

Light



...on a New World

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Cover picture: European Robin in winter

*Note: All Bible quotations are taken from the New King James Version
except where another version is indicated after the text.*



Editorial

AS another Christmas season approaches it may be pertinent to ask the question ‘what is Christmas all about’? If you were to visit a town centre this at time of year and ask people this question – I wonder what sort of response you would get? The amazing thing is that many people have totally lost sight of the real meaning of this event. Encouraged by the media, they rush around in an effort to spend money they don’t have, on things that people don’t really need, in an effort to make Christmas enjoyable. Is this really what Christmas is about?

Although many people celebrate Christmas each year without giving any thought to its origin and meaning, some do focus on these things with activities such as carol singing and watching their children perform nativity plays to remind us of the birth of Jesus. There is of course no evidence to suggest that he was born on 25th December. The record of his birth in the New Testament is silent on the dating of the event. So where did the date originate from? Put simply, it originated from a pagan Roman festival that marked the winter solstice—the return of the sun—and honoured Saturn, the god of agriculture as the following quotation demonstrates:

‘Roman pagans first introduced the holiday of Saturnalia, a week long period of lawlessness celebrated between December 17th and 25th ...The festival began when the Roman authorities chose “an enemy of the Roman people” to represent “The Lord of Misrule”. Each Roman community selected a victim whom they forced to indulge in food and other physical pleasures throughout the week. At the festival’s conclusion, December 25th Roman authorities believed they were

destroying the forces of darkness by brutally murdering the innocent man or woman...In the 4th Century, Christianity imported the Saturnalia festival hoping to take the pagan masses in with it...the problem was that there was nothing intrinsically Christian about Saturnalia. To remedy this, Christian leaders named Saturnalia's concluding day December 25th to be Jesus birthday.'

The evidence for the assumption that Jesus did exist, is of course overwhelming. We live in what is called the Christian era – This phrase recognises the incredible influence of one man on the history of the world during the last 2,000 years. There are around 2 billion people in the world who call themselves Christians. Did you know that every time you write the date you acknowledge the fact that Jesus lived on this earth some 2,000 years ago?

The timing of his birth was no haphazard event – and we're not talking about Christmas day. Whether Jesus was born on 25 December or some other day is of no real consequence – although it is more likely he was born at some other time of the year. The Bible tells us in detail about the events to do with his birth. It also tells us that Jesus was no ordinary man – everything to do with his life was mapped out in advance –for he was the son of God. The following articles in this issue focus on the Bible teaching concerning his life, death, resurrection and future work as king over the kingdom of God.

Perhaps you can remember one thing – the original message of Christmas has been totally lost – but as the nativity plays will demonstrate again, the wise men brought gifts to Jesus – gold frankincense and myrrh. When you buy your Xmas gifts think about the greatest gift of all – it's a priceless gift and we can all receive it if we are prepared to respond to God's love in the way we live our lives – as Paul put it simply in those words: *'The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord'* [Romans 6.23].

Will you accept the gift of God?

Editor

Bible Teaching About...

The resurrection of Christ

‘FOR I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the Scriptures’ [1 Corinthians 15.3]. The Apostle Paul wrote these words to the 1st Century Christians living in the city of Corinth, where he set out an argument for belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead that is as powerful today as it was then. Paul considered belief in the resurrection as being paramount to the gospel message. The very same gospel is preached today with the same requirement of belief in Jesus’ resurrection, without which, as Paul clearly told his readers, *‘...our preaching is vain and your faith is also vain’ [1 Corinthians 15.14].*

WHY BELIEVE IN THE RESURRECTION?

Why should anyone in the 21st Century still be required to believe in the risen Christ – to believe in an event that took place approximately 2,000 years ago? To answer this question we will look at what persuaded those who had been with Jesus, and the belief and hope that Jesus himself had in the resurrection.

For Jesus and his followers, the Scriptures consisted of the books that we know as the Old Testament and in them we should find the basis for belief in such an event. Jesus had told his disciples that he would die and be raised to life again. Matthew records one such occasion:

‘Then Jesus, going up to Jerusalem, took the twelve disciples aside on the road and said to them, “Behold, we

are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and to the scribes; and they will condemn him to death, and deliver him to the Gentiles to mock and to scourge and to crucify. And the third day he will rise again' [*Matthew 20.17-19*].

