

# Signposts To



David Matthew

'Are you atheist or agnostic? But you've always had a sneaky feeling God might exist after all? Looking for some signposts to guide you on your spiritual search? I have written this for you.'

# Signposts to GOD

David Matthew

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# Introduction

So, you're looking for God, are you? Keeping an eye open for signposts?

Good. This book is for you.

Well done for admitting it's God you're after. That's a good start — some people feel foolish even mentioning God, never mind admitting they suspect he's around, and that they'd like to get a handle on him.

I'd better start by telling you where I myself stand on the 'God' issue. Then, if you think I'm a dodgy signpost myself, you can bin the book and look elsewhere.

I'm in my late seventies as I write this, so I've had a long time to chew the subject over. I'm a reasonably intelligent man, well-educated, and with analytical tendencies, so be assured I'm not a sucker for anything weird or way-out. While I recognise that we must stay open to an element of mystery, I mostly like things clear and up-front.

And I believe in God, yes. By that I mean I believe there is an Ultimate Being who is (for lack of a better word) a 'person' rather than just a 'force' like electricity. What's more, I believe I have come to 'know' him — insofar as that's possible for human beings. I'm convinced, too, that, while he is infinitely great and 'other' — 'transcendent' is the proper word — he longs to relate to us humans.

That's one reason, I think, why all of us, in our own way, hanker after knowing him. I believe he responds to that longing whenever he sees it. So maybe, knowing, as he undoubtedly does, that you've picked up this book, he's smiling now! You may be a Hindu from India, or an agnostic from Manchester, an animist from the Amazon

jungle, a Muslim from North Africa, a Shintoist from Japan, an atheist from Reykjavik, a Buddhist from Thailand, or whatever, but God delights to respond when you reach out to him. So, something's happening already!

For myself, I'm a Jesus-man — I hold that Jesus offers the inside track to God. I was born and brought up in England, which has a long Christian cultural tradition. But I'm not a 'cultural Christian'. At the age of twelve, though my grasp of spiritual stuff was limited, I took the step of committing myself personally to follow Jesus Christ. Looking back, I'm convinced that's when I came to 'know' God in a meaningful way, and it has shaped my life ever since. Today, as a septuagenarian, I have no regrets at all. I'm as sure as ever that God has revealed himself uniquely in Jesus and that, if it's God you're after, he's your man.

I'm sure that God's love for you is such that he will reach you one way or another, whatever your background, religion, culture, history or opinions. But it's through Jesus that you will get to know him most directly and most intimately. So, some of the cultural and religious baggage you carry may need jettisoning along the way.

But all that's down the line. For now, give me a chance, at least, to walk with you along the God-road and point out a few signposts on the way. Here's the plan:

**Part 1: The Lure of the Journey.** We'll begin with what makes people go looking for God in the first place. Then we'll look at some broad truths about God and what he is like. This will be like looking at a map to review a hike you're about to start. It will give you an overall picture. Then, once you start walking, the features you pass will have a context.

**Part 2: Signposts of History.** God operates in the real world, so we're going to have to look at some history. This will be mainly the history of God's dealings with human beings in the centuries leading up to Jesus. On the way, we will identify some key events that are

signposts to God. These events will later prove to have a connection to Jesus himself, and will help us understand him.

**Part 3: Jesus.** Here we'll look at what the New Testament — the second of the Bible's two main divisions — says about Jesus: his birth, his life, his death, resurrection and ascension. Then we'll see how these point us to God.

**Part 4: The Signposts' Meaning.** Finally, with Jesus now in mind, we'll look back at the signposts we identified earlier, and see how each one illustrates what he has achieved. Each one will assure us we are on the right track to finding God. We will also see, from the signposts, how you can personally connect with God.

So, it's decision-time now: bin the book, or turn the page and stick with it. I invite you to give the second option a chance.



# Part 1: The Lure of the Journey

## 1. God-Thoughts

Yes, *of course* there's a God!

Deep down, you know it's true. Much of the time, naturally, you're rushing around doing stuff and don't have time to think about God much. Life is shaped by school, college, work, family or whatever. You have deadlines to meet, kids to take to ballet class, supermarket shopping to fit in, a bus to catch. And when you get chance to sag, you do it in front of the telly, which fills your mind with somebody else's frantic goings-on. It's all go.

But, now and again, you get the odd moment when God-thoughts rise to the surface. You find yourself wondering, 'What's this all *about*? What on earth is life *for*?' It can be a bit disturbing. That's why, often, you sever that line of thought deliberately, before it rocks your boat too much. But you can't stop God-thoughts coming, and it's amazing what can trigger them.

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You're walking down the street, for instance, and a hearse drives slowly past with a flower-covered coffin in the back, followed by a couple of black limousines. The folk inside look solemn.

'Who have they lost?' you wonder.

Some dear relative, no doubt, who once enjoyed life, told jokes, played with the grandchildren, drank sangria on holidays in Spain, supported Man United and liked jazz. All that's gone now. There's just

a corpse in a box, soon to disappear in smoke up the local crem chimney. Was their life worthwhile, you wonder? Did it have any real meaning or purpose? Is there life — *real* life — *before* death, let alone after it?

There must surely be *some* meaning to it, you decide. Otherwise, what's the point of *anything*? And you think about your own life: what's the purpose of *that*?

The folk in the black limousines will soon be at the funeral service. One or two will deliver the customary eulogy, in which even the biggest scoundrel who ever walked the earth will turn out to have been a saint of the first order.

'Another angel in heaven,' someone's bound to say. 'Yes,' adds another, 'he'll be looking down and grinning because we played his favourite Prince track for the exit music!'

And even as they say it they're thinking, 'Do I really believe that?'

It's all a bit unsettling. And then the curtains close, hiding the coffin from view, and the funeral-goers know that, behind those curtains, the council workers will be sliding the box into the furnace any moment now. So they carry on laughing and crying at the same time, head off to the wake, drink more than they should and listen to some thumpety-thump background music while they eat the sausage rolls. Then they'll disperse. Life's routines, shaken briefly by the family death, will take over again, keeping the deep questions suppressed till another time.

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You're on holiday in the Lake District. You've headed off after breakfast, in your boots and weatherproof gear, to climb that distant fell and, several hours later, you're approaching the summit. At last you take the final few steps and, with a smile of satisfaction, take your stand by the cairn and drink in the view. It's magnificent. You can see for miles. You feel exhilarated and, appropriately, on top of things.

Funerals and down-to-earth sources of God-thoughts seem a million miles away. Wow, this is superb!

Then the God-thoughts sneak up on you from another angle.

'It's silly, but I feel like saying thank you,' you muse. 'But who, or what, should I say thank you *to*? Is there, maybe, a God who *made* all this?' You pause to chew that one over for a few moments, then conclude, 'If there is, he must be big and powerful, to say the least. So he probably wouldn't take much notice of a speck like me on one of his mountains saying thank you.' So you pour a mug of coffee from the flask, nibble some chocolate and continue to marvel at the view. You suppress your 'thank you' and sideline your questions.

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Your young daughter has come home from school. She's had science today and has a question for you: 'Mum, Dad, do you know what the speed of light is?'

Even if you know, you pretend you don't, because you want to give her the pleasure of telling you. Which she does: 'It's 186,000 miles a second!'

You voice the appropriate 'oohs' and 'ahs' at the vastness of such a speed. But she hasn't finished yet: 'So, if light can go as far as that in just one second, how far can it go in a whole year?'

'I think we'll need a calculator for that,' you remark with a smile. 'Yes,' she replies. 'It's such a big number that nobody bothers writing down all those noughts. They just call it a "light year". And do you know, Mum, Dad, some of the stars up there in the sky are millions and billions of *light years* away!'

It boggles the mind. There's a thoughtful pause. All the family thought the drive from Dunstable to Inverness that you did last year was long enough, but this stellar kind of distance is in a different league. As the evening passes, you can't get it out of your mind, and

you're still mulling it over later that evening as you drift off towards sleep. The God-thoughts are here again!

'No, I just can't get my head round the bigness of it,' you conclude. 'I mean, this earth is big enough, in its own way. But really it's a pin-prick in the universe at large. I can't even begin to grasp just how vast it is.' You imagine yourself in a space-craft, hurtling through space. 'If I kept going, where would I get to?' you wonder. 'Is there an end to it somewhere? Or does the universe maybe go on forever? No, it can't do. It must have a boundary somewhere. But if I were to travel to it, what would I see when I looked over the fence?'

Your mind is going now. 'And there's another thing: all the planets and stars that the scientists have photographed are barren rock-scapes, while the earth is so luxuriant, with its glorious blues and greens and its amazing animal and vegetable life. Why's that? It almost seems as if Planet Earth was tailor-made for the likes of us to enjoy.' And you recall again the view from that fell-top in the Lakes.

'Mmmm. If it *is* tailor-made for us humans, who's the tailor?' you ask yourself. And you answer your own question: 'God, I suppose. It's the only explanation that makes any sense. And if he *is* the master-tailor, then everything I could see from that summit was peanuts for him to make. If he made the whole universe he's mega-big — and even less likely to be bothered with me than I thought.'

And you slip away to the Land of Nod with more questions than answers. But God, you feel sure, must be in there — or out there — somewhere.

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Such thoughts are normal. They come to everybody. Every one of us is like a jigsaw puzzle with a piece missing, and the piece is God. You can try and fill the gap by exploring forms of 'spirituality'. Zen Buddhism, perhaps, or Transcendental Meditation. If you live in, say, a Muslim nation you'll adopt the 'national religion'. If you live in the Amazon jungle you will follow your tribe's tradition of trying to fill

the gap with 'the spirits of the trees'. If you're a professed materialist, you'll probably end up like the guy who declared, 'I'm an atheist, thank God!'

This universal craving for what we might call 'spiritual fulfilment' is, in itself, a pointer to God's existence. So I invite you to admit to the craving. Better still, yield to it, and let it lead you to the missing piece of the jigsaw puzzle. It's God you're itching for, whether you realise it or not.

I'd like to introduce you to him.

## 2. Big and Big-Hearted

God is *big!* There's no escaping that.

The one who engineered the Big Bang must be, in some sense, bigger than the bang he triggered. And he must be bigger, somehow, than the universe he made. Our conversation about the speed of light and the vastness of the universe settled that. So let's just accept it for now, knowing that our feeble attempts to get our heads round the size of the universe — never mind the size of God himself — will inevitably end in frustration. Sometimes you just have to stop wondering, and accept.

Obviously, we aren't using 'big' in any material sense. God doesn't have physical dimensions. You can't get a tape-measure to a spiritual being. His hugeness is in his existence, in his presence. He is everywhere — at your side in the Lake District, in the street when the cortege goes by, and at your pillow as you drift off to sleep with thoughts of God and the universe. There's no escaping his presence. He's there in your darkest moments, in your time of terror, in your drunken stupor, in your moments of triumph, at your degree ceremony, your wedding, your promotion to the board, at the birth of your baby. At the edge of the universe, too — and beyond. One follower of God, who was a poet, put it this way:

'Where can I flee from your presence?  
If I go up to the heavens, you are there;  
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.  
If I rise on the wings of the dawn,  
if I settle on the far side of the sea,  
even there your hand will guide me,

your right hand will hold me fast.  
If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me  
and the light become night around me,"  
even the darkness will not be dark to you;  
the night will shine like the day,  
for darkness is as light to you.<sup>1</sup>

Yes, God is big. The word 'big', however, sometimes has a negative edge. We think of big business corporations, where profits rule and people, inevitably, become de-personalised, mere numbers on the employee-roll. In this respect, big is bad, just as small is beautiful.

But there's no badness about God's bigness. He isn't impossibly remote. Alongside his bigness is his capacity to view everything in his universe at the same level of detail. So he sees you, and knows you through and through, in as much detail as he knows the structure of the Milky Way and every back-alley within it. He knows every detail of your background, your DNA, your personality-traits, your strengths and weaknesses, your dodgy left knee, your gift for music, the colour of your eyes — everything. And because he's God, he doesn't lose track of all that when, so to speak, he takes his eyes off you and looks at another of his creatures. His bigness means he is comfortably on your case 24/7.

That can be a bit scary. You know, for instance, that you've been less than perfect. Certain episodes in your life you'd rather forget, because you're ashamed of things you've said and done. If God sees all that in among the rest, you may well feel apprehensive, especially if you've been taught that he's a bit like a Victorian schoolmaster, beetle-browed and frowning, pacing up and down his universe looking for sinners like you to pounce on and give a good thrashing to.

I'm sure there are issues in your life that will in due course need sorting out. But we can put that on hold for now. God doesn't suffer

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<sup>1</sup> David, the psalmist. In the Bible (Psalm 139:7-12).

from a sin-allergy, so you needn't fear that he'll run away from you in horror of being infected by your moral failures. Nor is he a cane-wielding schoolmaster intent on thrashing you within an inch of your life for failing to make the grade.

So what *is* he like?

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He is many things, that's for sure. We've already noted that he is big, far-seeing and immensely capable. He has other attributes, too. But if we liken all these traits to the spokes of a wheel, what is the hub? What is the *fundamental* feature of God's nature, the one that influences and gives direction to all his other characteristics?

God is *love*.

I didn't say, 'God is *loving*'. He *is* loving, and that's wonderful news. But to say 'God is *love*' is something more. It means love is his very nature, his essence, the fundamental flavour of his being. Love is not some bolt-on extra, it's what he intrinsically *is*. It's not just one aspect of his nature, alongside others. Like the sugar in the cup of tea, it flavours every part, and you can't get it out, or separate it from the rest. God *is* love.<sup>2</sup>

Maybe we need to clarify here what we mean by 'love', because we use the word in many ways. For some, love is the equivalent of *sexual activity*. Valid as it is, that's not what we're talking about here. God is not a sexual being. Strictly, he's not even a gendered being, though for convenience, and by tradition, we use words like 'he' and 'him'.

Nor do we mean a *sentimental* kind of love. When you bump into a friend who's walking her new cocker spaniel pup you might exclaim, 'Awww! Just look at him! He's so cute! I just *love* puppies!' But if the pup was in your house, chewing the Queen Anne chair-legs

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<sup>2</sup> This statement is made twice in the Bible by the Apostle John, in one of his letters in the New Testament (1 John 4:8. 16).



and leaving piles of unmentionables on the floor, your 'love' might quickly wear thin. God's love isn't the sentimental sort.

Instead, his is a *robust, committed* kind of love.

Some other languages have a word that hits the nail on the head. In Hebrew it's *chesed*. In first-century Greek it's *agapé*.<sup>3</sup> But in English we don't have such a word, so I need to spell out what God's love is like. It's a love *totally committed to the welfare of the one loved* — and that's you. It's determined to do you good, whatever the cost. It won't be diverted from its object. It won't fade. It won't fizzle out. It won't control you. It will make sacrifices. Indeed, it will even die, if necessary, to secure the welfare of the loved one. One ancient Greek writer, using the word *agapé* mentioned above, said this about it:

'Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.'<sup>4</sup>

Like me, you're probably thinking of people who have failed to love you in that way of uncompromising commitment. And others might say the same about you. But God's love is one hundred percent this kind. That's his attitude towards you. He is totally committed to your welfare. Nothing can change that, nothing at all. God *is* love, and you're at the receiving end of it!

Maybe you need to pause here and let that sink in. Let it soften you up a bit. If that's what God is like, perhaps you could begin to drop your defences, along with your 'Yes, but...'s and open up to him with a little more confidence. He's big, yes, but he's big-hearted, too. What a relief!

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<sup>3</sup> The languages of the two main sections in the Bible respectively: the Old Testament and the New Testament.

<sup>4</sup> The Apostle Paul. In the Bible (1 Corinthians 13:4-8).

### 3.

## The Social God

You may have heard the phrase ‘the Trinity’. It crops up in Christian circles a lot. The word is a mixture of ‘tri’, which means three — as in ‘tricycle’ and ‘triangle’ — and ‘unity’, meaning one. That’s why God is sometimes referred to as ‘the three in one’.

That may sound a bit technical but, once you unpack it, it’s heart-warmingly exciting! It’s an aspect of the fact that ‘God is love’. Love needs an object. But if God, as some religions teach, is utterly singular, isolated and remote, in an elite class of one, his love has nowhere to go.

‘Ah yes,’ you say, ‘but maybe that’s why he made *us* — so that he had someone to love?’ True, as we’ll see. But God was love *before* he made us. How could that be? Because he is a Trinity. He is ‘one’, yes, but within the oneness he exists as three ‘persons’. Maybe ‘persons’ isn’t the best word, but it’s the one that has stuck. We could say three ‘modes of being’ or, if you’re into Greek terms, three ‘hypostases’. Let’s stick with ‘persons’.

The three ‘persons’ of the Trinity are Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and they are one.

Let’s take the ‘one’ bit first. This aspect of the Trinity tells us that, between the three persons, there is absolute harmony. They are of one mind. No differences of opinion. No jockeying for position. No feeling inferior or pushed out. They exist in full agreement with each other because they are ‘one’. And what’s more, *love* flows between them! The Father loves the Spirit and the Son; the Son loves the Father and the Spirit; and the Spirit loves the Father and the Son. So as well as being of one mind, they are of one heart: a heart of love.

This love which, as we have seen, is the hub of God’s character, has *always* flowed between the persons of the Trinity, giving real meaning to the phrase ‘God is love’. That’s what led John Wesley — a famous 18th-century Christian leader — to refer to God as the ‘sweet society’.<sup>5</sup>

God could no doubt have continued forever in that happy, trinitarian love. But he decided to enlarge the circle, to extend the society. Love always makes room for others, so God created the universe and, within it, configured Planet Earth as the focus of his plan. Having populated it with plants and animals of huge variety, he placed human beings in this glorious setting.<sup>6</sup> It was they whom he would draw into his own circle of love. Caught up in a loving relationship with him, they would be his vice-regents, caring for the earth with him and on his behalf, and, in doing so, they would be immensely fulfilled and happy. Love would govern everything.

That’s important, so hold onto it. Why? Because, further down the line, things went wrong, and you will be in a better place to grasp the process of God’s getting things back on track if you have a clear grasp of his original intention. So let me say it again: God wanted a loving relationship with human beings. They would run the world for him, and with him, worshipping him for his goodness in providing it for them, with all its immense possibilities. They would act as his stewards in caring for it while, in the process, enjoying the endless fulfilment that life on earth would provide.

In setting up this scenario *God ran a risk*. Love is only love if it is freely given. He could no doubt have made us as automatons, programmed to love him and incapable of not doing so. But where

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<sup>5</sup> John Wesley was a great preacher who lived in the 18th century. He is best known as the founder of the Methodist Church.

<sup>6</sup> We won’t get bogged down here in how he did all this. Some Christians believe he used evolutionary processes to bring it about; others prefer the idea of special creation—or a mixture of both. It needn’t affect our journey at this point. Nor need we, at this stage, pursue the ‘other civilisations in the universe’ idea. There might be others, but you and I are human, here on Earth, and that’s our current focus in this book.

would have been the satisfaction for God in that? There's simply no substitute for love *freely given*. And the only way God could arrange for that was to grant humans freedom of choice — something love always does, for true love is never controlling. On that basis, they could respond to his love for them by loving him in return — or they could use their freedom to reject him and do their own thing.

In a test case — the well-known story of the Garden of Eden — God gave them a free choice. They rejected him and did their own thing. And that, alas, turned everything sour. (Don't worry if you feel you can't take the Eden story literally; the point holds good even if Adam and Eve, and their actions, are figurative for human attitudes to God generally).

'But surely,' you say, 'being God, and all-knowing, he must have known that's what would happen?' 'So why did he go ahead with it?'

Well, maybe he *didn't* know it would happen. Sure, we tend to think of God as, by definition, all-controlling, or at least as all-knowing. But it's love, not control, that is the heart of his being, and love always makes room for others. What's more, it gives them freedom to make genuine choices. And if they are free agents, making real choices in real time, God doesn't know what they will do until they do it. So we could say that the love that is God's essential nature makes him subject, at least to a degree, to the will and choices of us, his creatures. He doesn't know everything that will happen before it happens.

He does, however, know what choices we *could* make and what the effects of each possibility would be. Meanwhile, he doesn't just sit back and let us get on with it. In love he actively encourages us in the right direction. But he draws us, rather than pushes us. It's the carrot, not the stick. And yes, his love is gradually steering things towards the fulfilment of his goal so that, in the end, his purpose of perfect harmony between him and his creatures will indeed be achieved.

