actual marriage. That is why Joseph – who was then only engaged to Mary – decided he should divorce her when he discovered she was expecting a baby he knew was not his. Once he understood that the baby was a miracle and would be the son of God, of course he changed his mind.

Adultery was always a very serious offence. 4,000 years ago, Abraham came to the country of the Philistines and pretended Sarah was his sister, not his wife. She was taken into the palace of the king of the Philistines, but God intervened so that nothing bad happened:

*God came to Abimelech in a dream by night, and said to him, “Indeed you are a dead man because of the woman whom you have taken, for she is a man’s wife” (Genesis 20:3).*

Notice here that the punishment for adultery was death. This was also the punishment under the Law of Moses:

*The man who commits adultery with another man’s wife, he who commits adultery with his neighbour’s wife, the adulterer and the adulteress, shall surely be put to death (Leviticus 20:10).*

God considers adultery as very serious. In the beginning, He introduced marriage as a union between a man and a woman that was so close



that they would become ‘one flesh’. The sexual act is an expression of that unity. To involve a third party breaks that precious bond. In Bible times (and often today) marriage began with a solemn vow between the man and the woman that they would remain together for life. To break this promise is very serious in God’s eyes. He always keeps His promises, and He expects us to keep ours.

### **Modern Morality**

What does Jesus say about adultery? As we have seen before, he argues

that we should go beyond the provisions of the Law of Moses.

*You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart (Matthew 5:27–8).*

In Jesus' view, to look at someone else's spouse with a desire to commit adultery is just as bad as the actual deed. We have to stop the unlawful desire in the first place. The Apostle Paul is equally strict on this subject. He says that people who regularly commit adultery will not enter the Kingdom of God (see 1 Corinthians 6:9–10).

We live in a world where adultery takes place all too often – they call it 'having an affair'. We see it in the media, in films, in novels and in plays, and in the lives of many ordinary people. But it is wrong. God hates it, and serial adulterers will be banned from His Kingdom.

The society of the First Century was no different, especially in big ports like Corinth where there were many sailors and prostitutes. Paul says some of the Corinthian Christians had been like that before they became Christians. But their old sins had been washed away in the water of baptism, and now they must lead a pure and holy life (1 Corinthians 6:11). The same applies today. If we are baptised, then all our old sins are forgiven, and from then on we must keep ourselves free from immorality.

What will happen if we commit adultery after we are baptised? Does that mean we are banned from the Kingdom? The answer is that the other sins in Paul's list in 1 Corinthians 6:11

will also ban us from the Kingdom if they represent our way of life. Drunkards, thieves and extortionists are no better and no worse than adulterers. God is merciful, so if we do sin in this way, but repent and ask forgiveness (and do not continue in that sin!) He will forgive us because of the sacrifice of Jesus.

## **The Eighth Commandment: You Shall Not Steal**

To steal is to take away something that belongs to someone else and to use it as yours. It may be money, as when a burglar breaks into your apartment and empties your purse. It may be possessions, as when you are stopped in the street and someone demands your mobile phone.



It can also be something else, such as time. If your employer pays you to work ten hours a day but when he is out of the office and you take a two-hour lunch break so that you can watch football, that is stealing.

You can steal from a person, or you can steal from an organisation. If you make a false statement when you are filling in the form for the Government's tax collector so that you pay less tax than you should, that is stealing. If you jump over the barrier at the railway station and get on the train without a

ticket, you are stealing from the railway company.

God hates stealing in any form. He insists that we respect the rights of ownership of other people. He is so insistent on this point that the Law of Moses says if you find someone else's property that they have obviously lost, you have a duty by law to keep it safe and to return it at the earliest opportunity (see Deuteronomy 22:1-3). Even if it was your enemy's property, you must give it back to him:

*If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey going astray, you shall surely bring it back to him again (Exodus 23:4).*

It is interesting to see how the Law of Moses punished a thief. In our society, a thief is usually fined or sent to prison. But in the Law, the principle was one of compensation.