So on what did Jesus base his conviction that he would be raised from the dead on the third day as he had told his followers? A Psalm of David is one example, words which the Apostle Peter used in his preaching to the Jews in Jerusalem (see Acts 2.25-28):

'I have set the LORD always before me; because he is at my right hand I shall not be moved. Therefore my heart is glad, and my glory rejoices; my flesh also will rest in hope. For you will not leave my soul in Sheol, nor will you allow your Holy One to see corruption. You will show me the path of life; in your presence is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures for evermore'

[*Psalm 16.8-11*].

The Book of Job also makes clear the teaching about resurrection which Jesus, through his knowledge of the Scriptures, would have been familiar with:

'For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that he shall stand at last on the earth; and after my skin is destroyed, this I know, that in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!' [*Job 19.25-27*].

Drawing on that knowledge, when questioned about the resurrection of the dead by the Sadducees, an influential religious and political group who themselves did not believe in resurrection, Jesus reminded them that even Moses believed in such an event when he witnessed the miracle of the burning bush: '*Now even Moses showed in the burning bush passage that the dead are raised, when he called the Lord 'the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'*' [*Luke 20.37-38*]. Although these

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Jewish patriarchs had long been dead, the inference is that they will be raised from the dead at some future date.

From the reactions of the disciples to Jesus' pronouncement of his impending death and subsequent resurrection, it can be seen that they neither understood what he meant nor even believed it could happen. On one occasion Peter said *'Far be it from you, Lord; this shall not happen to you!'* [Matthew 16.22.] Their grief and dismay at the events of Jesus' arrest, trial and crucifixion are perhaps the more understandable, if at that time they had no hope in, or knowledge of the resurrection.

For Jesus however, the immediate prospect of pain, suffering and death were overshadowed by his conviction in God's plan of salvation, as was his prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane: *'O my Father, if this cup cannot pass away from me unless I drink it, your will be done'* [Matthew 26.42]. The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews also said of Jesus: *'who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God'* [Hebrews 12.2]. The joy that Jesus had in mind could only be achieved through resurrection because he knew that he must first of all die to fulfil God's plan of salvation.

THE RESURRECTION A REALITY

It is not until early in the morning, the day after the Sabbath and the third day since the crucifixion, that the reality of the resurrection became apparent to Jesus' disciples. Firstly, the four women who had followed Jesus and cared for him, Mary Magdalene (see article on page 21), Mary mother of James, Joanna and Salome, planned to anoint the body with spices but were presented with the unexpected view of the open tomb, the large stone that had closed the entrance rolled away, and two men dressed in white sitting there who asked them: *'Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but is risen!'* [Luke 24.5].

On hearing this, the women returned to the other disciples to tell

them. Peter and John then ran to the tomb, went inside to see the burial clothes laid there but no sign of the body of Jesus. Mary Magdalene remained at the tomb crying, only to hear the question asked of her by a man she assumed to be the gardener, *'Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?'* [John 20.15]. This was Jesus' first appearance to a disciple and he sent Mary back to the other disciples to tell them that he was alive.

Later that day he appeared to Peter and then to two disciples as they walked towards Emmaus, and finally to many disciples that same evening, allowing them to see his hands, feet and side marked by the wounds of crucifixion. John



The empty tomb

records in his gospel that the disciples were overjoyed, whilst Luke adds that they were also startled and frightened. One week later, Thomas, who was missing on that first evening, was with the other apostles, when Jesus appeared to them again and allowed Thomas to touch the wounds to convince him of Christ's resurrection.

Over a period of 40 days after his resurrection Jesus appeared to his followers many times, on one occasion to a group of more than 500, and said to them: *'Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.'* [Luke 24.46-47]. Mark's gospel record adds these important instructions to the apostles: *'Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature'* [Mark 16.15].

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This commission from Jesus, coupled with their experiences of being with him both before and after his death, encouraged this group of followers to spread a message of hope – a belief in the future resurrection of the dead, because Jesus had been raised through the power of God. Peter took the opportunity on the day of Pentecost to preach to the crowds assembled in Jerusalem:

‘Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God’s set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him’ [*Acts 2.22-24 NIV*].

The spread of the gospel message of belief in Jesus’ death and resurrection, of baptism into his name, in hope of the coming Kingdom of God on earth and the ultimate reward of eternal life, was under way. Peter later wrote in his first letter: *‘Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade’* [*1 Peter 1.3-4 NIV*].