But, in the meantime, God ran the risk — and humans let him down. Their bad choices put a spanner in the works.

It's as if a germ that we might call 'sin' or 'selfishness' was set loose on society. We are all diseased, and now live in a world out of kilter with God and his ways. All of us humans are messed up in one way or another. And the knock-on effect has touched every part of life and the world. We have natural disasters like typhoons, earthquakes, volcanoes and tsunamis. We have 'nature red in tooth and claw'. We have the anopheles mosquito and a host of deadly bacteria. We have wars, terrorism, slavery and human exploitation. Everything is far from the perfect, harmonious world that God has always yearned for — and that you, too, yearn for deep down.

Alienation marks the human condition. We feel alienated from the God we need, while the inner ache for him continues unabated. The god-thoughts insist on coming, and we live in hope that, somehow, the alienation can be sorted out so that we can experience his love in full.

It was towards that end that God began to steer the events of world history.

Yes, history. That's no surprise. God is concerned with human beings and their affairs, so if he was going to reach them at all, he would have to do it in the context of their real lives: the society they lived in, their worldview, the geographical and political realities of their day, and the events of their routine existence. So stand by for a bit of history!

## Part 2: Signposts of History

### 4.

## A Foot in the Door

If God was to fix the messed-up world, he had to start somewhere. So he started with a man called *Abraham*.

There had been lots of people around before Abraham, and God's love extended to every one of them. How he reached them we don't know, but we can be sure that the God who is love did it somehow. But with Abraham things moved up a gear. So that brings us to...

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### *Signpost 1: Abraham, the man of faith*

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I suppose God could have revealed himself to anyone as a means of getting his foot in humanity's door. But it was Abraham who had the privilege. Abraham lived a couple of thousand years BC, in what is today called Turkey. Like everybody else, he expressed his inner longing for God by worshipping his nation's pagan deities — until the one true God broke in on him and started to show him better things.

Notice, by the way, that it's God who took the initiative here. Being love, he could never comfortably turn his back on the mess that the world had become, pretending it wasn't there. No, his love compelled him to reach out to his estranged creatures. He has always been like that, and always will be. Aren't we glad!

God revealed himself to Abraham, throughout his long life, as utterly loving and loyal. He also made him some seriously big

promises. One of these concerned children. Sadly, Abraham and his wife Sarah had not been able to have children. It was a source of great sorrow to them, especially in a society where great store was set by the number of children you had. Then, when the couple were both way past child-bearing age, God promised them a son. At the time, it seemed so outlandish that Sarah laughed out loud. But God wasn't offended at that, and reaffirmed the promise. And Abraham believed him.

Here's where Abraham showed himself a man of *faith*. If faith means 'taking God at his word', Abraham had faith. The Bible records that 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.'<sup>7</sup> That's encouraging. It means that, even though Abraham was far from being righteous — that is, completely upright morally — his willingness to trust God's word to him ranked more highly in God's sight than his imperfections. So God accepted his faith as the equivalent of total righteousness. And Abraham's faith paid off. God evidently gave the old man's libido a boost, and rejuvenated Sarah's ovaries. The couple did the necessary and, nine months later, Isaac was born. A son and heir at last—named Isaac. Better late than never!

That's the first of our signposts. So take note of it: remember *Abraham, the man of faith*. We'll see him again later.

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## *Signpost 2: The sacrifice of Isaac*

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Sometime after this, when Isaac had grown to be a young man, something dreadful happened.

At that time in history, human sacrifice was widespread. Child-sacrifice, in particular, which to us is horrifying, people then viewed

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<sup>7</sup> Romans 4:3, quoting Genesis 15:6 (the alternative spelling, 'Abram', is used there).

as normal. As a man of that culture, Abraham came to the conviction that God wanted him to kill Isaac as a sacrifice, to prove that he valued God more than his own son. Whether that was God's idea is open to question, as we shall see. But God has always met people where they are, in their current cultural setting, with all the presuppositions this brings. We must always bear this in mind when reading the Old Testament.

So, Abraham set off, along with an unsuspecting Isaac, to the mountain-top where the deed was to be done. That Abraham was a man of his times is evident from his willingness to go through with it. He must surely have seen it as undesirable — killing this much longed-for only son, born to him and Sarah in their old age. But he seems to have shown no sign of backing out. Maybe that was a measure of how deeply ingrained the most appalling of practices can become in society.

At the moment when Abraham was about to slit the young man's throat, God intervened. An angel stopped the killing, and pointed out a ram, caught by its horns in a nearby thicket. So Abraham took that and offered it in sacrifice in Isaac's place. But his willingness to put God first, by doing what he believed him to be telling him to do, is a mark of his deep commitment to this God.

And we learn something about God from it all: he didn't want human sacrifices. Later, he showed that he didn't really want animal sacrifices either, but the move, in this incident, from human to animal was a move in the right direction. Abraham's ideas of what God was like were being developed.

This incident is our second signpost. Remember it. Note the idea of *substitution* that's central to it: the intended victim was spared and a substitute took his place.

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Now let's fast-forward in history to bring us within reach of our next signpost.

God continued to bless Abraham, giving him further promises. One was that he would become God's instrument to bring a better life to the whole of the broken world — yes, the whole world! In particular, he would be the patriarch of a large family, from which, somehow, the blessing would emerge to mend things everywhere. And that family would live in what later came to be known as the Holy Land.

Sure enough, this scenario began to unfold there in the Middle East. Abraham's son, *Isaac*, and grandson, *Jacob*, both continued the relationship with God. Each received further insights into his character and his ways. As for Jacob, God took the liberty of changing his name, renaming him *Israel*. His sons in due course became the fathers of the twelve tribes that grew, as the generations passed, to become the nation that took their father's name: the *nation of Israel*.

That nation, strangely enough, had its growth spurt in a foreign land: Egypt. It came about through the adventures of one of Jacob's sons named *Joseph*.

As a teenager Joseph got on the nerves of his older brothers, who contrived to get rid of him by selling him to some traders heading for Egypt. There, he was sold into slavery, where he had to grow up pretty quickly. In his distress he, too, fostered his relationship with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He discovered, in doing so, that this God was giving him an unusual insight into people's dreams; he was able to interpret them with astonishing accuracy — verified by the fact that the events he predicted actually came to pass.

This gift led, after many ups and downs, to his being summoned before Pharaoh, the ruler of Egypt, who himself had had a dream. He felt it was significant, but found his advisers and diviners unable to interpret it for him. And so Joseph ended up in Pharaoh's presence, where God gave him the dream's interpretation. The gist of it was that seven years of bountiful harvests would be followed by seven years of famine. This rang true with Pharaoh, who, struck by Joseph's

sharpness and character, put him in charge of storing up the grain during the first seven years, then overseeing the dispensing of it during the famine.

The famine duly arrived. It affected not just Egypt, but also the surrounding nations — including Israel, where Joseph's family still lived. When supplies of grain dried up, the news filtered out that there were ample supplies in Egypt, so the aged Jacob sent his sons to Egypt to buy some in. And who did they find themselves facing at the depot but their very own brother, Joseph, whom they had treated so badly many years before! To his credit, Joseph forgave them and, with Pharaoh's permission, invited the whole family to settle in Egypt for the famine's duration.

This they did. But life there was comfortable, so, when the famine ended, they stayed on. There in Egypt they prospered and had children galore until it was no longer an Israelite *family* living in Egypt, but the Israelite *nation*. As time passed, their extraordinary growth gave a later Pharaoh security concerns: if the Israelites decided to flex their muscles, he surmised, the Egyptians could be in trouble. The safest course was to nip the thing in the bud, which he achieved by imposing slavery on them. And, thus, Israel became a slave-nation inside Egypt, crushed by hard labour and demanding taskmasters.

Hold your breath: our next signpost is fast approaching...

## 5. Breaking Out

We left the nation of Israel in Egypt as slaves. It was a terrible life for them. They were unpaid, working for the most basic of food and accommodation. They were forced to work long hours of heavy manual labour on Pharaoh's latest building projects. And the Egyptian taskmasters were always close by, armed to the teeth, with a whip at the ready to lash your back if you slacked off. And now...

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### *Signpost 3: Passover*

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Here's where an Israelite called *Moses* comes into the picture.

Though an Israelite by birth, Moses, through an amazing twist of circumstances, had been raised as an Egyptian in Pharaoh's court. But, when he reached adulthood, he opted to go back to his roots, laying aside his Egyptian privileges and aligning himself with the Israelite slaves.

Then God revealed himself to him through the incident of the burning bush — the spontaneous combustion of a bush in the desert, a fairly common phenomenon, but this time it didn't burn up; Moses went to investigate, and God spoke to him there. He commissioned Moses to approach Pharaoh on his behalf with the demand to free the Israelites. But Pharaoh was no push-over, and dug his heels in time after time. God sent a series of plagues on Egypt to nudge him in the right direction, but they all failed to do so — until the last one. This came to be known as the *Passover*, and here's how it worked.

On a given night, it was revealed, death would strike the firstborn of every Egyptian family. But it would ‘pass over’ the Israelite families, who took certain steps, at God’s command, to avert it. Each family would prepare a lamb-dinner, so that they would have full stomachs when the call came to up sticks and leave the land of slavery. They were also to take some of the lamb’s blood and smear it outside their houses, around the doors. This was an indicator that, for this family, death had already taken place and those inside the house need thus have nothing to fear from it.

As midnight struck on the fateful night, a great cry of grief went up all across Egypt. The death of the firstborn was the straw that broke the camel’s back: Pharaoh at last gave the Israelites the ‘all clear’ to leave. And so began the great *exodus from slavery* that Jews remember to this day at their annual Passover celebrations. Under Moses’ direction, they headed out on the long journey to the ‘promised land’. God went with them, guiding them supernaturally as they headed into the desert that lay between them and their destination.

For now, remember this: *a lamb was killed. The tyrant was defeated. The captives went free.* Which leads us to...

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### *Signpost 4: The Red Sea*

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The freed slaves had a scare when they reached the shores of the Red Sea.

By that time Pharaoh had had second thoughts about letting them go. How would he succeed with his state building projects with no slave-labour to draw upon? So he dispatched his military — horse-men and chariots — to pursue the Israelites, round them up and bring them back. God’s people thus found themselves trapped. They had empty desert on either side, the Red Sea in front of them and the Egyptian chariots coming up behind. They needed a miracle — and

they got one. God, who for the most part chooses to not interfere with natural processes, reserves the right to intervene directly now and then, when it suits his purposes, and he did so now. He caused the waters of the Red Sea to part, allowing the Israelites to cross to the other side on dry land while holding back the Egyptian troops until they were safely across.

Then he removed the restraints and the Egyptian forces rushed across in pursuit, only to be overwhelmed as the waters of the Red Sea surged back into place. All were drowned. The Israelites, watching from the far side, breathed a sigh of relief that they were free at last. Now they could press on purposefully through the desert towards the Promised Land.

That's another one to remember: *passing through the water to safety at the other side.*

Just before we move on, it's worth pointing out that, in ancient times, history wasn't recorded the same way we do it today. We tend to expect 'hard facts', verifiable by cold evidence. But then it was different. Each nation had its own 'back-story', which wove together strands from its history and, in doing so, gave them a slant that helped explain the nation's origins and development. Not every item was necessarily 'hard fact', even though there was usually some of that behind it. It was more a matter of *interpreting* the factual aspects, sometimes exaggerating or even embroidering them, in order to give meaning to their lives and provide a sense of national identity and purpose in moving forward.

Many Christian scholars today regard much of the Old Testament 'history' that we've been dipping into as this kind of 'history with a bias' and not necessarily literally true in every detail. You can decide for yourself in due course. But, whatever view we take, it makes no difference at all to our looking at bits of it here, because the 'signposts' hold good regardless.

Now back to those Israelites en route to the Promised Land...

## 6.

# The Meeting Place

If the Israelite nation had kept up a decent pace, and taken a direct route, they would probably have reached the borders of Canaan — the Promised Land — in less than a month. As it was, it took them 40 years. Yes, that long!

We won't go into all the ins and outs of why. But, for a start, they took a round-about route. And they suffered all manner of delays, chiefly as a result of unrest and mutiny within the community. It's astonishing that God stuck with them, as their behaviour at times was enough to try even the divine patience. But stick with them he did. That's because of the kind of God he is: always longing for close fellowship with people, and displaying amazing forbearance with their frustratingly childish ways. And that leads us to...

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### *Signpost 5: God's People*

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There's nothing like adversity to bring people together. The slavery in Egypt had done that for the Israelites. By the time they left for the Promised Land they felt themselves very much to be a distinct people. Adversity had united them, for sure. But the amazing events leading up to their liberation had further strengthened that sense of unity under God, who had delivered them.

A couple of months into their travels, the time came for that unity under God to be ratified. By this time, they were near Mount Sinai. It was there that God gave Moses the moral guidelines that would keep

them in line with his will for them. We call them the Ten Commandments. They covered the fundamentals of the people's relationship with God, and their relationships with each other.

In addition, there was a whole raft of more detailed legislation. It covered aspects of life like the treatment of servants, liability for personal injuries, the protection of property such as flocks and herds, the keeping of the Sabbath, annual religious festivals — and much more. It all ensured that the people had a solid framework within which to order their lives and live in peace and justice.

The nation formally accepted responsibility for keeping all these requirements. This took place in a solemn ceremony, in which they undertook to accept and obey God's laws. 'We will do everything the Lord has said,' they declared; 'we will obey.' It was the making of a *covenant*, that is, a formal agreement between them and God. Animal blood was shed and sprinkled on the people to drive the message home. They would live in line with his laws, and he would undertake to look after them and bless them, insofar as they did so.

They were now Israel indeed, *'the people of God'* as never before, united under his rule and governed by his laws. Remember that, as we move on to...

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## *Signpost 6: The Tabernacle*

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One way God expressed his longing to be close to his people was through the *Tabernacle*, so you need to know what this was.

Sometimes it was called the *Tent of Meeting* — where God and his people could meet. In short, it was a portable place of worship. It had to be portable because the Israelites were a people on the move. So it consisted of hooked poles, curtains and removable coverings that could be packed away and carried whenever the nation struck camp, then reassembled at the next stopping-place.

It was always put up in the centre of the camp, with the twelve tribes pitching their tents on all four sides. This was symbolic, showing that God's presence belonged at the very heart of the nation's life. And God was happy to make his presence felt there. Indeed, when its initial construction was finished, he showed up there in an awesomely tangible way. What an astonishing thing: God in a tent!

There were *three zones* in the Tabernacle.

The outer zone was an open area, surrounded by a wall of curtains, but open to the sky. Here was located an altar where animal sacrifices could be offered by the priests. Any Israelite could enter this area.

Inside this zone, towards one end, was a covered area divided into two further zones. The first was called *The Holy Place* and contained various items of portable religious furniture, including a small table-like altar where incense could be burned, and a seven-branched lampstand. These articles all had symbolic meaning that need not bother us here. Only members of Israel's priesthood were permitted to enter this area.

At one end of this zone was a curtain, behind which was the third zone: the *Most Holy Place*, sometimes called the *Holy of Holies*. Inside it was just one item of furniture: the Ark of the Covenant. This was a gold-covered wooden box containing the stone slabs on which were engraved the Ten Commandments. On top of the Ark were two carved angelic figures, also gold-covered, with their wing-tips touching over the centre of the top of the box. This central spot — sometimes called the 'Atonement Cover' or the 'Mercy Seat' — was perceived to be where God placed what we might call his 'localised' presence.

This is an important signpost: *God in the Tabernacle, in the midst of his pilgrim people.*

An annual event inside the Holy of Holies is our next signpost...



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## Signpost 7: The Day of Atonement

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Access to the Holy of Holies was even more restricted than to The Holy Place. Only the High Priest himself could go through the curtain, and that only once a year, on the day of a religious festival called *The Day of Atonement*, or, in Hebrew, *Yom Kippur*.

It was the biggest day in the religious calendar. The people would gather at the Tabernacle, hushed as the sacred moment drew near. The High Priest, dressed in his ceremonial robes, would offer several animal sacrifices before approaching the curtain that marked the entrance to the Holy of Holies. Then, carrying a censer of burning incense, and a bowl of animal blood, he would disappear behind the curtain into the presence of God. There, the smoke from the incense would protect him by partially obscuring the holy Ark of the Covenant from his sight. He would sprinkle some of the animal blood on the Atonement Cover before coming back out to the waiting people.

All of this was to 'make atonement' for the sins of the Israelites. Moses put it this way to them: 'On this day atonement will be made for you, to cleanse you. Then, before the Lord, you will be clean from all your sins.'<sup>8</sup>

Remember this signpost, then: *the High Priest offering blood to deal with sins and bring moral cleansing.*

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What a remarkable scenario all this was!

Think about it. A bunch of far-from-perfect people, trekking through a Middle Eastern desert, carrying a portable place of

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<sup>8</sup> Leviticus 16:30

worship where God lived — at least, in a localised sense. A people with their God at the centre!

The Tent of Meeting was, we might say, the meeting-place of heaven (God's dimension) and earth (humanity's dimension). It was a small-scale representation of God's eternal desire to have a far bigger, worldwide people among whom he could live, and whose company he could enjoy, just as they could enjoy his.

The Tabernacle travelled with the Israelites throughout the 40 years it took them to reach the Promised Land. They had other indications of God's presence with them, too. Throughout their travels they enjoyed his guidance, manifested in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. Awesome stuff!

Their journey had its serious ups and downs, but in due course they made it. They crossed the border — the River Jordan — near Jericho and over the coming years conquered the Canaanite inhabitants to make the land their own. The Tabernacle was given a more permanent pitch, and life in the land began to settle down into a steady going-on. After such a chequered history, the people felt that, at last, life would take a turn for the better.

It did — and it didn't...

# 7.

## Temple and Kingdom

Things went well at first. As time passed, the famous King David made Jerusalem the capital. Then his son, King Solomon, who felt it inappropriate for God to continue living in a tent, so to speak, built the great Jerusalem Temple to replace the tent. And that brings us to the next signpost...

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### *Signpost 8: The Temple*

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That splendid building became the centre of the nation's worship. They perceived the presence of God to dwell there in a special sense, just as it had done in the Tabernacle. Several times a year, Jews from every part of the country made the trip to the Temple for the great annual festivals of worship and thanksgiving, including the Day of Atonement.

The Jews saw 'spirituality' as a series of concentric circles. At the centre was God himself, living (in the localised sense) in the Temple. Around that was their much-loved capital, the city of Jerusalem. Around that was the Holy Land and its Jewish inhabitants. And finally, beyond that, lay the rest of the world — the vast area of the Gentile (non-Jewish) nations. The idea was that the blessing of God's presence in the Temple's Holy of Holies would flow out from the centre to touch each circle in turn until, as one of Israel's prophets

put it, 'the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.'<sup>9</sup>

The Temple was still a key feature of Jewish life centuries later at the time of Jesus. That's why we mark it here as a signpost, and we'll be back to it later.

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Meanwhile, it's worth noting that this idea of God's presence at the centre of things in the Temple, and flowing out from there like ripples on a pond, had appeared before. It's in the book of Genesis, with which the Bible opens. The six-day 'creation' process described there was never meant to be taken literally as portraying creation out of nothing. It describes something different: how God prepared the existing materials of the universe, and of the earth in particular, to be a *temple* for him to dwell in.

God, it seems, is always arranging things so that he can live among people. In ancient times, people believed that the gods dwelt in temples. God went along with that notion. He organised the earth to be a *cosmic* temple where he and people could be together. This he achieved in six 'days', and then on the seventh day he moved in, so to speak. The idea was that the glory of Eden — an earthly Holy of Holies where God dwelt among his people — would percolate out to fill the whole planet. God himself would see to that, with the help of Adam and Eve and their descendants.

It was those helpers who, as we saw, let God down. Genesis chapter three describes how Adam and Eve, representing the human race, abused their freedom. They turned their backs on God and did their own thing. That threw a spanner into the works of 'God's presence percolating out from the centre'. As a result, his desire for

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<sup>9</sup> The prophet Habakkuk (2:14).

the *whole earth* to be a temple filled with his presence was temporarily frustrated.

