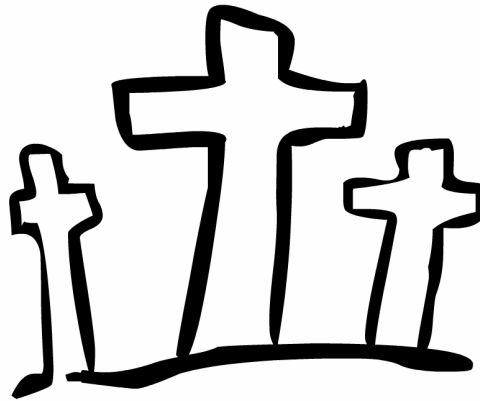


# ALL ABOUT CHRIST



## MOULTON PARISH CHURCH HOME GROUPS – SPRING 2010

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## GROUP BIBLE STUDY

The priority of any Bible study is to seek to understand what the Bible is saying to the people to whom it was first written as well as to understand it for our particular day and generation. So, the top priority is first to understand the text and then to make it meaningful and relevant. Here are some pointers to help you as you study the Bible:

**PRAY** - Our preparation for any Bible study should begin and end with prayer. We need to ask God, through the help of the Holy Spirit, to guide us as we read the Bible and prepare for a study.

**ASK** - In order to understand the Bible properly, we need to keep in mind six important questions:

1. **Who is speaking?** Everything in the Bible was written by men who were inspired by God. Though every writer of the Bible was inspired by God, sometimes the writers record words which come from the hearts of evil men. So, dealing with the question "Who is speaking?" will help us to know whether the words we are reading are words that we should obey today.
2. **Who is spoken to?** We need to realise that not every command that comes in the Bible is a command for us today. For example, the command by God to Noah to build an ark is obviously pertinent and relevant for Noah, but not for us.
3. **When is the Bible writer speaking?** In answering this question, we will need to make a distinction between those who are living under the law and those who live under the guidelines and principles as outlined to us in the New Testament, the way of Christ. Therefore, the principles we see with regards to worship in the Old Testament have a relevance to us, but we need to read them in the light of the New Testament. It is always important to bear in mind that one part of the Bible can often help us to understand another part.
4. **What type of language is the writer using?** The languages used are usually one of two types: either literal or figurative. Sometimes both will be mixed together in one passage - for example, Jesus is spoken of as the Lamb of God, which is clearly a figurative form of speech. However, he is also described as the one who takes away the sin of the world, which is literally true for those who believe. So, Jesus was not an actual lamb, but he was the one who became the offering for our sins.
5. **What are the conditions or circumstances in which this writing is given?** If we can get to grips with the particular circumstances the writer is facing when he writes, it helps us to understand what he is saying.
6. **What is the context of the Bible passage?** Think about what has just been said and what is about to be said in the particular book of the Bible, as well as the context of the Bible passage within the whole of the Bible.

The Bible is indeed God's inspired word - it is his revelation to all mankind. So, in order for us to understand the Bible we must seek to study it properly. Only then can we "*correctly handle the word of truth*". And if we keep these six simple questions in mind as we prepare our study, we will find that we can indeed get to grips with God's word.

**PLAN** - For those who are preparing and leading a study, the following steps should prove helpful:

1. Try to break the passage into parts or sections so that you can clearly divide up the passage you are looking at.
2. Think about what you don't understand in the passage and therefore what others might not understand as well. What parts do you need to gain more background and information about? Be ready to deal with puzzles that people will ask you about. So, for example, when studying John 3, people might ask 'What is the kingdom of God?', 'What is a Pharisee?'. These are obvious things that people might need to have some more information about.
3. Having broken the passage up into sections, we then come to thinking about questions. You can use the questions that are in this book. However, you may want to write your own, which is of course perfectly all right. Questions can be one of three types.

**Understanding.** The first type of question should be aimed at trying to draw out our understanding of what the passage is saying.

**Significance.** Only once we have begun to understand the passage can we move on to questions that try to highlight the significance of the passage in the light of the particular book or letter, and of course against the backdrop of the whole Bible.

**Application.** Then we move on to questions which apply to the situations we are facing today.

**ADDITIONAL COMMENTS**

- Do make use of clergy and commentaries and other Christians who have a maturity which you can rely upon when you are seeking to tackle Bible passages.
- It will sometimes prove helpful to have more than one translation as this will give you some fresh insights into the verses which you are focusing on.
- As we come to study the Bible we need to keep in mind that all the books of the Bible have one great theme: that is God's plan to save mankind from his sins through Jesus Christ.
- Fundamentally, make sure that whatever you do, you seek to do it to honour and glorify God.

## 'All About Christ' - Introduction

The story is told about Leonardo da Vinci, the great painter, as he was about to embark on his fresco of the Last Supper. Before beginning this mighty project he had prepared himself by prayer and meditation, yet when he dipped his brush into the paint and lifted his hand to begin the great work he found himself trembling! Surely this is the reaction to anyone who endeavours to grasp and show both the perfection and the sufferings of the Son of God, whose work is revealed to us in Jesus Christ. It is with these thoughts in mind that I begin the preparation of these studies on Jesus Christ.

Christianity is unique among the religions of the world, for it tells us that at the very heart of this faith is focused on the fact of its founder, Jesus Christ. Why is this? Well, the person of Jesus Christ is as important to Christianity as Jesus himself said. So, the central message of the gospel is not just about principles and doctrines, it is in fact about the very person of Jesus. It is about knowing him personally and intimately. As the Apostle Paul would remind his readers at the start of his letter to the Romans, the gospel of God that is the good news concerning his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Take a moment to consider these great truths which Paul unpacks at the start of his letter to the Romans: Jesus is, first of all, the Son of God. By saying that he is the Son of God, Paul means nothing less than that Jesus is God himself. Now, why does Paul say this? Well, it is because Jesus himself said it in John 8:58. But we know more, because Jesus not only says that he is the Son of God, but he says he is the Christ. In other words, he is the long awaited prophet who was prophesied to come as the Messiah, the one sent by God to redeem and rescue his people from their sin. Yet there is still more for us to see, because he is also described as our Lord. In the Greek Old Testament the word LORD was used to translate God's name, Yahweh. In the New Testament the same word is used for Jesus, and it is used by Paul at the start of Romans. So Paul is asserting again and again that Jesus is God! I hope you see at once that these truths about Jesus go to the very heart of the gospel.

The opening verses of Romans chapter 1 have even more to say to us about Jesus, for we are told by Paul that Jesus was born from the seed of David according to the flesh, and declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness by the resurrection from the dead. Here are two major assertions, the first of which is that Jesus was fully human. So we see at once that he was physically descended from Israel's greatest King, David! And it was from David that the line of the Messiah was to come. But we are told also that he was the Son of God, as his resurrection from the dead declares. I hope you can see that the resurrection is a declaration that Jesus is in fact the Son of God. So, these two great affirmations about Jesus combine for one great earth-shattering truth: that Jesus is the God-Man, uniquely qualified to be the mediator between God and man. And we see that the Christ is at the very heart of the gospel.

In our studies this term we will attempt to explore the role of Jesus Christ, both from the days before his incarnation, right through the great events of his life.

I think it will be important for us to realise that other religions hold Jesus in great respect and often will cite him as one of the great teachers of the millennium. But Christians need to realise that this is not an option for us, for Jesus himself claimed to be far more than just 'a good teacher', Jesus claimed to be God incarnate. Jesus saw himself as divine, so it is crucial that we do not regard him as less than he is or less than the gospel proclaims, otherwise we will undermine the work that he did and the good news that we seek to make known. So as you embark on these studies, certainly one good question to meditate and reflect on is, how do you regard Jesus Christ?