THE APOSTLE PAUL’S CONVICTION

The Apostle Paul was converted to this same message of hope, having done his utmost to stop its spread until he too saw the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus, as *‘one born out of due time’* [*1 Corinthians 15.8*]. Paul develops his argument concerning the necessity for belief in the resurrection – without it there is no hope:

‘Now if Christ is preached that he has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no

resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is vain and your faith is also vain. Yes, and we are found false witnesses of God, because we have testified of God that he raised up Christ, whom he did not raise up – if in fact the dead do not rise. For if the dead do not rise, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins! Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable’

[1 Corinthians 15.12-19].

The forgiveness of sins and the coming Kingdom of God that Jesus had promised could not be a reality if his resurrection had not taken place. Therefore faith in any other aspect of Jesus’ life and teaching was worthless. What was to become of believers that had already died without witnessing the promised return of Jesus to the earth? This was a question that had vexed the Christians at Thessalonica and which Paul responded to in his first letter, encouraging them with the absolute conviction that he had in the resurrection:

‘Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord’s own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first’ *[1 Thessalonians 4.13-16 NIV].*

Paul again and again in his writings, returns to his belief in the

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resurrected Christ and his own hope of resurrection as the foundation of his faith. He wrote to Timothy towards the end of his own life:

‘...I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that day, and not only to me, but also to all who have loved his appearing’ [2 Timothy 4.6-8].

Paul knew that the promised reward of eternal life was not to happen in his lifetime but was dependent on his resurrection from the grave to receive that reward. The writer to the Hebrews, after listing numerous notable examples of faith by individuals, echoes the same hope for the future:

‘These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, they were assured of them, embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth...And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise, God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us.’

[Hebrews 11.13, 39,40]

That list, which includes men like Noah, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, and Samson amongst others, makes clear that the promises made by God for faithful service were not realised during their lifetimes but had not been forgotten. Each is dependent on resurrection at the return of Jesus to the earth as he instructed his beloved Apostle John: ‘Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done’ [Revelation 22.12 NIV].

This brings us back to Paul’s argument in his letter to the

Corinthians: *'...if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men'* [1 Corinthians 15.17-19 NIV]. Paul did not believe that any were lost and that he also would be counted alongside those Old Testament characters that lived and died by faith.

THE GOSPEL MESSAGE OF HOPE

The New Testament message of hope and salvation is founded on the conviction of ordinary men and women, who witnessed the risen Christ and were compelled to spread the news far and wide at great personal cost. We have only to read through the record in the Acts of the Apostles to see what perils were undertaken for the sake of preaching the gospel. As Paul wrote in his second letter to Corinth: *'That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong'* [2 Corinthians 12.10 NIV].

Paul considered such difficulties of no importance because of what had been promised through resurrection, confirmed by God when he brought His son Jesus back from the dead. He continues in his explanation to those at Corinth:

'But now Christ has risen from the dead, and has become the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since by man came death, by man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. But each one in his own order: Christ the first-fruits, afterwards those who are Christ's at his coming' [1 Corinthians 15.20-23].

If what the Bible teaches about the resurrection of Jesus is unreliable, then the faith shown by countless individuals as recorded in the Bible and down to the present time is of no value whatsoever.

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Even prayer to the God of heaven and earth is unnecessary and misguided if Jesus is dead and buried, for God's whole message of salvation is centred around the risen Christ.

He is God's appointed king who will come again to set up God's kingdom on earth – not in heaven as so many believe. It's a heavenly kingdom in the sense that it is of Divine origin and dependent on the return of Jesus from heaven, where he now sits at the right hand of God. This is the essence of God's plan for the future, a wonderful plan of salvation for all true followers of Jesus which is described by Paul in words addressed to the 1st Century Christians at Ephesus:

‘Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ...In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace which he made to abound towards us in all wisdom and prudence, having made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure which he purposed in himself, that in the dispensation of the fullness of the times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth – in him’ [*Ephesians 1.3-10*].

The last message of Jesus to believers re-enforces the words of Paul concerning the Divine plan centred in his death and resurrection. The Apostle John who recorded this last message in the Book of Revelation saw a vision of the redeemed. They sang a new song about their redeemer:

‘...you were slain, and have redeemed us to God by your blood out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation. And have made us kings and priests to our God; and we shall reign on the earth’ [*Revelation 5.9, 10*].

LIVING PROOF

Jesus had said to Thomas, the apostle who doubted:

“Reach your finger here, and look at my hands; and reach your hand here, and put it into my side. Do not be unbelieving, but believing.” And Thomas answered and said to him, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus said to him, “Thomas, because you have seen me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” *[John 20.27-29]*.