*If a man steals an ox or a sheep, and slaughters it or sells it, he shall restore five oxen for an ox and four sheep for a sheep. If the thief is found breaking in, and he is struck so that he dies, there shall be no guilt for his bloodshed. If the sun has risen on him, there shall be guilt for his bloodshed. He should make full restitution; if he has nothing, then he shall be sold for his theft. If the theft is certainly found*



*alive in his hand, whether it is an ox or donkey or sheep, he shall restore double (Exodus 22:1-4).*

If someone stole a sheep and that sheep was still on the thief's premises he repaid two sheep. But if he had killed it or sold it to someone else, he had to repay four sheep. This was a good deterrent to stop people stealing sheep.

However, there was another possibility under the Law of Moses. If someone stole something from their neighbour, afterwards they might repent and wish they had not taken it. In this case, the thief could go to the priest and confess the sin.

Notice, it was a sin, because the thief had broken the Eighth Commandment. God, who sees everything, knew all about the theft, and God was offended about it. But of course, the neighbour was also upset, having lost the possession. So the thief had to put things right with the neighbour first.

*Then it shall be, because he has sinned and is guilty, that he shall restore what he has stolen, or the thing which he has extorted, or what was delivered to him for safekeeping, or the lost thing which he found, or all that about which he has sworn falsely. He shall restore its full value, add one-fifth more to it, and give it to whomever it belongs, on the day of his trespass offering (Leviticus 6:4-5).*

Then the thief could go to the Tabernacle and bring the priest an offering for his sin, to put things right with God:

*And he shall bring his trespass offering to the LORD, a ram without blemish from the flock, with your valuation, as a trespass offering, to the priest. So*

*the priest shall make atonement for him before the LORD, and he shall be forgiven for any one of these things that he may have done in which he trespasses (v6-7).*

Notice the difference between this case and the one above. If the thief was caught with the stolen animal in his possession and had no intention to return it, he had to pay the owner at least twice or four times the value of the animal. If he repented and apologised of his own accord, he only had to repay one fifth extra. Thus, the Law of Moses encouraged people to repent and put things right with each other and with God.

The Law of Moses shows us that we cannot hide anything from God. He sees all that we do, and He judges us. When we take an extra hour off work, He knows about it. When we steal a pencil from the stationery cupboard, He sees and remembers.

### ***Christians and Stealing***

What does the New Testament have to say about stealing? Once more, the Apostle Paul has some advice for us. In Ephesians 4:22-24 he says when we are baptised we become new men and women. It is like going into a shop and being given a new coat. We take off our old coat and put it in the bin, and we put on the new coat.

The old coat we take off is the 'Adam, or sinful, coat'. Adam was made in the likeness of God, but in character he failed to be like God. He was a sinner. We must put on the 'Jesus coat', for Jesus was like God in character as well as appearance – we see this in verse 24.

Stealing belongs to the sinful way of life. Stealing is wrong. It hurts other

people. It takes away something that was theirs, and now they cannot enjoy it any more. They may not know who it was that stole their possession, but they are left angry and miserable, and you have been the cause of that bad feeling. In contrast, says the Apostle, when we put on the new man, the one modelled on Jesus, we have to change from *hurting* people to *helping* them.



Imagine a skilled pickpocket who has heard about Jesus. Before, he never needed to go out to work, because he lived by stealing. Now this man has become a Christian. It is not enough for him to say 'I have stopped stealing from people'. Now, says the apostle, that former thief must go out to work and earn money to give to people in need – see verse 28. He does not just stop taking away from people, he has to give to them.

We live in a world where many people have no moral standards. They steal and cheat and commit fraud without hesitation. If we want to be followers of Jesus we must observe scrupulously the rules of property. We must return lost things we find. We must give to people, not take away from them.

**David M. Pearce**

## The Reliability of the Gospels - 10

# The 'Uninventable' Jesus

The Gospels depict Jesus in a way unlike any other historical figure or character of the day, either Jewish or from Roman-Greek society. He has some of the characteristics of a Jewish teacher, but there are major problems with seeing him in this way. There is nothing about him to suggest he is a Greek hero.

