

# Orthodox Christianity

by

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## **Introduction**

Religion touches the deepest part of a person. Throughout human history, man has shown a persistent impulse to understand and connect with the source of life and all creation. This impulse has proven to be a fundamental aspect of what it means to be human. Through good times and bad, through the calm, enlightened periods of history, and through times of great upheaval, the quest for the meaning of life has remained. This quest for meaning, for the source of everything in life, has found expression in what is called religion.

Religion is not the same as superstition, but it can become that if man's quest for the truth is perverted or misapplied. The presence of many religions, which at times contradict each other, does not mean that all religions are wrong or that there is no absolute truth. Disagreement about the truth does not mean that truth does not exist. In order to discern which truth claim, which religion, is correct, a person needs to have accurate information in order to make an informed decision. Too often in regard to religion these facts are hard to find. Additionally, a person needs to make a proper inquiry. Where did this religion come from? What are the people like who believe in this religion? What does this religion teach? Is there any evidence for this religion being true? Asking these questions and receiving informed, reasonable answers is the difference between religion and superstition. Reverence for something or someone not worthy of worship is also superstition.

Christianity has the most adherents of any of the worlds religions. It has affected world history for two thousand years. Some of history's most intelligent and influential people have been Christians. Yet, despite its prevalence, there is a considerable amount of misunderstanding regarding the teachings of the religion's founder, Jesus of Nazareth. This misunderstanding comes from both within Christianity and from outside Christianity.

The misunderstanding of Christianity by those outside Christianity comes from two sources. First, it is often difficult to fully understand a religion when one does not belong to that religion, particularly if one does not share the fundamental view of the world as held by the members of that religion. In regard to Christianity, the depth and subtlety of its teaching often elude those who do not participate in the life of Christianity. The second source of misunderstanding of Christianity comes from those who deliberately

seek to distort its teaching in an effort to discredit Christianity. The source of this misunderstanding is the easiest to correct, both with the publication of books such as this and with the internet providing easy access to reliable information.

The misunderstanding of Christianity by those from within Christianity is the most difficult misunderstanding to correct. It is also a source of puzzlement for those who are not Christians. How could people misunderstand their own religion? Nevertheless, misunderstandings arise over the long course of time. In Christianity these misunderstandings have become institutionalized. This accounts for the multitude of churches.

This book attempts to remedy some misunderstandings about Christianity. First it will present a concise summary of the historical circumstances within which Christianity arose. Then it will present the history and teachings of the founder of Christianity, Jesus of Nazareth. Then it will briefly explain the developments of the Christian Church.

The term we use for the source of life, for that which gives meaning to life, is God. God is a general term, it is not a name. Some religions say there are many gods. Other religions, such as Buddhism, say there is no God, and yet go on to populate the heavens with beings who serve the same function as God. Christianity acknowledges the existence of one God. It also teaches that God has acted in human history to reveal himself to us. It is the intention of the author of this book to present an accurate and clear understanding of Christianity to those who, for whatever reason, have been denied access to the truths which were revealed to man by God.

## I. The Roots of Christianity

To get a good understanding of Christianity it is helpful to understand the historical and religious environment from which it arose. Knowing this helps to establish a context for how Christianity arose. This is important in Christianity because one of the fundamental teachings of Christianity is that God acts through history. God has made himself known to mankind by directly involving himself in history. This involvement has not only happened in the past but is continuing to this day, and will continue in the future.

In other words, it is helpful to explore the roots of Christianity. What happened prior to Christianity? What were the religious expectations at the time when Christianity arose? By knowing this it will be possible to understand how Christianity fit into these expectations. Examining these and other issues will establish a firm foundation for understanding Christianity.

Christianity arose in a region on the eastern edge of the Mediterranean Sea, in a geographical area of the Middle East which has been called by several names but which we will refer to in this book simply as Palestine. Over the long course of human history this region has been populated by different people. Strong armies have swept through and conquered the area on many occasions. One reason for this has to do with its geographical location. It was a land bridge joining two large and important regions: Egypt to the south, and Mesopotamia to the north. As the fortunes of these important regions waxed and waned, so too was there an ebb and flow of various peoples through Palestine.

One group of people in particular will be the focus of this examination of the roots of Christianity. These people are known by three names. During the earliest part of their history they were called the Hebrews. Later they were called the Israelites. Finally they were called the Jews, which is the name they are known by to this day. The reason for these different names will not be examined in this book which has as its emphasis the history of Christianity. So for simplicity this book will refer to them throughout their history as the Jews.

The exploration of the historical background of Christianity begins with the Jews because it was from these people and their religion that Christianity arose. In particular, the history of the Jews begins with one man. His name was Abraham. He was a shepherd who lived in northwestern Mesopotamia about 4000 years ago. He would become the first Jew.

One day God spoke to Abraham. God told Abraham to leave his country for a land which God would show to him. God said that he would make Abraham a great nation, his descendants would be as numerous as the stars, and he would enjoy God's protection. Abraham was a man of great faith so he did what God instructed him to do. Abraham eventually settled in Palestine after God told him it was the land he would give to Abraham and his descendants. Eventually Abraham became a prosperous and powerful chieftain in Palestine.

The story of Abraham's life was of great interest and importance to the Jews. He was the leader, the patriarch, of a people whom God had set apart to be God's chosen people. Also, Abraham was an example of the faithful servant of God. This was especially shown by one incident in Abraham's life.

After Abraham had settled in Palestine, God decided to test Abraham. God told Abraham to take his son Isaac to a certain mountain. There Abraham was to sacrifice his son as a burnt offering to God, thereby returning his son to God. Isaac was very dear to Abraham because Abraham had been without children for many years. Despite this, Abraham arose early and began his journey with Isaac to the mountain of which God had told him. On the way Isaac asked Abraham about the lamb for the burnt offering. Abraham told him God would provide the sacrificial lamb. When they arrived at the mountain Abraham built an altar, set the wood on it, bound Isaac, and laid him on the altar. Then he raised his hand to kill his beloved son. Just then God told him to stop. God now knew that Abraham was devoted to God. Abraham then noticed a ram behind him and offered it as the burnt offering. In the future, this area would become Jerusalem, and the Jewish Temple would be built on the mountain where Abraham was prepared to sacrifice his son.

Isaac would later marry and have a son named Jacob. Subsequently, Jews would often refer to their God as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. During Jacob's life God changed Jacob's name to Israel, which means he who strives with God. It was after this that the Jews, who had been called Hebrews since the time of Abraham, were also called Israelites. Toward the end of Jacob's life a famine drove the Jews into Egypt where they were welcomed by the king of Egypt, whose title was Pharaoh. They were given good land to live on and they prospered.

However, when a new Pharaoh ruled Egypt he became suspicious of the Jews. He began to enslave them and ordered that male children were to be killed as they were born. One woman who did not

want her newly born son killed put him in a basket and set the basket afloat on the Nile river. The basket was found by Pharaoh's daughter. She pitied the child and took him as her son. She called him Moses.

Moses was raised as an Egyptian in Pharaoh's household. But as a young man Moses, who knew he was a Jew, could see the difficulty of his people. One day he killed an Egyptian who was beating a Jew. Afterwards he fled into the desert east of Egypt. It was there that God spoke to him out of a burning bush. God said he had heard the cries of his people, the Jews. He said he was sending Moses back to Egypt to deliver the Jews from their bondage and to lead them to a good land, a land flowing with milk and honey. Moses, who knew this was the God of his fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, asked him his name. God said, "I am who I am." This is the source of the Jewish name for God. It appears in various writings as either the letters YHWH, as the word Yahweh, or incorrectly as Jehovah. However, the Jews thought God's name was too sacred to pronounce, so they referred to him simply as the Lord.

Moses returned to Egypt to contend with Pharaoh. Moses told Pharaoh that God had said, "Let my people go," but Pharaoh refused to let the Jews leave Egypt. In response, God sent ten plagues of increasing severity on Egypt. These plagues were: 1) the water of the Nile turned into blood, 2) frogs, 3) gnats, 4) flies, 5) diseased cattle, 6) boils, 7) a severe storm, 8) locusts, and 9) a blinding sandstorm. When these nine plagues did not convince Pharaoh to let the Jews go, God sent a final plague upon the Egyptians. This plague was the death of the first born of Egypt. To insure that death would pass over the Jewish households, God instructed Moses to have each Jewish household kill a lamb. Then they were to take some of the blood from this lamb and place it on the two doorposts and the lintel of their houses. When the angel of death passed through to kill the Egyptians, he would see the blood and pass over the Jewish houses, thus sparing the first born of the Jews. The commemoration of this event, and the food associated with it, became a major feast for the Jews, called Passover. Also, it would play a prominent role in Christianity.

With this final plague Pharaoh allowed the Jews to leave. After their exodus they entered the desert east of Egypt. It was during this time in the desert that the twelve Jewish tribes, named for Jacob's sons, were constituted as one nation, called Israel. And it was in the desert that the relationship between God and Abraham's descendants was renewed.

Abraham and his descendant's were chosen by God to enter into a covenant with God. This was an agreement between God and the Jews. In this agreement the Jews were bound to God and he was

acknowledged by them to be the only God. Since he was the only God they would worship him alone. He would instruct them so they would know how to live in a way which pleased him. In return, the Jews would be God's own people. They would have his protection and know he was near. If they kept this covenant they would be a holy nation.