21st Century disciples do not have the physical body of Jesus to touch so as to confirm their belief in his resurrection, but we do have the written record of those faithful witnesses like John, who ends his Gospel record with the words:

‘...these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name’ *[John 20.31]*.

In this article we have considered **‘what’** the Bible teaches about the resurrection of Jesus Christ. John gives us the **‘why’**, that we may have hope of resurrection to a new life – as Paul wrote to the believers at Corinth:

‘Christ the first-fruits, afterwards those who are Christ’s at his coming’ *[I Corinthians 15.23]*.

Do you believe this?

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Bible Characters

Mary Magdalene

WHO was Mary Magdalene and why was she chosen to first bear witness to the resurrection of Jesus? When Mary woke up very early the morning after Sabbath had ended, she had no idea that she would bear witness to the greatest miracle the world has seen. Far from it – it must have seemed to her that all hope had been extinguished from the world. Her teacher, her Messiah, had been executed by the Romans. Before the day had ended however, Mary Magdalene was entrusted with a message that has since changed the lives of millions: ‘You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He is risen!’ [Mark 16.6]

In the early dawn of a spring morning on the Mount of Olives, just outside the walls of Jerusalem, Mary met and spoke with a man she knew had died. In her life and that of many others since that day, a new realisation dawned – death had been overcome. She was the first to witness the joy of the Gospel.

WHO WAS MARY MAGDALENE?

Throughout history Mary Magdalene has been misrepresented and much that is written about her has little basis in the Bible record. Most often she has been portrayed as a reformed prostitute. In Western art, depictions of her have often been highly sexualised. In dictionaries it is not uncommon to come across definitions of Magdalene as ‘*Popularly, a woman found out.*’ (Websters), or ‘*a reformed prostitute.*’ (Random House).

This popular misconception of Mary Magdalene goes back many centuries and can, in part, be traced back to the Catholic Pope, Gregory

the Great, who in 1591 delivered a sermon in which he merged three Bible characters into one and characterised Mary Magdalene as a harlot. It wasn't until 1969 that the Catholic Church officially set the record straight and accepted that there was no reason to identify Mary Magdalene with the repentant sinful woman who washed Jesus' feet (see Luke 7 verses 36-50).

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT MARY MAGDALENE?

Although Mary Magdalene was obviously close to Jesus, very little is actually revealed about her in the Bible. She is referred to in all four of the gospel records, where she plays a prominent role in the story of the resurrection of Jesus but before that little is revealed.

The name Mary Magdalene seems to signify that she was known as Mary from Magdala, but where Magdala was and whether Mary was born there, or lived there at some point, is not known. The only reference to a place called Magdala in the New Testament is in the Gospel record of Matthew where we read that Jesus '*sent away the multitude, got into the boat, and came to the region of Magdala*' [Matthew 15.39]. This translation is however doubtful and most modern translations refer to it as '*Magadan*'.

The word Magdala derives from the Hebrew word '*migdal*,' meaning tower. In the Jewish Talmud there are two references to places called Magdala. One of these, '*Magdala Nunayya*,' or '*Magdala of the fishes*' was on the Sea of Galilee near Tiberius. As many of the disciples worked in the fishing trade, it would perhaps seem likely that they visited this town, on the western edge of the lake, and it was there that Mary first heard the gospel message.

THE HEALING OF MARY'S AFFLICTION

The first reference to Mary Magdalene is found in the record of Luke and it is here that we discover Mary's troubled past, for the gospel writer states of her: '*Mary called Magdalene, out of whom had*

come seven demons’ [Luke 8.2]. New Testament writers occasionally use the language and superstitious beliefs of the people of their day and references to demons, or unclean spirits, are often used to describe some form of mental affliction. Jesus does not discuss medical definitions, being more interested in a person’s faith and in bringing them into his kingdom, speaking to them in language they understood.

There can be little doubt that whatever sickness Mary had, it brought her great suffering. In other instances where people are characterised as being possessed of unclean spirits we see a pattern of suffering. The mother of a girl with *‘demon possession’* in the region of Tyre and Sidon called out to Jesus, *‘Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon-possession’* [Matthew 15.22 NIV].

Later a father approached Jesus with a similar plea: *‘Lord, have mercy on my son,’* he said, *‘for he is an epileptic and suffers severely;’* [Matthew 17.15] *‘It is destroying him,’* the father adds in Luke’s record [Luke 9.39]. There also seems to be the suggestion in the Gospel records that those suffering in this manner sought to harm themselves or take their own lives. The father of the boy who was brought to Jesus told of how the boy was thrown into water or into fire, as if this were a deliberate act of self harm, rather than him being thrown to the floor.