The Apostle Paul noted this:

*For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness (1 Corinthians 1:22-23).*

The point here is that if the pagan Greeks were inventing someone to be the Son of God, he would not have been crucified. Instead he would have been a hero in the Greek mould. Similarly, if the figure of a Messiah were to have been invented by a Jew, then that Messiah would not have been crucified.

### The Jewish Expectation

The Jewish idea of Messiah came from the Old Testament. Passages like Psalm 2 give a picture of the kind of person the Messiah would be:

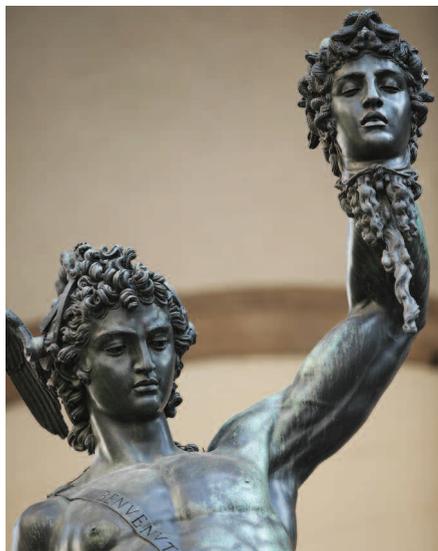
*The LORD has said to me, "You are My Son, today I have begotten you. Ask of Me, and I will give you the nations for your inheritance, and the ends of the earth for your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron; you shall dash them to pieces like a potter's vessel." (Psalm 2:7-9).*

In the first and early second centuries there were a number of people who claimed to be the Messiah and raised rebel armies to defeat the Romans. All of them failed and their followers were scattered. However, their existence indicates what Jews expected in a Messiah.

Had the Gospels been made up by a messianic Jew, they would have reflected these military ambitions. Certainly, the descriptions of the Jewish authorities (Scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees) would have been quite different.

### No Greek Hero

The alternative possibility is that the Gospels were invented by a Gentile (a non-Jew). However, we also know what the Greeks expected from a Son of God. In the second century, Lucian



of Samosata wrote a satire on Christianity, and an attack on Christianity was written by Celsus. In the early third century Philostratus wrote a book which attempted to show that Apollonius of Tyana was a more acceptable hero than Jesus Christ. These attacks on Christianity show what kind of hero the Greeks were expecting and would find palatable.

The Greek documents indicate a hero who differed from Jesus in a number of ways. The Greek messiah would have had the body of a Greek god. He would have defeated his enemies in battle, caused and stopped plagues, destroyed monsters and appeared in great splendour and glory. As Celsus explains in intricate detail, the hero would have met kings and worked with cities. He would not have been born to a carpenter's wife, in an obscure area on the fringe of the Roman Empire. His miracles would have been magnificent works of huge theatrical effect rather than healing sick people or feeding the hungry. He would have been a philosopher-hero like Apollonius or a demigod like Hercules.

Clearly Jesus of Nazareth, who walked among the poor, healed the sick and proclaimed the Kingdom of God to come would not match the expectations of those looking for a pagan hero or a Greek demigod.

## **Inspiring Followers**

It is almost impossible to imagine how a figure like Jesus could have inspired a community of followers who, after his death, spread across the world carrying his message. That is unless the claims of Jesus and the testimony of eye-witnesses are true and he genuinely rose from the dead.

Many Jews followed messianic figures like Theudas (see Acts 5:36) or the Egyptian leader (Acts 21:38). They rose up and went into the desert, or they mustered armies to fight the Romans, but they were defeated. The messianic figure died and the surviving followers dispersed. The followers then had two choices. Either they found another messianic pretender to follow or they gave up completely. They did not continue to follow their leader after he had died.

Jesus Christ is different. Jesus never raised an army, and had no intention to take power by force. At the time of his crucifixion his last remaining disciples "*forsook him and fled*" (Mark 14:50). During the time between the crucifixion and the resurrection, Jesus' disciples hid away. There was no intention to go out and spread the message of Jesus despite his death.

It was only after the resurrection that the followers of Jesus began to organise themselves, and only fifty days later, after Pentecost, that they began to proclaim the Gospel publicly. There was something quite different about Jesus which meant that his disciples followed a different course of action from those followers of other teachers and leaders.