Now let's jump forward in history to Jerusalem, the Israelite capital, where we left off a moment ago. Here, once again, we see God's 'fill the earth' desire expressing itself. The Jerusalem Temple was where God now focused his earthly presence. He intended his presence and blessing to move out from there, through the concentric circles, to eventually embrace the whole earth.

Things for a while looked to be moving in the right direction. As Israel grew in numbers, God in due course had a substantial presence in the world in the form of a nation who, at least in theory, were committed to him and to living in a way that pleased him. He assured them that, insofar as they succeeded in that, they would know his blessing, which would touch them in very down-to-earth ways. Their strong family-life and principles of social justice, based on the standards God was revealing to them, were streets ahead of anything in the surrounding nations. These factors brought a stability that made for material prosperity: good crops, growing herds of sheep and cattle, sound health and a flourishing of the arts — including music composed for the praise and worship of the God who had made all this possible.

Israel, in this capacity, were God's 'foot in the door' for reaching the ends of the earth. They were a sample of a better society, serving as a beacon to the rest of the world — the Gentile nations around them. And that, as we have noted, is exactly what God had called them to: they were to be 'a light for the Gentiles.' Their very existence said to the Gentiles, 'Look at the quality of our life. It's what you've always longed for but have never been able to achieve. We enjoy it because of the God we worship and serve. So, turn from your heathen ways and respond to his love yourselves, then you will experience the same happy and fulfilled life.'

That was the theory. In practice it didn't work out that way. And once again it was because of human failure: the Jews — most of them,

anyway — abused the freedom God had granted them. Instead of exporting the knowledge and blessing of God to the nations around them, they became selfish and inward-looking. They hogged the blessings to themselves. They looked down their noses at the ‘Gentile dogs’, who understandably weren’t impressed. It was the story of Eden and human disobedience all over again.

But they were at least a *nation* of some substance. Which brings us to our next signpost...

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### *Signpost 9: Kingdom*

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For a long time after leaving Egypt, the Israelites had no king. Well, they had — but not a human one. Their king was God himself; they were a *theocracy*. The day-to-day leadership was in the hands of God’s appointed representatives. That was Moses at first. Then, after they entered the Promised Land, Joshua. But these men never dreamt of calling themselves kings, or acting like kings.

Later, as the people began drifting away from the Lord, they periodically came under attack from surrounding nations, like the Moabites and Philistines. When that happened, temporary leaders emerged to organise a resistance army. They are commonly called ‘judges’: leaders like Gideon, Samson and Deborah. But the rule of God’s law was breaking down throughout that period, which is best summed up in the closing phrase of the Book of Judges: ‘In those days Israel had no king; *everyone did as they saw fit.*’

Soon, they began agitating to have a king like all the nations around them. God as King wasn’t enough; they wanted a human one. Once again, God met them where they were on this, and agreed to their request. Enter King Saul. He quickly proved a disappointment and was succeeded by the great King David. That was David the giant-killer, David the musician and psalmist. Under him, the nation

prospered, expanded and won the respect of the Gentile nations beyond its borders. After David came his son, King Solomon. Solomon brought the kingdom to its peak of territorial expansion and political and military dominance. But at a price — with him the kings of Israel began to slip away from God’s standards and become more and more like Gentile rulers.

Solomon’s greatest achievement, no doubt, was the building of the Temple in Jerusalem. It had been his father David’s idea, and David had done much of the preparation for it, but it was Solomon who saw the project through. God was now able to move out of his tent, so to speak, and take up residence among his people in a more splendid edifice.

After Solomon, things went rapidly downhill. The nation of Israel, in a messed-up state, suffered a terrible split. Ten of the tribes went one way, and two another. Now there were two nations: Israel, the larger one, and Judah, each with their own line of kings. Most of those kings turned out to be wicked, self-serving men, with leanings towards the pagan gods of the surrounding nations and only a token recognition of the God of the Jews — whom they called Yahweh, or ‘the Lord’. Trouble was brewing.

The ten, in due course, lost their way both spiritually and morally. They ended up overrun by savage Assyrian invaders, and the Jews who survived were dispersed — absorbed into Gentile society. Gone. The little two-tribe nation of Judah kept going a while longer until they, too, slipped into a similar decline. Before long the latest super-power of the day, the Babylonians, invaded them, destroying their capital, Jerusalem, with its great Temple and the worship of God practised there. Then they hauled all its key citizens off into exile in Babylon. That was 586BC.

By the way, we still call these Jews ‘Israel’ even though, technically, they were the descendants of the two-tribe nation of Judah. They held on to the name Israel because it was synonymous with ‘people of God’, and that’s how they still saw themselves, even when in exile.

Wistfully, they looked back to the great days under King David. Would such heady days ever return? Their prophets said yes. A day would come when, better than David, God himself would be their King, ushering in a time of joy, prosperity and blessing. This would be *the kingdom of God*. Festering in exile, the Jews held onto those promises as their only speck of light in a dark existence.

One prophet, in particular, gave some detail about the kingdom of God. Daniel, by means of dreams and visions, led the Jews to expect a series of four consecutive world-empires. All would be led by powerful kings, and all would achieve their dominance through military might. With the benefit of hindsight, we can identify these as the Babylonian, the Medo-Persian, the Greek and the Roman empires. And then, Daniel declared, 'In the time of those kings, *the God of heaven will set up a kingdom* that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure for ever.'<sup>10</sup>

Later, Daniel presented the same four-empires scenario using different imagery. And again, hard on their heels, comes the kingdom of God: 'In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and *his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.*'

Here we have the Messiah-figure, coming to God in a way which Christians of every generation have identified with Christ's ascension (more on that soon). And, in doing so, he becomes God's appointed King, at the head of a kingdom which, unlike its predecessors, will last for ever.

We shall return to this important signpost later.

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<sup>10</sup> See Daniel chapters 2 and 7.



# 8.

## To Babylon and Back

The Babylonian exile was Israel's all-time low. But things moved on, and the next signpost is...

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### *Signpost 10: Exile and return*

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The exile to Babylon was a disaster of the first order. The people lived in despondency. Everything they had loved and treasured — their homeland, the capital city Jerusalem, and the Temple — was far away, and in ruins. They could no longer worship God properly because his home, the Temple, had been razed to the ground. But God had 'moved out' even before that. The prophet Ezekiel had seen a vision of the presence of God rising up from the Holy of Holies and moving away, out of sight. So when the Babylonians had eventually come crashing in there to loot and burn, they had found that God was no longer in residence.

The Israelites languished in exile for seventy years, dreaming of home.

By the end of that time, the Babylonian Empire had been conquered by the Persians, so the Jews found themselves under new masters. The prophet Jeremiah had forecast seventy years as the exile's duration, and as that period drew to a close, the people wondered what would happen. Happily, their new masters adopted new policies on the repatriation of conquered nations like the Jews. So, it was a Persian ruler, King Cyrus, who eventually gave permission for

Jews to return to their homeland. Did they leap at the prospect? Most of them didn't. They had got their feet under the Babylonian table and had adjusted to a new way of life. They saw little appeal in having to up sticks again and make the long trek — a couple of thousand miles by the typical safe route — back to a ruined country that would take decades to rebuild. They opted to stay put.

But a few did take up Cyrus's offer. They were such a small proportion that they came to be known as 'the remnant' of Israel. After the long, weary journey home they found Jerusalem still in a state of ruin. But at least they were home again. Conscious of the national sins that had led to the destruction of the Temple and to exile, they were keen now to show that they had learnt their lesson. They were determined to see the worship of God reinstated as priority. That meant rebuilding the Temple. They tackled this project with enthusiasm under the leadership of Zerubbabel, and in due course it was finished.

The new Temple, however, was a mere shadow of the one it replaced. Some elderly Jews, who remembered the glory of Solomon's Temple, wept at the comparison when the new one was commissioned. More significantly, at its inauguration God failed to turn up in tangible majesty the way he had done in Solomon's day. But at least the system was up and running again. The pattern of sacrificial worship had been reinstated and the priests were doing their thing once more. Now the people could focus on rebuilding the broken-down walls of Jerusalem, erecting decent houses for themselves, and getting some order back into their everyday lives.

That's two key features to hold onto: *exile*, and *return from exile*. They will become hugely important later on.

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Meanwhile, God's original purpose of getting his estranged world reconciled to himself had never wavered.

As we have seen, his plan from the start was to have a people — the Israelites — who would be ‘a light for the Gentiles’. They would be his means of bringing the whole world to recognise and respond to his love. People everywhere would become God’s vice-regents, looking after the world on his behalf, in happy fellowship with him. This would be a world marked by peace, deep fulfilment, happiness and unending blessing. His plan of using Israel as his foot in the door to reach the world had now foundered on the rocks of that nation’s failure, that was true. But God never ditched it for some other scheme. In spite of the setbacks, he stuck with the original scheme. But how would he get it to work?

Gradually, indications began to emerge. The prophets and poets of Israel began to receive insights from God on the subject. Two distinct lines of revelation began to crystallise. One line was that, because the Israelites had been such a drastic failure, *God himself* would step in to achieve his goal of a world united to him in love. He would intervene in person to do what his chosen agents had proved unable to do. So the Israelites began to pray, ‘Come, O Lord, and do it!’

The other line was that God would use *someone else* to do the job on his behalf. That ‘someone’ would be a Jew *par excellence*, who would personally embody everything that Israel as a nation had failed to be. He would keep God’s law and do his will perfectly, thus becoming the planned ‘light for the Gentiles’ by representing him accurately to the whole world. And he would be a king — *God’s king*, a divine representative, a King David Plus.

The title the Jews began to use for this figure was ‘Messiah’, which means ‘anointed one’. In Israelite society, anointing was conferred on prophets, priests and kings. The Messiah would be all three. As prophet he would represent God to the people. As priest he would represent the people to God. And as king he would rule on God’s behalf.

The ‘king’ bit was particularly important. In fact, ‘the kingdom’ became a major theme in Jewish thinking. People longed for the day

when God would rule as King over a world completely at one with him: the *kingdom of God*.

The prophets shared insights into the nature of it. It would be full of joy, splendour, peace, harmony and fulfilment. The wolf would lie down with the lamb. War would be no more, as people laid down their arms and beat their swords into ploughshares. Here was something to long for, to aspire to, and to work towards.

'Kingdom' was central to both the lines of revelation that were emerging. In the one, *God himself* would reign as King while, in the other, *Messiah* would be the King. How these two lines might converge no-one could really say. All the Jews knew was that divine help for their messed-up situation had been promised and would surely come. Their God would not let them down. Against this background of expectation, Israel's history continued after their return from exile.

But there was deep dissatisfaction. The exile was over now, true enough, but for most Jews it didn't feel like it at all.

That was because, even though now back in their own land, they were in fact a puppet-nation under the heel of one Gentile empire after another. At first, they were governed by the Persians. They couldn't complain too much since it was the Persian emperor, Cyrus, who had allowed them to return to their land in the first place. But in due course the Greeks rose to prominence on the world stage and took over control of little Israel. After that it was the Romans, and they were still the ruling power when Jesus eventually came on the scene. The Jews, to their frustration, had been unable to throw off the yoke of any of them and become a free people.

That's what led them to think deeply about their predicament. For a long time, they had thought that their problem was the exile and that, once it was over, everything would be fine. But here they were, back in their land, yes, but still under foreign domination. Maybe, they realised, the real issue was a deeper one than political realities

like territory and governments? Maybe *something deep in their human nature* was the real problem?

Certainly, their long history of falling short of God's requirements pointed in that direction. Their deepest being was seriously corrupted. They were evidently sinners by nature as well as by practice. Their Messiah, when he showed up, then, would have to achieve something more drastic than freeing them from foreign domination.

How that could ever happen was anyone's guess. Meanwhile, they kept their eye on the political situation and prayed for God's intervention and Messiah's coming.

At the crossroads of BC and AD it finally happened!

# 9.

## The Story So Far

We've reached a key point in the story. Messiah is at the door. God's plan remains on track. So, this may be a good place to pause and review the story so far. These are the main elements of it:

### **Our hunch:**

- We all know, deep down, that God exists. God-thoughts insist on coming. Admit to the craving, and yield to it!

### **What God is like:**

- God is vast beyond our imagination. But, at the same time, he loves us, his creatures, and longs for relationship with us.
- God is love — in the sense of a deep, unshakable commitment to our welfare.
- God is a Trinity: three 'persons', yet one God, a 'sweet society' of inter-personal love in himself.

### **God involves human beings:**

- He chose to extend the circle of love to embrace us humans.
- Love is only love when freely given, so God took the risk of giving us freedom of choice to respond to his love. We abused that freedom and so began to feel alienated from him.
- Yet still we feel the need for him as much as ever.

## **Towards a solution:**

- God began to steer the events of world history towards a solution to the problem.
- He revealed himself, little by little, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Israel).
- The family grew to become the nation of Israel, and ended up, through Joseph, as slaves in Egypt.

## **Israel's great deliverance:**

- The Passover events led to the nation's release from slavery.
- Their miraculous crossing of the Red Sea made the break with Egypt final.

## **Israel in the Promised Land:**

- Under Moses' leadership they journeyed to the Promised Land of Canaan, where their ancestor Abraham had lived.
- They settled in the land, making the Temple, in Jerusalem, the focus of the nation's spiritual life.
- The plan was that their success and exemplary lifestyle would be 'a light for the Gentiles' around them.

## **Israel's failure and decline:**

- But they let God down by hogging his blessings to themselves instead of exporting them.
- In spiritual decline, the nation split two ways and ended up being invaded by Gentile armies.
- The Temple was destroyed, and the people carried off into exile in Babylon.

## **Back in the land, but:**

- Even when some returned and got the Temple and the city of Jerusalem rebuilt, they felt that life was still only second-best.
- The fact that their nation was constantly under foreign domination made them feel that the exile hadn't really ended.

## **Pointers to better things:**

- The prophets of Israel began to speak of a coming day when God would intervene to put everything right.
- He would establish his kingdom and rule over a blessed and fulfilled people.
- Some prophecies pictured God himself doing this; others pointed to one who would reign on his behalf: the Messiah.
- The Jews began to realise that their problem was not just political, but moral and spiritual. Messiah would need to deal with that — the sin issue — first.
- Then the blessings of God could truly begin to filter out to the world at large.

Along the way, we identified ten 'signposts' that, as we move on, will become keys to our understanding of Jesus and what he has achieved.

These were:

1. Abraham, the man of faith
2. The sacrifice of Isaac
3. Passover
4. The Red Sea
5. God's people
6. The Tabernacle
7. The Day of Atonement
8. The Temple
9. Kingdom
10. Exile and return



So now we can go back to the story and see what happened next...

## Part 3: Jesus

# 10. Breakthrough!

Jesus arrived! BC was about to become AD — or BCE was about to become CE.

Jesus' arrival was the major turning-point in the history of the world — and that's no exaggeration. With Jesus, *everything* was about to change! He would enable God's plan to work.

The Bible offers four perspectives on the life and death of Jesus. We call them the 'four Gospels', named after their authors, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. We shall refer to them a good deal from now on.

Jesus' coming started, of course, with the events we commemorate at Christmas. In a minor Roman province at the back end of the Roman Empire, a young Jewish girl of 15 or 16 years of age gave birth to a son. No fanfare of trumpets announced his arrival. Nor did Mary give birth to him in a smart maternity wing. She was away from home, travelling to Bethlehem with her fiancé, Joseph, to register in the latest census announced by the authorities. Hundreds of folk were on the move, so the roads and lodging-places were all crammed. But, with the birth imminent, they managed to find a place typical of ordinary people's dwellings of the day. This was a living-room with a space at one end for the family's animals. And it was in a hollowed-

out space, where the animal-feed was put, that Mary made a bed of straw for her newborn son.<sup>11</sup>

‘Aha!’ you say. ‘So, Joseph and Mary weren’t yet married, but they had clearly jumped the gun and Mary had got pregnant. Ah well, it happens a lot. No big deal!’

That’s the natural assumption, and that’s what many of the locals thought about the birth of Jesus, even after he was grown up.<sup>12</sup> But it’s a mistaken conclusion. Let’s take a closer look.

While Jesus’ birth was in many respects very ordinary, in other ways it was as extraordinary as they come. You can read about it in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. First, Mary received an angelic visitation. Don’t be too quick to dismiss that notion as fantasy. We’re talking here about the great creator-God breaking into the realm of humanity. That’s a mind-boggling concept, so it would be odd if no extraordinary phenomena showed up. In such a context, an angel acting as a messenger from God is no great surprise.

The angelic visitor, named Gabriel, informed Mary, who was a virgin, that she would become pregnant. This would happen not by the usual means, however, but by the direct operation of God the Holy Spirit upon her. The ‘holy one’ to whom she would give birth would, therefore, ‘be called the Son of God.’<sup>13</sup> And, since God isn’t into coercion but co-operation, Gabriel gave her the option of agreeing to be the vehicle of God’s entering the world of humanity, or turning it down. Mary wasn’t stupid. She knew enough about people to realise that many of her family and contacts wouldn’t swallow her story about her pregnancy being divinely caused. But this girl had a real faith in God. She agreed to the proposal, saying to the angel: ‘I am the

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<sup>11</sup> Many popular facets of the Christmas story don’t fit with the realities of the situation. If you’re interested, you can read about it in Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, SPCK, 2008, p25-37.

<sup>12</sup> Note the sarcastic hints to that effect in John 8:39-41.

<sup>13</sup> Luke 1:35

Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled.<sup>14</sup> Sure enough, she became pregnant.

The next problem was for Joseph, her fiancé. In Jewish society at that time, engagement was a legally binding arrangement, as binding as marriage itself. The sexual dimension, however, was not permitted until the marriage. Joseph knew full well that he and Mary had not had sexual relations, yet here she was, pregnant. We can't blame him, then, for jumping to the obvious conclusion and being deeply upset. He clearly loved the girl but felt, in the circumstances, that he had to divorce her, if only to protect his own reputation. He would do it quietly, he decided, with the minimum of fuss, to protect the girl he still loved.<sup>15</sup> A good, sensitive guy, Joseph!

This called for another angelic visitation. In a dream, an angel assured Joseph that Mary hadn't been involved in any hanky-panky, but that the work of the Holy Spirit accounted indeed for her pregnancy. He could go ahead and marry her without any qualms. Of course, it was up to him whether or not he did so. We could understand if he had played safe, for his reputation's sake, by breaking off the engagement. But he didn't. He married the girl and, as the Scripture records, 'He did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son.'

They named him Jesus. That was in direct response to the angel's word to Joseph: 'You are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.'

Names in those days were important. Parents often chose them to show the kind of person they hoped their child would grow up to be. Jesus was a common name. It's the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew name Joshua, which means 'rescuer', 'deliverer' or 'saviour'. Jewish parents would call a newborn son Jesus in the hope that he would grow up to rescue the Jews from the Roman occupation.

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<sup>14</sup> Luke 1:38

<sup>15</sup> See Matthew 1:18-19

Joshua had been one of the outstanding heroes of Jewish history, centuries before. He had taken over from the great Moses and ‘saved’ the Israelites by bringing them into the Promised Land after their escape from slavery in Egypt. Remember that? It was this ‘saving’ aspect that the angel referred to when he said that this Jesus would ‘save his people’. But not from the Romans — ‘from their *sins*’. Mary’s firstborn, according to the angel, was destined to be another great saviour of the people, but this time from the shackles of their human frailty.

Another extraordinary event took place before very long.

A group of non-Jews arrived to pay homage to the child Jesus. Here we have an early indicator that the deliverance this boy would achieve was not going to be for Jews alone; it would extend into the world of the Gentiles. The visitors have traditionally been called ‘magi’, ‘wise men’ or ‘kings’, and they came from somewhere in Arabia. Traditionally, too, there were three of them. The Bible doesn’t give a number, but the number has been assumed from the fact that they brought three gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh. These men read the star-signs that were their speciality to indicate that the newborn boy they were to visit had been ‘born king of the Jews’. Hence the expensive gifts they brought, fit for a king.<sup>16</sup>

They naturally turned up first in Jerusalem, the capital city, where one would expect a king to be. Sure enough, there *was* a ‘king of the Jews’ based there. His name was Herod. And he wasn’t a baby. He was grown-up, nasty and selfish. Herod was of mixed parentage, Greek by culture and Jewish by religion, and he ruled Israel on behalf of the Romans. The politically volatile situation in his day made him understandably insecure, so you can imagine his alarm when told

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<sup>16</sup> They said they ‘saw his star when it rose’ (Matthew 2:2). One commentator says: ‘The planets Jupiter and Saturn were in conjunction with each other three times in 7 BC. Since Jupiter was the ‘royal’ or kingly planet, and Saturn was sometimes thought to represent the Jews, the conclusion was obvious: a new king of the Jews was about to be born.’ Wright, T. (2004). *Matthew for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-15* (10). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

that there were Arabian visitors in town, seeking the newborn 'king of the Jews' so that they could pay him homage!