It is not insignificant of course, that we are told that Mary suffered from seven unclean spirits. The number seven in the Scriptures has always signified completeness. Mary, it would seem, was overwhelmed by her sickness. Undoubtedly she was *‘suffering terribly’*, like the young girl brought by her mother to Jesus. Undoubtedly it was *‘destroying’* her, as it had been *‘destroying’* the young boy brought by his father. Another odd characteristic of those brought to Jesus suffering mentally in the way is that these tortured individuals were acutely aware of who Jesus was. *‘You are the Son of God.’* they cried out [Mark 3.11]. On another occasion two terrified men in the region of the Gergesenes shouted out: *‘What have we to do with you, Jesus, you Son of God?’* [Matthew 8.29].

Mary too, in her suffering, must have felt deeply that the man she was brought to was different to any other. No doubt she was terrified of his godliness as the others had been. Perhaps she too begged that he might not come close to her. Undoubtedly as Jesus looked down upon her, he must have pitied her deeply, yet recognised in her, beneath the screaming and the violence and the foaming ugliness of her condition, the purity and godliness of her being. Firmly and tenderly, as was his way, Jesus reached out to her, and his touch brought her peace.

MARY'S SERVICE TO HER MASTER

Mary would never forget that healing. She would never forget that Jesus had saved her with his touch. From that moment on she became his devoted disciple, travelling with him, aiding him in whatever way she could, as Luke records:

‘...(Jesus) went through every city and village, preaching and bringing the glad tidings of the kingdom of God. And the twelve *were* with him, and certain women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities – Mary called Magdalene, out of whom had come seven demons, and Joanna the wife of Chuza, Herod’s steward, and Susanna, and many others who **provided for him** from their substance’ [Luke 8.1-3].

The words ***provided for him*** are *‘dihkonoun’* in the Greek language of the New Testament. The same word is used of the angels who came to Jesus when he was at his lowest after the temptations in the wilderness. It is also the word that the early Christians adopted to call those who helped lead the churches – they were called deacons. Mary’s life became one of devoted service to Jesus; following wherever he went, no matter how hard life on the road must have been, making sure that Jesus was cared for and had what he needed to carry on with his ministry.

This in itself, if it was all that we knew about Mary Magdalene,

serves as a great testimony and example to us. It is a beautiful story of redemption from suffering and despair, and of quiet, dedicated service. Though we may not suffer as Mary suffered, we can like her, experience the profound joy of redemption, the deep peace of knowing that we have moved from darkness into light. And there is an inexpressible pleasure in quietly serving Jesus, of becoming deacons in the original sense of that word – ministering to others, serving their needs and caring for them.

MARY STOOD AT THE FOOT OF THE CROSS

Mary's greatest hour though, was still to come. But before she could get to it she once more had to experience the most profound horror and suffering. There can be little doubt that as the time of the Jewish Passover drew near, Mary Magdalene was with Jesus and his disciples as they prepared to celebrate together in Jerusalem.

Following the last supper with the twelve, Jesus withdrew from Jerusalem with his disciples. It does not seem from the record though, that the women went with them. Perhaps Jesus, knowing what was to come, knowing that his darkest hour was close and that Judas would betray him in the garden, forbade them from accompanying him. Jesus was arrested in the night. All of his disciples fled apart from Peter and John who followed him at a distance, back through the city gates into Jerusalem. It was probably one of these two who brought the news early the next morning to the women, for the next we see of Mary Magdalene and the other women is as they stood at the foot of the cross.

Interestingly, in the records of Matthew and Mark, Mary Magdalene is given prominence among the women. *'There were also women looking on from afar, among whom were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the Younger and of Joses, and Salome' [Mark 15. 40].* Mary the mother of Jesus is only mentioned in the record of John. Matthew informs us that even the centurion, a brutal Roman soldier, accustomed to death and suffering of the most extreme kind, *'feared*

greatly', or was *'terrified'* as the NIV puts it, at the nature of Christ's death. How must Mary Magdalene and the other women have felt, as the man they loved and served and believed in, was executed viciously, torturously on the barbaric cross?

Despite the horror, despite the fear that had driven all his disciples from him, Mary Magdalene stayed with her 'rabbi', her 'master'. When all the others had gone, including John, the last of the disciples, and Jesus' own mother, Mary lingered on, unable to leave the body of Jesus unattended.

When Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, two secret followers of Jesus, carried his body to the tomb, we find that Mary is still with him – faithful to the end: *'...when Joseph had taken the body, he wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, and laid it in his new tomb which he had hewn out of the rock; and he rolled a large stone against the door of the tomb, and departed. And Mary Magdalene was there, and the other Mary, sitting opposite the tomb'* [Matthew 27. 59-61].

There is no suggestion that Mary understood what was happening any more than any of the disciples did. Undoubtedly she believed in the resurrection as Martha the sister of Lazarus had confessed: *'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day'*. But all that she had believed in and hoped for must have been crushed by the course of events.

Despite this, despite her lack of understanding, Mary continued to serve her Master. The hour was late and the Sabbath was almost upon them, but she had to know where he had been laid, so that at the earliest possible moment she could return to anoint him, to dress him properly in death.

MARY AND THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS

We hear nothing of how that Sabbath passed or what Mary or the disciples did. It is not clear whether Peter and John stayed in Jerusalem and the eleven joined them there, or whether they had all made their

way back to Bethany on the other side of the Mount of Olives, but it seems that they spent the Sabbath together.

It was still dark when Mary rose as soon as she could after the Sabbath, and the sun had just risen by the time she arrived at the tomb. Again, the Gospel writers accentuate Mary Magdalene as being pre-eminent among the women that served Jesus: *'On the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark'* [John 20. 1].

There is a breathlessness in the Gospel records when they re-tell what happened early that spring morning. The stone was rolled away. The body of Jesus was missing. Mary was distraught. As John records: *'Mary stood outside by the tomb weeping'* [John 20. 11]. In the midst of their misery an angelic presence stood before them, clothes shining in the darkness of the tomb, with a remarkable message: *'I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he is risen.'* [Matthew 28.5,6 NIV]. Mary and her companion were filled with fear and wonder. Mark records that they were *'trembling and bewildered'* [Mark 16.8 NIV], and they *'fled'* the tomb. Luke records their *'fright'* [Luke 24.5 NIV] in the presence of the angel.

Confused, afraid and mourning, Mary lingered in the garden close by the tomb. Despite the fact that it is empty, she is unable to drag herself away as the others have. *'They have taken away my Lord,'* she says to the man who approaches her. He remained her *'Lord'* even in death, even in her lack of understanding she served him still. When Jesus calls the distraught woman's attention to himself, and looking up she recognises him, she responds as a disciple, a follower; *'Rabboni!'* she calls out. *'My teacher'* and in Matthew it is recorded that she with the other women *'held him by the feet and worshipped him'* [Matthew 28. 9].

From darkness, Mary once more finds herself in the light. From fear and suffering, Jesus once more lifts her to a state of joy and peace. She becomes his first witness; the first witness of the gospel message.

Indeed Jesus commissions her as the first messenger of the great news of salvation, saying ‘*go to my brethren and say to them, “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, and to my God and your God”*’ [John 20. 17].

It’s interesting to compare the reaction of Mary to the resurrection of Jesus, with that of the rest of the disciples: ‘*And when they heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, they did not believe*’ [Mark 16. 11]. The whole episode of the death and the resurrection of Jesus speaks clearly of the veracity of the Gospel records. The Gospel writers make it clear that the disciples failed their Lord, they betrayed him, denied him, fled from him, lost faith in him. The early disciples did not commend themselves in these records; without exception they are depicted in their weakness. Mary alone stands as an exception to that record. She remains an example of faithfulness and devotion.

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM MARY MAGDALENE?

We learn firstly how important it is to go back to the Bible record to discover what it truly says rather than relying on the distorted vision of it handed down by popular opinion and the church. Her story graphically and movingly reveals the power of redemption, of how faith in Jesus can bring healing and peace and an escape from suffering and fear. We also learn from Mary the power of quiet service and of courage in the face of incredible fear. We witness the beautiful quality of sustained faith, even when we are tested and fail to comprehend why things are happening in our lives.

We see too, finally, her courage in witnessing to what she had beheld, despite being mocked. To the disciples her ‘*words seemed... like idle tales, and they did not believe them.*’ [Luke 24. 11]. Mary’s death is not recorded in Scripture but she died in hope of the resurrection to be realised in that day when her Master returns and her faith is finally vindicated.

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What did Jesus mean?