Essentially the Jesus of the Bible could not and would not be invented. Nobody in the ancient world would have devised anyone like the Jesus we read about in the Gospels. He simply doesn't fit the ideas of the world of his time. The evidence shows that Jesus was real, and because he rose from the dead he still is real. It is up to us to consider this carefully and to investigate the claims of Jesus Christ.

**John Thorpe**

# Faithfulness

There is a story in the Jewish writings, the Talmud, about an engaged couple. The man had to go away, but wrote love letters to his fiancée, promising to return.

In his absence, friends of the beautiful young girl mocked her, taunting her that her man would never return. Nonetheless, despite many temptations, she kept reading the promises in his love letters and remained faithful right up to the day when he finally did return to her.

This Talmudic story equates the girl to the Jewish nation in captivity. They had God's Promises, His Law and His Prophets, which gave them comfort that God would not forsake them.

## Israel's Disobedience

However, the nation of Israel would never have gone into captivity if they had remained faithful to God. They had promised that they would follow God's commandments. Yet despite God pleading with them, they became corrupted by the idolatry of the nations near to them (see Jeremiah 7:23–26). The language of their prophets describing this rebellious behaviour is explicit and distasteful, comparing them to prostitutes.

*...on every high hill and under every green tree you lay down, playing the harlot (Jeremiah 2:20 & 3:1,6).*

*You trusted in your own beauty, played the harlot because of your fame, and poured out your harlotry on everyone passing by who would have it (Ezekiel 16:15).*

When God had first chosen the Jewish nation, they were desperate and without help. They had nothing, but God had offered them so very much. Although they were filthy, He was prepared to make them beautiful for Himself (Ezekiel 16:3–14). Faithfulness is critically important to God, and the language of flagrant prostitution shows His utter hatred of their subsequent waywardness.

## The Faithful Bride

In contrast, the Old Testament book called "The Song of Solomon" or "Song of Songs" uses the most endearing romantic language to describe a faithful couple, dedicated to each other.

The young girl yearns for her husband-to-be, and she prepares herself and her house for his arrival. All the time she is looking and listening for him, ignoring any taunts or mocking from the sceptics.

This is a parable of the loving spiritual relationship between Jesus Christ and his faithful followers, both male and female.

In the New Testament Jesus is several times portrayed as a bridegroom (e.g. Matthew 9:15; 25:1–13). The bride represents all true believers from creation to the return of Jesus. Jesus has gone away to heaven, but the Bible is full of promises that he will return to establish his kingdom on earth. This union of Jesus with immortalised believers – raised from the dead if they have died before his return (1 Corinthians 15:50–53) – is described in terms of a wedding (Matthew 22:1–14).

The love of Jesus has never been and can never be surpassed (John 15:13) – he died for true believers:

*Christ also loved the church and gave himself for her, that he might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that he might present her to himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish (Ephesians 5:25–27).*



Every single human being is blemished by sin, and we can never by our own efforts attain perfection, even less eternal life. But Jesus is able to present each faithful believer as ‘faultless’. His Father, the Lord God, is prepared to accept them as unblemished, because of Jesus’ sacrifice.

All Jesus asks is that believers remain dedicated, accepting and trying to obey what he said, while waiting, watching and longing for his return. Failure to do this leads to corruption of the Gospel, and prostitute imagery is again used in Revelation 17 to depict the false systems of belief. We need to appreciate that we all have the same wayward inclinations as Israel did – wanting to mix God’s ways with human ideas. Consequently, Christian believers have no grounds to consider themselves superior to Israel (Romans 11:19–24). There is no room for complacency.

## Our Response Now

In this life, some people are blessed with the love and devotion of a spouse. They know the intense yearning when waiting for the return of their loved one. This can be all-consuming, and they would never dream of looking at anyone else or jeopardising their relationship. Such unions do not last for ever – they belong to our mortal life (Matthew 22:30).

But the love of Jesus is eternal, he died for his ‘friends’ – those who try to do what he asked of them (John 15:14). Our devotion, loyalty and longing for him should be greater than in any human relationship. How can we even consider jeopardising this priceless and eternal spiritual relationship?