'King of the Jews' was Messiah-talk and, as Herod knew only too well, would-be messiahs appeared on the scene from time to time, stirring up political instability and threatening Herod's position. Such pretensions had to be nipped in the bud. So, summoning the Jewish religious experts, he quizzed them as to what the Scriptures said about where the promised Messiah would be born. 'In Bethlehem', they told him. So, he sent the magi off to Bethlehem to find their 'king of the Jews', insisting that they let him know when they found him, so that he, too, could go and pay him homage. What he really meant was 'so that I can have him snuffed out'.

Off went the Arabians and found the child Jesus in Bethlehem. They worshipped him and presented their gifts. But they didn't return via Jerusalem to report to King Herod. Having been warned in a dream not to do so, they chose a different route home.

It didn't take Herod long to realise that the magi had let him down. But no problem: he knew that Bethlehem was where the child would be. So, heartless tyrant that he was, he ordered a massacre of all the boys in Bethlehem and district under two years of age.

But Jesus escaped the slaughter. An angel had warned Joseph in a dream of what Herod proposed to do, instructing him to take Mary and their child to Egypt until the danger had passed. As a result, Jesus lived for a while in Gentile (non-Jewish) territory — yet another pointer to the scope of the saving work he would later achieve.

After Herod's death, the family moved back to their own country and settled in the village of Nazareth. Family life there continued as normal. Joseph was a local carpenter or builder, and he and Mary went on to have other children —conceived and born, unlike Jesus, in the usual way.

Meanwhile, Mary's boy was growing up...

# 11.

## Who Is This Boy?

We have little information about the years between Jesus' birth and his emergence onto the public scene at the age of 30.

But we assume he grew and matured like any other boy, learning the Hebrew Scriptures from his parents and in the local synagogue. He doubtless helped Joseph in the family business, too. It seems likely that Joseph died quite young, and that the burden of running the business and maintaining the family fell on the shoulders of Jesus at some point, as he advanced through his teenage years and into his twenties.

We do know of one incident when Jesus was just twelve years old. Jews were required to travel up to Jerusalem several times a year for the great annual festivals based at the Temple. When Jesus was twelve his family went up to that year's Passover festival. Most of the villagers from Nazareth would have travelled together. As it was just short of 100 miles, it took several days each way.

All went well at the festival, then the party started the journey home. Joseph and Mary didn't worry that Jesus didn't seem to be around as they began the trip; they assumed he was in the party somewhere with his friends and their families. But he wasn't, and it was only after a whole day's travelling that this came to light. Imagine their panic as they turned around and headed back to the city.

Jerusalem was a sizable place, and still crowded, so looking for Jesus was no easy task. It was only after three days of desperate searching that they tracked him down. He was in the Temple courts, blissfully unaware, it seems, of the anxiety his absence had caused. Mary and Joseph found him with a group of Jewish religious teachers,

asking them questions and discussing the faith with them. Quite something for a twelve-year-old!

Mary, relieved yet angry, admonished him: 'Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you.' The young Jesus seems to have been both surprised and puzzled at this: "Why were you searching for me?" he asked. "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?"<sup>17</sup>

This whole incident was significant. For a start, it shows that this son of Mary's was clearly not your average lad. True, in some ways he was quite normal. He ate, drank, slept and went to the toilet like anybody else. His growth through childhood was normal. He developed his character, learning as he went along, steered both by the example of his parents and local community and by the standard teaching he received at the synagogue in Nazareth.

But there are signs that, in other ways, he was unusual. Not many twelve-year-olds, I'm sure, ever spent three days in theological discussions with the wise and experienced experts in the Jewish faith. Your average youngster would have got his questions answered in the first few minutes and have drifted off with a 'Thank you'. Or the teachers would have got bored with the triviality of the conversation and politely drawn it to a close. But here was Jesus, still engaged with them after three days, 'listening to them and asking them questions.' What's more, the Bible records, 'Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers.'<sup>18</sup> So the questions and answers were not just one way.

Then there's the extraordinary focus of the boy. An average twelve-year-old would soon have been missing Mummy and Daddy, and crying to be reunited with them. But not this one. He seems to have been so absorbed by his hunger to bottom-out some aspects of

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<sup>17</sup> Luke 2:49

<sup>18</sup> Luke 2:46-47



the Jewish faith that the family connection receded into the background.

Where, I wonder, did he stay overnight after his family had packed up and departed? Who fed him? Where did he sleep? We have no idea. And such was the boy's focus that, even when Mary and Joseph eventually tracked him down, he seems to have been surprised at both their arrival and their concern. Hence his question: 'Didn't you know I had to be *in my Father's house?*'

He was referring to the Temple, of course, the house of God. Two things stand out here. The first is Jesus' assumption that this is where anybody would want to be if they were not required to be anywhere else. He was drawn to it like a bee to honey.

The second is that he called the Temple 'my Father's house'. Immediately before that, Mary had scolded him, 'Your father' — referring to Joseph — 'and I have been anxiously searching for you'. In response came this clear hint from Jesus that, while Joseph fulfilled, at least in an everyday sense, the role of his father, his real Father was the one whose presence the Temple represented: God himself.

Even more striking, he calls it '*my* Father's house'. It was common enough for Jews to refer to God as '*our* Father', but most unusual to give the phrase this personal slant. We have a pointer here, then, that Jesus, even at this early age, saw himself as somehow standing in a unique personal relationship to God.

Anyway, the incident concluded with Jesus rejoining Mary and Joseph and dutifully returning with them to Nazareth, where, the Scripture notes, he was 'obedient to them'. So, it's back to some kind of normality again.

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The Temple episode forces us to ask, 'Who exactly was this boy?' He seems to have embodied a unique mixture of the ordinary and the

extraordinary. Later, as he grew into manhood, conducting his public ministry before his cruel death, his resurrection and his ascension, his followers would begin to analyse the growing stream of data in order to identify him more precisely. What did they conclude?

Let's deal with the easy bit first: Jesus, they agreed, was *truly human*.

He wasn't some hybrid, half human and half divine, and thus neither truly man nor truly God. His humanity was not a façade behind which lurked his 'real' divine self. No, he was as genuinely human as you and me. His body worked in exactly the same way. His mind and emotions functioned typically. He had all the feelings we are familiar with: sadness, joy, weariness, anger, disappointment, frustration and the rest. The four Gospels make that clear. As his crucifixion drew near he broke into a cold sweat at the grim prospect of the suffering to come. He desperately wanted to avoid it. Indeed, he prayed to God that if there was any way of avoiding it without scuppering the divine purpose, he would like to take that route, please. Yes, he was 'fully human in every way'.<sup>19</sup>

That means he wasn't above temptation. The Scripture is clear on this: he was 'tempted *in every way*, just as we are — yet he did not sin.'<sup>20</sup> So, whatever the worst temptation you have ever faced, he has been there and felt it. But there's one big difference: 'he did not sin'. It's one thing to be tempted; it's another to yield to it. You and I experience both, but Jesus, his friends insisted, never once yielded to temptation — he was sinless. The apostle Peter, for instance, who was as close to Jesus as anyone for three full years, and thus well placed to see Jesus as he really was, especially when relaxed and away from the crowds, put it bluntly: 'He committed no sin.'<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Hebrews 2:17

<sup>20</sup> Hebrews 4:15

<sup>21</sup> 1 Peter 2:22

It wasn't just his friends who reached that conclusion. If it had been them alone, we could be left thinking, 'Well, they were probably biased.' No. His enemies, too, who would have loved to find some sin to fasten on him, were forced to admit that they couldn't find any. On one occasion Jesus found himself faced with a group of them, all desperate to pin something on him. Looking them straight in the eye, he challenged them, 'Can any of you prove me guilty of sin?'<sup>22</sup> They had nothing to say. So, in this respect, at least, the perfectly 'normal' Jesus was uniquely abnormal.

Gradually, his followers began to follow the 'uniqueness' track and were forced to the conclusion that, in some indescribable way, this ordinary guy with whom they rubbed shoulders as they walked the dusty roads of Galilee, *was actually God*. Not just 'godly' in the broad sense of that term, but literally God by nature — God in human form.

That carried staggering implications. For instance, since God is, by definition, eternal — without beginning or end — they came to see that Jesus had had an eternal existence prior to his birth to Mary in Bethlehem. He had been forever part of that 'Godhead' that we looked at earlier, the eternal circle of fellowship and love that came to be called the Trinity. The boy who, aged twelve, referred to God as 'my Father' had himself been from eternity 'the Son'. He was God in the sense of being 'made of the same stuff' (we might say) as the Father and the Holy Spirit. His essential being was divine.

When the Trinity decided to reach out in love to messed-up human beings, and to draw them into their circle, it was the Son who came among us. God, we might say, leaned down to voice his invitation to us to draw near, and the 'word' he spoke was Jesus.

This is a powerful metaphor. It is through people's words that we really get to know them. If I, for example, had been mute from birth, you would have a hard job getting to know me, because it's the words we speak that reveal the kind of people we are. This, then, is why

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<sup>22</sup> John 8:46

Jesus is called in Scripture ‘the Word’ of God. Through him we find out what God is really like.

The apostle John — who gave us the account of Jesus’ life that we call John’s Gospel — wrote about Jesus as ‘the Word’. ‘The Word was *with* God,’ he said, ‘and the Word *was* God’. Then he added, ‘The Word *became* flesh and made his dwelling among us.’<sup>23</sup> We call this his *incarnation* — from the Latin word *carnis*, meaning ‘flesh’. It’s a way of saying that the eternal God, in initiating a relationship with us, entered the realm of humanity by *becoming one of us* in the person of Jesus.

Notice John’s little phrase: he ‘made his dwelling among us’. Literally it is: ‘he *pitched his tent* among us’. Does that ring a bell from our ramble through Israel’s history a while ago? Do you remember the Tabernacle, or Tent of Meeting? It was that portable place of worship during the Israelites’ long years in the desert, en route from Egypt to the Promised Land. And behind its curtain, in the Holy of Holies, God placed his localised presence, right there among his people. And now Jesus was here, pitching his tent, so to speak, among human beings in that very land. *He, in person, was now the localised presence of God!*

Yes, I know: this is mind-blowing stuff. But we’re talking God here, so that should be expected. The Bible’s authors were as blown away by it all as are you and I. But they were unable, in good conscience, to water down the conclusions to which their observations unfailingly led them: that ‘God was pleased to have *all his fullness* dwell in him’ (Jesus).<sup>24</sup>

Note ‘*all his fullness*’. Jesus was no demi-god. He was the real thing. While truly human he was, in some unfathomable way, also truly God. This is the one whom Mary placed in the manger, who suckled at her breast, who learnt to walk and talk, who began his school

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<sup>23</sup> John 1:1, 14

<sup>24</sup> Colossians 1:19

lessons, and who sat with the spellbound Jewish teachers at the Temple in Jerusalem.

This extraordinarily ordinary boy grew to be a man, so let's join him at that point, as he came at last to public attention.

# 12.

## Jesus the Man

It was not until he was aged 30 that Jesus became a public figure. The public had received advance warning of it. This was thanks to his cousin, John, who came to be known as John the Baptist.

John was an unusual man, a prophet in the old Hebrew tradition. There had been no prophets around for four centuries, so John's ministry caused a stir. A bit of an odd character, he wore a camel-hair garment with a leather belt, as the great prophet Elijah had done centuries before. He operated in the semi-desert area between the Judean hills and the Dead Sea. He favoured a diet of locusts (yes, the grasshopper-like creatures) and wild honey. A walking curiosity!

But it was his message, even more than his lifestyle, that gripped the people of Judea. He told them that *'the kingdom of God' was arriving any time now!* What's more, he made it clear that Jesus was the King of that coming kingdom. He would clean things up and set things straight once for all. And that would include dealing with that perennial problem: sin. As 'the Lamb of God', John declared, he would 'take away the sin of the world' — not just Jewish sins, but Gentile ones, too, including Roman sins. And yours.

With this intriguing advance billing, Jesus came on the public scene at the age of 30 and was quickly recognised, for starters, as a rabbi, or Jewish teacher. Like all rabbis, he gathered round him a group of disciples, who would learn from him and propagate his teachings. It's interesting that he chose twelve of them. For Jews, that was a meaningful number: the nation of Israel had existed in twelve tribes, the descendants of the twelve sons of Jacob. Could it be, they wondered, that Jesus, by choosing twelve new boys, was hinting that

he planned to somehow *rebuild the people of Israel*? All this aroused a great deal of curiosity; he was one to keep an eye on!

Not that you could easily overlook him. His attitudes and actions were astonishing in every way.

For a start, he broke all the accepted social rules based on the much-revered Law of Moses. He happily did way-out things like talking to unaccompanied women, and touching lepers. He deliberately broke the legalistic Sabbath rules. Worst of all, he hobnobbed with all the wrong folk: Samaritans, prostitutes, tax-collectors employed by the Romans, and low-life in general. In fact, he preferred their company to that of the religious establishment: the teachers of the Jewish law and the Pharisees. The ordinary folk loved him for it, but it made him enemies, too.

His teaching had the common people hanging on every word. It was nothing like what they were used to. The Jewish teachers specialised in quoting this learned rabbi and that one, offering a variety of opinions on some aspect or other of the Law of Moses. It wasn't exactly gripping stuff. But Jesus told stories! We call them parables — stories with a meaning behind the colourful characters Jesus described. He talked about real-life situations that everybody could relate to, like sowing seed, making bread, and fishing, but always with a deep life-lesson in there for those with ears to hear.

He spoke with gentleness and compassion. But when it came to serious issues he didn't mess about. Luke records that the people 'were amazed at his teaching, because his words had *authority*.'<sup>25</sup> While that pleased them no end, it upset the religious teachers. These revered the Law of Moses as God's final word on just about everything. But Jesus would say things like, 'You have heard that it was said...' (and here he would quote from the Mosaic law) '...but I tell you...' (and he would advocate a different line of action altogether). Who did he think he was?

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<sup>25</sup> Luke 4:32

Sometimes his teaching was opposite to everything society accepted as normal. The Jews, for example, knew how to look after one another. They were happy enough to ‘love your neighbour as yourself’ in practical ways. But there was no chance they would do the same for the Romans, whose soldiers patrolled the streets and whose governors kept bumping up the taxes. No, any good Jew delighted to hate every Roman and make life difficult for them any way they could. Then Jesus set the cat among the pigeons by saying, ‘You have heard that it was said, “Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.” But I tell you, *love your enemies* and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven.’<sup>26</sup> That was truly shocking. But it kept the people coming back for more, strangely intrigued by the power of his message.

Then there were his powers of healing. These were outstanding. As news of them spread like wildfire, crowds homed in on him wherever he went, seeking his healing word or touch. He didn’t disappoint them. Wherever he went, he left behind a trail of people with smiles on their faces, people whom he had healed, encouraged, affirmed and blessed. The four Gospels are full of such accounts. How did he do it?

Just before embarking on his public ministry, Jesus had had a personal crisis-experience that he himself later identified as a key to his healing powers.

He had spent six weeks alone in a remote desert area, grappling with some major temptations. He had been, we might say, face to face with the devil himself — that dark figure who summarises and heads up everything that is evil and anti-God. In those forty days he faced down the temptation to side-step his calling in view of the suffering he knew it would entail, and to take dubious short-cuts to his goal. He turned down, too, the temptation to use his status as God’s Son to become a ‘magical’ Messiah, with a star billing that would feed his

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<sup>26</sup> Matthew 5:43-45



ego. No, he knew his calling was to a new kind of kingship altogether, and in that grim desert confrontation he poked the devil in the eye and sent him running.

Only then did he begin his public work of teaching and healing, under a fresh empowering of the Holy Spirit. When asked about his amazing success in healing the sick, he answered in an intriguing way: 'How can anyone enter a strong man's house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man? Then he can plunder his house.'<sup>27</sup>

The 'strong man' in this metaphor is the devil himself, who had greedily snatched away from people their health and fitness, their *joie de vivre* and their *shalom*. Jesus needed to break into the 'strong man's' house, get the stolen goods back and return them to their proper owners. And he could do just that, because, in those crucial six weeks in the desert, he had 'tied up the strong man', who was now powerless to prevent Jesus retrieving, and returning to his victims, their stolen health and happiness.

But Jesus brought more than just physical healing. He dispensed the spiritual kind as well: he *forgave sins!* This deeply offended the Jewish religious leaders, who tut-tutted and accused him of blasphemy, exclaiming, 'Who can forgive sins but God alone?'<sup>28</sup> To which the answer, I think, is, 'Exactly.'

What's amazing is that he forgave sins *without being asked to do so*.

On one occasion, a paralysed man was brought by some friends to the house where Jesus was teaching. It was crowded out and they couldn't get through with him on his stretcher. So, they took him up onto the flat roof, made a hole in it and lowered him down right in front of Jesus — top marks for determination. The number-one need, as they and the paralysed man himself doubtless saw it, was for

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<sup>27</sup> Matthew 12:29

<sup>28</sup> Luke 5:21

healing. But, instead, Jesus said to him, ‘Friend, your sins are forgiven.’ This got the religious leaders upset, and here’s how Luke describes what happened next:

‘Jesus knew what they were thinking and asked, “Why are you thinking these things in your hearts? Which is easier: to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up and walk’? But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.” So he said to the paralysed man, “I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home.” Immediately he stood up in front of them, took what he had been lying on and went home praising God. Everyone was amazed and gave praise to God. They were filled with awe and said, “We have seen remarkable things today.”’<sup>29</sup>

Remarkable things indeed. Paralysis healed, and sins forgiven! Whether the man’s paralysis was in some way a result of a sinful lifestyle we simply don’t know. But, either way, Jesus had the authority to deal with both, and deal with both he did. No wonder he had the nation buzzing!

All this was a pointer to what still lay ahead for Jesus. A time was coming when he would confront the devil and all the forces of evil in a way more decisive than his earlier victory in the desert. He would ‘tie up the strong man’ once and for all through his approaching crucifixion and resurrection. And that would herald a new era in which the forgiveness of sins would be available to all — with healing, too, as an occasional side-dish.

Meanwhile, the clashes between Jesus and the Jewish religious establishment became more frequent, and more intense. The two were clearly on a collision course. And the collision would take place

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<sup>29</sup> Luke 5:22-26

in Jerusalem. Eventually, the time came for Jesus to make his way there...

# 13.

## Jesus in Jerusalem

Jesus had been on his collision-course with the Jewish authorities, and their Roman overlords, for virtually all of his three-year public mission.

God can get in the way sometimes and, in the person of Jesus, he had been getting in the way of their political, nationalistic and personal ambitions. Jesus knew full well what the end-result would be: things would come to a head and they would put him to death. And it would happen in Jerusalem. We could understand it, therefore, if Jesus had stayed away from the city and continued teaching and healing in the rural areas. But no, he felt destiny drawing him to the holy city with its Temple, where heaven and earth met and where, once more, world-changing history was about to be made. And so, as Luke puts it, 'Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.'<sup>30</sup>

He arrived there as a hero. His reputation with the common people was by this time sky-high. His healings and miracles were talked about everywhere. Word had long been circulating that he was shaping up to be the long-anticipated Messiah.

The trouble — as we have seen — was that the Jews had a fixed idea of what Messiah would look like. He'd be a military man who would muster Jewish forces and defeat the Romans on the field of battle. Then, with the Romans broken and defeated, he would reign as King of the Jews from his throne in Jerusalem. Soon, he would get the newly-independent Jewish nation back on its feet again. He would ensure that everyone obeyed the Law of Moses, that the

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<sup>30</sup> Luke 9:51

Temple worship went by the book, and he would lead the nation to heights of prosperity and world influence that would echo the achievements of the great King David centuries before.

So as Jesus now entered the city the crowds turned out to welcome him, the one on whom their hopes were pinned.