The study of Christ is in fact one of the most important topics in the whole of the Bible. It is the foundation for all our doctrine. So, a wrong understanding of Christ will result in errors in the most fundamental beliefs and practices. The Bible presents Christ in three spheres: his pre-incarnate state, his humanity and his glorious divinity.

Even recently there have been attacks against the biblical presentation of Christ. We need only think for a moment about the way in which the incarnation of Christ has been questioned by Bishops at the end of the twentieth century.

Any doctrine which states that Jesus Christ is not the divine, eternal Son of God, is automatically opposing the Bible's clear teaching. The issue has been discussed many times by the church, and was the dominant issue that was debated in the early centuries of the Christian faith. It shaped two great Church Council meetings (Nicaea and Chalcedon). Whilst not being the central issue, it certainly was the dividing point

for heresy or orthodoxy, and it could well be said that the same could be applied today. So take your time grasp who we are studying this term and ask God to give you more and more insight into his grace so that you may grow in your God given faith in Christ.

## Study 1 - Colossians 1:13-23 - The Pre-Incarnate Christ

The Lord Jesus Christ was unique. He was unique for many reasons. We know that every person has to enter into our world through birth, and this is seen as their beginning. But the birth of Jesus Christ was not like that - his birth did not mark his origin. Only the Lord Jesus Christ could say, "My life did not begin when I was born", for the Lord Jesus Christ had a pre-incarnate existence; he existed before he was born into humanity! You see, his birth did not mark his origin but only his appearance as a man on the stage of the world. This can be said of no other person, so we need to see right at the very start that Jesus Christ's life did not begin with his birth. In Jesus Christ, we glimpse the meeting place of eternity and time, we see the stepping into our world of God himself to take on human form. We need to see here that his nature was derived from his eternal being - he did not become God's Son at his birth in Bethlehem, nor when he rose from the dead. No, Jesus Christ is God, supreme and without beginning.

In John's gospel we read, "In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God and the word was God." A little further on we read, "And the word became flesh". Who is John speaking of? It is Jesus Christ, the one who dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. Here in these verses John is consciously echoing the very words that come at the start of Genesis, yet the implication in John's Gospel is that he is talking about the beginning that goes back further than the one mentioned in Genesis. In John's account of the beginning, which appears to be what some call 'eternity past', he describes the existence of the word. In verse 14 he tells us that the word became flesh and dwelt among us. Developing this point, John quotes Christ, using the expression that he used to describe himself, leaving no doubt that Christ was the word that was existent in the very beginning. It is these very ideas that Paul now takes up in our passage for this session's study.

Paul begins with a customary salutation at the start of his letter by expressing thanksgiving and prayer for the Colossians. Hearing of their condition from Epaphras, he is thankful for their faith, love and hope (v1-8). His prayer is that they will be filled with the knowledge of God's will, and walk in a manner worthy of the Lord. Paul wants them to be strengthened by God's glorious power and ever thankful that the Father has qualified them to be partakers of a great inheritance. And all this has come about because they have been delivered from the powers of darkness and given into the kingdom of God's dear Son. This is where they will experience not only redemption but also the forgiveness of their sins.

Now, the reason behind the letter to the Colossians had been the arrival of Epaphras in Rome (1:8). He had brought to Paul disturbing news about the presence of heretical teaching in the church at Colossae. Though the letter itself gives us no direct account of the strange teaching that lay behind Paul writing this letter, yet there are many clear allusions to the heresy that are sketched across the letter and give us some clear features to understand. The first of these was that it professed to be a philosophy. The apostle Paul, however, recognised it to be both hollow and deceptive (2:8). Secondly, this philosophy placed much emphasis on ritual circumcision, dietary laws and the observance of holy days (2:11, 14, 16, 17). The third aspect of this heresy was the belief that it was necessary to placate certain supernatural powers. The false teaching insisted that these powers had to be not only placated but also worshipped (2:15, 18, 19). So immediately you can see the impact this would have on Jesus Christ: he would be relegated to a relatively minor place within the Colossian church. As HCG Moule said "It was the doctrine of God and of salvation that cast a cloud over the glory of Jesus Christ." You can probably see at once that this kind of wrong belief cast doubts over the incarnation and identity of Jesus Christ, and of course we can see many similar ideas at work in the church and our culture today - I mention the Jehovah's Witnesses as one clear example.

### The Supremacy of Christ

It is clear with this backdrop of the Colossian heresy that it was easy to see that the church was decrying and undermining the person of Jesus Christ. To those who followed the errors of Colossae, Christ was not a triumphant redeemer to whom all authority in heaven and earth had been given, rather he was just one of the many spiritual beings who sought to bridge the gap between God and us humans.

This passage in part is Paul's response to this false teaching, one of several great passages on Christ in which Paul makes great declarations about the nature of Jesus Christ (see also Ephesians 1:20-23; Philippians 2:5-11).

### The Scope of Christ's Supremacy (verses 15-18)

What we find now in these verses are three great sweeping statements concerning Christ. The first is in relation to his deity (v15); the second in relation to creation (v15-17); the third in relation to the church (v18). If in his letters to the Galatians and the Romans his task had been to expound the importance of Christ for salvation, now in the face of such teaching in Colossae, he must expound and teach Christ's cosmic significance. It is with this background that we see how important it is to recognise the pre-existence of Christ.

In regard to his divinity, Christ is "the image of the invisible God". We must not understand the apostle's statement to be teaching that Christ is the image of God in a material or physical sense, but the true meaning must be sought on a deeper level than this. What we glimpse in these verses is something of the pre-existence of the Son. We need to realise that Christ always has been, is, and always will be the image of God. His incarnation did not make him the image of God, but it did bring him as that image within our grasp and understanding. We see that in relation to the universe Christ is described as the firstborn over all creation. The idea of him being firstborn is a reference that is used in other places in the New Testament. It should denote the priority in time and the supremacy in rank. Also it is Christ who is before all creation in time - he is over it in rank and dignity. So the Christ that we worship, the Christ who is our Saviour is Lord over all God's creation.

In verses 16-17 the apostle now states the ground for Christ's dominion over creation - it is because he made it. To him it owes its unity, its meaning and its very existence. We see this hammered home by Paul with his phrases: in him, through him, for him. What Paul is telling us here, then, is that creation is for Christ, in the sense that he is the end for which all things exist, the very goal towards whom all things were intended to move. It is inescapable that Paul is trying to drive home not only to the Colossians but also to us that whatever supernatural powers there may be in the universe, Christ is the one who made them and he is their Lord. So we see then that in verse 16 Paul has told us the essential reason for Christ's lordship over creation is that he is the creator. So verse 17 is a summing up of the thoughts that lie at the heart of verses 15-16, yet with a useful addition: for it rounds out and completes the statement of Christ's relationship to creation. "He is before all things, and in him all things hold together" - this is important in that we see that Christ is the one who both unifies and personally sustains all creation. What Paul is telling us is that all of creation springs from him and finds in him its common bond.

So with these first verses in mind, Paul now takes us on a stage to see Christ in relationship to the church. Once again the idea of supremacy is coming through. Remember that 'the church' means the gathering of God's people. Paul now goes on to tell us at least one reason behind Christ's headship over the church: "he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead". What lies behind what Paul is saying is that Christ is not only the origin and source of the life of the church, but he is also the fountain from which the church comes. We also grasp here the idea of sovereignty that is woven within this passage: because Christ was the firstborn from the dead, he has the dignity and sovereignty belonging to the firstborn.

So then, Paul has described the unique supremacy of Jesus Christ. He has affirmed him to be the image of God. He has told us that he is Lord over creation. Paul has underlined this by the fact that he is head of the church - indeed, he is first in all things.