The Jew's covenant with God was an important development in history. It marked for the world the beginning of the understanding that there is only one God. Prior to this people thought there were many gods. People worshiped a variety of gods, and depending on one's needs, a person might worship a local god, a family god, and various other gods who were thought to have control over different aspects of life, such as weather, fertility, and health. The Jews were the first to realize there is only one God. They began to understand the other gods did not exist. This understanding that there is only one God is called monotheism.

The covenant with God was at the center of the Jewish religion. As long as they obeyed God he would protect them. So God gave them laws to help regulate their society. He gave them instructions on how to worship. And he gave them moral instructions so they could live in a way that did not give offense to God.

On an appointed day, God descended on Mt. Sinai in the desert east of Egypt. The mountain was shrouded in a thick cloud. Thunder and lightning came from the cloud. The sound of a trumpet was heard. Then God called Moses up to the top of the mountain. There God spoke to him the Ten Commandments which would be the basis of their legal and moral code.

At this time the Jews did not have a permanent temple. Instead they worshiped God in a tent which they took with them on their travels. God instructed them to build an ark, which would be called the Ark of the Covenant. It would be a sanctuary where God could live with them. Within this Ark was placed the Ten Commandments. Later, when the Jews built their Temple in Jerusalem, the Ark was placed in the holiest part of the Temple, indicating the Ten Commandment's central importance in the Jewish religion.

The Ten Commandments, a basic expression of legal, moral, and religious precepts, would later be acknowledged by Christians as having a central role in regulating a person's conduct. This is because the Ten Commandments were seen as having universal application; their relevance was not confined only to

the Jews. Rather, the Ten Commandments were understood by Christians to be the fundamental legal, moral, and religious code given to all humanity by God.

The Ten Commandments can be divided into two parts. Commandments 1-4 deal with one's relationship with God. Commandments 5-10 deal with one's relationship to society.

### **The Ten Commandments**

- 1. I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before me.**
- 2. You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them.**
- 3. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.**
- 4. Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work.**
- 5. Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land which the Lord your God gives you.**
- 6. You shall not kill.**
- 7. You shall not commit adultery.**
- 8. You shall not steal.**
- 9. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.**
- 10. You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant, or his maidservant or his ox, or his ass, or anything that is your neighbor's.**

The first commandment prohibits worship of any god other than YHWH, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This means not to hold any person or thing as being equally important to God or more important than God. Neither money, possessions, fame, comfort, physical appearance, pleasure, nor anything else of this world is to become supreme in one's life.

The second commandment is similar to the first. It prohibits giving worship that is due to God to any man-made object or anything found in nature. A distinction is understood between worship and

eneration. A person can venerate a representation of God knowing that one's prayers pass on to that which is being venerated.

The third commandment means not to speak disrespectfully or casually about God. It also means not to curse, or invoke incantations.

In the Jewish account of the creation of the world, an account also accepted as valid by Christians, God created the world in six days. On the seventh day he rested. The fourth commandment is an obligation to observe the seventh day of the week as a day of rest from work. It is a day set aside for worship and contemplation of God.

The fifth commandment raises the love, respect, and obedience due to parents to the level of an obligation, a duty imposed by God.

The sixth commandment shows the sacredness of human life. Man was made by God. It is not proper for a person to take his own life or to murder another person.

Adultery violates God's desire that people lead a pure life. The seventh commandment prohibits this activity.

The eighth commandment recognizes the right to own property. It is an instruction to refrain from taking another's possessions, to not take what is not given.

The ninth commandment is an obligation to not lie, misrepresent the truth, tell half truths, give false testimony, be deceptive, or in anyway to be dishonest in words or actions.

Covetousness often leads to actions prohibited by the nine commandments listed above. Thus, the tenth commandment prohibits covetousness. Envy and desire for what another person has can lead not only to bad actions, it can cause one to become discontent with what God has seen fit to give. This commandment, therefore, is an instruction to be content with what God has given.

After receiving the Ten Commandments the Jews continued their journey in the desert east of Egypt. They wandered in the desert for forty years. Finally, Moses went up onto a mountain and God showed him Palestine, the land he had promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But Moses died on the mountain, so he did not make it to the promised land.

The land given to the Jews by God was inhabited by many different peoples. It would require years of fighting in order to make the land their own. During that time disunity developed within the

twelve tribes of the Jews. They were finally united by a warrior who was made king. His name was David and he would establish his capital in Jerusalem. Because of his accomplishments as king, David holds a position of great importance in the history of the Jews. He succeeded in uniting the disorganized and divided tribes of the Jews, turning them into the dominant military and political force in Palestine. Future events in the history of the Jews would cause them to look back to this time, dating to about 1000 BC, with longing, and expectation.

David was also a skilled composer of psalms, which were poems to God. Some of David's psalms were prophetic. One well liked psalm by David is Psalm 22:

**The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want;**

**He makes me lie down in green pastures.**

**He leads me beside still waters;**

**He restores my soul.**

**He leads me in paths of righteousness**

**For his name's sake.**

**Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,**

**I fear no evil;**

**For thou art with me;**

**Thy rod and thy staff,**

**They comfort me.**

**Thou preparest a table before me**

**in the presence of my enemies;**

**Thou anointest my head with oil,**

**my cup overflows.**

**Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me**

**all the days of my life;**

**And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord**

**forever.**

David's son Solomon became king after him. He was a man of great wisdom. It was Solomon who built the first Jewish Temple. It was a magnificent architectural achievement. It was at this Temple that the Jews made their sacrifices to God. And it was in this Temple that the Ten Commandments were enshrined.

The Jews covenant with God bound them to rules of conduct and worship. When they strayed from these rules, prophets would arise who would call the Jewish people back to God. The history of the Jewish people is a repeating cycle of falling away from God and his commandments, and then returning to him. It is a history of prosperity and plenty followed by moral decadence, impure worship, and the worship of false gods; a history of sinning, of not following God's instructions, followed by repentance. Finally the northern part of the Jewish kingdom consisting of ten of the twelve tribes of the Jews, strayed so far from what God wanted that he cast them out of his land. The Jewish people from the ten northern tribes were conquered by Assyria, a mighty empire north of Palestine, in 722 B.C. They were sent into exile. They never returned. They ceased to exist. They are called the ten lost tribes of Israel.

Later, when the remaining two tribes in the southern part of the Jewish kingdom also fell into idolatry and licentiousness, they too were conquered and sent into exile, in 585 B.C., by a mighty kingdom north of Palestine. This time the conquerors were the Babylonians. The Jewish Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed. These two southern tribes fared better than the ten northern tribes, however. Forty eight years after their captivity these two tribes were allowed to return to their homeland. Also, they were allowed to rebuild their Temple, although it did not match its former grandeur. The returning Jews were still subject to the Babylonians. This subjection continued after the Babylonians were conquered by the Greeks under Alexander the Great. The Jews enjoyed a brief period of autonomy centered around 100 B.C., but by 63 B.C., they were again subjects of foreign rule, this time by the Roman Empire.

The Jews wanted to be delivered from their subjugation. They wanted to be restored to their former greatness as God's chosen people. They wanted to enjoy the protection of God and to know he was near. They looked for a King of the Jews who would be like David, who would restore the greatness of the

Jewish nation. A King of the Jews who would lead his people out of their captivity, who would save them, and who would establish God's kingdom. This king would be anointed with oil, as in the past, signifying that he was chosen by God. This anticipated king was called the Messiah, meaning the anointed. The Jews longed for the Messiah. Surely God would hear their cries. Surely he would not forsake his chosen people for much longer. Surely God would send his Messiah and save his people from their bondage.

## II. The Life of Jesus

A prophet living in the wilderness of Palestine was calling on the Jews to repent of their sins because the kingdom of heaven was near. The history of the Jews contained many such prophets. Even this prophet, who is now called John the Forerunner, was foretold by an earlier prophet named Isaiah who said,

“The voice of one crying in the wilderness:

Prepare the way of the Lord,

make his paths straight.”<sup>1</sup>

By calling on the Jews to repent, John was calling them back to the way of life required of them in their covenant with God. The call for repentance was a call for a return to God. After they had confessed their sins, John would baptize them in the Jordan river. This baptism was a symbolic washing away of their sins. John, who is also called John the Baptist, began to draw large crowds who asked him if he was the anticipated Messiah. John responded, “I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”<sup>2</sup>

When John saw a man named Jesus walking toward him, John said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” Then he said, “For this I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel.”<sup>3</sup> On the previous day, Jesus had come to John to be baptized. John protested saying he needed to be baptized by Jesus, but John baptized Jesus when Jesus said it was proper for John to do so. When Jesus came up out of the water “the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and alighting on him; and lo, a voice from heaven, saying, ‘This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased.’”<sup>4</sup>

Who was this man who was so highly regarded by such a well know prophet? Where did he come from?