‘Hosanna!’ they shouted. The word means ‘Save!’, and in shouting it they were saying to Jesus, ‘Save us from the Romans!’

To make their political expectations clearer they also called out, ‘Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!’<sup>31</sup> They were saying, ‘Come on, Jesus. You’re the one. We’ve been waiting for you for centuries. You’ve been talking a lot about the kingdom, so we know what you’re after. We’re ready to join you whenever you issue the call to arms. Just get on with it and let’s zap these pesky Romans for good. Then, with you as king, we can get the nation back on track and become the envy of the Gentile world!’

But they had got it seriously wrong.

Jesus had never for a moment intended to be that kind of Messiah. He had time and again indicated his commitment to non-violence. On one occasion, for example, he had visited the synagogue in Nazareth and, as a visiting rabbi, had been invited to read from the Hebrew Scriptures and comment on them. He read a passage much beloved of the Jews as giving voice to their deep desire to thrash the Romans. It was from the prophet Isaiah, chapter 61, and goes like this:

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me,  
because the LORD has anointed me  
to proclaim good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted,  
to proclaim freedom for the captives  
and release from darkness for the prisoners,  
to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favour

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<sup>31</sup> Mark 11:9-10

and the day of vengeance of our God...<sup>32</sup>

This, as the Jews saw it, was Messiah speaking prophetically. It was his job-description. It's what he would do when he came, with the help of 'the Spirit of the Sovereign Lord'.

He would do all those nice things to help the poor, beleaguered people of Israel. But they always enjoyed the climax that came in the final phrase: '*...and the day of vengeance of our God*'. That's the bit that drew an 'Amen' from the lips of every synagogue congregation. To them it meant one thing only: Messiah would crush the Romans on God's behalf. Vengeance for their oppression and cruelty! He would slaughter them right, left and centre. There'd be Roman blood everywhere!

So, anticipation of the last phrase was high as Jesus began to read the well-known passage. It rose as he continued, coming to a peak as he read '*...to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour...*' and they waited for the punchline. Then the unthinkable happened: 'He rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down...' and he said to the congregation, 'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.'<sup>33</sup>

Two astonishing facts emerge from this. First, Jesus had admitted that he was indeed the Messiah, by claiming that Isaiah's words were fulfilled in him who had read out the words. But second, and even more astonishing, he had stopped short of what they all thought was the best bit, and had closed the book! He'd missed out the punchline! It was like shouting, 'Hip, hip...' and then turning away.

This was a deliberate choice on his part, and by it he declared, in the clearest way possible, that 'vengeance', with the slaughter and bloodshed it involved, was never going to be his way, because it was not God's way. He would never be a military Messiah.

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<sup>32</sup> Isaiah 61:1-2

<sup>33</sup> Luke 4:16-21

But all that had been forgotten as Jesus now rode into Jerusalem, and the Jews were as usual calling for him to kill the Romans. He took no notice, satisfying himself with a look round the Temple courts before retiring for the night.

He came back the next day and caused a massive disturbance by overturning the money-changers' tables in the Temple courts. We'll come back to that later, as we review the signposts, and see its deep significance. At this stage, we will just note that it angered the Jewish authorities even further, increasing their determination to see him dead.

Then Jesus celebrated the Passover with his disciples. This annual meal commemorated the events that had led to the exodus from Egypt centuries before. There was a well-established routine for the celebration, but Jesus upset that, too, by giving it a completely new twist. That's another signpost we'll be coming back to soon.

Then the pace of events quickened. Aided by the traitor, Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve disciples, the authorities arrested Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. First, they hauled him up before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish legal tribunal. False witnesses testified against him. Their testimony, however, proved inconsistent and thus useless. Jesus himself kept mostly silent, making no effort to counter the accusations. Until the High Priest, who was chairing the court, got to the key issue and demanded, 'Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?' Jesus replied, 'I am.' And that was it. Blasphemy, in their view. Worthy of death. Reason at last to be rid of this trouble-maker.

But the Jews were not allowed, under Roman law, to carry out the death penalty. So, they dispatched him to the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. Again, Jesus made no attempt to defend himself, remaining silent. The Jewish leaders took advantage of that to urge the watching crowds to call for his execution, and before long the very people who had so recently treated him like a king as he had

entered the city were now yelling, 'Crucify him!' And the crowd-pleasing governor pronounced the death sentence.

The Roman soldiers mocked and beat him cruelly. They flogged him with whips that tore the skin from his back. They dressed him in a purple robe of royalty and rammed a crown of thorns on his head, then beat him over the head with sticks. They fell down in mock homage before him, crying, 'Hail, king of the Jews!' All of this declared, '*We're* in charge round here, and don't you forget it. Rome rules. Any self-styled kings like you can expect this kind of treatment.'

And they took him just outside the city to Calvary — which means 'Skull Hill' — to be crucified.



# 14.

## The Cross

The cross is the commonest Christian motif. We find crosses in churches and chapels across the world. Some people wear a gold or silver cross on a chain around their neck.

The danger is that the cross becomes something nice and decorative. It gets sanitised, far removed from the gruesome reality that the cross of Jesus truly was. Can you imagine wearing a miniature electric chair round your neck, or having on your church wall a replica of a criminal receiving a lethal injection? That's not an appealing idea. But crucifixion was a fearfully cruel method of execution, designed by the Romans to inflict the maximum pain for the longest time before the victim succumbed at last to death — which, in the end, was usually by asphyxiation.

Tens of thousands were put to death that way, and Jesus was just one of them. So, what made his death different from the rest?

For a start, he *didn't deserve it*. As one of the two brigands crucified alongside him said to the other, 'We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.'<sup>34</sup>

It's not that Jesus just hadn't committed any major crime but remained tainted by little sins and imperfections like the rest of us. He was free even of those. Everybody said the same. As we noted earlier, even his enemies, who would love to have pinned anything at all on him, were silent when challenged to do so.<sup>35</sup> His friends said

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<sup>34</sup> Luke 23:41

<sup>35</sup> See John 8:46

the same. These were his disciples, who walked and talked with him daily, sleeping in the same room and eating at the same table. If anybody could spot flaws, it would have been them. But they couldn't find any. Nailing this man to a cross, then, was a gross injustice.

Second, *Jesus didn't resist it.*

Normally, a condemned man would scream and struggle violently, in a last attempt to hold onto life. Burly soldiers would kneel on his chest and hold him down while they hammered in the nails. But not Jesus.

He hadn't even put up a verbal fight at his trial, when false accusations were thrown at him from bent witnesses. Instead, 'He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth.'<sup>36</sup> When it came to the actual crucifixion, he adopted the same unresisting approach. No-one would ever be able to say he died reluctantly. In anticipation of that, he had once said. 'I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No-one takes it from me, but *I lay it down of my own accord.*'<sup>37</sup>

That doesn't mean he wasn't terrified at the prospect.

As events moved close to his arrest — and the appalling suffering he knew would follow — he spent time in the Garden of Gethsemane in prayer to his Father. Disciples Peter, James and John were there with him, invited to keep him company at a time when, as he himself put it, 'The sorrow in my heart is so great that it almost crushes me.' They witnessed his mental and emotional struggle as he prayed out loud, 'My Father, if it is possible, take this cup of suffering from me!' But, even as he prayed, he knew that the great trinitarian purpose for him was to achieve victory *through* suffering, not by avoiding it or

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<sup>36</sup> Acts 8:32. This describes how the Ethiopian eunuch was reading these words from the prophet Isaiah (chapter 53), and how the evangelist Philip explained to him that it was all about Jesus.

<sup>37</sup> John 10:17-18

inflicting it on others. And so he concluded, 'Yet not what I want, but what you want.'<sup>38</sup> He would drain the 'cup of suffering' to its dregs.

And he did. This, the central act of all human history, is summed up by Mark the Gospel-writer in the stark statement: 'And they crucified him.'<sup>39</sup>

It was his enemies, both Jewish and Gentile, who, representing us all, had combined to condemn him to death. At that point he put into practice his own kingdom-teaching that we should love our enemies. He submitted to the cross, calling down on his torturers, not fire and brimstone, but his Father's forgiveness.

In a way too deep and mysterious for the likes of us to fathom, all the world's evil came together to crush him, and he somehow absorbed into himself its full force. In doing so, he stopped its momentum, opening up a new era in which, through a spiritual change of heart, we now see within reach a life without violence, hatred and sin.

But at the time, with Jesus' death, bang went all the hopes of the Jews.

The one they'd hoped would be the Romans-crusher had been crushed by the Romans, in cahoots with the Jewish authorities. Like every one of the upstart 'messiahs' who had come before him, he had got the chop. The Roman juggernaut lumbered on, unslowed.

True, there were a few Jews whose expectations of Jesus had maybe been a bit broader than most, like the Twelve and the wider circle of sympathisers who had followed Jesus for three years. But the crucifixion silenced them, too. A couple of them, making their weary way from Jerusalem, where the grim event had taken place, to their home in Emmaus, were typical in their despair: 'He was a prophet,' they said, 'powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be

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<sup>38</sup> Matthew 26:38-39 Good News translation

<sup>39</sup> Mark 15:23

sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel.’<sup>40</sup>

Those hopes were now dashed. As usual, death had had the final word.

What exactly happened at the cross? How did it contribute to the working-out of the divine purpose? In what meaningful way did it bring to a climax that long process of history we looked at earlier?

We’ll return to this as we review the signposts. Suffice it to say, for now, that this, Jesus’ apparent defeat, was in fact his *triumph*. I know — that turns all conventional thinking on its head. But it’s true. The hymn-writer Samuel Gandy put it like this:

Through weakness and defeat  
He won the victor’s crown,  
Trode all our foes beneath his feet  
*By being trodden down.*

The cross, however, wasn’t the end of the story...

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<sup>40</sup> See Luke 24:13ff

# 15.

## Resurrection and More!

Death happens all the time. We're used to it. That's why we have to make an effort to see what made Jesus' death different. Resurrection, however, is something else: it's not just rare, it's unheard of!

But the Gospel record is clear: three days after Jesus' death and burial, *God brought him back to life!*

This was a unique event. During his public ministry, Jesus had brought three other dead people back to life—Jairus's daughter, the widow of Nain's son, and Lazarus—but in due course these all grew old and eventually died again. Not so with Jesus himself. He came back to life at a new level, no more to succumb to the ageing process, and never to die again. Paul put it like this: 'Since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him.'<sup>41</sup>

The resurrection of Jesus is what makes the Christian faith unique. That's doubtless why opponents of the faith have always tried to disprove it, convinced that, if they can just pull that brick out of the wall, the whole faith-structure will collapse. And that's correct. Even the New Testament acknowledges it: 'If Christ has not been raised', says the apostle Paul (the early Christian leader who wrote about half of our New Testament), 'our preaching is useless and so is your faith... If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins.'<sup>42</sup> Enemies of Christianity have been chipping away at the wall for two millennia without success.

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<sup>41</sup> Romans 6:9

<sup>42</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:14, 17

One famous attempt to disprove the resurrection came back in 1930, when Frank Morison published a book entitled *Who Moved The Stone?* In it, he set out to look at all the available data, both biblical and historical, and to show once for all that the resurrection could not possibly have taken place. His approach was in the style of a lawyer, looking at the evidence and building conclusions from it.

He began his task in the deep conviction that he would end up exposing the resurrection as a myth that no sensible person could possibly accept. But as he sifted the evidence he found, to his surprise, that it was all pointing inescapably in the opposite direction. In spite of his best efforts, the data convinced him that the resurrection of Jesus must, in fact, have taken place. His book, when it came out, presented a powerful case *for* the resurrection instead of against it. The book has remained in print to this day. Since then, many other authors — including some trained lawyers skilled at examining evidence — have written similar works, all reaching the same conclusion.

If you yourself are a sceptic, maybe you need to check one of them out. All the usual ideas come under scrutiny: the notion that Jesus didn't really die but was just in a coma, and that the cool of the tomb brought him round. Or the suggestion that the disciples, who obviously really missed him, were understandably hallucinating when they claimed to have seen him. These and related ideas sound quite reasonable until you start looking at the evidence, then they just don't stand up. At the time, of course, the whole issue could have been settled if the Jewish and Roman authorities had produced Jesus' dead body. But they couldn't.

Yes, Jesus rose from the dead: buried on Good Friday, raised on Easter Sunday!

The Jews had always believed that, at the end of time, God would raise *everybody* from the dead to stand judgment. But God had now seemingly thrown a spanner in the works. He had raised *one* man from the dead, not everybody. And he had done it in the middle of

history, so to speak, not at the end of it. That had some powerful implications, and we'll come back to them. But first we need to see the account of Jesus' time on earth through to its conclusion.

After the resurrection, Jesus was around for six weeks. During that time, he appeared on many occasions to his disciples, and spent sustained periods of time with them. You might well think, 'I'd love to know what they talked about.' Well, as it happens, we know the general drift of their conversation. Luke says of Jesus: 'He appeared to them over a period of forty days and *spoke about the kingdom of God.*'<sup>43</sup> That's no surprise, since the kingdom of God was what he had spent most of the time talking about in his three years of public ministry before the crucifixion. Hold on to that and we'll return to it anon.

At the end of the six weeks, Jesus left them. This event is what we call the Ascension, and Scripture describes it as follows: 'He was taken up before the disciples' very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.'<sup>44</sup>

He had returned to heaven — the 'God' dimension from which he had come in his incarnation. The rest of the New Testament describes the ascension as his *enthronement*. The King, we might say, having gone out to do battle over the powers of evil, and having conquered them decisively through his death and resurrection, had now come home victorious.

His departure from earth took place in the context of two intriguing promises. One of them, Jesus himself had made to his disciples just before leaving them: they should stand by, he had said, for an empowering experience that would shortly be theirs. He described it in the words, 'You will receive power when the *Holy Spirit comes on you*; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and

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<sup>43</sup> Acts 1:3

<sup>44</sup> Acts 1:9

Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.’<sup>45</sup> Yes, those are the ‘concentric circles’ we mentioned before. Just what the experience would entail, they were probably not sure, but it implied that they would certainly know that it had happened, and that they would be ready for anything as a result of it.

The other promise to the disciples came from ‘two men dressed in white’, who appeared from nowhere as the disciples were gazing up into the clouds that had just enveloped Jesus, hiding him from sight. We are clearly meant to see these as heavenly messengers, or angels. This is what they said: ‘This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will *come back* in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.’<sup>46</sup> Intriguing! How far into the future that would be, nobody knew. But it assured them that they hadn’t seen the last of him. And, until such time as he returned, the promised Holy Spirit would be his *alter ego* to comfort and direct them, just as Jesus himself had done.

Theologians often talk about ‘the Christ event’. It’s a convenient phrase to describe everything involving Jesus, from his birth right through to his ascension.

It starts, then, with the Christmas story (the virgin conception and birth, the manger, the shepherds etc.), goes through Jesus’ childhood (including the Temple incident when he was twelve), into his adult life, focusing on the three years of his public ministry (his healings, miracles and clashes with the authorities), his arrest and trial, his crucifixion, his resurrection, the six weeks with his disciples, and finally his ascension to heaven. It is thirty-three years condensed into ‘the Christ event’.

That event marked the great turning-point of world history. It marked God’s decisive intervention in his messed-up world to *start putting things right*.

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<sup>45</sup> Acts 1:8

<sup>46</sup> Acts 1:11



We now need to consider how that works, and what it all means. What exactly did 'the Christ event' achieve? Could these happenings of two thousand years ago possibly affect you today, making a real difference to your everyday life and your prospects for the future? And if they can, how?

It's time to start pulling a few loose ends together, and we'll do it by returning to the signposts.

# Part 4: The Signposts' Meaning

## *a. What Jesus Accomplished*

### 16. That Should Have Been Me!

What was it, then, that Jesus achieved, particularly by his death and resurrection?

Christians and Bible scholars have been mulling over this topic for two thousand years. You would think that, by now, they would have bottomed it out. But no, this, the greatest of themes, seems bottomless. Nevertheless, some fundamentals have stood the test of time, and we'll content ourselves with those. A review of the signposts will help us do it. Each one will illustrate some aspect of what Jesus achieved. For convenience, we'll tackle them in a different order from the original one. Let's begin with...

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#### The sacrifice of Isaac (*signpost 2*)

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The message here is that the death of Jesus has to do with *substitution*.

Remember the story? Abraham believed that God wanted him to prove his commitment by sacrificing his only son, Isaac. He and the young man set off for Mount Moriah, where the act would take place. They had offered animal sacrifices together before, but Isaac noticed something different this time. Between them, they carried the usual wood, knife and portable brazier of hot coals, but they were short of

the usual sacrificial lamb. So, ‘The fire and the wood are here,’ Isaac observed, ‘but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?’

Clearly, Abraham couldn’t say, ‘Oh, that’ll be you this time, son’. The boy would likely have bolted. So, he gave the diplomatic reply, ‘God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.’<sup>47</sup>

This was more than just diplomacy. We learn from a later Bible writer that ‘Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead.’ While he was willing to go through with the dreadful act, his faith told him that he wouldn’t be saying a final goodbye to his son, because God, having been assured of Abraham’s obedience, would likely give him back to him in resurrection. Naturally, these weren’t thoughts he could share with Isaac as they trudged up the mountain, so ‘God himself will provide the lamb’ had to do.

Now, put God the Father in the place of Abraham, and put Jesus — God the Son — in the place of Isaac.

Jesus, as he went up to Jerusalem, was heading to his death. And it would take place outside the city walls, just a stone’s throw from Mount Moriah — the place where Abraham had taken Isaac to sacrifice him, and also the very spot on which the Jerusalem Temple now stood. As the crucifixion drew closer, Jesus was deeply conscious that his Father was with him, echoing the twice-used statement in the Abraham story, ‘The two of them went on together.’

How do you imagine the aged Abraham managed to seize, tie up and heave up onto the altar of stones a fit, strong young man like Isaac? The boy could easily have thrown off his father’s grasp and made a break for freedom. And that’s why Christian commentators down the years have concluded that, before they got to the altar-place at the top of the mountain, Isaac had put two and two together and realised what the plan really was. Doubtless some of his father’s sincere faith in God had rubbed off onto him, and, as a result,

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<sup>47</sup> Genesis 22:7-8

believing this to be what God himself wanted, Isaac went along with it willingly.

That certainly tallies with the statement made by Jesus that ‘I lay down my life... No-one takes it from me, but *I lay it down of my own accord*.’<sup>48</sup> It was never the case that God the Father somehow jumped his Son and forced him into a situation he didn’t choose to be in. When the dread day came, and Jesus expired in agony on the cross, it was because he was a willing victim. Sure, God the Father, like Abraham, knew what was coming, and went along with it, knowing the fruitful outcome it would bring. But he felt the awful pain of parting with one so dearly loved. ‘He did not spare his own Son,’ Paul states, in amazement, ‘but gave him up for us all.’<sup>49</sup>

Now, I suspect you’re thinking, ‘But wait a minute, Isaac *wasn’t* killed in the end. It was that ram that died, not him.’

Good point. That’s where *substitution* comes in. No story’s details can be pressed to be a perfect illustration of something as complex and wonderful as the death of Christ. So now there’s some role-swapping here. In the latter part of the story, Isaac is no longer a picture of Jesus but of *us*, who escape death, and Jesus is now portrayed by the *ram*, the substitute who died.

Can you imagine how Isaac felt as he stood that day by the stone altar, with the smoke of the sacrifice rising into the sky? He’d been stretched out on it himself a few moments ago, but now he was standing there, free and unharmed. He had watched the ram being killed and set alight as a sacrifice. He was doubtless thinking, ‘Wow, that should have been me!’

Isaac is you. So, as you contemplate the death of Jesus on the cross, I invite you to say to yourself, ‘That should have been me!’

In some inexplicable way, then, in the death of Jesus a substitution has taken place. It somehow means that you are now free, and safe.

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<sup>48</sup> John 10:17-18

<sup>49</sup> Romans 8:32

Just what that involves can wait for later. But, for now, I suggest that — if you're still serious about finding God — you pause and let it sink in. You might even consider saying a prayer to God, even though that's something you may not be used to, and even though you may still not be sure there *is* a real God to pray to. So maybe you can say something like, 'Well, God, if you're real and can hear me, I just want to say thank you. I don't really understand things very well, but if Jesus somehow took the hit for me, I'm grateful.'

The death of Jesus also marked *the end of blood sacrifices*.