### **The basis for Christ's supremacy (verses 19-23)**

We learnt in v18 that Christ does not share the supremacy that has been given to him by God. Verse 19 opens with the phrase, "For God was pleased..." - what was God pleased about? Well, it seems that God was pleased that in Christ all the fullness of God should dwell in him. This immediately would counter those who were following the heresy that was being pedalled there in Colossae, that Christ was something less than God. It seems likely that those who were following this heresy certainly would have seen Christ as among the supernatural powers who could mediate between God and man, but certainly he wasn't alone. While admitting that he had a heavenly origin and that God was in some sense present in him, he was however not sufficient for all our needs. But Paul slams into this idea by declaring that Christ is not just one of many divine beings, he is in fact the only mediator between God and the world.

This idea of reconciliation is then taken forward in verses 20-23. So, in verse 20 we are told that the Father was pleased "to reconcile to himself all things" through Christ. The danger here is that universalism, that is the belief that all will be saved, can slip in through the back door. It seems on the surface that this verse certainly lends weight to that false teaching. But we know in the light of other Scriptures that

without personal trust in Christ there is no salvation. Jesus Christ himself has spoken of those who do not repent as going way into eternal punishment (Matthew 25:46). No, we should see this reference as referring to the cosmic significance of Christ's work. This is the way in which all of creation will be reconciled to God because the impact of sin has affected all creation. What Paul is trying to stress in these verses is that we can be absolutely sure that our safety is in the best possible hands. Having given his own Son on the cross (verse 20), God isn't now going to leave us in the lurch. All of us have doubts and questions - there are things which make us wonder whether we really are safe in God's love. Paul is writing to the Colossians, and to us who have doubts and uncertainties, to know that our salvation is secure because the one who came to rescue us is the Christ, the Son of God.

We all know that the Christian life is far from easy. Yes, we are kept safe by God, but that doesn't mean that we don't face problems and opposition. Paul himself was encountering just such opposition from those who were peddling the heresy in Colossae. Paul is reminding his readers that we are called to serve God. We hear the good news and respond to it. Suddenly we have access to the greatest information the world can ever know, that God has stepped into our world to rescue us, to save us and to dwell in our hearts. Yes, those around us don't know this secret, but we do. This great news is for everyone (verses 23, 27). The truth is that we who once didn't want to know God have been made his friends (verse 21).

The reason behind the letter was that Paul had received a report of the situation at Colossae from Epaphras (1:7-8). His report was for the most part was favourable (2:5), but the subject matter in the letter powerfully suggested that the church was facing a two dangers: the danger of decline into paganism with its gross immorality (cf, 1:21-23; 2:6; 3:5-11) and the danger of accepting what has been come to known as "the Colossian heresy". This heresy was a syncretism involving four elements both pagan and Jewish in origin: **1. Philosophies of men** - which denied the all sufficiency and pre-eminence of Christ (2:8) **2. Judaistic ceremonialism** - that attached special significance to the rite of circumcision, food regulations, and observance of special days (2:11,16-17) **3. Angel worship** - which detracted from the uniqueness of Christ (2:18) **4. Finally, asceticism** - which called for harsh treatment of the body as the means to control its lusts (2:20-23). To guard against these dangers, Paul writes to warn the Colossians against falling away. To all this a right understanding of Christ was the answer.

### Questions for Discussion

- 1) What in verse 15 makes it clear that Jesus is supreme over all creation and how do verses 16-17 confirm this? Are you able to list five things that illustrate Christ's superiority in creation from verses 15-17?
- 2) What is revealed in verses 15-20 concerning our Lord's relation to God, to creation, and to the Church? Why are these truths important for the believer?
- 3) List four things which illustrate Christ's pre-eminence in redemption (verses 18-20). What was the former condition of the Colossians? How were they changed (verses 21-22)?
- 4) Upon what condition would they be presented as holy, blameless and faultless (verses 22-23)? How much would you say is the lordship of Christ over creation a feature of your relationship with him? How would you respond if someone said: "I wish that God would reveal himself to me"?
- 5) Based on the passage what do we discover about Christ? If you had to condense the whole passage down into just a few thoughts, what are the three key things of significance we could share from here?

## Study 2 - Luke 1:26-38 - The Incarnation of Christ

Men and women have always craved the idea that God should be both tangible and recognisable. We see this throughout the history of mankind - time and again people have bowed down to stones, trees and objects that they have created with their own hands and called them god! Idolatry seems to have been a hallmark of man's heart from the very beginning. We even see this idea coming through in John's gospel when Philip asks Jesus, "Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough" (John 14:8-9). What has been God's response to this universal longing? Well, it is the incarnation of his Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus himself tells Philip that "anyone who has seen me, has also seen the Father" (John 14:9). The clear implication of what Jesus is saying is that the acts and attitudes of the Son are a direct revelation of the activities and attitudes of the Father.

When we speak of Christianity, or for that matter the gospel, we must not only examine and understand what Jesus did, but also who he was and is. For just as trust in the historical events of our Lord's life are vital for salvation (the virgin birth, the sinless life, his sacrificial death, his resurrection and his ascension) so is faith in the person of Jesus Christ. It was Jesus himself who emphasised the central importance of his own person when he asked the disciples in Matthew 16:15, "Who do you say I am?" It is this question of the identity of Jesus Christ that still causes people trouble today. Across 2,000 years we have found many answers to this one question, and clearly it seems to me to be a question that separates those who are saved from those who are lost, those who are sheep from those who are goats and those who are living in a far country from those who have come home to the Father and are rejoicing once more in his fellowship.

The virgin birth is an essential belief of the Christian faith. This great act of God stepping into our world gives us vital information about the mission and nature of the Christ. The doctrine of the virgin birth (the incarnation) is based on two explicit Bible accounts: Matthew 1:18-25 (the Christmas story) and Luke 1:26-38.

Clearly there were a number of reasons why God stepped into our world and became a man. The first of which was to confirm the promises that God had made across the Old Testament that he would venture into our world to reveal himself to us (Isaiah 7). Secondly, as we have already seen, it was to reveal the Father to us - Jesus described himself as revealing the Father to his disciples. Thirdly, he was coming into the world to be a faithful high priest so that the sacrifice could be made that would be acceptable to God the Father to pay the price for our sin. Jesus came into the world not only to do that great work of offering a sacrifice but also to destroy the work of the devil, whose aim has been to undermine the cause of God and to destroy the high point of God's creation - namely humankind. In the incarnation we see before our eyes an example of a holy life and one that is there for us to be able to be clothed in his holiness. Finally, the Bible teaches us that the supreme reason why the Son of Man came into the world was to save sinners (1 Timothy 1:15). The salvation of men and women was the ultimate reason why the Father sent the Son into the world, and this is unpacked for us when we read John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." It is here that we clearly see the connection that is being made between the giving of the Son in the incarnation, and that he was also willing to die in our place - this, then, is the whole mission of the Son.

### The Birth of Jesus foretold

Luke's gospel begins with the encounter of Zechariah and the angel of the Lord. It is at this point that Luke begins to weave a deep theological event into the narrative that has begun as his story unfolds. This is clearly an act of revelation by God so that we may fully understand the coming of Jesus Christ into the world. We see here in chapters 1 and 2 the account of the birth of Jesus that is both beautiful and vital if we are to grasp the significance of his rescue mission. Luke is giving us the ideas and the truth behind the incarnation. What we glimpse here is the union of God with a woman. This is a great mystery: Luke speaks of the spiritual overshadowing by God himself that will produce the Holy One within Mary. In our passage we find reference to the divine Sonship of Jesus (verses 32, 35); we find reference to his Messianic role and reign over his kingdom (verses 32, 33); we see the God Most High (verses 32, 35); finally we witness the power of the Holy Spirit and the grace of God at work in one person's life (verses 29, 30, 34, 35, 38).