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 3.4

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 3.11

<sup>3</sup> John 1.29,31

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 3.16-17

## Birth

The Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus, who ruled from 27 B.C. to 14 A.D., ordered a census to be taken of the Roman Empire. This included Palestine which had fallen under Roman control. In the town of Nazareth, in a region of northern Palestine called Galilee, there lived a man named Joseph. He was betrothed to a woman named Mary. Joseph was of the lineage of King David, so to be enrolled in the census he was required to return to the city of David, Bethlehem, which was south of Jerusalem in an area called Judea. Even though Mary was pregnant and it was almost time for her to give birth, they traveled to Bethlehem as they were required to do. The city of Bethlehem was crowded because of the census, so there was no room for them in the inn. Instead they went to a stable, where Mary gave birth to her son. She wrapped him in swaddling cloths and put him in a manger. There were shepherds in the fields nearby. An angel of God appeared to them and said, “Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord.”<sup>5</sup> Eight days later the boy was circumcised according to Jewish religious practices and named Jesus.

Mary’s pregnancy had been disturbing to Joseph because when he learned of it they were not yet married and so they had not been together as husband and wife. He did not want to disgrace Mary so he planned to quietly divorce her. But he was told in a dream to “not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>6</sup>

What had happened was this. An angel had appeared to Mary saying, “Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women.”<sup>7</sup> Mary was troubled by this greeting but the angel continued. He said, “you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son.”<sup>8</sup> Mary told the angel she was a virgin. The angel said,

“The Holy Spirit will come upon you,  
and the power of the Most High will overshadow you;  
therefore the child to be born will be called holy,

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<sup>5</sup> Luke 2.10-11

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 1.20

<sup>7</sup> Luke 1.28

<sup>8</sup> Luke 1.30-31

the Son of God.”<sup>9</sup>

Mary, a model of faith for all Christians, did not refuse despite all of the trouble and scandal that pregnancy might bring upon her, but said simply, “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.”<sup>10</sup> Afterwards, when Mary was talking with a relative she spoke of her devotion to God. She said,

“My soul magnifies the Lord,  
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden.  
For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed;  
for he who is mighty has done great things for me,  
and holy is his name.

And his mercy is on those who fear him  
from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm,  
he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts,  
he has put down the mighty from their thrones,  
and exalted those of low degree;  
he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and the rich he has sent empty away.

He has helped his servant Israel,  
in remembrance of his mercy,  
as he spoke to our fathers,  
to Abraham and to his posterity for ever.”<sup>11</sup>

After the birth of Jesus, Mary and Joseph went to the Temple in Jerusalem to offer a sacrifice for their purification. There was a devout man at the Temple named Simeon who had been told he would not die until he had seen the Messiah. When he saw Jesus being brought into the Temple he said,

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<sup>9</sup> Luke 1.35

<sup>10</sup> Luke 1.38

<sup>11</sup> Luke 1.46-55

“Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace,  
according to thy word;  
for mine eyes have seen thy salvation  
which thou hast prepared in the presence of all peoples,  
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,  
and for glory to thy people Israel.”<sup>12</sup>

Mary and Joseph did not return to Nazareth immediately. Joseph had been told, again in a dream, to take his family and flee into Egypt. In 40 B.C., the Romans had appointed a king for the Jews. This king first became aware that something significant had happened in his territory when wise men from the East arrived telling him they had come looking for a newly born king of the Jews. They had seen his star and had come to worship him. It had been foretold in earlier times by a Jewish prophet that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. The wise men found Jesus in Bethlehem, worshipped him with gifts, and then returned to the East without telling the king that they had found the boy. When the king realized he had been tricked, he ordered all male children two years of age and under in Bethlehem to be killed. Mary and Joseph had already fled to Egypt and did not return to their home in Nazareth until the king had died.

Little is known about the life of Jesus as he was growing up. Joseph was a carpenter, and every year Jesus and his parents went to Jerusalem for the Passover feast. As he got older Jesus grew in wisdom. When he was twelve he amazed the teachers at the Temple with his understanding.

Following his baptism by John the Forerunner, Jesus withdrew into the desert for forty days. Then, at about the age of thirty, Jesus began his public life and ministry. He began to gather twelve disciples, representing the twelve tribes of the Jews, to be his closest followers. These men would later be called the Apostles. Jesus returned to Galilee in northern Palestine. His ministry, which consisted of teaching and performing miracles, was mostly confined to the region of Galilee. It was there in a town called Cana that he began to show signs to indicate who he was. Jesus and his disciples attended a wedding in Cana. When all of the wine had been consumed Jesus instructed the servants to fill six large jars with water, which he then turned into wine. This was the first of the signs which revealed his glory. When Jesus taught “the

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<sup>12</sup> Luke 2.29-32

crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority.”<sup>13</sup> Jesus’ miracles were signs of his authority. His miracles were of three types, dealing with healing, nature, and evil spirits. More examples of these miracles will be given later, after Jesus’ teaching is presented in detail.

## Teachings

The primary message of Jesus’ teaching concerned the kingdom of God, which was also called the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom of God would end the domination of the world by the devil. Jesus taught that the kingdom of God was here now, but it was to be a future reality as well. For example, in speaking about the kingdom as having arrived already, Jesus said, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel.”<sup>14</sup> Gospel means the good news. Jesus was saying believe in the good news about the kingdom of God. In teaching about the arrival of the kingdom of God, Jesus echoed the teaching of John the Forerunner. However, there was a significant difference in their teachings. John said he was preparing the way for the person who would bring about the kingdom of God. Jesus taught that the kingdom had arrived in his person. He said, “if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.”<sup>15</sup>

As was shown in the last chapter, there was a link between the kingdom of God and the Messiah who would bring it about. When some of John the Forerunner’s disciples asked Jesus if he was the one to come, if he was the Messiah, Jesus answered, “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them.”<sup>16</sup> On another occasion, after reading from a prophecy concerning God sending a prophet to comfort the Jews, Jesus made a more direct claim to being the expected Messiah by saying, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”<sup>17</sup> To the assembled Jews Jesus was clearly indicating that he was the one sent by God.

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<sup>13</sup> Matthew 7.29

<sup>14</sup> Mark 1.15

<sup>15</sup> Matthew 12.28

<sup>16</sup> Luke 7.22

<sup>17</sup> Luke 4.21

On one occasion, Jesus was asked specifically when the kingdom of God would come. He told them to “behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you.”<sup>18</sup> Speaking of himself as the Son of man, which he did often, he said, “Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of man will give to you. . . . For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven, and gives life to the world.”<sup>19</sup> Here Jesus makes clear both the connection between his person and the kingdom of God, and that the kingdom had now arrived.

As a final example of the kingdom of God being present now, in the person of Jesus, the following story was told about Jesus. “The tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, ‘This man receives sinners and eats with them.’

“So he told them this parable: ‘What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, “Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost.” Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.’”<sup>20</sup> Just as “those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. . . . [so] I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.”<sup>21</sup> Jesus was calling them to join him in the kingdom of heaven.

When Jesus taught about the kingdom of God he often used metaphors, similes, and parables. By doing this he accomplished two purposes. He made a difficult subject like the kingdom of God easier to understand, and he displayed that in some way the kingdom of God is mysterious and ineffable.

The kingdom of God was also to be a future reality, and the coming of the kingdom of God occupied a central place in Jesus’ message. The coming of the kingdom of God will be the end of the domination of evil over the world, and the last day of the world will be a time of judgement. It will be a time of joy for those people who will be raised in glory to be with God in his kingdom. But it will be a time of great sorrow for those who rejected Jesus’ teaching, because by doing so they will face damnation.

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<sup>18</sup> Luke 17.21

<sup>19</sup> John 6.27,33

<sup>20</sup> Luke 15.1-7

<sup>21</sup> Matthew 9.12-13

Jesus taught that “the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field; but while men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. And the servants of the householder came and said to him, ‘Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then has it weeds?’ He said to them, ‘An enemy has done this.’ The servants said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ But he said, ‘No; lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reaper, Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.’”<sup>22</sup>

Later, Jesus explained this parable to his disciples. “He who sows the good seed is the Son of man; the field is the world, and the good seed means the sons of the kingdom; the weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the close of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the close of the age. The Son of man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and throw them into the furnace of fire; there men will weep and gnash their teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of the Father” (God).<sup>23</sup>

Continuing with this idea Jesus said, “the kingdom of heaven is like a net which was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind; when it was full, men drew it ashore and sat down and sorted the good into vessels but threw away the bad. So it will be at the close of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous, and throw them into the furnace of fire; there men will weep and gnash their teeth.”<sup>24</sup>

Jesus never said when the last day would come. He said “of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son [referring to himself], but the Father only.”<sup>25</sup> Thus the need for constant vigilance, the need to live every day as if it would be the last day. Concerning this he told the following parable.