Like the girl in the Talmudic story we need to read the Bible promises, believe them completely and – loving him for all he has done – prepare for Jesus’ return. Absolutely nothing in this life matters as much as this does, and the joy of that great day of the Lord will surpass anything we can experience or even imagine now. The critical question is: are we behaving spiritually like a prostitute or like the faithful young girl?

**Anna Hart**



# Three Absolute Truths

“What is Truth?” Pontius Pilate demanded of Jesus Christ. Who knows how the course of history may have evolved, had Pilate learned then of God’s purpose with the earth and with man. The pivotal role that Jesus would play to further God’s purpose, his crucifixion and resurrection, was imminent. The merciless Roman governor would not learn the three great truths of Bible narrative: God’s absolute sovereignty, His purpose with the earth, and His purpose with mankind.

## Absolute Sovereignty

The first truth, God’s sovereignty, is difficult to grasp. Many people try to make God conform to what they perceive Him to be, attributing their own standards of fairness. But God does not conform to any personal image we may hold. On the contrary, God says through Paul:

*But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, “Why have you made me like this?” (Romans 9:20).*

This is God, Creator of light and darkness. Speaking through the prophet Isaiah, God describes the huge differences of thought and action between humankind and Himself:

*“My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,” says the LORD. “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8–9).*



## Purpose with the Earth

God’s purpose with the earth is detailed in the Bible narrative from Genesis to Revelation. He created the earth to last for ever, never to be destroyed by fire, flood, or nuclear bomb. After the Flood, every living being was destroyed, except for Noah and those on the ark. The earth did remain, however, with the promise of God by the rainbow sign that He would never again destroy all flesh.

*While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, winter and summer, and day and night shall not cease (Genesis 8:22).*

In Numbers 14:21, God declared that all the earth would be filled with the glory of the Lord. God created the earth, He established it; He did not create it in vain but formed it to be inhabited (Isaiah 45:18).

From a human point of view, earth’s life is finite, and the world can end with a whimper or become a burned out cinder in space. But God has promised something better.

Mankind cannot solve the world’s problems. It is God who will rescue His creation. He has promised to make

everything new in a kingdom where there is peace in human society and in the natural world, and the earth is full of the knowledge of God (see Isaiah 11:1–9). With the dawning of the Kingdom age, we read that weapons will be converted to farming tools, and war will cease for ever. A few lines describe this new world order:

*For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; and the former shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I create... The voice of weeping shall no longer be heard in her, nor the voice of crying... And My elect shall long enjoy the work of their hands... For they shall be the descendants of the blessed of the LORD... before they call, I will answer; and while they are still speaking, I will hear... They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain (Isaiah 65:17–25).*

## **Purpose with Mankind**

The third truth, God's purpose with men and women, shares good news with bad. The Good News, preached by Christ and his disciples, was of the establishment of the Kingdom of God on the earth. Christ's parables declare the essence of the kingdom where its citizens manifest attributes like faith, joy, love, forgiveness and mercy.

The bad news for some is that this kingdom will not be open to everyone, but limited to those who accept God's offer and have faith in Him. These citizens will be those who display the characteristics Jesus described as hungering and thirsting for righteousness; being merciful, meek, pure in heart, peacemakers, and having endured persecution for their faith's sake (Matthew 5:3–12).

It is these followers of Christ who have tried their best (and he does not ask for more!) who will be made perfect and immortal in the Kingdom of God.



What should we do then? Live just for the moment? Just hope for the best and that everything will be all right?

More than forty generations after that fateful scene between Jesus and Pilate before the Praetorium, we witness today the sad outcome of a world with humans in charge.

God's word will prevail, however, and soon Christ will return to set up the promised Kingdom of God. No one knows when this will happen, but signs are evident, most visibly in the establishment of the Jewish state and the breakdown of morals in our society.

Let's listen to God's truth preached by Christ and his disciples as we find it in our Bibles. Then let's respond with faith, baptism and trying our best to follow Jesus. For he said:

*Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom (Luke 12:32).*

**Leroy Canoles Jr.**

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