Let's face it: the whole 'sacrificial death' thing is a scar on humanity. From time immemorial, people have believed that the gods are angry with them for their sins and failure, but that they can be appeased by blood — by the offering of either human or animal lives. It may be the throwing of virgins into the crater of the local volcano, or some other grim variation of scape-goating, but the whole scenario is horrific, and we can say with conviction that God, who is love, has always wanted to see the end of it.

At the same time, he has always shown himself keen to relate to people, and that has meant his being willing to meet them where they are, rather than where he would like them to be. So, during the long centuries when the idea of blood sacrifice was endemic in human society, he accommodated himself to the situation and even used people's sacrificial practices to make himself known. The Abraham and Isaac incident is a case in point. But all the time, God was wanting to move things further and further away from those dreadful practices.

One big step in the right direction was the move from *human* sacrifice to *animal* sacrifice. That's exactly what we see in our Abraham story. A human sacrifice was imminent, but *God himself intervened to stop it* and to indicate an animal that could take Isaac's place.

But God's will was always to put an end to blood sacrifices of *every* kind, and in Jesus he did exactly that. Jesus became God's statement

that this was the sacrifice to end them all. His death was not just a move in the right direction, like that from human to animal sacrifices, but the end of *all* blood sacrifices. One New Testament writer made this clear. Jesus, he said, ‘offered *for all time* one sacrifice for sins.’ Those sins are now forgiven and, he continues, ‘where these have been forgiven, sacrifice for sin is no longer necessary.’<sup>50</sup>

So, God himself provided the lamb — Jesus, the Lamb of God. And that marked the end of sacrifices for good — if only people would get the message. Virgins living near volcanoes could now relax.

As for you, your own life will never now be forfeit, no matter how dire your sins. That’s another reason to say thank you to God

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<sup>50</sup> Hebrews 20:12, 18

# 17.

## Victory and Liberty

Now we return to...

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### The Passover (*signpost 3*)

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In the Bible at large, the Passover is a much bigger deal than the Abraham and Isaac story. It's a major theme that appears often, and prominently.

The Passover is, first, about *victory*.

The Hebrews, you will recall, had become a slave-nation in Egypt. Their lives were miserable. They sweated long hours every day under the eyes and whips of Pharaoh's taskmasters, working on his massive city-building projects at Pithom and Rameses. They had neither rights nor choices. All aspects of their life were dictated by the powers of Egypt. They longed to be free, but how could a ragged and disorganised bunch of slaves ever hope to defeat the superpower of the day?

The Passover changed all that.

You remember the story. Each Hebrew family killed a lamb, daubing some of its blood around the doors of their poor homes. That showed that death had already taken place there. Death, therefore, would not enter that home to strike down the firstborn but would 'pass over' it. Then each family cooked and ate the lamb-meat to fortify themselves for the freedom-journey ahead, as they waited for

midnight. That was when death struck every Egyptian firstborn and brought the stubborn Pharaoh to his knees.

A defeated tyrant, he gave the slaves their freedom, and they trooped out of Egypt, en route to the Promised Land. This was *victory* of the first order! Their cruel and powerful enemy, who had kept them enslaved for so long, had been beaten, and they set out on the long journey with songs of victory on their lips.

The New Testament writers apply this to the death of Jesus. '*Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed,*' says Paul.<sup>51</sup>

It's easy enough to join up the dots. His death meant the defeat of the 'Pharaoh' who had enslaved the whole human race, including you. You can call that tyrant by lots of names: the devil, Satan, the powers of evil, sin, death, self — and more. Some Christians hold Satan to be a unique personal being; others see the name just as a convenient cipher, or code-word, for everything opposed to God and his ways, or the tendency in society for things to turn nasty. You can make up your own mind on that in due course. It doesn't alter anything at all in our journey through the signposts.

The name certainly covers what the New Testament writers call the 'principalities and powers' or the 'powers and authorities.' These are the legitimate structures of human existence, like families, governments, schools and colleges, businesses and so on. They so easily get taken over by dark forces and manipulative personalities, and then, instead of enhancing life and order, they become instruments of oppression, exploitation and fear. The Jewish and Roman leaders at the time of Jesus were in that category. They saw a chance of finishing Jesus off once for all. We could say that Satan, tricked by Jesus' non-violence — which he saw as 'softness' — into thinking he was easy game, steered things towards the crucifixion. When it took place, and Jesus died, he was doubtless cock-a-hoop.

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<sup>51</sup> 1 Corinthians 5:7



But he was in for a nasty surprise: the resurrection! The ‘soft’ side of the human Jesus had veiled his divinity from the devil’s view, and the whole scheme backfired on its perpetrator. God raised Jesus from the dead to be the supreme King forever, with the devil under his feet. The prisoners’ cell-doors were thrown open. There was nothing, now, to stop the slaves from stepping out into glorious liberty and pursuing their ‘Promised Land’ destiny unhindered. Paul puts it like this: ‘Having *disarmed the powers and authorities*, Jesus made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.’<sup>52</sup> And again: ‘It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.’<sup>53</sup>

Now apply that to your own situation. Only you can say what it is that has kept you ‘bound’ and has frustrated your desire to live in true freedom. But, whatever it may be, Jesus by his death and resurrection has broken its power. The shackles have been broken; you can throw them off and go places, now, in the company of the victorious Jesus!

The Passover also spells *redemption*.

That’s a technical term that needs a bit of explanation. It’s nothing to do with handing in your money-off coupon at the supermarket checkout when you buy your groceries. In the context of ancient Israel, redemption (literally, ‘buying back’) chiefly meant *being bought out of slavery by the payment of a ransom-price*.

In the Passover scenario it’s the same picture as ‘victory’, but with a different nuance. It indicates that a freedom-price — the *ransom* — has been paid and the slave is now free. The New Testament uses this language. ‘It was not with perishable things such as silver or gold’ says Peter, ‘that you were *redeemed* from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.’<sup>54</sup> Paul uses similar

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<sup>52</sup> Colossians 2:15

<sup>53</sup> Galatians 5:1

<sup>54</sup> 1 Peter 1:18-19

language: ‘Christ Jesus,’ he states, ‘gave himself as a *ransom* for all people.’<sup>55</sup>

By his blood — that is, his death — Jesus paid the price of our freedom, of *your* freedom. Don’t ask who the price was paid to — that’s not the point, and the metaphor breaks down here, as they all do somewhere. Certainly, nobody paid anything to the devil or to the powers of evil, any more than the Passover events paid anything to Pharaoh. The point is a simple one: Jesus did *everything necessary to secure the slaves’ freedom*.

Note that Jesus ‘gave himself as a ransom *for all people*.’ That includes you. The way is clear: you can step out of your grubby slave-quarters. But God won’t force you out. It’s hard to imagine why anyone would stay confined if the door is open. I can think of only two reasons. One is ignorance: the slave doesn’t realise that the door is no longer locked. If that’s you, let me make it clear: the door is now *unlocked!* The other reason might be the security of the familiar. But that’s a desperately poor substitute for the glories of liberty. Now that Jesus has paid the price, you’re free to leave!

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One other thing here. For the Jews, the Passover was so significant that it gave rise to an annual commemoration, which Jews observe to this day. The event in Jesus’ life called the *Last Supper* was such a Passover meal. Jesus attended it with his disciples in an upper room in Jerusalem, not long before his death.

There was a well-established pattern to the celebration, with a set order of eating, drinking and Scripture-reading that was familiar to every Jew. So, as the Twelve sat with Jesus, they knew what was coming. Or they thought they did. Imagine their shock when Jesus broke into the time-honoured routine and gave the whole thing a

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<sup>55</sup> 1 Timothy 2:5-6

new twist. The bread, which traditionally spoke of the unleavened bread the Israelites had eaten in haste just before leaving Egypt, now took on a new significance. ‘This is *my body* given for you,’ said Jesus. ‘Do this in remembrance of *me*.’ Something similar happened with one of the meal’s traditional cups of wine: ‘This cup is the *new covenant in my blood*, which is poured out for you,’ Jesus announced.

A ‘covenant’ was a formal agreement between two parties, in which each agreed to act in certain ways towards the other, with built-in benefits for compliance and penalties for failure to comply. In Bible times, it was normal to slaughter an animal to ratify a covenant. The shedding of its blood was the equivalent of ‘signing the document’ in a legal transaction today, like buying a house.

God’s dealings with ancient Israel thus far had been on the basis of the ‘old covenant’, by which he would prosper them insofar as they kept his commandments. But a ‘new covenant’ was about to be initiated between God and people in which, thanks to what Jesus would accomplish, God would receive and bless all who came to him in simple faith. The ‘shed blood’ — the ‘signature’ — ratifying this new covenant would be Jesus’ own blood, shed on the cross.

At the Last Supper, he gave this new focus to the cup of wine. It’s hard for us today to grasp how mind-blowing these changes were for the disciples. But you can see, I hope, how it all fits in with the Passover imagery we have been looking at. Massive as the original Passover was for the Israelites, it was nothing compared to the death of Jesus, *the* Passover lamb. His broken body and shed blood would trigger a *worldwide* release from the tyranny of evil for all who would dare to believe it and step out on the strength of it.

Ever since the *Last Supper*, Jesus’ followers have regularly celebrated the *Lord’s Supper* — variously called Holy Communion, the Mass, the Lord’s Table or the Eucharist. It reminds them of the costly ransom that has brought them liberty.

If you're still 'living in Egypt', of course, taking communion will be meaningless. But there's no longer any need to stay holed up in that miserable existence. Head on out!

## 18.

# The Priest and his Offering

The freed Hebrew slaves made their way out of Egypt, across the Red Sea and through the desert, arriving in due course in the Promised Land of Canaan. There, life gradually settled into a routine.

After the period of the judges, the monarchy was established, and the third king, Solomon, built the great Temple in Jerusalem. There, the system of worship based on animal sacrifices ticked over steadily. The people were still a long way from ditching the dreadful practice of blood-sacrifices and, for the time being, God went along with it because it was a fixture in ancient society and the time was not yet right for getting rid of it. So he accommodated the practice among the Israelites. He did so even to the point of allowing it to be the vehicle of his fellowship with them and, in particular, the means by which sins could be dealt with. That brings us to...

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### The Day of Atonement (*signpost 7*)

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The Day of Atonement, like Passover, was an annual festival of the Jewish people. Its Hebrew name is *Yom Kippur*. Originally held in the Tabernacle as they travelled through the desert and in the early years of their life in Canaan, the practice continued in Solomon's Temple.

With the people standing all around in awed silence, the High Priest alone would go through the curtain into the Holy of Holies — the place of God's localised presence — carrying smoking incense and a bowl of animal blood. There, he would sprinkle some of the

blood on the gold-plated Atonement Cover, that is, the lid of the chest called the Ark of the Covenant. Then he would come back out through the curtain, to a corporate sigh of relief from the people.

The relief was that the holy presence of God, to which he had drawn near on their behalf, had not struck him dead. That's why he took blood in there. Once again, it's a 'substitute' thing: the blood was proof that death had taken place already.

But the people's relief was also that, for another year, the nation's sins had been dealt with. The whole purpose of the exercise was to 'make atonement' for the sins of the Israelites. They had been told: 'On this day atonement will be made for you, to cleanse you. Then, before the Lord, you will be clean from all your sins.'<sup>56</sup>

At that stage in history, 'sins' were viewed as a corporate issue. While individuals were no doubt conscious of personal sins, the sacrificial system did not focus on those. Its central concern was the way in which, as a *nation*, they had fallen short of God's requirements and strayed from his ways. The Day of Atonement thus brought *national* forgiveness. But that doubtless trickled down into the consciousness of individual Jews, so that they felt personally forgiven, too.

Two components were key to the annual ceremony: the High Priest himself, and the blood he took in there. The *offerer*, and the *offering*.

The New Testament takes up these aspects and applies them to Jesus.

The Letter to the Hebrews portrays Jesus as the High Priest to end all High Priests. The ones who served the Israelites were mortal. They served for a few years before growing old and dying, requiring someone else to fill the post, since the Yom Kippur offering had to be made year after year. But Jesus, because he has overcome death and is now alive for ever, will fulfil his High Priestly role for ever. His

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<sup>56</sup> Leviticus 16:30

intercessory function in God's presence is permanent. Or, as the Letter to the Hebrews puts it: 'Because Jesus lives for ever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.'<sup>57</sup>

There's another difference. The High Priest of Israel went through the curtain of the Temple into the Holy of Holies, which was merely an *earthly representation* of the true presence of God. It was 'a copy and shadow of what is in heaven'.<sup>58</sup> But Jesus went into the *real* presence of God when he ascended to heaven.

And another difference. The Israelite High Priest took into the Holy of Holies an offering of animal blood to make atonement for the sins of the nation. And what did Jesus take into God's presence? 'He offered *himself*.'<sup>59</sup> We might say he took his own blood. He went 'through the curtain' into God's presence having shed his own blood on our behalf. That blood was the perfect offering, sufficient to deal with sins once for all, and never needing to be repeated.

So, Jesus was, at the same time, both the offerer and the offering, the High Priest and the sacrifice.

This is rich imagery, with a host of interconnected meanings. But the bottom line is simple: through his death on the cross, Jesus *dealt with the sin issue once and for all*.

Never again will anything need to be done about it, because it has been definitively sorted. That means that *your* personal 'sin issue' has been sorted. It's interesting that, whereas the Old Testament focused on the sins of the nation of Israel as a whole, the New Testament drills down to the individual level. It assures you that *your* sin, with its power and its consequences, has been dealt with by Jesus. That's why the apostle Paul, and millions of Christians since, have been thrilled

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<sup>57</sup> Hebrews 7:24-25

<sup>58</sup> Hebrews 8:5

<sup>59</sup> Hebrews 7:27

to state with confidence, 'The Son of God...loved *me* and gave himself for *me*.'<sup>60</sup>

Try speaking that out loud. Let the wonder of it sink in.

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<sup>60</sup> Galatians 2:20



# 19.

## Exile Over

Now we return for a second look at...

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### Exile and Return (*signpost No.10*)

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The exile to Babylon (586 BC) was the all-time low in Jewish history. It happened, you will recall, after the reigns of kings Saul, David and Solomon, when the nation split into two. The larger ten-tribe nation of Israel had already been taken off to Assyria and absorbed there over a century earlier. Then the new superpower, the Babylonians, attacked the remaining two-tribe nation of Judah and dragged them, too, into exile.

We noted earlier how this knocked the bottom out of people's lives. With the Temple in ruins, Jerusalem sacked and the people themselves dragged off to distant Babylon, they felt totally disorientated. Everything that had given their lives structure, meaning and purpose had vanished.

Only one speck of hope remained: the word of the prophet Jeremiah that the exile would not be for ever. This became a major theme of Jewish expectation. *Return from exile* became the great national hope. The people talked about it all the time; it's what kept them going.

Jeremiah had declared that the exile would last, in fact, for seventy years. For many of the older folk, that meant never seeing home again. But at least the younger ones could perhaps look forward to

better things, and the nation as a whole could get back to something like normality. So, they lived in hope and, with the seventy years up, sure enough, they got the 'all clear' from King Cyrus of Persia to go back home.

Even though, on the face of it, the return from exile was a big deal, we noted that it proved a bit of a damp squib when it came. For a start, only a small proportion of the exiled Jews took advantage of the chance to go home. The rest opted to stay put, having adapted to Babylonian life and ways. Then, when the returnees got back and gave priority to rebuilding the Temple and getting the worship-system up and running again, the end result was a bit disappointing. The new Temple was a mere shadow of the splendid Temple of Solomon that it replaced. And God didn't show up in visible splendour at its consecration this time.

But the biggest negative was the fact that, even though now 'back home', the nation was still not free and independent. It remained part of the great Persian Empire. They were still ruled by Gentiles. But, they hoped, things could change, and maybe their independence lay not far ahead.

They were disappointed. Despite their best efforts, they remained the puppets of one superpower after another. After five hundred years, when Jesus came on the scene, they were still under foreign domination: by this time, the Romans. So, while the exile was technically long over, it didn't feel like it. Being in your own land isn't quite the same when foreigners run the show and squeeze you for taxes, and foreign soldiers patrol the streets to keep you from rebelling. The great 'return from exile' vision of the prophets wasn't, in practice, everything it had been cracked up to be.

That got the people looking again at the prophetic messages. And there they discovered that the prophet Daniel had provided a helpful insight. God had revealed to him that, in one sense, the exile would last, not seventy years, but 'seventy times seven' years — that's four

hundred and ninety years.<sup>61</sup> That period, he said, would come to a close with the appearing of a ruler designated the 'Anointed One' — that is, the Messiah.

The Jews began doing their sums, and by the days of Jesus they reckoned that the time was just about up. That's why the Romans, around that period, had to cope with a steady flow of self-styled Messiahs, who all tried to rally Jewish forces to fight off the Roman overlords. The Romans beat them all down with an iron fist; they crucified them.

This heightened expectation explains why so many Jews latched onto Jesus; maybe he was the 'real' Messiah, at last. He certainly was, of course, but they couldn't see beyond their vision of a political and military Messiah, which they projected onto Jesus. To them, military might was all that mattered in the end. The best-armed and best-organised fighting machine always came out on top, so that's what Messiah would need to put together. It was the same, sad old scenario that had blighted the world from time immemorial — brute force, killing, rape and pillage. That's how society worked, so that's how the Jews would finally escape their prolonged exile and become a powerful, independent nation once more.

Jesus would have none of that. God is love, not war and killing. Paradoxically, Jesus would sort the issue in a whole new way: through succumbing to the killing machine, then triumphing through resurrection. He would love his enemies, not slaughter them. The end of exile would be in peace, not war.

What's more, the scope of *this* end-of-exile would go far beyond the petty political and territorial ambitions of the downtrodden Jews in Palestine. It would highlight the fact that people everywhere, whether Jews or Gentiles, are *all* 'in exile' — far away from their longed-for 'home' of a peaceful, prosperous and purposeful existence, where they live in harmony with God and one another.

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<sup>61</sup> See Daniel 9:20-27

The Old Testament shows the exile to be the consequence of Israel's sins, so return from exile is inextricably bound up with 'the forgiveness of sins'. Sin, of course, is a universal problem, not just a Jewish one. Happily, the death of Jesus accomplished 'the forgiveness of sins' for Jews and Gentiles alike, and thus the end of exile for all. Jesus, declares Paul, is the one 'in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins'.<sup>62</sup> 'Redemption' — there's that word again. In this terminology, exile is a form of slavery from which Jesus has 'redeemed' us; our sins are forgiven, and all of us are free now to go home.

But where is 'home'? For us, certainly not Jerusalem — the scope of what Jesus achieved by his death goes far beyond people returning to a Middle Eastern city. The forgiveness of sins is way bigger than that.

There is another Jerusalem. The New Testament calls it 'the *new* Jerusalem', as distinct from the old one. This is a metaphor for 'God's people at home'. It is a way of saying 'the community of those who have heard, and acted on, the Cyrus-like voice that says, "You are free to return".' It embraces all those who, realising what Jesus has accomplished, have upped sticks and left 'Babylon', accepting the invitation to go home to where God lives among his people. I'm one of them. I can say that while, naturally speaking, I live in Cornwall, England, spiritually speaking I live in the new Jerusalem. I'm part of the worldwide community of Jesus-people — sometimes called the universal church.

How about you? Cyrus is still saying, 'You're free to go home'. What's to stop you doing it — unless you're too settled in Babylon?

The new Jerusalem today — the church, in the sense of 'Jesus-people together' — is an outpost of heaven on earth. True, much that currently goes under that name is pathetic and lifeless. But let's judge 'church' by its best expression, not its worst. Church, as God intends it to be, is a colony of that better society, marked by peace, joy,

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<sup>62</sup> Colossians 1:14

harmony and *shalom*, which will one day be universal. The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews addresses followers of Jesus this way: ‘You *have come* to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.’<sup>63</sup> We are there already, part of local churches that are, by definition, made up of people determined to trust and follow Jesus.

But there’s a day coming when ‘the new Jerusalem’ will become the biggest thing — in fact, the only thing. The last book in the Bible struggles to find words adequate to describe its wonders: ‘Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,”...I saw the Holy City, *the new Jerusalem*, coming down out of heaven from God... And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and will be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”’<sup>64</sup>

That glorious state of affairs is still future. It awaits the age to come, after Jesus returns. By comparison, what Christians enjoy in the present-day new Jerusalem is limited. In spite of the huge positives, we are still prone to sin and weakness. Some of our fellow-citizens too easily rub us up the wrong way. But the prospect of the full deal keeps us going. Hope is a great encourager.