‘My kingdom is not of this world’

IN reading the words of God in the Bible, many people fall into the trap of trying to understand them from a human perspective rather than considering the ways of God. This is despite the clear statements from God that His ways are not our ways. In the book of Deuteronomy, God tells us that we must keep His commandments: *‘Therefore you shall keep the commandments of the LORD your God, to walk in his ways and to fear him’* [Deuteronomy 8.6]. In Isaiah we read concerning God: *‘...my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts’* [Isaiah 55.8, 9].

‘ARE YOU THE KING OF THE JEWS?’



The same applies when we read the words of Jesus – we need to understand them in the context of the ways of God. Jesus said: *‘My kingdom is not of this world’* [John 18.36] while being questioned by Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor of Judea, after his arrest. Pilate had asked Jesus *‘Are you the King of the Jews?’* [John 18.33]. The Jews were pleading with Pilate to execute Jesus. Knowing that it was God’s purpose that he should die Jesus replied:

‘My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now my kingdom is not from here’ [*John 18.36*].

In these words, Jesus is indicating to Pilate that he knows the weak Roman Governor will give in to the request of the Jewish leaders and have him crucified. If it had been the will of God that he became king of the Jews at that time, then he says that his servants would have fought for him. Those servants would be his disciples. He also knew that he could call upon the angels of God to assist him.

But it was not the purpose of God that Jesus should become king of the Jews at this time. God had another purpose. It was essential in God’s purpose that Jesus should die and subsequently rise from the dead. The throne that Jesus will occupy as king was not only for ruling over mortal men and women, but rather a kingdom established by God for those that seek Him. In his last message to his followers, Jesus said: *‘To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with me on my throne, as I also overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne’* [*Revelation3.21*].

GOD’S KINGDOM IN THE PAST

God had a kingdom on earth in the past. He chose the Jews to be his own people and at their request he established a kingdom and gave them their first king, Saul. Sadly the people did not follow the commands of God or walk in his ways and wickedness took a hold. As a result God brought an end to the kingdom, when first the Assyrians and then the Babylonians invaded their land and took most the Jews into captivity. From this time onwards the Jews waited for a promised Messiah (or *‘anointed one’* as the word means) who would deliver them and restore the kingdom.

When Jesus was raised from the dead his disciples recognised that

he was this Messiah and so they asked him, '*Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?*' [Acts 1.6]. They expected that after the dramatic events that had occurred, Jesus would now proclaim himself as their king. They had not understood the purpose of God and so Jesus told them '*It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in his own authority*' [Acts 1.7].

The time for God's kingdom to be established and for Jesus to take the throne has not yet come. However, there are many signs in the world about us that, in the light of Bible teaching, show us that the return of Jesus and the coming of that kingdom are not far off. It is to that time that the true follower of Jesus looks with eager anticipation.

'YOUR KINGDOM COME'

Jesus told his disciples that they should pray for the coming of the kingdom. In his prayer, which is commonly known as the Lord's prayer, he uttered the words: '*Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. **Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven***' [Matthew 6.9,10]. Many millions of people use those words each day without really stopping to think what they mean.

These words from the Lord's prayer tell us that there will be a time when God will set up His kingdom. They emphasise the fact that the kingdom will be on this earth – not in heaven or some other place. At that time God's will is to be done here just as it is now done in heaven. In other words the subjects of that kingdom will live according to God's law and not the sinful ways of man.

The prophet Micah looked forward to that time when he wrote:

'Now it shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and peoples shall flow to it. Many nations shall come and say, "Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the

LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; he will teach us his ways, and we shall walk in his paths.” For out of Zion the law shall go forth, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He shall judge between many peoples, and rebuke strong nations afar off; they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. But everyone shall sit under his vine and under his fig tree, and no one shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken.’

[Micah 4.1-4]

From Micah’s words we see that the future time will be very different from today. It will be a time when there will be an end to the wars and conflicts of today’s world. It will be a time when people will live at peace without fear. How wonderful that time will be!

When Jesus was answering Pontius Pilate, he knew that there was still much to happen before the kingdom would come, hence he responded to Pilate in the way that he did. When Jesus had been crucified we read that *‘Pilate wrote a title, and put it on the cross. And the writing was, JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS’ [John 19.19].* This did not satisfy the Jews who had failed to recognise the one who was their Messiah. John continues his account:

‘Then many of the Jews read this title, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin. Then the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, “Do not write, ‘The King of the Jews’, but, He said, I am the King of the Jews”. Pilate answered, “What I have written, I have written”’ *[John 19.20-22].*

Pontius Pilate had more discernment than the Jews to whom Jesus should have been welcome as their Messiah. Pilate saw the kingly nature of Jesus but he was not to see the kingdom at that time.