The encounter begins with the fact that Elizabeth is in her sixth month. This brings us a direct link between the life of John the Baptist and that of Jesus. John the Baptist's beginning has been told to us earlier in chapter 1 (verses 5-25). The same approach is now given to the arrival of Jesus Christ into the world, as

we witness God's power over human reproduction. So, our account begins with God sending the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee. In verse 27 we are introduced to the young virgin, Mary, and immediately we know the contrast with the old priest Zechariah. Yes, one had passed the time for having children, but one was just beginning the opportunity to conceive. The very word 'virgin' reminds us that this is someone who is yet to experience sexual relations. But we learn more about her, for she was pledged to be married to Joseph - the relationship that she had begun with Joseph was legally binding, but intercourse had not been permitted because it was not to be undertaken until their marriage had begun. What we know of these times is that only divorce or death could sever the link that had been made between Mary and Joseph. We are also told by Luke that Joseph is a descendant of David - this again links us back into the Old Testament, and the promise of a coming Messiah.

In verse 28 we are suddenly told that Mary is "highly favoured" - no such greeting was given to Zechariah. Why was she highly favoured? Well, of course, she is to receive God's grace. What we learn later on in verse 30 is that Mary "has found favour with God". Yes, the angel tells her also that "the Lord is with you", and this leads us to recall the way the angel of the Lord addressed Gideon, to reassure him of God's help even though he faced a great challenge (Judges 6:12).

Well, Zechariah, when he had met an angel, was gripped with fear (verse 12), yet the very appearance of an angel and these words of great greeting we are told "troubled Mary" (verse 29). The angel is content with seeking to reassure her that she has indeed found favour with God - and we need to remind ourselves that God's grace banishes fear. It is also interesting to note that most of the time when people in the Bible encounter an angel, fear is the natural response (see for example the encounter of the disciples with an angel on the day of Jesus' resurrection in Luke 24).

It is now that the bombshell arrives before Mary - Gabriel explains to Mary that she has found God's grace and in a very significant and special way. We find here an echoing of Isaiah 7:14, for Mary is told that she will be with child and give birth to a son and she is to give him the name Jesus. Surely this news must have come as a bombshell to Mary. It is interesting that it is the angel who names the child Jesus, as in the first century it was the prerogative of the father to give the child its name. The name Jesus (Joshua) was common in Old Testament times and continued to be a popular name throughout the first century. It is in Matthew 1:21 that we are given an explanation behind the name that the angel gives to Mary: it comes out of the word "saves", because God will save his people from their sins. If the first news of verse 31 was a shock, then surely the news in verses 32 and 33 must have entirely taken Mary off her feet. Recall, if you will, back in Luke 1:15 how Gabriel had qualified his prophecy about the greatness of John. But here his statement about the greatness of Mary's son has no qualifications whatsoever! The striking note of difference is that Mary's son will be called the Son of the Most High! Not only will he be the Son of the Most High, he will also be given the throne of his Father David (a clear reference back to King David) but he will also reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and his kingdom will never end. We see here the gradual unfolding of Jesus' Messianic destiny, firstly his Sonship, secondly his divine origin and thirdly his reign as King.

By the time we come to verse 34, we are hardly surprised at all by the question Mary raises: "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" Unlike Zechariah, Mary doesn't ask for a sign, only for more light so as to understand this incredible truth that has been revealed to her. At the heart of her doubts is the question that she is still a virgin, and has not had sexual relationships with a man. Clearly Mary, at some stage in the future, was expecting to have normal sexual relationships with the man who would be her husband. What we are witnessing here is that Mary is clearly puzzled by what the angel has said to her. Please note that Mary is not questioning God's ability, she is not doubting the truthfulness of what the angel has said, she merely wants to know how it is going to be accomplished in the light of her own age and situation. The Bible makes it very clear in response to her that it will be the work and power of God's Holy Spirit - he is going to supersede the laws of nature in order to produce a child in the womb of Mary, in just the same way in which the Holy Spirit comes into the heart of a believer, to bring us life before God.

### **Is the Virgin Birth really all that Important?**

I clearly want to say it is. For if Jesus was not born of a virgin, then he was an illegitimate child. If Jesus was an illegitimate child, then he is unqualified to be King of the Jews or to sit on the throne of David. If he was not born of a virgin, then he was just a man who died a long time ago. And if he was not born of a virgin, then you or I do not have hope of eternal life.

As our passage comes to a conclusion, what have we learnt? It is this: that there is a connection between Elizabeth and the birth of John the Baptist, and Mary and the birth of Jesus. The important lesson for Mary is that she is being given a sign with the news about Elizabeth, for Elizabeth's pregnancy is a sign to Mary. Remember that Zechariah had asked for a sign and had been given one. Mary does not ask, but she has also received a sign from the angel.

Our passage comes to a conclusion with verses 37-38. In verse 37 we have a promise: we have a God who is Master of every situation that he encounters - notice the tense of the words that are used, they are future-focused. Surely this is reassuring for Mary and for us - because there will never be a time when anything is impossible for God. Of course for Mary there is a decision to make: will she believe that God is in control, or is God more real to her than any problems that she is now facing? Our passage concludes with Mary's response, which is surely a great encouragement to us as believers today - don't miss the implication of Mary's statement, she is going to become pregnant, she is going to have a child, but she will have a child without the benefit of a husband! In our own day and age, we would hardly bat an eyelid at such news, but in Mary's day this was far from an easy situation to face. In some quarters it was perceived that the penalty for unfaithfulness would be death by stoning; outwardly to the world it would appear that she had become unfaithful, and in spite of all this pressure, we discover that Mary is willing to submit herself to the will of the Lord. It is well worth looking at this passage again in the light of the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth - Zechariah had all the benefits of an education as one who was part of the priesthood of God's people - yet he did not believe the very promises that God had made. Mary, on the other hand, was a simple village girl - she had no formal training or education as far as we know - yet she really believed and trusted in God and his word given to her by the angel.

### Questions for Discussion

The virgin birth is a vital belief of the Christian faith. This event gives us several important bits of information about the mission and character of the Christ. The doctrine of the virgin birth is based on two explicit gospel accounts (Matthew 1:18-25 and Luke 1:26-38) and is found in the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14 and is taken for granted in Paul's letters (see Romans 1:3; Galatians 4:4; Philippians 2:7).

- 1) Secular people often make fun of the virgin birth. Does this passage actually teach that Jesus was born of a virgin (verses 26-31)? What does Luke reveal about the family life of Jesus? Why is the amazing moment of verses 31-33 important to our understanding of who Jesus was and is?
- 2) What was different about Mary's "How?" question (1:34) to the angel from Zechariah's "How?" question (1:18)? Why was Mary rewarded and Zechariah disciplined?
- 3) Read verses 32-33 again. How would Mary's son fulfil God's promises, the prophecies given long ago (See 2 Samuel 7:11b-13,16; Isaiah 9:7)? What does this teach us about God? About Jesus? About his Kingdom?
- 4) What does the conception of Jesus teach us about him, his past, his life and his future?
- 5) In Mary we see a servant of God; she gave birth to God's perfect servant. Why is it so hard for us to accept being a servant? Why do we have such trouble being submissive to God? Have you had any experiences where God has taught you to be a willing servant? Where is God at work in your life today so that you have an attitude of submission to Him?

## Study 3 - Matthew 4:1-11 - The Temptation of Jesus Christ

### Introduction

Since the birth of Jesus 30 years previously, we now enter the next section of Jesus' ministry. In chapters 2 and 3 of Matthew, we are afforded very little of what had happened in Jesus' life. All that we know is that he lived in Nazareth and worked as a carpenter (Matthew 13:55 and Mark 6:3). The time came for him to begin that public ministry which would culminate at the cross outside Jerusalem. At this point in the story we have to see whether he is still qualified to be King. Had anything taken place that would throw doubt on whether he could be the one that God was calling? In chapters 2 and 3 of Matthew we find the witness of five key people who speak of the person of Jesus Christ, and that he is indeed the Son of God and the King.