Take note, then, of this important signpost: *return from exile*. It points your way to better things here and now, as well as brilliant prospects for the future!

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<sup>63</sup> Hebrews 12:22

<sup>64</sup> Revelation 21:1-4. See also v9-26

# Part 4: The Signposts' Meaning

(continued)

## *b. Connecting with God*

### 20.

## A Better Kingdom

So far, we have highlighted some Old Testament signposts and noticed how they point to 'the Christ event'.

We have noticed, too, how they point the way to a better life for you:

- As the ram died in Isaac's place, Jesus has died in yours, so that you can live!
- The tyrant 'Pharaoh', representing all that holds you captive, has been defeated by Jesus.
- Liberation from 'Egypt' — which stands for your own enslavement — is now yours, thanks to Jesus, the Passover lamb, who was slain for you.
- The High Priest, Jesus, has offered his own blood for you, taking care of your sins.
- Like King Cyrus, Jesus has announced your freedom to leave the exile caused by your sins and go home to where you belong.

Now it's time to consider how, in the light of all that, you can connect with God for yourself. And we'll do it by returning to the remaining signposts, starting with...

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## Kingdom (*signpost No.9*)

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Connecting with God means signing up as a ‘kingdom’ person. *Jesus* is the King of that kingdom. He is the Lord, the boss, the ruler, the one now running the show. This is perhaps the major message of the New Testament, summarised in the phrase ‘Jesus is Lord’, that is, King.

The ‘kingdom of God’, you will recall, is what the Jews had been yearning for for centuries, ever since prophets like Daniel had predicted its coming. It was the promised time when the dominance of human kingdoms, based on the heavy-handed use of force and sustained by the military, would give way to a new kind of kingdom altogether — God’s kind. That kingdom would be his means of putting the messed-up world to rights at last. People were not sure exactly how it would work, but if it was God’s kind of kingdom it would be good, so bring it on!

Jesus was King of that kingdom, in one sense, from the very start. Remember the events surrounding his birth. The angel Gabriel gave Mary some startling information about the child she would bear: ‘He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants for ever; his kingdom will never end.’<sup>65</sup> Note the vocabulary: ‘throne’, ‘reign’, ‘kingdom’.

Then the Magi came seeking one ‘born *king* of the Jews’. As we saw, this description troubled Herod, who himself held that title. He knew, as did everybody, that this was Messiah-talk, and that the promised Messiah would be, by definition, a king.

Later, John the Baptist came on the scene, heralding Jesus’ public ministry. ‘The *kingdom* of God has drawn near,’ announced John. It is

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<sup>65</sup> Luke 1:32

imminent, he meant. It's at the door, so stand by. All the kingdom prophecies were about to be fulfilled at last.

John didn't hesitate to point to Jesus as the King of that kingdom. 'I immerse you in the waters of the Jordan,' he told the people of Judea, 'but the one coming after me will do better than that: he will immerse you in the Holy Spirit and fire!' The Jews knew what that meant. The ancient prophets had spoken of a purifying outpouring of the Spirit of God at Messiah's coming, and everybody knew that Messiah ('anointed one') would be an anointed *king*. On another occasion, John pointed to Jesus and declared, 'Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!' The sin of the *world*? This was big stuff that only a king could do.

Then, just before Jesus began his public ministry, he had his battle with the powers of evil in the desert, overcoming the fierce temptations thrown at him there. That was all part of his role as the King. He asserted his spiritual authority over the forces of evil, requiring them to back off and leave him free to dispense healing and life unhindered.

When he said to his disciples, on another occasion, 'The kingdom of God is in your midst,' he was referring to himself: *he* was the King. As the embodiment of everything that God's kingdom stood for, he did the Father's will perfectly. And when that kingdom would, in due course, come to be populated by citizens like him — people becoming like him through the empowering of the Holy Spirit — it would arrive in its fullness. That's why, in the prayer he taught us, we say to God: 'Your *kingdom* come.' And, to spell out what that means, we add, 'Your *will be done on earth* as it is in heaven.' Even as we pray it, we are striving to be the answer to our own prayer.

In all his 'kingdom' talk, the hard bit for Jesus' followers was that his enemies crucified him. Surely, they reasoned, becoming King means being exalted, lifted up, honoured — not crucified!

But Jesus didn't see it that way. His kingdom would turn all the usual presuppositions as to what 'kingdom' means on their head. As



the servant-King, his lowest point was in fact his highest. 'I, when I am *lifted up* from the earth,' he said, 'will draw all people to myself.' And the writer who recorded that — John — adds: 'He said this to show *the kind of death he was going to die.*'<sup>66</sup> Yes, he would be 'lifted up' on a cross to die an agonising death. But, paradoxically, that very 'lifting up' was his *enthronement*, the act by which his kingship was established!

And the ratification of his kingship was the resurrection! Jesus is the one who, according to Paul, 'was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our *Lord.*'<sup>67</sup>

He has conquered death. He has been down into it, come through it, and emerged from it in victory. Now he's like one of the seasoned pioneers from the old days, who broke open unknown, daunting territory, then came back to say to other would-be travellers, 'Trust me. I've been right through everything and I'm back here to tell the story. So, I'm qualified. Put your faith in me, and I'll lead you safely there yourselves. Stick with me and I'll see you through.'

The risen Lord Jesus, similarly, says, 'Death? Been there. Done that. And I'm here alive and well, living a new quality of life. I'm qualified. So, stick with me and I'll see you, too, safely through death and out the other side to better things.'

Those 'better things' are kingdom things, and they have two dimensions: a *present* one, and a *future* one.

First, Jesus is King *now*. He stands at the head of a new order, a new community, a new kingdom. He invites you to join him as part of that community, a citizen of that new kingdom. It's the kingdom where we put God's will first and, with all our hearts, seek to do it. We model ourselves on Jesus, confident that the Holy Spirit, who lives in us, is working from the inside to make us more and more like him.

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<sup>66</sup> John 12:32-33

<sup>67</sup> Romans 1:4

Wherever we go, we want to leave behind us — as Jesus did — a trail of people who have been blessed, encouraged, helped and affirmed. And we achieve this not by some massive feat of self-effort. No, we just trust ourselves to him in an act of faith, believing that his very life, as a result, is also in us, enabling us to be and do what would otherwise be impossible. This way, we can ‘be Jesus’ to others.

This is kingdom life. We enjoy it in common with all who have committed themselves to Jesus. Together, we make a difference. We look at this sad and broken world and, with the Lord’s help, do everything we can to mend it. We start with people. Like Jesus, we look out for the marginalised and downtrodden, the despised and hurting, and pour balm into their wounds in whatever way we can. Where there are disputes, we work at being peacemakers. We love people self-sacrificially, as Jesus did.

But it doesn’t stop at that personal level. We give attention, too, to the *structures of human existence* that Paul calls ‘the powers and authorities’, where dark forces often rule, bringing misery instead of wholeness and joy — families, schools and colleges, choirs, governments, sewing groups, businesses, and whatever. We infiltrate them on the King’s behalf, opposing all that is dark, and shining the light of kindness, love and encouragement into every corner, so that everybody comes to enjoy being part of them. We lift the atmosphere.

We also oppose *systemic sins* in the corridors of power, as opportunity permits. We speak in Jesus’ name to the powers that be, agitating for justice, for peace, for wholeness and integration.

More than that, as kingdom people, we give attention to the *material world*. One day, we believe it will be totally renewed, when Christ brings his kingdom to its consummation, so we do all we can to move things along in that direction right now. We don’t subscribe to the ‘float off to heaven when you die, and leave the world to rot’ view, which has torn generations of Christians away from their duty to this planet that God made and loves so much. On the contrary, we work under Jesus here and now to tackle every blight that plagues

our world — from climate change to the destruction of the rainforests. It's an exciting life!

Of course, we come up against huge opposition at every level. The devil may have received his death-sentence at the cross, but the sentence hasn't yet been carried out. In the meantime, he and his minions, knowing that their time is short, are going down fighting, and there may well be casualties among us in the conflict. But our King has been through death and out the other side, promising that he'll bring us through, too, so we have nothing to fear!

All this is the kingdom's *present* dimension. But it has a *future* one, too.

While we will do all we can here and now to be the answer to the prayer, 'Your kingdom come', we won't be able to finish the job. Jesus himself will do that, at his promised return. What a day that will be! It will spell liberation, victory and wholeness all round. Here's how Paul describes it:

'I don't think there's any comparison between the present hard times and the coming good times. The created world itself can hardly wait for what's coming next. Everything in creation is being more or less held back. God reins it in until both creation and all the creatures are ready and can be released at the same moment into the glorious times ahead. Meanwhile, the joyful anticipation deepens.

'All around us we observe a pregnant creation. The difficult times of pain throughout the world are simply birth pangs. But it's not only around us; it's *within* us. The Spirit of God is arousing us within. We're also feeling the birth pangs. These sterile and barren bodies of ours are yearning for full deliverance. That is why waiting does not diminish us, any more than waiting diminishes a pregnant mother. We are enlarged in the waiting. We, of course,

don't see what is enlarging us. But the longer we wait, the larger we become, and the more joyful our expectancy.'<sup>68</sup>

Another translation of that passage describes the whole of creation being set free from 'its bondage to decay'. What a liberation that will be! And there will be new, immortal bodies for us, like the body of Jesus after his resurrection. What tremendous prospects! What a privilege to be moving things towards that glorious goal today! This gives life meaning and purpose — if only you will get on board.

So, you have a choice to make. By default, you're not a kingdom person. Becoming one will require a conscious decision on your part to cross the line.

You need to do that before God. I suggest you talk to him. He's a personal God, remember, not some faceless 'force', so you can speak to him, confident that he has all the time in the world for you and will listen carefully. This is the essence of prayer. So talk to him — preferably out loud, because that gives it a helpful objectivity.

Maybe you could say something like, 'God, I'm weary of serving the petty interests of my own little kingdom. I'm ready, Lord, to sign up as a citizen of *your* kingdom, and to find something really worth living for. I'm ready now to give my full allegiance to King Jesus, to let him run my life, even though I know it will be costly. This is me, God, signing on the dotted line to be a Jesus-person. Amen.'

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<sup>68</sup> Romans 8:18-24 *The Message* translation

# 21.

## A Step of Faith

Did you pray a prayer like that?

Maybe you don't feel ready for it just yet, but still feel drawn towards the kingdom life I have been describing. That's good. The God-thoughts that led you to this book are taking you somewhere positive. But you may still be unclear about how exactly you get on board. Hopefully this will become clearer as we return to another signpost...

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### Abraham, the man of faith (*signpost No.1*)

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Yes, back to good old Abraham! As the New Testament writers looked back at his life, the feature that stood out was his *faith*.

By that, they didn't mean his set of beliefs, as when we say, 'I'm of the Hindu/Christian/Buddhist faith.' They referred to the fact that *he took God at his word*. He believed what God had said. Specifically, God had promised Abraham and Sarah a son. But they were both well beyond child-bearing age. So, they had a choice: they could either believe the fact that human reproduction at their age was impossible, or they could believe God's word. It was one or the other.

Abraham, the Scripture records, 'believed God'.

That's the bottom line for you, too. We're not talking about you having children in your old age, of course. We're looking at the principle of *taking God at his word*. In your case we're looking at the whole great storyline of Israel's history, culminating in 'the Christ event',

and the fact that God tells us he worked in all of this to bring things to the point where you can now connect with him.

- He tells you that Jesus died in your place, like Isaac's ram and the Passover lamb, so that you can live.
- He tells you that the devil, that Pharaoh-like tyrant, has been defeated by the death of the Lamb of God, so that you can step out in freedom to pursue your destiny.
- He tells you that Jesus, that great High Priest, has offered his own blood to atone for your sins, so that you need not fear judgment.
- He tells you that the period of miserable exile has come to an end, and that you are at liberty now to go home.
- He tells you that King Jesus has defeated death and come back to life to invite you to join him in seeing his kingdom established worldwide.
- He tells you that, in the company of Christ, there is hope and a future.

All you need to do, then, is what Abraham did: *take God at his word*.

I'm sure you have as many unanswered questions about it all as did Abraham. That's normal. Mercifully, you don't need to understand everything before you can take this step of faith. Sometimes you need to step out in faith first, then everything else falls into place. And a step is a step. You will never *drift* into a place of believing God. Yes, you may need a period of thinking, assessing and reviewing the situation before you are ready to act — I suspect you're in one now — but, at some point, you will need to deliberately move your foot forward and take that step.

I mentioned in the introduction that I took that vital step when I was aged only twelve. Did I fully grasp what it meant? Far from it. All I knew was that God loved me, Jesus died for me, and that a new and better life was available if I would just believe it.

The believing we're talking about isn't just mental acceptance; it's practical. There's a story about the famous French tightrope-walker,

Charles Blondin (1829-1896), best known for walking across the Niagara Gorge. He did it just walking across. He did it with a wheelbarrow. And he did it carrying a man on his back. After this last feat, as he stepped back onto firm ground to the applause of the crowds, one man exclaimed, 'Wow, Mr Blondin, you are brilliant! You can do *anything* on that rope!' Blondin turned and looked at him. 'Do you believe I could carry *you* across?' he asked. 'Why yes, absolutely!' replied the man. 'OK,' said Blondin, 'climb on my back.' The man suddenly remembered he had an appointment... The point is clear. He 'believed' that Blondin could carry him across, but he believed *only in thought, not in action.*

The kind of believing God wants from you, in response to his provision in Christ, is not mental acceptance, though that may be a good start. He's looking for *a concrete step of reliance on his word.* Are you ready for that? For me, as a boy of twelve, that involved my kneeling alone at my bedside one night and praying aloud. I don't remember much of the detail, but the gist of it was: 'Lord Jesus, I know I am a sinner who needs to be forgiven. Thank you for dying to make that possible. Father God, will you please accept me as your child, not because I'm good enough — I'm not — but because Jesus is good enough. Accept me, please, for his sake. Amen.'

Nothing particular happened. No flashes of light or anything. But I climbed into bed knowing deep down that God had heard my prayer and accepted me as his child. Over the years, I had committed lots of Bible verses to memory, thanks to Sunday School attendance, and as I began to slip into sleep I remember saying to myself, 'Well, Jesus said, "He who comes to me I will not cast out." I've now come to him, so he hasn't cast me out. That means I'm in. Good.' And off I went to sleep.

Looking back, it was all rather simple, maybe even naive. But it was *sincere.* And that, it seems, is what God is looking for. Give some thought to how *you* might take the vital step of faith that will connect

you with God. Look again at the prayer I suggested at the end of the last chapter.

However you do it, *forgiveness of your sins* will be part of the picture. Jesus has dealt with that issue once for all, as we have seen. The blood of atonement has been shed. What you have to do is believe it. Which brings us to just one more thing about Abraham.

When the Scripture records that Abraham ‘believed God’, it goes on to say, ‘and it was *credited to him as righteousness.*’ That’s important. It means that, in God’s view, our trusting him, or taking him at his word, ranks higher than moral performance. Abraham was far from completely ‘righteous’, as is clear from the record of his life. But God was willing to overlook his shortcomings in view of this fundamental virtue: *his willingness to take God at his word.* God is the same today. Sure, he wants you to live a life of goodness and integrity, as far as you can — and he will help you with that — but in the end what he is looking for is your willingness to rely on his promises. If you do that, he will ‘credit it to you as righteousness’. Consider yourself forgiven and accepted!

That’s a mind-blowing deal! Forget all that soul-destroying struggling to please God, in the hope that you might achieve some ‘pass mark’ and thus make your way into his good books. You’ll never manage it. It’s your faith, your trust, your taking him at his word that he’s after. The rest will look after itself. Are you up for it?



## 22.

# Through the Water

We have seen how vital it is for you to take *a step of faith* to take advantage of what Jesus has done. I mentioned that, for me, it was a deliberate act of prayer to God when I was just a kid. But there is a better way, recognised by Christians in every generation: *baptism*. To see what that is all about, let's return to another signpost...

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### The Red Sea (*signpost No.4*)

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After the Passover, the Israelites left Egypt en route for the Promised Land. We could say, I suppose, that my prayer of faith as a boy was the equivalent of my participation in that exodus. The blood had been shed, the way out was clear, and I took it. So far, so good. But you will recall that, shortly after leaving Egypt, the Israelites found themselves on the shores of the Red Sea, with Pharaoh's horses and chariots coming up behind to take them back to slavery.

That's when God stepped in to make the break with Egypt final. He parted the waters, so that they could cross on dry land, while the waters swept back down on the pursuing Egyptians and drowned them all.

The apostle Paul sees in these events a picture of Christian baptism. 'Our ancestors,' he says, 'all passed through the sea. They were all *baptised* into Moses...in the sea.'<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> 1 Corinthians 10:1-2

What is he getting at? First, you need to understand that the word ‘baptise’ means literally ‘immerse’. In some branches of Christianity, baptism is administered by pouring or sprinkling water from a font onto the person being baptised. That’s fine, as far as it goes. But scholars agree that baptism from the start was by dipping the person right under the water, in the sea, a river or a pool. It was an act of *immersion*. They went under, and came up spluttering and joyful. That’s behind Paul’s statement that the Israelites ‘all passed through’ the Red Sea, emerging safe and sound at the far side.

‘Yes, but wait a minute,’ you’re thinking. ‘They *didn’t* pass through it in the sense of being submerged, or even getting wet!’

Exactly. That’s the whole point: they came through alive and well. When a person is plunged beneath the water in baptism, if they are held under for more than a moment or two, they will end up dead. Then, they will emerge, not spluttering and joyful, but silent and deceased. All this is a key part of the symbolism of baptism. The act is a kind of mini-death. They go down under the water into ‘death’, and then come up from it alive in ‘resurrection’.

It’s a re-enactment of the sufferings of Jesus, allegiance to whom they are pledging by being baptised. He went ‘down’ into death for us, then came ‘up’ again in resurrection. The person being baptised is saying, in effect, ‘I, too, am now “dying” — saying a final farewell to my previous lifestyle — and, as I emerge from the water, I’m “rising again” to a new way of life altogether.’<sup>70</sup>

The Israelites ‘passed through the sea’ and emerged safely at the far side. They were alive. What was dead were their oppressors. Imagine them standing on the far shore and looking back across the water towards Egypt. The threat was gone. Any thoughts of a return to Egypt were now ruled out. There was only one way left to go: forward to the Promised Land, united under Moses’ leadership. The old life of slavery was gone for ever now; new life was theirs as they

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<sup>70</sup> Paul develops this imagery in Romans chapter 6.

pursued their destiny as free people. Little wonder the prophets and psalmists of Israel, for generations after the event, looked back at the Red Sea crossing as one of the highlights of their national experience of God.

If you have come to a point of readiness to put your faith in Jesus and all he has done, you need to get baptised. That could be your means of taking that vital step.

Baptism is such a drastic, physical event that you will never forget it. It's far more memorable than 'saying a prayer of commitment', no matter how sincere that prayer may be. Sometimes, after many years of living as a follower of Jesus, especially when the pressure is on, it's easy for the memories of a prayer — even one said out loud — to become a bit hazy. But you can't get hazy about being baptised. It's a messy, splashy, material event, in the company of fellow-Christians rejoicing all around you. As such, it becomes a helpful signpost to which you can look, to get your bearings, when going through trouble, doubts or worries years later. For me, it took place a couple of years after my 'prayer of commitment', and I remember it well. I wish it had taken place sooner.

There's one other thing to note about the Red Sea experience. To quote Paul more fully, the Israelites 'were all baptised into Moses *in the cloud* and in the sea.' What's this 'cloud' bit? In the Bible at large, clouds are a common metaphor for the presence of God. For the Hebrews after the exodus, his presence manifested itself in his guiding them through the desert by 'a pillar of cloud', which at night shone like fire. So to be baptised 'in the cloud' means 'in God' — to be 'immersed in God'.

We see this happening when we come to the New Testament. There, we find the first believers in Jesus, at or around the time of their baptism in water, being also 'baptised in the Holy Spirit'. That's a way of saying they had a conscious experience of being 'immersed in God'. This still happens today, and is a powerful confirmation of God's presence with you. Be open to it!