“The kingdom of heaven shall be compared to ten maidens who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. For when the foolish took their lamps,

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<sup>22</sup> Matthew 13.24-30

<sup>23</sup> Matthew 13.37-43

<sup>24</sup> Matthew 13.47-50

they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, they all slumbered and slept. But at midnight there was a cry, 'Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' Then all those maidens rose and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' But the wise replied, 'Perhaps there will not be enough for us and for you; go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves.' And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast; and the door was shut. Afterward the other maidens came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' But he replied, 'Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.' Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."<sup>26</sup>

Concerning the judgement that will take place on the last day, Jesus, referring to himself as the Son of man and as King, said that, "When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will place the sheep at his right hand, but the goats at the left. Then the King will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee drink? And when did we see thee a stranger and welcome thee, or naked and clothe thee? And when did we see thee sick or in prison and visit thee?' And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.' Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see thee hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to thee?' Then he will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of

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<sup>25</sup> Matthew 24.36

<sup>26</sup> Matthew 25.1-13

these, you did it not to me.’ And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”<sup>27</sup>

This parable reveals an important aspect of the kingdom of God. Entry into it requires a person to conduct his life properly. More specifically what this parable reveals is that how we treat others in our daily lives will determine how we are treated at the judgement on the final day. This parables gave an indication of how Jesus expected his followers to conduct themselves.

Thus, it is not enough simply to believe that Jesus was the expected Messiah. It is not enough to have faith in him. Jesus required an active faith in order for a person to participate in the eternal life of God’s kingdom. He told his followers that “if you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples.”<sup>28</sup> Jesus asked, “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do what I tell you?”<sup>29</sup> Then he said, “Not every one who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that [final] day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, “I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers.”<sup>30</sup> Thus, merely doing good works in the name of Jesus, or simply saying that one has faith in Jesus, does not mean that one is really a follower of Jesus. Jesus made it clear that having faith in him meant obedience to his teaching, and this meant living a moral life and loving one’s neighbor. “If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.”<sup>31</sup>

Jesus taught what was required in order to enter the kingdom of God. Acting on what Jesus taught allowed one to enter the kingdom of God through what Jesus called the narrow gate, “for the gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few.”<sup>32</sup>

Jesus taught that an important requirement for entry into God’s kingdom was repentance. John the Forerunner also taught this, but Jesus gave the theme of repentance its full meaning and significance. By repentance Jesus did not only mean that one felt sorry for one’s wrongdoing. Certainly sorrow for going

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<sup>27</sup> Matthew 25.31-46

<sup>28</sup> John 8.31

<sup>29</sup> Luke 6.46

<sup>30</sup> Matthew 7.21-23

<sup>31</sup> John 14.23

against God's will and for engaging in bad conduct was important, but Jesus meant more than this when he said to repent. Repentance for Jesus was a changing of one's heart and mind. It was a turning away from old habits of wrongdoing, turning away from sin, and turning toward living a moral life and a life of showing love and concern for one's neighbor. It was a return to God from whom we came. Repentance meant to become a new person, one who lives according to God's will. Jesus said that "unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God."<sup>33</sup>

The kingdom of God is to be regarded as a treasure, a spiritual treasure, which is to be obtained at a great price. Jesus taught that "the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it."<sup>34</sup> Obtaining the kingdom of God requires unceasing attention because, as Jesus said, "no one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."<sup>35</sup>

However, in regard to earthly treasure, Jesus taught that acquiring and holding onto riches was an obstacle to attaining the kingdom of heaven. Jesus told a rich man "if you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven."<sup>36</sup> Jesus told his disciples, "it will be hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. . . . It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." His disciples asked, "Who then can be saved?" Jesus said, "With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."<sup>37</sup>

Jesus taught the crowd, "Take heed, and beware of all covetousness; for a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." Then he told them this parable. "The land of a rich man brought forth plentifully; and he thought to himself, 'What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?' And he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns, and build larger ones; and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; take your ease, eat, drink, be merry.' But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you.'"<sup>38</sup> By refraining from covetousness we are provided "with purses that do not grow old, with a

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<sup>32</sup> Matthew 7.13-14

<sup>33</sup> John 3.3

<sup>34</sup> Matthew 13.45

<sup>35</sup> Luke 9.62

<sup>36</sup> Matthew 19.21

<sup>37</sup> Matthew 19.23-26

<sup>38</sup> Luke 12.15-20

treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”<sup>39</sup>

To further illustrate how one should view the consequences of covetousness Jesus told the following parable. “There was a rich man, who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, full of sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man’s table; moreover the dogs came and licked his sores. The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham’s bosom. The rich man also died and was buried; and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes, and saw Abraham, far off and Lazarus in his bosom. And he called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy upon me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in anguish in this flame.’ But Abraham said, ‘Son, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.’”<sup>40</sup>

Central to Jesus’ teaching on living a moral life was our conduct toward others. Jesus said, “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. To him who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from him who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to every one who begs from you; and of him who takes away your goods do not ask them again. And as you wish that men would do to you, do so to them.

“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. And if you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, and do good, and lend expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the selfish. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.”<sup>41</sup>

This call to be merciful is important to understand. Jesus made it clear that on the day of judgement, how we judged our neighbors is how we will be judged. He warned, “Judge not, and you will

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<sup>39</sup> Luke 12.33-34

<sup>40</sup> Luke 16.19-26

<sup>41</sup> Luke 6.27-36

not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. . . . For the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”<sup>42</sup> Jesus asks, “how can you say to your brother, ‘Brother, let me take out the speck that is in your eye,’ when you yourself do not see the log that is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take out the speck that is in your brother’s eye.”<sup>43</sup>

The connection between our forgiveness of others and God’s forgiveness of us is further illustrated by how Jesus taught his followers to pray. He told them to pray like this:

**“Our Father who art in heaven,  
Hallowed be thy name.  
Thy kingdom come.  
Thy will be done,  
On earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread;  
And forgive us our debts,  
As we also have forgiven our debtors;  
And lead us not into temptation,  
But deliver us from the evil one.”**<sup>44</sup>

In this prayer, God’s forgiveness of our sins is clearly tied to our forgiveness of those who have sinned against us. Then, just so there is no doubt, Jesus says very directly, “if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”<sup>45</sup>

For Jesus, the law given to the Jews by God, through Moses, was the starting point of a moral life. He said, “I have come not to abolish [the law and the prophets] but to fulfil them.”<sup>46</sup> However, Jesus was concerned for the inner perfection of the person rather than for the outer adherence to the law. When Jesus

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<sup>42</sup> Luke 6.37-38

<sup>43</sup> Luke 6.42

<sup>44</sup> Matthew 6.9-13

<sup>45</sup> Matthew 6.14-15

<sup>46</sup> Matthew 5.17

said “you, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect,”<sup>47</sup> he was guiding his followers to understand God’s intention behind the law. Yet to prevent any misunderstanding about the importance of the law, Jesus said, “Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but he who does them and teaches them shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.”<sup>48</sup>

Jesus then proceeded to reveal a deeper meaning to the law. In regard to the sixth of the Ten Commandments he said, “You have heard that it was said to the men of old, ‘You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be liable to the hell of fire.”<sup>49</sup>

In regard to the seventh commandment he said, “You have heard that is was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that every one who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”<sup>50</sup>

The law which Moses gave to the Jews permitted a man to divorce his wife. But Jesus said “that every one who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, makes her an adulteress; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”<sup>51</sup>

It might appear that Jesus was increasing the burden of the law by expanding its meaning. However, there is a simple, underlying principle to his teaching, namely love of one’s neighbor. When Jesus was asked “which is the great commandment in the law” he said, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.”<sup>52</sup> On another occasion he made the necessity of love for one’s neighbor clear. He said, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one

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<sup>47</sup> Matthew 5.48

<sup>48</sup> Matthew 5.19

<sup>49</sup> Matthew 5.21-22

<sup>50</sup> Matthew 5.27-28

<sup>51</sup> Matthew 5.32

<sup>52</sup> Matthew 22.36-41

another.”<sup>53</sup> Thus, he placed love for one’s neighbor on the same level of importance as the Ten Commandments.

## **Miracles**

One way in which Jesus showed love and concern for others was in his healing of the sick. Miracles are divine interventions which alter the normal course of events, and are a reminder of God’s power over nature. Jesus was known as a worker of miracles by historians writing near to the time when he lived. For example, the knowledge that Jesus was a miracle worker appears in the first century A.D. writings of the Jewish historian Josephus, and in the Jewish commentaries on Jewish law dating to 200 A.D. His miracles were signs of his authority and evidence that the kingdom of God had arrived in his person. Also, Jesus’ healing miracles were a fulfillment of the prophecies about the Messiah. In fact, many of the people who followed Jesus asked themselves, “When the Christ (Messiah) appears, will he do more signs than this man has done?”<sup>54</sup> Jesus himself said, “Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe.”<sup>55</sup> However, when his followers began to think more about his miracles than about his teachings concerning the kingdom of God he said, “An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign.”<sup>56</sup> By adulterous he meant being disloyal to God.