The first witness that Matthew gives us is John the Baptist (Matthew 3:1-15). It is 400 years since the nation had seen a prophet speaking boldly for God in its midst. John appeared, and a great revival took place within Israel. The ministry of John the Baptist came to a head when he witnessed to Jesus Christ as the Son of God and as the Lamb of God (John 1:29).

The second person who witnesses to the identity of Jesus Christ is of course the Holy Spirit (Matthew 3:16). The coming of the Holy Spirit like a dove identified Jesus to John as he was baptised and came up out of the water (John 1:31-34). This event also acted as an assurance to Jesus himself as he began his ministry that the Spirit would always be with him (Matthew 3:34).

The third person who witnesses to the identity and work of Jesus Christ is of course our Heavenly Father (Matthew 3:17). The Bible gives us three special occasions when the Father spoke from heaven: first at the baptism of Jesus, then at the transfiguration of Jesus and finally when he approached the cross (Matthew 17:3; John 12:27-30; Matthew 3:17).

The fourth person who witnesses and testifies about the uniqueness of Jesus is a strange person to choose: namely Satan (Matthew 4:1-11). Yes, from the exalted moment of his baptism in the Jordan, Jesus is now led into the wilderness for a time of testing by Satan himself.

The final person who will bear witness to Jesus Christ as God's Son is of course Christ himself (Matthew 4:12-15). Matthew in his gospel shows us clearly that every aspect of our Lord's life was controlled by the word of God. It is important to realise that Matthew puts this gospel together by subject matter rather than in a topical order. But in this study we will focus on the temptation of Christ.

So, if the baptism of Jesus was a revelation of his divinity, then the temptation which he faced from Satan's own hand could hardly be a clearer reminder of his humanity. We will discover as we study these verses that they speak not only of his divinity but also of his humanity, having to face up to the pressures that temptations bring.

In Matthew, Mark and Luke we find that there are accounts of Jesus' temptation. The briefest of these are given in Mark's gospel (Mark 1:12-13). It is interesting to reflect for a moment the contrast between Matthew's account of the temptation and that of Luke. In Luke we find that a genealogy is inserted between the baptism and the temptation, whereas in Matthew we find that there is no genealogy and we are immediately taken to the events in the wilderness. What is also interesting to note is that there is a marked contrast between Adam who was tested in the bliss of the garden of Eden and yet fell, and Jesus who was tested in the hardships of the wilderness and yet triumphs. What is also important to pick up are that the responses that Jesus makes to Satan all come from the book of Deuteronomy, in particular from chapters 6-8.

We need to say also that it is difficult to be absolutely certain what happened, or in what form Satan came before Jesus. For example, standing on a high mountain (verse 8) would not in itself provide us a view of all the world. I think what can best be presupposed is that here was a vision of the world in a sense stretching out before Jesus. On the other hand, do not slip into the belief that the story is merely symbolic, as opposed to visionary. What we have here is an account of the real struggles that Jesus would face as the devil himself sought to drag him away from the mission that his Heavenly Father had given him.

We need to see that Jesus' three temptations are linked to his baptism, not only by the references to his Sonship and the Spirit, but to the opening, "Then" (verse 1). It is important also to pick up straight away

that it is the Spirit who leads him out into the desert to be tempted by the devil. We need to see that God is in control of the events that are taking place. It is important not only for Jesus, but for us, to realise that God can sometimes use events and circumstances which at the time feel harsh and painful to bring eventual good to his servants. Surely this was the realisation that Joseph had when he could look back on his life and see how God had guided him both to the highs and lows of his experience.

In addition, as Jesus was being tempted God clearly was linking this back to the way in which Israel as his people were tested, and Jesus' response needs to be seen in that light. As we look at verse 2 we see a parallel to the 40 years in the wilderness that Israel spent, being reliant upon God to provide them with manna and food each day. Both the hunger of Jesus and that of the people all those years before was to teach an important lesson - it was to prepare them for an important task that would lie ahead. Also notice the irony of the account that Matthew gives us of Jesus' life, in comparison to that of his ministry - note that Jesus is hungry, but he feeds others (Matthew 14:13-21). Jesus grows weary (Matthew 8:24), but he offers rest (Matthew 11:28). Jesus is a King, but pays tribute (Matthew 17:24-27). There are others that can also be seen.

### **The First Temptation (verses 1-4)**

Look at verses 3-4 - the tempter now comes to Jesus. This is all part of the first temptation. What we see here is the strain that is being applied to Jesus between the love of God and the will of God: "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." Here we hear an echo of Satan's words to Eve in Genesis 3 - there is a subtle suggestion that our Father does not love us. A further suggestion is also made: that divine power shouldn't be used to meet the need. Could it be that, when we put our physical needs ahead of our spiritual needs, we sin? The key here is will we allow God's will to have first place in our lives? So we see that the point of the temptation must be determined by closely examining both the temptation and the response of Jesus. The first temptation was no simple act to use improper means for making bread, nor was it an attempt to use the power he had to prove that he really was God's Son; no, it was the temptation to use his Sonship in a way that was inconsistent with his God-given mission.

It is amazing to think that we hear a similar taunt given to Jesus while he hung upon the cross: "If you are the Son of God..." (Matthew 27:40). If he had acted upon the taunt this would of course have undermined the very purpose of his coming. We know that Jesus could have gained the support of legions of angels, but if he had his whole mission would have been undermined, for he came to suffer and to die and to fulfil the Scriptures (Matthew 26:53-54).

So, Israel's hunger had been intended to show them that hearing and obeying the word of God is the most important thing in life (Deuteronomy 8:2-3). So Jesus learned obedience through suffering. You see, the real bread that Jesus needed was obedience to God's word. It is strange to report that Israel demanded its bread, but died in the wilderness; Jesus denied himself bread, retained his righteousness and lived by faithful submission to God's word.

### **The Second Temptation (verses 5-7)**

This is even more subtle. This time the devil uses the word of God: "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down. For it is written: "He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'" The setting of this second temptation is the holy city, Jerusalem. No doubt, the highest point of this city would be the temple complex. The quote that Satan uses comes from Psalm 91:11-12. The heart of the temptation is questioning whether the Father really does care for Jesus.

Notice how Jesus responds to this temptation, for he says, "It is also written, Do not put the Lord your God to the test." Here is a helpful reminder that we should never separate one part of the Bible from another part. We must allow Scripture to interpret Scripture. Certainly, those with a certain mind can always prove something from the Bible if we isolate the text from its context and turn it into a pretext.

So, as we read of what seems to be Jesus' hesitation, wondering whether he or his Father could command the normal forces of nature, it is because Scripture forbids putting God to the test (verse 7). We see again a link back to the wilderness wanderings of the people of God in Exodus 17:2-7, where the children of God put the Lord to the test by demanding water. Jesus in his response sees that the Scriptures expressly forbid what Satan says to him. The right response is an attitude of trust and obedience (Deuteronomy 6:17). In the way in which Jesus uses Scripture, we see how he uses one part of Scripture to interpret another, setting us a wise example that we would do well to follow.

### **The Third Temptation (verses 8-11)**

This temptation offers Jesus a shortcut to his kingdom. The Lord Jesus knew that his mission was to suffer and die before he could enter his glory and open a way for his brothers and sisters who have been called by God into the kingdom. If he now bows down to worship Satan just once, he could enjoy all the glory without enduring the suffering. The devil always wanted worship, because he always wanted to be God (Isaiah 14:12-14). This goes to the heart of what is wrong with our world today, in so far as we want to worship the creature rather than the Creator. The very high mountain spoken of in verse 8 does not seem much more than a prop for a vision for the world's kingdoms. It is of course possible that there is a link to Moses as he looked over at the Promised Land (Deuteronomy 4:1-4). What we can see here is that Satan now offers the kingdoms of the world and their glory without showing their sin, and as we have already discovered, Jesus came to deal with sin. So, here is the temptation: to gain power by worshipping God's rival. What Satan is doing is offering Jesus a bypass to his kingdom, missing out the cross and suffering. The temptation in a sense will be offered again when Peter speaks to Jesus in Matthew 16:23 offering Jesus a way of bypassing the cross, and that is why he is rebuked.