THE GOSPEL MESSAGE

What does all this mean for you today?

The role of Jesus as the future king of the earth is a fundamental part of the gospel message – the good news of God’s plan for the world. If we accept the message of the Bible about the saving nature of Jesus’ death and resurrection (see article on page 3) and of his future kingship, then we can become Christians in the fullest sense – followers of Jesus. The true Christian must follow a way of life that is in accordance with God’s ways and this means that we have to turn our backs on the ways of man where they do not accord with what God wants.

THE CHRISTIAN WAY OF LIFE

In particular we have to remember that the true Christian is looking for the coming of God’s kingdom and does not expect man to be able to resolve all the problems of the world himself. Indeed the true Christian will see that man has created the problems and will be unable to put them right.

Jesus tells his followers that they must be in the world but not of it. In his prayer to his Father, shortly before his arrest, Jesus used these words about those that followed him:

‘I have given them your word; and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not pray that you should take them out of the world, but that you should keep them from the evil. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.’

[John 17.14-16]

The Apostle John wrote in strong terms about the relationship that should exist between the true Christian and the world:

‘Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world - the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life - is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides for ever.’

[1 John 2.15-17]

When we look at the world around us and see the crime, violence, war, pollution, immorality, drug taking, corruption and the many other problems that exist, we realise how different the world is from the ways of God portrayed in the Bible. The true Christian looks and works for much better things, with the realisation that it is only through the intervention of God that real change can be brought about.

THE DAYS OF NOAH – A SIGN FOR TODAY

In the beginning God, created the world and the first chapter of Genesis tells us that all the work of His creation was ‘*very good*’ [*Genesis 1.31*]. Man marred that goodness through his sin. By the time of Noah, God had to intervene because of the sinfulness of man. We read of that time in the book of Genesis: ‘*Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually*’ [*Genesis 6.5*]. The intervention of God was to bring a flood that eradicated all life from the earth except for Noah and his immediate family. In this way God made a fresh start.

Jesus said that at his coming the world would be in a similar state to that which existed when God brought the flood. Jesus said: ‘*For as in the days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and did not know until the flood came and took them all away, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be*’ [*Matthew 24.38-39*]. The words ‘*Son of Man*’ are frequently used as a description of Jesus himself in the Gospel records.

THE COMING OF THE KING

The Bible shows that in the past God has intervened in the affairs of the world when his anger is roused by the wickedness of man. As the world becomes increasingly godless, it cannot be long before God intervenes once more to rid the world of its wickedness and to establish His kingdom on earth. The Apostle Paul wrote words of comfort to the 1st Century Christians:

‘...you who are troubled rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ’ [*2 Thessalonians 1,7, 8*].

After the earth is cleansed from wickedness, the kingdom will be established by Jesus, who will sit on the restored throne of David in Jerusalem. Remember the words that were spoken to his mother Mary before his birth – words that are frequently recited at Christmastime:

‘...behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call his name JESUS. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David. And he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end’ [*Luke 1.31-33*].

The prophet Isaiah foretold the coming of Jesus and said of him:

‘For unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon his shoulder. And his name will be called Wonderful, Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David and over his kingdom, to order it and establish it with judgment and justice from that time

LIGHT ON A NEW WORLD

forward, even for ever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this' [*Isaiah 9.6-7*].

As the above verses show, the kingdom that Jesus will reign over will be very different from today's world. It will be ruled with justice and righteousness and will be a place of peace and plenty. More importantly, the kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom and those who have followed the teaching and example of Jesus to the best of their abilities will be given eternal life and places of authority to rule with Jesus in the age to come.

When Jesus said to Pontius Pilate '*my kingdom is not of this world*' he knew that the time was not right for him to take the throne and set up the kingdom. He knew also that the opportunity to be part of that kingdom still needed to be made known through the preaching of the Gospel to many nations in future generations. But at some stage the process will end.

A PERSONAL MESSAGE

For those that want to be part of that everlasting kingdom – **now is the time to act!** Now is the time to find out from the Bible, how to serve Jesus. For each one of us there is a choice – we can love the world or we can do the will of God. Remember the words of the Apostle John that we have already referred to: '*he who does the will of God abides for ever*' [*1 John 2.17*].

Is your expectation limited to the kingdoms of this world, or do you pray to God as Jesus did: '*Your kingdom come*'?

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