Even the Romans were aware of Jesus’ miracles. On one occasion a Roman centurion asked Jesus to cure his paralyzed servant. Jesus answered, “I will come and heal him.” But the centurion said, “Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, ‘Go,’ and he goes, and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes, and to my slave, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.” Impressed by this Jesus said, “Truly, I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.” Then he said, “Go; be it done for you as you have believed.” The servant was healed at that time.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> John 13.34-35

<sup>54</sup> John 7.31

<sup>55</sup> John 4.48

<sup>56</sup> Matthew 12.39

<sup>57</sup> Matthew 8.5-13

There are many recorded instances of Jesus healing the sick. For example, on another occasion a leper said to Jesus, “Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.” Jesus said, “I will; be clean”, and the leper was healed.<sup>58</sup>

As Jesus was traveling through the countryside with a crowd a blind man called out to him, “Jesus, have mercy on me.” The crowd tried to quiet the man but he called out again, “Have mercy on me.” Jesus pitied the man and said, “Receive your sight; your faith has made you well.”<sup>59</sup>

The following story is told about Jesus when he was at his home in Galilee. “Many were gathered together, so that there was no longer room for them, not even about the door; and he was preaching the word to them. And they came, bringing to him a paralytic carried by four men. And when they could not get near him because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and when they had made an opening, they let down the pallet on which the paralytic lay. And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, ‘My son, your sins are forgiven.’ Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, ‘Why does this man speak thus? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?’ And immediately Jesus, perceiving in his spirit that they thus questioned within themselves, said to them, ‘Why do you question thus in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, “Your sins are forgiven,” or to say, “Rise, take up your pallet and walk”? But that you may know that the Son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins’—he said to the paralytic—‘I say to you, rise, take up your pallet and go home.’ And he rose, and immediately took up the pallet and went out before them all; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, ‘We never saw anything like this!’”<sup>60</sup>

These are just a few of the many recorded occasions in which Jesus healed the sick. On other occasions he helped people who had been possessed by evil spirits. On one such occasion a man approached Jesus and said, “Teacher, I beg you to look upon my son, for he is my only child; and behold, a spirit seizes him, and he suddenly cries out; it convulses him till he foams, and shatters him, and will hardly leave him.” Jesus asked that the boy be brought to him. “While he was coming, the demon tore him and

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<sup>58</sup> Matthew 8.2-3

<sup>59</sup> Luke 18.35-42

<sup>60</sup> Mark 2.2-12

convulsed him. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, and healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. And all were astonished at the majesty of God."<sup>61</sup>

At times Jesus would also demonstrate mastery over nature. One evening when Jesus was in a boat with his disciples on the Sea of Galilee "a great storm of wind arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already filling. But [Jesus] was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him and said to him, 'Teacher, do you not care if we perish?' And he awoke and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, 'Peace! Be still!' And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. He said to them, 'Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?' And they were filled with awe, and said to one another, 'Who then is this, that even wind and sea obey him?'"<sup>62</sup>

On another occasion "[Jesus] made his disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. And after he had taken leave of them, he went up on the mountain to pray. And when evening came, the boat was out on the sea, and he was alone on the land. And he saw that they were making headway painfully, for the wind was against them. And about the fourth watch of the night [ just before dawn ] he came to them, but when they saw him walking on the sea they thought it was a ghost, and cried out; for they all saw him, and were terrified. But immediately he spoke to them and said, 'Take heart, it is I; have no fear.' And he got into the boat with them and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded."<sup>63</sup>

The most famous incident of Jesus displaying mastery over nature occurred when "a multitude followed him, because they saw the signs which he did on those who were diseased. Jesus went up on the mountain, and there sat down with his disciples. Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand. Lifting up his eyes, then, and seeing that a multitude was coming to him, Jesus said to Philip, 'How are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?' This he said to test him, for he himself knew what he would do. Philip answered him, 'Two hundred denarii would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.' One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, 'There is a lad here who has five barley loaves and two fish; but what are they among so many?' Jesus said, 'Make the people sit down.' Now there was much grass in the place; so the men sat down, in number about five thousand. Jesus then

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<sup>61</sup> Luke 9.38-43

<sup>62</sup> Mark 4.37-41

<sup>63</sup> Mark 6.45-51

took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. And when they had eaten their fill, he told his disciples, ‘Gather up the fragments left over, that nothing may be lost.’ So they gathered them up and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten. When the people saw the sign which he had done, they said, ‘This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world!’<sup>64</sup>

There were times, as the following stories show, when Jesus performed another kind of miracle which supported the belief that Jesus was the one foretold to come. Here is a story told about Jesus after he returned home from a trip.

“There came a man named Jairus, who was a ruler of the synagogue; and falling at Jesus’ feet he besought him to come to his house, for he had an only daughter, about twelve years of age, and she was dying.” Jesus proceeded to the man’s house but “a man from the ruler’s house came and said, ‘Your daughter is dead; do not trouble the Teacher any more.’ But Jesus on hearing this answered him, ‘Do not fear; only believe, and she shall be well.’ And when he came to the house, he permitted no one to enter with him, except Peter and John and James [his close disciples], and the father and mother of the child. And all were weeping and bewailing her; but he said, ‘Do not weep; for she is not dead but sleeping.’ And they laughed at him, knowing that she was dead. But taking her by the hand he called, saying, ‘Child, arise.’ And her spirit returned, and she got up at once; and he directed that something should be given her to eat. And her parents were amazed.”<sup>65</sup> News of this incident spread throughout the region and increased Jesus’ fame.

On another occasion, Jesus “went to a city called Nain, and his disciples and a great crowd went with him. As he drew near to the gate of the city, behold, a man who had died was being carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow; and a large crowd from the city was with her. And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her and said to her, ‘Do not weep.’ And he came and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, ‘Young man, I say to you, arise.’ And the dead man sat up, and began to speak. And he gave him to his mother. Fear seized them all; and they glorified God, saying,

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<sup>64</sup> John 6.2-14

<sup>65</sup> Luke 8.41-42,49-56

‘A great prophet has arisen among us!’ and ‘God has visited his people!’ And this report concerning him spread through the whole of Judea and all the surrounding country.”<sup>66</sup>

The most famous story of Jesus raising the dead involves his friend Lazarus. Jesus received word that his friend Lazarus was ill, but by the time Jesus traveled to Lazarus’ home, Lazarus was dead. Jesus asked, “ ‘Where have you laid him?’ They said to him, ‘Lord, come and see.’ Jesus wept. So the Jews said, ‘See how he loved him!’ But some of them said, ‘Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?’

“Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb; it was a cave, and a stone lay upon it. Jesus said, ‘Take away the stone.’ Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, ‘Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Did I not tell you that if you would believe you would see the glory of God?’ so they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, ‘Father, I thank thee that thou hast heard me. I knew that thou hearest me always, but I have said this on account of the people standing by that they may believe that thou didst send me.’ When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out.’ The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with bandages, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, ‘Unbind him, and let him go.’ ”<sup>67</sup>

## **Conflict**

This story has an ominous ending. “Many of the Jews therefore, who had . . . seen what he did, believed in him; but some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council, and said, ‘What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. If we let him go on thus, every one will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation.’ But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, ‘You know nothing at all; you do not understand that it is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish.’ . . . So from that day on they took counsel how to put him to death.” And “Jesus therefore no longer went about openly among the Jews.”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Luke 7.11-17

<sup>67</sup> John 11.1-44

<sup>68</sup> John 11.45-54

As the previous stories reveal, Jesus was a teacher and worker of miracles. Because of this he attracted the attention of the Jewish religious authorities, who were called the scribes and Pharisees. They tried to discredit him by asking him questions designed to trick him into giving answers which were contrary to the Jewish religion. However, Jesus was too clever to fall into their traps. “One day, as he was teaching the people in the temple and preaching the gospel, the chief priests and the scribes with the elders came up and said to him, ‘Tell us by what authority you do these things, or who it is that gave you this authority.’ He answered them, ‘I also will ask you a question; now tell me, Was the baptism of John from heaven or from men? And they discussed it with one another, saying, ‘If we say, “From heaven,” he will say, “Why did you not believe him?” But if we say, “From men,” all the people will stone us; for they are convinced that John was a prophet.’ So they answered that they did not know whence it was. And Jesus said to them, ‘Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.’”<sup>69</sup>

The Jewish religious authorities saw Jesus as a threat because he was outspoken in his criticism of them, frequently saying they were hypocrites who placed harsh religious burdens on the people. The religious authorities were also becoming afraid of the people because Jesus’ popularity was increasing. The people saw him as a prophet. Jesus’ attitude toward the Jewish religious authorities is best illustrated in a speech he made to the crowds at the Temple.

Jesus said, “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; so practice and observe whatever they tell you, but not what they do; for they preach, but do not practice. They bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men’s shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with their finger. They do all their deeds to be seen by men; for they . . . love the place of honor at feasts.” In reference to the burden of ritual purity he continued, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you cleanse the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of extortion and rapacity. You blind Pharisee! first cleanse the inside of the cup and of the plate, that the outside also may be clean. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within they are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but within you are full of hypocrisy and iniquity.”<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Luke 20.1-8

<sup>70</sup> Matthew 23.2-6,25-28

In plotting to kill Jesus the Jewish religious authorities faced an obstacle. Their country was occupied by the Romans and only the Romans had the authority to sentence people to death. Thus, they would have to involve the Romans, but the Romans were not interested in the Jews' internal religious disputes. However, the Romans were very interested in challenges to their governance of occupied territory. In order to involve the Romans in the plot to kill Jesus, the Jewish religious authorities would need to convince the Roman authorities that Jesus was a threat to social order and stability. In other words, instead of presenting Jesus to the Romans as a threat to the established Jewish religious order, they would need to show that Jesus was a threat to Roman rule.