Notice the response that Jesus makes to this third temptation. He again reminds Satan that "It is written..." and from this we find that Satan now goes from his presence. It is also encouraging for us to remember that there will come a time when Jesus' kingdom so grows that Satan's power and grip on this world will once and for all be destroyed. The final victory will be over death itself (1 Corinthians 15:25-26).

I think what we are beginning to see from our study of Matthew 4 is that Jesus had from the very start of his ministry a combination of both his kingship and also the fact that he will be the suffering servant. This is first highlighted not only when he is born, and the gifts from the wise men, but is also again shown in his baptism and now becomes an essential part of his mission.

It is helpful to be reminded here that as Satan disappears he will continue to be at the elbow of Jesus, ready to try and draw him away from the mission that God has given to him. This should remind us that our victory over temptation on any particular occasion never guarantees us freedom from further temptation. In a sense, every victory that we achieve will only make Satan try harder to bring us down. The lesson that we can learn here is that the word of God will be our sure defence when we not only know it but also apply it to our lives. The Scriptures end here with the fact that Jesus not only resisted Satan and Satan departed from him, but God then sent angels to minister to Jesus' needs. We, too, need to be aware and reassured that God will minister to our needs when we face temptations and are victorious.

### Questions for Discussion

Satan tempted Eve in the garden of Eden and caused her fall into sin. In the same way he tempted God's people during the 40 years in the wilderness, and made them fall. Satan has tempted every one of us. The words from heaven, the descent of the Holy Spirit upon him, and Jesus' obedient submission to God's will in baptism should have prepared him to begin his ministry. However, all three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) record a significant event of the temptation that immediately follows on from Jesus' baptism. Though we do not like it, facing temptation is an everyday experience for the Christian who is in God's service.

- 1) We often think of the Holy Spirit as leading a believer to a good life. Why, then, did he lead Jesus to the wilderness to be tempted by the Devil (verse 1)? Why does the Holy Spirit also lead us to situations where we can face temptations?
- 2) The first temptation concerns our basic needs: hunger, thirst, sexual needs, need for safety, etc (verses 3-4). Why would it have been a sin if Jesus had acquired something to eat by changing stones into bread? Do you think that people can live by the Word of God alone, without their basic needs having been fulfilled (verse 4)?
- 3) The second temptation concerns our relationship with God (verses 5-7). What could Jesus have proved to the world if he had jumped down from the top of the temple and got away with it? In which form does the second temptation come into our lives?
- 4) The third temptation concerns the object of our faith. Does Satan speak the truth in verse 9? Give your reasons. What would the world have gained, perhaps temporarily, if Jesus had done as Satan tempted him to do? What temporary gain can we get if we submit before gods and lords other than the living God?
- 5) What do these temptations teach us about Jesus as he begins his public ministry? What was Jesus' weapon when he was fighting with the Devil? What is your weapon when fighting against temptations and sins? How has your understanding of Jesus Christ grown?

## Study 4 - Matthew 17:1-13 - The Transfiguration of Christ

One of my memories from my first visit to the Holy Land will be my visit to the Mount of Transfiguration. It was a bright, sunny day as we climbed the mountain to worship in the church that stood at the top to commemorate the spot on which Jesus Christ was transfigured. Though Jesus' transfiguration on the mountain (traditionally thought to be Mount Tabor) is one of the famous events in his life, it is often one of the least understood stories. This significant event took place shortly before his Passion. The sheer strangeness of the transfiguration, and perhaps its association with some mystics in the past, has helped to push this event in the life of our Saviour, Jesus, into the background of church life. Yet, at the heart of this story is the glory of Christ.

When we think of glory, often we think of something that has been achieved by extraordinary athletic prowess or business achievements, but in the Bible it is to do with God's radiance shining forth - it is the majesty of God. In a real sense this is a time that the deity of Jesus breaks out into humanity. It is here on the mountain that we are given a glimpse of the glory of Christ, as a brilliant light shines from Jesus himself. This light was a visible manifestation that a barrier had indeed been crossed. Here we see a link back to Moses and to the wilderness when God gave him the 10 commandments - remember, Moses' face shone with the reflected glory of God. But Christ did not reflect God's glory, it was his glory that was breaking forth upon us.

So as we consider in this study the glorious event which has, with justification, been termed one of the most astonishing moments in Jesus' life on earth, we need to give it our full attention. So it is with some fear and trepidation that we will seek to explore something of the glory of God as it breaks forth in this passage of Matthew 17.

Before we explore Matthew, we need to remind ourselves that this event undoubtedly meant a great deal to Jesus Christ himself. For in the days ahead he was going to feel the humiliation of being stripped, beaten and then crucified. Remember, also, that this moment of transfiguration comes following Peter's great and comforting confession of Jesus' deity; and it was here that the voice of his Father again confirmed his divine sonship; and it was before this event that he had shared with his disciples the very important fact of his impending suffering and death. Now on the mountain, where he is transfigured, he will meet again with both Moses and Elijah - two great giants of the Old Testament.

### Verses 1-8

The chapter begins with the momentous events taking place on the mountain, and ends with Peter catching fish to pay his taxes. What we witness here is the kingship of Jesus across the entire chapter. We are going to focus our time on verses 1-13. The passages in both Matthew and Mark begin by reminding us that the transfiguration took place six days later, while Luke tells us it was some 'eight days after...' (Luke 9:28). There is no contradiction; Luke's statement is the Jewish equivalent of about one week. It is during that week that Peter and the other disciples would have no doubt discussed together what Jesus had meant when he told them about his death and resurrection. In addition, as good Jews, they would also have reflected upon how this would be achieved in terms of the teaching in the Old Testament and its promises about the kingdom.

Clearly at this moment we are witnessing a significant turning point in the life of Jesus with his disclosure of his identity to his immediate disciples. Notice also the fact that all this is taking place on a mountain - the mountain calls to mind Moses and Elijah, both of whom received special revelation on a mountain (Exodus 19:24; 1 Kings 19). We are told that Jesus took with him Peter, James and John, namely his inner circle from the twelve. The other important thing we are told right at the start of this account is that this was done privately - he wanted to be alone just with a few select disciples.

As we move into verse 2 we are told that Moses' face shone because he reflected something of God's glory (Exodus 34:29-30), but Jesus himself was transfigured. The very fact that Jesus was transfigured before them implies that it was largely for their sakes, namely for the disciples. Could it have been given to underline what Jesus had just been teaching them just a few days before about his real identity and mission? So, whatever confirmation the experience may have given to Jesus himself, it certainly was a revelation to the disciples. They begin to realise that they have been given a privileged glimpse of the pre-incarnate glory and an anticipation of Jesus' exultation when it comes (2 Peter 1:16-18). It is interesting to contemplate what the disciples must have made of this event as they looked back on it from the light and experience of Jesus' death on a cross. Here the disciples had been given a glimpse of his

glory, and yet at the cross they also saw the suffering of their Saviour. Yet, all will come to light through the resurrection and the ascension of Jesus.

Now, in verse 3, we find Moses and Elijah join Jesus on the mountain. Theologically Moses and Elijah have roles looking to the future: Moses was the model for the prophet who would come; Elijah was the forerunner. In their ministry we also know that these two men were used in times of transition of God's work here on earth: Moses introduced the covenant; Elijah sought to renew the people. Remember also that both Moses and Elijah experience something of God's glory: Moses in Sinai (Exodus 31:18); Elijah at Horeb (1 Kings 19:8). We should not forget that both Moses and Elijah would know what it meant to be rejected and to suffer.