So, give serious thought to being baptised.

Your background, of course, may be one in which your parents took you, as a baby, to be baptised in a church that practises infant baptism. They doubtless did so in all sincerity, doing what they believed was best for you. They likely made promises on your behalf. Later, as you grew older, you may, or may not, have chosen to be 'confirmed', to show that following Jesus was now your personal choice. But maybe, looking back on all that, you realise you didn't have any real personal stake in it, whereas, now, you are pursuing God seriously, and want to take a conscious step of faith. There is no reason at all why you should not now be baptised by immersion to achieve just that.

There is something wonderfully decisive about baptism. It could spell the difference between a radical change of direction in your life and continuing to vaguely 'think about religion'. Are you ready to embrace the challenge?

## 23.

# Not Guilty

Come with me into a court of law.

Here, in the dock, is a man called Fred, charged with robbery at a local jewellers. Two legal teams are present. Counsel for the prosecution will make the case against Fred. Counsel for the defence will argue for his innocence. The session begins, with the jury listening intently to everything, and the judge overseeing the whole proceedings. In due course, after both teams have done their best, after Fred has been grilled by both, and several witnesses have given evidence, the jury retires to reach its verdict. Before long, they return to the courtroom, Fred is asked to stand, and the judge asks the foreperson of the jury how they find.

‘Not guilty, your honour.’ The judge strikes the bench with his gavel and declares the court dismissed. Fred is free to go.

Now let’s suppose that you and I know something that no-one in the court found out: that Fred *did*, in fact, rob the jewellers. That means that, while Fred’s *true condition* is ‘guilty’, his *legal status*, thanks to the court’s verdict, is ‘not guilty’.

I invite you now to take Fred out of the picture and put yourself in his place. Never mind imaginary crimes like the robbery. Let’s focus on your overall moral status, ranging from major crimes to minor indiscretions. And let’s replace the judge with *the* Judge, God himself. What is your *true condition* before him? Guilty — without any question. We could put any human being in that situation and the condition would be the same, since we all fall short of perfection one way or another, and most people, when pressed, will admit that openly.

But, as we saw with Fred, *true condition* and *legal status* are not the same. Fred walked out of the courtroom a free man, not because he was innocent, but because the court, after all its deliberations, *declared* him innocent.

And now I have good news for you. Yes, you are ‘guilty as charged’ before God, the Ultimate Judge. He knows the score; there’s no pulling the wool over *his* eyes. But, in his love, God is able to pronounce over you, ‘Not guilty’! To use the technical term, he *justifies* you, because of what Jesus has done, and your faith in him! You can walk free from God’s courtroom to live a life in the sunshine, away from the clouds of condemnation.

We saw an example of this in the case of Abraham. He was no paragon of perfection, but, in God’s book, his willingness to ‘believe God’ — to take God at his word — ranked more highly than his moral performance and, on those grounds, God ‘credited it to him as righteousness’. That’s the way God is. He is not subject to a moral code that somehow stands outside of himself and outranks him, so that he has to bow to its rules. No, God himself *is* ‘the rule’, and he chooses to be a God of grace and to justify the guilty. He can ‘do an Abraham’ on you! Here’s how the apostle Paul puts it:

‘If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about — but not before God. What does Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” Now to the one who works, wages are not credited as a gift but as an obligation. However, to the one who does not work but *trusts God who justifies the ungodly*, their faith is credited as righteousness.’

This is brilliant news, and one of the greatest joys of being a follower of Jesus! I’m far from perfect, I know. And I know that God knows. But, through taking him at his word and putting my total reliance on Christ and what he has done, I’m pronounced ‘not guilty’.

I no longer have to worry that my sins and shortcomings are piling up at such a rate that the tipping-point must be close, when my debit side exceeds my credit side, and God's judgment is released against me, either now, or at the final judgment. Instead, I look up, see my heavenly Father smiling, and hear him say to me yet again, 'Not guilty!'

This is a tremendous incentive to please him. But it's no longer a case of pleasing him so that, if I make the grade, he will accept me, but of pleasing him out of gratitude that he *has* accepted me, without reservation, for Jesus' sake. Yippee! This is the life!

I hope and pray, with all my heart, that you, too, will come to this happy place, if you haven't come to it already. It's just one facet of the amazing experience of connecting with God and knowing him.

# Part 4: The Signposts' Meaning

(continued)

*c. God's People*

## 24.

### The Redeemed Community

Connecting with God, by faith in Jesus, starts as a personal thing. It's something between you and the Lord. I urge you, if you are still hesitating, to cast your doubts aside and take that step of personal commitment to Jesus.

Once you've connected with him, you soon realise you now have much in common with others who have done the same. It's a bit like when I got married. I fell in love with, and married, Faith, who has now been my wife for well over fifty years. But I quickly realised that, in marrying her, I had married into her family. It took a while for me to get to know them all, but in the end my life was much the richer for it.

It's no accident that the commonest metaphor in the Bible for 'Christians together' is *family*. God is our Father and Jesus is our Elder Brother, who taught us to pray, 'Our Father...' The great thing about a well-functioning family is that you are never alone. There are siblings to play with. There are younger ones to look after and teach about life. There are older ones to learn from. Nothing is worse than loneliness, and a good family is the best antidote.

God's family is called *the church*.

Oh dear, you say — because 'church' often has negative overtones so strong that they drown out the melody. You think, perhaps, of the



sexual abuse of youngsters by church leaders that has been big news in recent times. You recall childhood visits to church, where you weren't allowed to eat sweets, the service went by the book, the singing was dire, and you were bored out of your mind. You remember the priest who was 'holy' when officiating but notorious in the community as money-seeking or foul-mouthed. The tuba-player in the Salvation Army band who was having an affair with the cornetist's wife. The hell-fire preaching that gave you nightmares. The TV evangelist begging for money in exchange for vials of 'holy water' so that he could buy a private jet. It's grim stuff, and I don't blame you for wanting to stay away from it.

But it doesn't *have* to be like that. Church can be hugely supportive, comforting, stimulating and warm. Church comes in many varieties, and what suits one person won't suit another. So, if you've connected with God, I encourage you to check out different ones in your neighbourhood. Take your time finding a church where you can truly belong, and where you are accepted, loved and encouraged in your faith.

In that connection, it will help us, at this point, to review...

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## The People of God (*signpost No.5*)

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After the exodus from Egypt and the crossing of the Red Sea, the Hebrews were the *redeemed community*.

God had delivered them from slavery, given them their freedom and pointed them in the direction of their destiny: the Promised Land. Their common experience joined them to each other, under Moses' leadership. Shortly after that, you may remember, they cemented their identity as a nation by renewing their covenant with the Lord. He would now, in a reinforced sense, be their God, and they

would be his people. Their 'togetherness' as the people of God was stronger than ever.

Today, all whose faith is in Jesus Christ are the 'redeemed community'. Because of their common experience of redemption from slavery, they are one people. It has nothing to do now with nationality. Jewishness in the sense of 'the people of God' has been redefined through Jesus. Now, all who put their faith in him, whether Jews or Gentiles, are the 'children of Abraham'.<sup>71</sup> There are millions of us, all over the world. There's no way, then, that we can ever be all together in any physical sense. We have to be content with being 'together' with a limited number of them. And that normally means being part of a church in our locality where we can 'do life together' with like-minded people.

Notice I said 'do life together'. Being the people of God is a far cry from 'going to church' on Sunday morning.

Church, in the real sense, is not a building at all; it's people. Church, you might say, is not where we go, it's what we are. Just as the Israelites lived all aspects of their lives together, we are called to be God's community 24/7. That's because we can no longer tolerate a divide between the sacred and the secular. All of life is now sacred, and we live that life together with our fellow-believers. We look out for one another. We share our belongings, as appropriate. We keep an eye on each other's children. We take meals round when one of our number has just had a baby. We take our elderly brothers and sisters in Christ to the supermarket in our car. We pray together, in each other's homes as well as in organised services. We sing together, we laugh together, we weep together.

You need to be part of such a community. Seek one out!

'But shouldn't *society at large* be like that?' you ask. Ideally, yes. And we will all want to help that be the case. But the church, as a society within society, is a prototype. Fellow-believers in Jesus, be-

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<sup>71</sup> See Galatians 3:6-7

cause of their common love for him, have more than average opportunities to look out for each other. Sometimes, outsiders looking on and saying, as they often did in the early days of the church, 'See how these Christians love one another!' are drawn, by what they see, to find Jesus for themselves.

That leaves just two more signposts to review, and we'll combine them. They are...

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### The Tabernacle (*signpost No.6*) and The Temple (*signpost No.8*)

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We saw earlier how the Tabernacle in the desert, and its later replacement, the Temple in Jerusalem, were central to Jewish life. They were the intersection of heaven and earth, for each was where God lived among his people. That's why people were so devastated when the Babylonians sacked Jerusalem in 586 BC and razed the Temple to the ground, taking the people off into exile.

What happened to God's presence when the Temple was destroyed?

The prophet Ezekiel explained it. In a graphic description, in the book of the Bible that bears his name, he describes the presence of God, like some great spiritual machine, rising up from the Temple and taking its departure. God, in other words, had already said goodbye and left. He was heartbroken, because he still loved his people and remained committed to them. But it takes two to tango, and they had made it clear, by their persistent waywardness and disloyalty, that they no longer wanted him around.

After the seventy years of exile, a remnant of Jews returned to the Holy Land and rebuilt the Temple. But, as we noticed, it was a good deal smaller than Solomon's had been, and the tangible presence of God never graced it as it did the earlier one at its inauguration. In

spite of that, the worship continued in the usual way, and the annual feasts drew the people to Jerusalem again. They took it by faith that God's presence was with them, there in the Holy of Holies, but somehow the whole thing didn't seem to be as living a reality as it had once been.

By Jesus' time, the Temple built by the returnees from exile had been extended on a huge scale and made into a structure of beauty and magnificence second to none in the ancient world. The work had taken forty-six years and was still not quite complete. King Herod had been the driving force behind the work, which was widely admired, even by those who didn't like him. But beauty and magnificence are no substitute for the presence of God, which didn't mark this structure any more than it had its pre-extension hub.

Here's where the prophet Ezekiel comes into the picture again. At the time of the exile, he had prophesied a glorious new age when *the Temple would be rebuilt* — a Temple of such vast proportions and splendour that he was clearly trying to portray something that stretched his powers of description to the limit.

This coming Temple, he said, would be marked by the presence of God in an overwhelmingly awesome way. Herod's vast and stately edifice fell short of that, lacking the felt presence of God. Maybe Ezekiel was hinting that *something bigger and better than an actual building* was in the pipeline?

Then there was Daniel's prophecy that the exile would come to an end after 490 years — which took things up to the time of Jesus. That's why the Jews in Jesus' day reckoned they could look for something drastic to happen pretty soon. Whatever that was, it would include *the Temple being blessed with the presence of God at last* — God would dwell among his people in a more tangible way than they were currently experiencing.

Which brings us to Jesus. As a Jew of his time, Jesus went to Herod's Temple often, but he had some curious things to say about it. One day, for example, he was walking past it with his disciples, who

commented on the magnificence of its structure. Jesus replied, ‘As for what you see here, the time will come when not one stone will be left on another; every one of them will be thrown down.’<sup>72</sup>

That seemed unthinkable. It was, after all, a huge and solidly-constructed edifice, built to last. Yet Jesus seemed to be hinting that it would in due course meet a fate similar to the one that had befallen Solomon’s Temple. The disciples couldn’t get their heads round that.

On another occasion he said something even more way-out. ‘Destroy this temple,’ he said, ‘and I will raise it again in three days.’

That certainly had his listeners puffing out their cheeks and scratching their heads. What on earth did he mean? The apostle John, who recorded the incident, added an explanatory comment: ‘But the temple he had spoken of was *his body*. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said.’<sup>73</sup>

‘His body’? Yes. Hold that — it’s important.

In these two Temple incidents Jesus was indicating two things. First, Herod’s magnificent Temple was going to be destroyed in the near future. And, second, Jesus himself, his body, was the *real* Temple in God’s grand scheme of things. It was in him *as a person*, not in any building, that the intersection of heaven and earth would now be located. He would be Emmanuel: God *with* us.

He proved right on both counts. History records that, in the year 70 AD — just a few decades after Jesus — Roman armies besieged Jerusalem, starved it into submission, then overran it, setting fire to the city and reducing the Temple — yes, even that grand and glorious Temple — to smoke-blackened rubble.

As for the other bit, Jesus himself is indeed ‘God with us’. We don’t need to go to any temple, or even to a church or chapel, to touch the divine, because God doesn’t inhabit buildings anymore. The parish church on the corner is no more ‘the house of God’ than the Pig and

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<sup>72</sup> Luke 21:6

<sup>73</sup> John 2:19-22

Whistle pub by the green. As one old hymn puts it: ‘Where Jesus is, ‘tis heaven *there*.’ He himself is the Temple now.

But there’s a fascinating twist to this. While Jesus himself is now the Temple, where God dwells among his people, there is a sense in which *we ourselves*, as his people, are also ‘the Temple’!

Here’s how it works. The New Testament, using a biological metaphor, talks of Jesus as the ‘head’ of the church, which is his ‘body’. Just as you are one person, your head and body comprising a single entity, there is a sense in which Christ (the head) and the church (his body) are a single entity, too.

On the basis of this unity of head and body, the New Testament names both *Jesus himself* and the *people of God* as the Temple. ‘Don’t you know,’ Paul asks the Corinthian Christians, ‘that *you yourselves* are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells among you? ...God’s temple is sacred, and *you together* are that temple.’<sup>74</sup> It all makes sense. Christ himself is the new Temple. He and his people — head and body — are one. So the people of God are as much the Temple as Jesus himself is. And that’s where God dwells.

All this has two practical implications.

One is that, if you dodge ‘church’ you are missing out on a key part of God’s provision. By steering clear of the Temple which is the *church* (in the ‘people’ sense of that word), you cut yourself off from a vital aspect of the presence of God. You need your fellow-Christians if you are to grow and mature in your faith.

The other is that you need to do your bit to help the often weak and deformed ‘body of Christ’ grow and mature, so that it matches the majesty of Jesus, the Head. Only as you throw yourself into the life of the church can you contribute your own gifts to it and also benefit from the different gifts that the Lord has given to its other ‘members’ (parts of the body). This way, says Paul, ‘we will grow to

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<sup>74</sup> 1 Corinthians 3:16-17

become in every respect the *mature body* of him who is the head, that is, Christ.<sup>75</sup>

But, returning to the ‘temple’ theme, *the worldwide Christian community* is the great Temple that Ezekiel prophesied. That’s where God now lives!

The days the prophet foresaw are upon us! If the church at large can get its act together, it can turn the world upside down and make the presence of God felt everywhere. For you, all this simply means: don’t be content with connecting with God at a personal level. Sure, enjoy being close to Jesus. Follow him, obey him, live his way. But as you do, before long you’ll hear him say, ‘It’s time you got in there among my other people.’

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<sup>75</sup> See Ephesians 4:11-16

# 25.

## Journey's End

We're all on a spiritual journey.

I've been on mine a long time. As I write this, it has been over 65 years since I started my pilgrimage of faith as a boy of twelve. Where you yourself have got to, only you can say. But I hope that what I have written may have helped you escape a purposeless existence and, through Jesus, make a start on your own journey of faith.

I urge you to keep moving. Don't get too comfy and settle down. Continue seeking God with your whole heart, talking to him all the time, learning and growing in your faith. There will be lots of questions, many of them permanently unanswered. That's no surprise, since we are dealing here with a God who, while intimately with us in Christ, is at the same time utterly 'other' and transcendent. Questions like...

- What about people of other religions? Can God reach them, too? Yes, he'll be there for them as they live up to the light they have. He's keen to include, not to exclude.
- Did God kill Jesus? No. It was people who killed him. But, mysteriously, God used his death to bring life and victory!
- Is hell real? Not if you're thinking of a Dante's Inferno-style place. If there is a place of ultimate separation from God, only those who choose to be there will be there.
- Is death the cut-off point for connecting with God? I see no reason to think so. He remains forever open and welcoming. But there's no time like the present!



- What about all the people who lived before Jesus? And those today who live their whole lives without hearing about him? That's God's problem, not yours, and you can be sure he has somehow made provision for them all. Maybe he'll use you to reach some of them?

Those are just my own current convictions, arrived at in the light of the often-confusing biblical data that we consult when trying to answer such questions. My advice would be to not get caught up in the imponderables. Just get on with living in the good of your connection with God. Learn to press on humbly, content with the light that you do have, and avoiding navel-gazing by constantly reaching out in service to others.

Meanwhile, read the Bible. It's not an easy book, but worth sticking with. As you read, remember that, technically, it's not a book but a *library* of books, of many different genres, by many different authors, and from many different periods of history. It needs to be interpreted wisely if you are to get a balanced overall picture from it, but your church should be able to help with that.

Sooner or later, of course, you will die. What happens then is in God's hands, and you can trust him. The 'not guilty' verdict already declared over you will still stand. It's Jesus' performance, not your own, that is the guarantee of that, so you have nothing to fear.

Maybe you are wondering what heaven will be like. If being in heaven means being in the presence of God, enjoying the lovely fellowship of the Trinity, it's going to be amazingly good. Put out of your mind the stereotypes that get bandied around, like wearing a one-size-fits-all white robe, walking on golden pavements, and twanging a harp, all while floating around on clouds wearing a pious expression. I'm sure that appeals to you as little as it does to me. But trying to say what it *will* be like is a waste of time. It's just going to be brilliant!

More importantly, heaven is *not the final destination*.

Go back to where the whole scenario of life, the universe and history started: God's purpose to be in unbroken fellowship with

human beings, who would care for the world on his behalf, making it a universal 'temple', where God and his people would enjoy everything good and glorious for ever. In spite of human failure, he has never abandoned that purpose. One day it will come to fruition. That's the final destination.

This is the bright and appealing future that we touched on earlier: the kingdom in all its glorious fullness. God's dimension and ours — heaven and earth — united at last. His presence pervading everything. Endless peace, purpose, joy, challenge, creativity and fulfilment. And all in a deliciously down-to-earth environment in a renewed creation. No more pain, sorrow or tears. No more death. Dogs that don't bite, I think. And maybe teddy bears!

Part of your purpose here and now is to move things along in that direction. With the Holy Spirit's help, you can be like Jesus, touching those around you with love, warmth, encouragement and hope. You can push for justice and integrity in public life. You can speak to the powers that be, challenging them not to abuse their clout. You can set up toddler groups, food banks, hospices or whatever to improve people's lives. We won't put everything to rights, of course. But the time is coming when, as God himself moves things along, *Jesus will return to give things the final push and bring in, at last, what the Bible calls 'the age to come'*.

'The age to come' is a funny old thing. In one sense it's here already, overlapping with 'this age', because it was inaugurated by the Christ event. It has been chugging along ever since, sometimes making great strides in its improvement of the human condition and the state of the planet, at other times failing dismally and seeing things slip back a bit. But we are to remain optimistic about its continuing progress in 'this age', doing our bit to help it along. But when Jesus returns, as the angels promised at his ascension, 'this age' will come to a decisive end and 'the age to come' will be upon us in all its consummate splendour. Ah, happy days!

With such prospects, serving others today is a delight and a privilege. So is worship. It's easy to raise your voice in songs of praise to a God who has given you such great and precious promises.

But life today won't all be sweetness and light. Some people, some dark forces, will scratch and spit, hating the fact that you are Christ's representative. They may even kill you, just as they killed your Lord and Saviour. But he has drawn death's sting, and the end of this life becomes simply the gateway to something far better. You can't lose!

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So, be honest: as you come to the end of this book, where are you at?

Have you 'connected with God' in a decisive way yet? Can you see the passing funeral cortege, or the view from the mountain-top, and breathe a meaningful prayer now, because you know and love him, and have his perspective on things? Can you talk to your child about the speed of light and the vastness of the universe knowing, now, that the unfathomable creator God is also your loving Father?

Or do you still have some way to go? If so, take your time. But keep seeking God. He'll never give up on you, so the least you can do is not give up on seeking him. Whether you consider yourself a 'believer' or not, speak to God in prayer. Ask him your questions. Tell him your frustrations, even if you feel you still have to start with 'God, if you're really there...'

Be happy. Be blessed.