A week before the Passover feast, Jesus made a triumphal entry into Jerusalem. His popularity was at its height because he had just come from raising his friend Lazarus from the dead. He spent several days preaching to the crowds. The Jewish religious authorities, who had their own Temple security force, were afraid to arrest Jesus openly because of what the crowds might do. They sought a way to arrest him in secret. They convinced a disciple of Jesus who knew where Jesus stayed to betray him. The disciple's name was Judas. Judas was a greedy man and so they agreed to pay him for his betrayal. Late on Thursday night Judas led a group of Roman soldiers and officers of the Temple to where Jesus was staying. It was in the Garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives located across the valley from the Temple. Jesus was arrested and taken before the Jewish religious authorities. His disciples went into hiding.

His arrest did not surprise Jesus. He knew it would happen, so he tried to prepare his followers for what was to come. On various occasions he told them that where he was going they could not go. He said to them that there would come a time when they would look for him but would not find him. He also made reference to the Jewish story of Jonah who spent three days in the belly of a great fish.

Jesus was having supper with his twelve closest disciples when Judas left to betray him. Jesus knew this would be an important supper so he had planned for it in advance. This supper was afterwards called the Last Supper. At this supper, the night before the preparation for the Passover feast, he made references to what was about to happen. He foretold, "I shall not eat [Passover] until it is fulfilled in the

kingdom of God.”<sup>71</sup> Later, in the Garden of Gethsemane, he told them, “You will all fall away because of me this night; for it is written, ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.’ ”<sup>72</sup>

At the Last Supper Jesus performed an act which was to become the central act in Christian worship. “Jesus took bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, ‘Take, eat; this is my body.’ And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink of it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you I shall not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.’ ”<sup>73</sup>

## **Death**

After Jesus was arrested, he was taken that night to an illegal trial before the Jewish Council of religious authorities. The chief priest in charge of the trial was Caiaphas, the one who had earlier said it was better for one man to die for the good of all the people. They were seeking evidence to put Jesus to death. They tried to accuse him of saying he would destroy the Temple. In fact, in predicting his death, Jesus had said that if they were to destroy the temple (referring to his body) he would raise it in three days. When Jesus was asked if he was the Messiah, the Son of God, Jesus said he was. The high priest accused him of blasphemy, and those assembled said he deserved death. Then they bound Jesus. When morning came they took him to Pontius Pilate who was the governor of the region where Jerusalem was located. It was Friday morning, the day the lambs were sacrificed in preparation for the Feast of the Passover.

Pilate at first wanted nothing to do with Jesus or his accusers. He told the Jewish authorities to deal with Jesus themselves. When they said it was not lawful for them to put a man to death, Pilate called for Jesus and questioned him. He asked Jesus if he was the King of the Jews. The Messiah was expected to be a king who would lead the Jews out of their captivity. If Jesus was claiming to be the King of the Jews this would have been seen by Pilate as a threat to Roman rule. Jesus’ answer further clarified his teaching on the kingdom of God. He said, “My kingship is not of this world; if my kingship were of this world, my servants would fight, that I might not be handed over to the Jews; but my kingship is not from

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<sup>71</sup> Luke 22.16

<sup>72</sup> Matthew 26.31

the world. . . . For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Every one who is of the truth hears my voice.”<sup>74</sup>

Jesus was from the region of Palestine called Galilee, so in an attempt to get rid of him, Pilate sent Jesus to Herod, the governor of Galilee who was in Jerusalem for the Passover. But after briefly questioning Jesus, Herod sent Jesus back to Pilate. By this time a crowd of Jews had gathered. Pilate went out to them and told them he could find no basis for a charge against Jesus. He then mentioned the custom of releasing a prisoner at Passover. He asked the crowd if they wanted him to release Jesus. The crowd had been agitated by the Jewish religious authorities against Jesus, so they said they wanted Pilate to release another prisoner. Pilate asked the crowd what he should do with Jesus. Their answer was to crucify Jesus.

Pilate saw that a riot was starting, so in front of the crowd he washed his hands telling them he was innocent of what was going to happen to Jesus. The crowd of Jews said to let Jesus' blood be on them and their children. Pilate had Jesus scourged. The Roman soldiers mocked Jesus. They placed a crown made of thorns on his head and wrapped him in a purple robe, purple being the color of royalty. Pilate questioned Jesus further but Jesus did not answer. Pilate asked him why he would not speak and told Jesus he had the power to crucify him or let him go. Jesus said, “You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above; therefore he who delivered me to you has the greater sin.”<sup>75</sup> Pilate again tried to release Jesus, but at the crowd's continued insistence, Pilate handed Jesus over to the soldiers to be crucified.

Crucifixion was a common form of execution with the Romans. The condemned prisoner would carry the crossbar of the cross to the site of the execution. He would then be stripped, and tied or nailed to the crossbar. The crossbar, with the prisoner attached, was then hoisted onto the upright part of the cross which was already in place. Death by crucifixion was slow and agonizing, being caused by shock, thirst, exhaustion, and finally asphyxiation. The execution was carried out in a public place to serve as a deterrent to criminals and insurrectionists. It was an ignoble form of death, particularly for the Jews who considered impaling an executed prisoner on a tree to be a disgrace reserved for those considered accursed.

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<sup>73</sup> Matthew 26.26-29

<sup>74</sup> John 18.36-37

<sup>75</sup> John 19.11

Jesus was led to the execution ground, followed by mourners. He was nailed to the cross. He said, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.”<sup>76</sup> There were two criminals crucified on either side of him. One prisoner insulted Jesus, but the other one said, “Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingdom.” Jesus told him, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”<sup>77</sup> Then, saying, “It is finished,”<sup>78</sup> he bowed his head and died.

The Roman soldier who was facing Jesus said, “Truly this man was the Son of God!”<sup>79</sup> Those who had assembled to watch the crucifixion returned home lamenting what had happened. Some of Jesus’ followers, including his mother Mary, stood at a distance, watching and mourning.

Jesus died quicker than expected. The dead body of the crucified prisoner was usually left on the cross to serve as a warning to others. However, in this case the next day, Saturday, was to be a special Sabbath associated with the Passover. Therefore, the Jews wanted Jesus’ body removed from the cross before sundown, because sundown was the beginning of the Sabbath according to their way of reckoning the beginning of a new day. Joseph of Arimathea, who was a prominent member of the Jewish Council but also a secret disciple of Jesus, asked Pilate if he could take away the body of Jesus. When permission was given, Joseph took the body to a new grave cut out of the rock in a garden which was close by. The body was hurriedly prepared because of the approaching sunset. The body was wrapped in linen cloths with spice. There was no time to anoint the body according to Jewish custom. This would have to be done after the Sabbath. A large circular stone was rolled in front of the entrance since this is how tombs were constructed at that time. The Jewish religious authorities, in consultation with Pilate, put a seal on the stone and posted a guard.

The followers of Jesus went into hiding. They were, of course, deeply saddened by Jesus’ death. But more than this they were lost and confused. They thought Jesus was the promised Messiah, the Son of the Living God, the one who was to lead Israel out of its bondage. Now he was dead. Now their expectations were shattered. What was the meaning of his life? What was the purpose of Jesus’ message if it had all come to nothing? What did it all mean?

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<sup>76</sup> Luke 23.34

<sup>77</sup> Luke 23.42-43

<sup>78</sup> John 19.30

<sup>79</sup> Mark 15.39

### III. Resurrection

At dawn on Sunday, the day after the Sabbath, eight women followers of Jesus, including Jesus' mother Mary, brought myrrh to Jesus' tomb to anoint the body in accordance with Jewish custom. They wondered among themselves how they would roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb. To their surprise they found the stone had already been removed. When they entered the tomb the body of Jesus was not there. As they stood there confused, two angels appeared to them and said, "Why do you seek the living among the dead?"<sup>80</sup> Then they were told, "Do not be afraid; for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him."<sup>81</sup> They left quickly to tell the disciples, feeling both joyful and fearful.

Just before the myrrh-bearing women had arrived at the tomb, an angel had come down from heaven and rolled back the stone. The earth quaked, and because the angels appearance was like lightning, the guards at the tomb became afraid. They shook and became like dead men. After the women left, the guards went to tell the Jewish religious authorities what had happened. The Jewish Council assembled and bribed the guards to tell people that the disciples of Jesus had stolen the body at night while the guards were sleeping. The guards took the money and did as they were instructed.

When the women told the disciples what they had seen at the tomb, the disciples did not believe them. It sounded like nonsense. Two of the disciples went to the tomb to see for themselves. They saw the empty tomb and they saw the cloth which had been around Jesus' head. They also saw the linen cloths which had wrapped Jesus' body rolled up in a separate place. But they did not yet understand what the empty tomb meant.