In verse 4 we find Peter stumbling, probably not certain of what he should be saying or doing. I am sure that Peter spoke for the three when he made his suggestion of building shelters there on the mountain. Take note now how Jesus responds to this suggestion: yes, Jesus had been transfigured, but the disciples must now bear witness concerning him (verse 5). It is from Mark and Luke's accounts that we get a glimpse of the foolishness of Peter's remark.

In verse 5 comes the next revelation of "the cloud". Throughout the Old Testament the idea of a cloud was very much linked to the presence of God with his people. What we are told is that a voice comes from the cloud and what he says largely repeats what had been said earlier in Matthew 3:17, again stressing that Jesus is both Son and suffering servant. What is given to us, and is of great significance, are the words, 'Listen to him'. Once again we are back in Deuteronomy, this time in Deuteronomy 18:15, which confirms that Jesus is the prophet like Moses. That is not to say that Jesus is just another prophet like Moses in stature, but rather a prophet who is patterned on Moses. We need to see that Jesus far outstrips Moses. The disciples are told to listen to him. We need to see that the climax of this revelation is Jesus, the Son, the servant God and the One who loves us.

In verses 6-8 the effect of the transfiguration on the disciples reminds us of Daniel (Daniel 10: 7-9). The visible glory of God brings terror, but Jesus calms his disciples' fears. These verses have much for us to ponder: firstly the fact that they fell face down to the ground, and of course at the end they see no one except Jesus. Surely these events make us draw the conclusion that Jesus is the one to be worshipped, honoured and glorified. This great event, though significant for Jesus, was largely for the disciples: he was transfigured before them, the voice spoke to them, it is they who fell face down on the ground.

What can we pick up then, from the first part of this passage? Firstly we glimpse the glory of Jesus. As far as the Bible account goes, this is the only time that Jesus revealed his glory in this way while he was on earth. Secondly, we see the glory of Jesus' kingdom. You will recall how at the close of his sermon about cross-bearing, he says his disciples will glimpse 'the Son of Man coming in his kingdom' (Matthew 16:28). Well, Peter, James and John certainly witnessed this event. Thirdly, we are given a pointer towards the glory of his cross - the disciples had been told previously about his mission and his identity; now they learn that suffering and glory will go together. Peter had opposed his going to Jerusalem to die, so Jesus had to teach him that this was part of his mission, there would be no crown without the cross. And finally, we get the glory of his submission - the transfiguration was God's way of teaching Peter and the other disciples that Jesus is glorified when we deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow him; first the suffering, and then the glory. Surely each of the three disciples would need to understand this important truth. James would be the first disciple to die (Acts 12:1-2); John would be the last disciple to die, he would suffer persecution and exile on Patmos (Revelation 1:9); and Peter would suffer the agonies of the cross and death in Rome.

### **Verses 9-13**

Turning now to verses 9-13 we discover the link with Elijah. This is the last time that Jesus will command his disciples to be silent until his resurrection comes. Here again we see the link between the events taking place and Jesus' suffering and death. Yet, the question to ask is why did Jesus impose silence on his disciples? It was probably for two main reasons: (1) Because the story would only stir up superficial political interest. Already Jesus was being menaced by large crowds and his mission was put under threat because he was unable to move due to the people. (2) Because of the resurrection, by which he would be declared by power to be the Son of God. That now raises another question in our minds as we come to verse 10 - why did the disciples ask the question, "Why then do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?" I guess it was because the disciples were beginning to understand that Jesus was indeed the Messiah, yet they were worried how they would respond to the scribes who might well say that Elijah must

come before the Messiah. The disciples had yet to grasp that Elijah had in fact come with John the Baptist. Of course it could have been that the disciples thought the appearance of Elijah on the Mount of Transfiguration was a completion of this story, but this seems unlikely.

Turning to verses 11 and 12, Jesus now answers their question, “To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things. But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they did not recognise him, but have done to him everything they wished. In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands.” Jesus’ point is general: John the Baptist (Elijah) did fulfil his mission, but he was killed doing it. So, in the same way, the Son of Man is going to suffer and die at their hands. By verse 13 it seems as if the penny has now dropped for the disciples for they realise that he is speaking of John the Baptist.

So, what have we learned? Well, Elijah would come as Malachi 4:5-6 promised. We have seen that Elijah, in the person of John the Baptist, had already come (Matthew 11:10-15). The nation had allowed John to be killed, and as we will discover in the next few chapters, Jesus would be allowed to be killed as well, as the nation called for his blood. Yet, God’s plan would be at work and would be fulfilled even in the hands of sinful men. It is sad to report that even with all the promises and prophecy in Scripture of Elijah and a Messiah coming, when they did come, they did not recognise either Elijah (ie, John the Baptist) or the Messiah, but rather they put them to death, just as they had done with the prophets of old.

### Questions for Discussion

Moses and Elijah had wanted to see God hundreds of years before this event, but they couldn't. According to the Old Testament, if a sinner looks the holy God in the face, he will die. Concerning the death of these two, see Deuteronomy 34:1-6 and 2 Kings 2:11.

- 1) Looking at verse 1, how do you think these three disciples felt when Jesus asked them to go to a mountain top with him? Have you ever had a "mountain top" experience, such as a powerful experience at a worship service or weekend away, so you never wanted to leave and go back to the "valley" of your life?
- 2) Have you ever wished you could see God? If you have, in what sort of situation was it? What was the meaning of Jesus' face and clothes changing like that? Why did God want to show the divine figure of his Son in front of human beings?
- 3) Why did God choose no-one other than Moses and Elijah (verses 3-5) to be on this mountain? Why did two representatives of the Old Testament also have to be present at this occasion?
- 4) In the story of the transfiguration what was the purpose it had for Christ himself and for the disciples? In particular, in verses 7-9, what was the significance of Jesus touching his disciples? Why was the appearance of Moses and Elijah significant and what do we learn from this about Christ, his work and character?
- 5) Looking at verses 9-13, why didn't Jesus want his transfiguration to be known to anyone else, not even the nine other disciples? What are the links between his suffering and ministry and John the Baptist and Elijah, and why is it important that the disciples understood?

## Study 5 - Matthew 27:32-56 - Christ and the Cross

If there is one event that goes to the very heart of the Christian faith then surely it is the cross of Christ. Though Jesus' life had many fascinating twists and turns, and his stories and exploits are told time and time again, it is the cross that is at the centre and is the one story that comes to the fore not only during Easter but right across the Christian year.

Let me say this plainly - it is no accident that the cross occupies the centre of the Christian life. It is no surprise that when a Christian speaks he will always speak of the cross when he thinks of his own walk and life with God. For it was on the cross that the Son of God became sin for us. It was on the cross that the Son of God paid the debt we owe to God. It was on the cross that the Son of God satisfied the demands of God's law and justice. It was on the cross that the Son of God made atonement for man's disobedience and brought reconciliation to those who were dead in their sins. It was on the cross that the Son of God gave us entry into the presence of God himself by his great sacrifice.

So what does all this signify? Well, in receiving the anger of the Father on the cross Jesus Christ was able to make atonement for his people. Jesus Christ carried the punishment for sins of human beings. He atoned for them by accepting the just punishment due for those sins that were ours but now he bore. The Old Testament pronounced a curse upon any person who broke the law of God, so on the cross Jesus Christ took the curse of the law upon himself - he became a curse for us (Galatians 3:13). So we see that Christianity insists that the atonement involves both substitution and satisfaction. In taking God's curse upon himself, Jesus satisfied the demands of God's law. He received God's anger for us, saving us from the wrath that is to come (1 Thessalonians 1:10), and supremely he did this willingly - he stepped in and became our substitute and died in our place. Amazingly, he became the Lamb of God who took away the sin of the world.