That same day two of the disciples were on the road to Emmaus, a village about seven miles west of Jerusalem. They were talking about all that had happened. A man came and walked with them. He asked them what they were talking about. One of the disciples asked the man if he was the only one in Jerusalem who did not know about the events of the last few days concerning Jesus of Nazareth. So they

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<sup>80</sup> Luke 24.5

<sup>81</sup> Matthew 28.5-7

told the man about Jesus, how he was a prophet who had been handed over by the Jewish religious authorities to be crucified; how people had thought he was the one who would redeem Israel; how now, three days after his death, they were amazed at being told that he was alive. The man said to them, “O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?”<sup>82</sup> He then interpreted all the Jewish scripture concerning the Messiah. When they arrived at Emmaus the two disciples invited the man to stay with them since it was evening. He agreed, and at the dinner table the man took the bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to the disciples. At that moment they recognized that the man was Jesus, but then he vanished. The disciples said to each other, “Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures?”<sup>83</sup>

They left immediately for Jerusalem to tell the other disciples. As they were speaking to the other disciples, Jesus stood among them. They were afraid, thinking he was a ghost. Jesus said to them, “Why are you troubled, and why do questionings rise in your hearts? See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself; handle me, and see; for a spirit [ghost] has not flesh and bones as you see that I have.”<sup>84</sup> Jesus asked for something to eat. They gave him broiled fish which he ate. Then he told them, “These are my words which I spoke to you, while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled.”<sup>85</sup> He then opened their minds, instructing them on the meaning of the scriptures. He said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.”<sup>86</sup>

Jesus appeared to his followers in and around Jerusalem, and in Galilee, for forty days. He told his disciples, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age [world].”<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Luke 24.25-26

<sup>83</sup> Luke 24.32

<sup>84</sup> Luke 24.38-40

<sup>85</sup> Luke 24.44

<sup>86</sup> Luke 24.46-48

<sup>87</sup> Matthew 28.18-20

Finally, he led them to Bethany, a town east of Jerusalem. He told them to stay in Jerusalem until they received the Spirit. He then lifted his hands and blessed them. As he did so, he ascended to heaven.

Jesus had spoken of the coming of the Holy Spirit before he was crucified. This is the same Holy Spirit who spoke through the prophets. At the Last Supper Jesus had said, “The Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.”<sup>88</sup> He said the Counselor “dwells with you, and will be in you.”<sup>89</sup> He also told them, “I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will convince the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment: concerning sin, because they do not believe in me; concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you will see me no more; concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world [Satan] is judged.”<sup>90</sup>

The coming of the Holy Spirit was important because now that Jesus had returned to be with the Father in heaven, the Holy Spirit would remain on earth to instruct the followers of Jesus. During the forty days after his resurrection when Jesus instructed his disciples, he told them to await the coming of the Holy Spirit in Jerusalem. So after Jesus’ ascension, the disciples returned to Jerusalem to wait for the Holy Spirit.

Fifty days after Passover was the Jewish feast of Pentecost. This obligatory religious observance was originally an agricultural festival. Pentecost was a time for the Jews to give thanks to God for an early harvest. On the day of Pentecost, Jesus’ closest disciples and others were gathered in one house. Suddenly from heaven a great sound came. The sound was like a great wind. This was followed by tongues of fire which rested on each one of them, filling them with the Holy Spirit. They began to speak in other languages. There were people from many foreign lands in Jerusalem. Each one was surprised and confused to hear the followers of Jesus, who were Galileans, speaking in each person’s native language. In response to their surprise and confusion, Peter, a close disciple of Jesus, made the following speech.

“Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem . . . hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs which God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know—this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God,

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<sup>88</sup> John 14.26

<sup>89</sup> John 14.17

<sup>90</sup> John 16.7-11

you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. But God raised him up, having loosed the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it.

“Brethren, I may say to you confidently of the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. Being therefore a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants upon his throne, he foresaw and spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption. This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. 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 which you see and hear. . . . Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.”<sup>91</sup>

Those who heard this speech were deeply affected. They asked what they must do. Peter said, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children and to all that are far off, every one whom the Lord our God calls to him.”<sup>92</sup> On that day three thousand were baptized. From that day, Jesus’ closest disciples and followers went out to spread the Gospel, the good news about Jesus, to the rest of the world.

## Understanding

The good news, the Gospel, preached by Jesus was that the kingdom of God was at hand. After the resurrection of Jesus, and the descent of the Holy Spirit who gave further instruct to them after Jesus’ ascension, the disciples of Jesus had a more complete understanding of Jesus’ Gospel. The Gospel preached by Jesus’ disciples and followers as they spread it throughout the world was this:

1. The Messiah has come.
2. He is Jesus of Nazareth.
3. He is not only the Messiah but the Lord himself.
4. He fulfilled all the prophecies and demonstrated who he was by his words and deeds.

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<sup>91</sup> Acts 2.14, 22-25, 29-34, 36

5. He was crucified but he rose from the dead.
6. Because of this you too can have eternal life.

The opposition to Jesus' message by the Jewish religious authorities did not end with the crucifixion of Jesus. As his disciples preached the Gospel, they too were persecuted. Even as the number of followers increased, the disciples were arrested more than once. Also, just as with Jesus, the Jewish religious authorities stirred up the people against the disciples with false charges of blasphemy. This resulted in the martyrdom by stoning of Stephen, a prominent member of the Jerusalem Church. Eventually all except one of Jesus' closest disciples would be martyred, either in Jerusalem or as they spread the Gospel throughout the world. Many other Christians would be martyred as well.

Persecution was just one of the challenges faced by the early Christians. One of the first challenges faced by the followers of Jesus was their relation to the Jewish religion. Were the people who wanted to be Christian, but who were not Jews, required to become Jews and follow Jewish religious law? Of special concern was whether non-Jews, called Gentiles, were required to be circumcised and adhere to Jewish dietary law. Followers of Jesus were divided on this. Some said the Gentiles must be circumcised, others said it was not necessary because God had given the Holy Spirit to the Gentile believers just as he had the Jewish believers. Finally, the disciples of Jesus and other prominent members of the Jerusalem Church gathered in a council to settle the issue. After a discussion, James, the leader of the Jerusalem Church, decided Gentiles were not required to be circumcised or adhere to Jewish dietary law.

As the Gospel of Jesus spread into the Roman empire, the early Christians encountered various philosophies and pagan religions. One of the main causes of the persecution of Christians had to do with their refusal to worship the Roman emperor as a god. This worship was required by the Roman Empire, even if it was only nominal, and Christians were considered treasonous by their refusal. Christians went through many periods of persecution. Despite this, those who accepted the Gospel increased in number. Finally, in 313, Constantine, the emperor of the Roman Empire, issued an edict which granted tolerance to the Christians and gave them full legal status with the other religions of the Empire. Constantine did this because he felt the Christian God had given him victory in a battle which secured his position as emperor. In 380, the emperor Theodosius made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire.

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<sup>92</sup> Acts 2.38-39

Another challenge facing the growing Church was one which persists to this day. Even when Jesus was on earth, there were people who misunderstood him and his message. Thus, from the very beginning followers of Jesus had to contend with false teachings about who Jesus was or what he taught. After Jesus' ascension the authenticity of what was being preached in the name of Jesus could be determined by referring back to those who were with Jesus while he was on earth and who witnessed his resurrection. Of these followers, Jesus had selected twelve disciples to which he gave special spiritual gifts and authority. These were called the Twelve. They were also called the Apostles.

As Christianity spread leaders were needed to head the churches in large cities and geographical areas. These leaders were called bishops. The Apostles would lay their hands on the one who was chosen to be bishop and invoke God's grace to come upon him. This bestowing of the gift of special grace would allow the bishop to fulfill his responsibilities as head of a local church with the help of the Holy Spirit. This laying on of hands by the Apostles would also serve as an assurance that the bishop was chosen by the Apostles and that he represented the true teaching of Jesus. Eventually successors were needed for the Apostles who had died. The bishops were the successors to the Apostles because of the gift of grace communicated to them by the Apostles through the laying on of hands and the invocation of the Holy Spirit.. These bishops in turn selected others to be bishops and consecrated them by laying their hands on them. Thus, the gift of special grace of the Holy Spirit was passed from the Apostles through an unbroken line of bishops. This tradition of Apostolic succession was one way the Church assured that Jesus' message was being preserved intact and without defilement. In fact, not only was Apostolic succession an assurance of authenticity, it was one of the essential and defining features of the Church. The true Church established by Jesus only exists where there is Apostolic succession.

Thus, the challenge the Church faced by the misunderstandings and distortions of Jesus' teaching was countered by reference to the Apostles. The solution to this problem was handled after the death of the Apostles by consulting with the successors to the Apostles, the bishops who stand in the line of Apostolic succession.

During the first eight centuries of the Church, all of the bishops from prominent cities throughout the Christian world gathered seven times in a worldwide council. The most important of these cities were Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Jerusalem, and Antioch. These general councils were called

Ecumenical Councils. The purpose of these Ecumenical Councils was to counter heretical teachings by precisely defining and clarifying the Church's understanding of Christ's teaching. The validity of this process was assured and accomplished through the guidance of the Holy Spirit working through the bishops who had received a special gift of the Holy Spirit as a result of their being in the line of Apostolic succession.

The Ecumenical Councils helped to clarify who Christ was and his relation to humanity. The Ecumenical Councils confirmed the Apostles understanding that Christ was fully God and fully human, that Christ had two natures in one person. Another result of the Ecumenical Councils was a precise statement of what the followers of Christ, Christians, believe about Jesus, God, the Holy Spirit, and their relation to each other. This statement is called both the **Creed** and the **Symbol of Faith**.