This idea of atonement has met considerable opposition. Some have called this whole idea either immoral or barbaric. But we must not let these statements of so-called spiritual leaders deter us from believing what the Bible teaches. The verses of Scripture that we are studying show us that it holds the key to the mystery of Christ's death and has power to change people's lives. Today we are in need of renewing the emphasis on the atonement both in the teaching of the church and in our own personal walk. We must remember that sin is never a popular subject; we live in a time and age when we are asked to accept everything and to expect little or nothing from others. The day of speaking about people wilfully rebelling and disobedient seem to have gone from our culture and time, but this is to mask and undermine the traditional understanding of the Christian church when it comes to talking about sin and the need for sin to be paid for. Of course, God's willingness to forgive us when we do not deserve it smacks of judgement. The cry from some is, why doesn't God just accept us as we are and let us do as we like? The call today is that we need to fulfil our potential without restraints, and have no standards imposed other than those that we make ourselves. Sadly the message is now one of acceptance rather than forgiveness, and this undermines the great message of the gospel.

It is said that the history of the world is little more than a collection of days, and most days are ordinary days. However, some days do come and mark a change in history; some days even make a change in our world forever. One such day is the day that Jesus Christ died on the cross. This day is also remarkable because it is both a day of intense evil but also a day when good brings victory over evil.

Each gospel writer gives his own account an independent feel by what he includes or excludes. Matthew tends to be somewhat more explicit than, say, Mark - Matthew's account contains a number of very telling references to Jesus and the Old Testament (verse 34 - Psalm 69:21; verse 35 - Psalm 22:18; verse 39 - Psalm 22:7; verse 43 - Psalm 22:8; verses 48 and 49 - Psalm 69:21).

In verse 33 we see the place of Jesus' crucifixion. It was a prominent place, Golgotha, the place of the skull - or as it would become known, Calvary. The place resembles the skull of a dead man, and those of us who have been to Jerusalem and seen the garden tomb will know exactly the kind of feel that this part of the landscape had. No doubt it was a place littered with the bones of those who had died before. It was outside the gates of the city of Jerusalem, well known to the people as a place of execution. Interestingly it was also a historical place, for this mountain, that was special to the Jews, was defiled by the Romans. It was on this mountain that Abraham brought his son, Isaac, many centuries before to offer him to God (Genesis 22). In this story of Abraham's offering of Isaac up to God we see also that it was a place of prophecy, for the passage in the Old Testament pictures clearly the coming death of God's Son,

Jesus Christ, on Calvary. Here we see a picture of a willing father giving up his own son to die. Remember that it was Abraham who said, “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering” (Genesis 22:8).

As we will see, the mockery that Jesus faces reveals more about the mockers than it does about Jesus, for Jesus is indeed the King of the Jews (verse 37), he is the meeting place with God (verse 40), the Saviour of men (verse 42) and the King of Israel (verse 42). Of course, we are witnessing the death of the Son of God (verse 43). So our passage begins by revealing humanity at its worst - the Jews have mocked Jesus as Messiah, and then the Roman soldiers ridicule him as King. The soldiers speak more truly than they know, for Jesus is both King and suffering servant.

The Bible doesn't go into detail, it simply says in verse 35, they 'crucified him'. These words do not begin to do justice to the horror that Jesus Christ endured on that cross for us. We need to recall that he had already been through four trials, that he had been beaten to within an inch of his life, that he had been beaten not just by Romans but also by Jews, that he endured the horror of mockery and ridicule, that he had been spat upon and that he had to carry his cross to Calvary. And then he was crucified.

We see also that Jesus endured the pain from the crowds; for Jesus not only endured the agony of the cross, ie, the physical torture of being nailed to that cross, he also had his suffering intensified by the crowds around him. The religious rulers ridiculed this sad and broken figure hanging on the cross. The two other men who were crucified with him joined in the mockery; the only compassion he received that day was from a tiny group of people gathered at the foot of the cross watching him die (his mother, an aunt, a beloved disciple and a woman delivered from a life of sin) - they were there to love him and to mourn for him.

In verse 45 the darkness was a sign of judgement. This truly was an amazing event that for three hours while Jesus died darkness covered the face of the earth. It was at this moment that we realise the truth of 2 Corinthians 5:21, where Jesus Christ became sin for us. In an amazing way all our sins were transferred to him as he hung on that cross - he, the last Adam, became our sin and he was judged by God in our place. The darkness here is the darkness of judgement

Jesus had been crucified at 9 o'clock in the morning and for three hours he had hung in the light. Now it was dark. Jesus had spoken at least three times before this darkness fell; repeatedly he prayed, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). At the end of the three hours of darkness Jesus cried, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (verse 46) - this was a direct quotation from Psalm 22:1. Jesus spoke these words in Hebrew, but the spectators did not understand him; they thought he was calling on Elijah for help. Now, before his imminent death, Jesus Christ speaks three more times. We are told in John's gospel that he was thirsty, and then Jesus cries out, “It is finished”. His final words were, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” What we witness here is that Jesus Christ voluntarily yielded his spirit and died. Though Jesus was terribly weak as he was killed, he also showed us the wonderful power that was in his death.

### **Verses 51-56**

At the same moment of Jesus' death three miracles take place: firstly the veil in the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; secondly an earthquake opened many graves; thirdly some of the saints rose from the dead. The tearing of the veil symbolised the wonderful truth that a new way had opened up to God (Hebrews 10:14-26). The earthquake reminds us of what happened on Mount Sinai when God gave the law to Moses (Exodus 19:16ff). We are not told who these saints were, they were simply believers who had died; but I suggest that the saints who came out of their tombs did so as a vindication that Jesus had paid the price for sin. The result of all this was a testimony of the centurion who watched and said, “Truly this was the Son of God”. So, in these verses we discover that Jesus' death has opened up a fresh access to God that made the Old Testament sacrificial system obsolete: this is highlighted in verse 51 when we read of the curtain in the temple being torn in two from top to bottom. Of course, for some they would see this as the end, but we I believe should see this only as the beginning.

## Questions for Discussion

There is no doubt that the crucifixion of Jesus was a terrible event. The Bible itself tells us little about the details of what happen but rather focuses upon helping us understand it meaning, not just for ourselves but also for Jesus. What we know is clear that it was a terrible and painful way to die, that Jesus was willing to accept it without help (Matthew 27:32-35) Secondly, it was a shameful way to die, (Galatians 3:13) mocked by those who watched, and killed along with common criminals (Matthew 27:36-44). There was also great physical suffering, but it went deeper for there was the spiritual agony as well. All this teaches us more about Jesus Christ and his relationship with his heavenly Father and with us.

- 1) Imagine that you are the soldier and you are watching Jesus who is on the cross. What do you see? What do the events of this passage reveal to us about Jesus Christ? What do his final moments reveal?
- 2) Why did Jesus refuse to come down from the cross and prove that he is the Son of God? Why did he refuse to save himself (see also Matthew 4:5-7; 26:53, 54)? What did his death reveal to us about God's attitude to the world and sin?
- 3) How was scripture fulfilled (see also Isaiah 53:12b; Psalm 22:7, 8)?
- 4) Having read verses 45-49 what does it mean that the world became dark? What did Jesus cry out? What was Jesus' deepest agony and his confidence (see also Psalm 22:1-3; Isaiah 59:2; 53:6b; 12bc)?
- 5) Read verses 50-54. What happened at the time of Jesus' death? What does it mean that the curtain of the temple was torn? What does it mean that tombs broke open?
- 6) What was the testimony of the centurion (see also Hebrews 10:19, 20)?
- 7) What is the meaning to us and to the world of Jesus' death? What does it mean to be crucified with Christ? Have you taken advantage of what "the death of Jesus" means for you...?