**I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.**

**And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Only-begotten, begotten of the Father before all ages. Light of Light; True God of True God; begotten, not made; of one essence with the Father, by Whom all things were made;**

**Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and became man.**

**And He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered, and was buried.**

**And the third day He rose again, according to the Scriptures;**

**And ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of the Father;**

**And He shall come again with glory to judge the living and the dead; Whose Kingdom shall have no end.**

**And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life, Who proceeds from the Father; Who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified; Who spoke by the prophets.**

**In one Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church.**

**I acknowledge one Baptism for the remission of sins.**

**I look for the resurrection of the dead;**

**And the life of the world to come. Amen.**

What is revealed in the Creed is that Christians worship one God consisting of three persons. Together they are called the Trinity. The three persons of God are distinct yet they share one essence. When God moves out from himself, he does so through his energies. All of creation, including man, is the energy of God. Man can participate directly with God through God's energies. However, man can never share in God's essence. The distinction between God and man is always maintained.

Christians understand that man was created in the image and likeness of God. Being made in the image of God means that man possess qualities in common with God such as intelligence, immortality, goodness, rationality, wisdom, virtue, and free will. But these qualities have been covered over by man's fallen and sinful nature. Consequently, these qualities are only dimly manifest. However, being made in the likeness of God means that man can perfect himself in order to more fully reflect the image of God in which he was made.

The life of Christians consists of fasting, prayer, attending the services of the Church, and participation in special rites of the Church called Mysteries. The Mysteries of the Church are visible acts, rites, which communicate the invisible grace (energy) of God. The Apostles were made the stewards of the mysteries of God by Christ and this stewardship has been passed down through Apostolic succession. Examples of the Mysteries of the Church are the Mystery of Repentance and the Mystery of Baptism. The central Mystery of the Church is the Mystery of the Eucharist. This Mystery is the re-creation of the Last Supper where the disciples consumed the body and blood of Christ. The Eucharist is spiritual food and drink. Christians primarily partake of the Eucharist during the Church's worship service called Divine Liturgy. A Christian partakes of the Eucharist for the remission of his sins and for the healing of his soul and body.

The knowledge which the Church possesses of Christ and his teaching, and of the Church's understanding of itself, is preserved and communicated from generation to generation in both oral and written form. Collectively this knowledge is called the Tradition of the Church. The content of this Tradition is vast and covers all aspects of Church doctrine and practice. It includes the rules governing the

Church and its worship, icons which offer a glimpse into heavenly life, and writings by special teachers called Church Fathers which offer insight into doctrine and the spiritual life. Also included in the Church's Tradition is the full understanding of Jesus' mother, Mary. In the Church's worship and devotional practice she is venerated as the Mother of God.

Perhaps the most well known aspect of this Tradition is the collection of books which emerged from it to form the Scripture of the Church, known collectively as the New Testament. Through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Church identified which books were authentic accounts of Jesus' life and teaching, thus meriting inclusion in the New Testament. These books were written with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and are considered the word of God. When the New Testament is coupled with the collection of Jewish Scriptures, called the Old Testament, the resulting book forms a history of the salvation of mankind. It is called the Bible. Devout Christians read from it daily.

## **The Orthodox Church**

Throughout the history of the Church there have been people who distort and misunderstand Christ, his teaching, and his Church. Despite this, the Church has the responsibility to maintain the true faith and teachings that it has received from the Apostles without making alterations. Christ established his Church in the world. He established only one Church, and there is only one Church which has been in existence since the time of Christ and which has preserved unchanged the teaching that Christ gave to the Apostles. In the world there are many groups that have arisen which call themselves a church. In the same way, a man may call himself a tree, but his calling himself that does not make him a tree. Likewise, these groups call themselves churches, but calling themselves churches does not make them churches. These groups are not a part of the Church established by Christ and they are not in the line of Apostolic succession. They are not authentic or legitimate churches. They are the inventions of men.

The true Christian Church is called Orthodox. It is neither Roman Catholic nor Protestant. Orthodox means correct worship. When Christianity is first brought to a country the newly established Orthodox Church there grows until it is able to function on its own. It is then called the Orthodox Church

of that country. Well known examples of the Orthodox Church are the Russian Orthodox Church, the Greek Orthodox Church, the Antiochian Orthodox Church, and the Orthodox Church of America.

### **What A Person Must Do**

This book has revealed that 2000 years ago God came to earth to save mankind which had fallen into sin. God had prepared mankind for his arrival by influencing the course of history through the Jews. God offers salvation to all people through his son Jesus. But a person must be an active participant in his salvation by accepting that Jesus is God and following his teaching. In addition to leading a moral life, this means joining oneself to Christ's Church in order to participate in the Mysteries of the Church and receive the fullness of Christ's teaching. If you are convinced of the truth presented in this book, or if you want more information or have questions, you are urged to visit the website [www.orthodox.cn](http://www.orthodox.cn) . This is a Chinese language website. Or you can contact

Theotokos "Unexpected Joy" Orthodox Church

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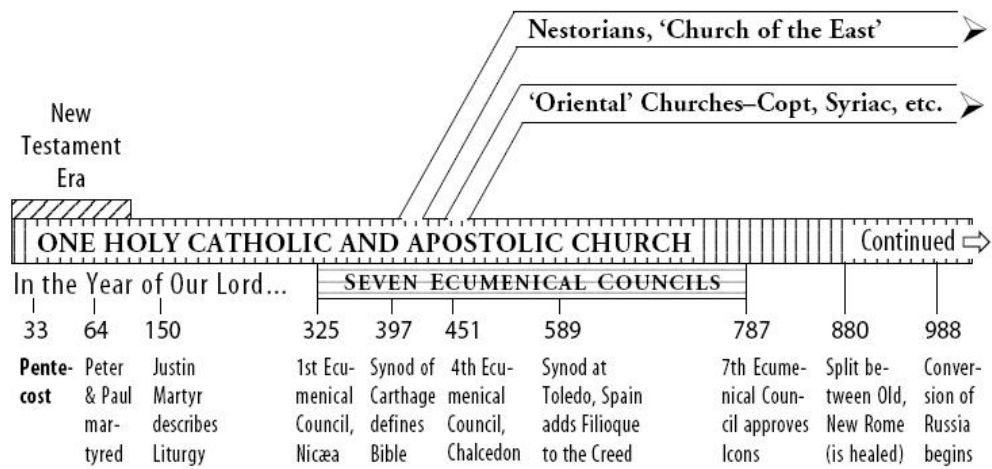
Email: [rmullin@att.net](mailto:rmullin@att.net)

Christ our Lord and Savior is calling you to his kingdom in heaven. He will dry your tears and forgive all your shortcomings. He is waiting for you. Finding Christ's Orthodox Church in China is not easy, but we live only once and then we are judged. Do not let this opportunity for eternal life with your Father in heaven slip through your fingers.

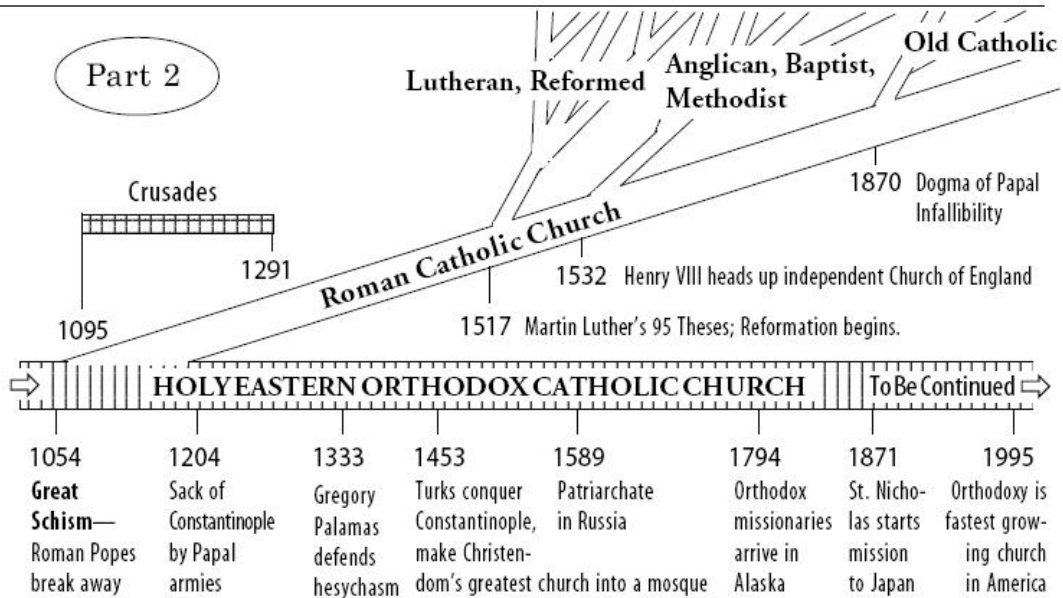
# TIMELINE OF CHURCH HISTORY

inspired by a timeline from Conciliar Press

Part 1



Part 2



*All Christian churches can be traced back historically to the Orthodox Church founded by the Lord Jesus Christ.*