

Introduction

For a couple of years I taught a scripture class at a school in Newcastle. Whenever I paused the lesson to take a question from the class the most enthusiastic and well thought questions always came from the same person. Surprisingly they weren't from any of the kids. They were from their teacher, Mr Lumley. Whilst his questions were often off topic, they were always very thoughtful, honest and sincere.

One time after class I asked Mr Lumley why he was so interested in Jesus. His response was fascinating. *'I love Jesus!'* he said. This was astonishing to me. *'NO way! I didn't realise you were a Christian. What church do you go to?'* He was shocked that I would ask such a question. *'Ohhh not like that',* he said, *'I'm not religious or weird or anything. Jesus is my favourite revolutionary. He sure knows how to start a movement. He transformed the Roman Empire by empowering the little guys. It's too bad he didn't live to see all he achieved. What a guy!'*

He then went on to show me one of his favourite songs about Jesus. No, it wasn't 'Amazing Grace' or 'Shout to the Lord' - it was a song by King Missile III called 'Jesus is way cool'. Here are some of the lyrics.

Jesus was way cool
Everybody liked Jesus
Everybody wanted to hang out with him
Anything he wanted to do, he did
He turned water into wine...
He walked on the water
And swam on the land
He would tell these stories
And people would listen
He was really cool
He could've played guitar better than Hendrix
He could've told the future
He could've baked the most delicious cake in the world
He could've scored more goals than Wayne Gretzky
He could've danced better than Barishnikov
Jesus could have been funnier than any comedian you can think of
Jesus was way cool... no wonder there are so many Christians
(King Missile III)

This encounter is insightful on many levels. Firstly, it shows us that people find Jesus fascinating. So fascinating that 2000 years after his death even non-religious people still research him, write songs about him and ask questions about him. Secondly, it suggests that people have some pretty interesting ideas about who Jesus was and what he came to do. To Mr Lumley Jesus was the original Che Guevara who met an untimely end at the hand of a corrupt empire. To King Missile III Jesus was just like them, a cool, quirky hippie. And no doubt if you're reading this you have your own ideas about Jesus - who he was and what he came to do.

This 4 week course is designed to cut through some of the fallacies and misconceptions and introduce you to the 'real Jesus'. The Jewish Jesus, who grew up in a backwater town called Nazareth. The Jesus whom tax collectors and prostitutes loved, and religious leaders hated. The Jesus who amazed, captivated, puzzled and offended the people who met him. The Jesus who countless people have loved, adored and worshiped throughout the centuries. The Jesus of Martin Luther King Jnr, Desmond Tutu and Bono. The Jesus we meet in the scriptures. My friends - THIS IS JESUS!

The course

If you want to get to know the 'real Jesus' a great place to start is one of the 'gospels'. The 'gospels' are the four accounts of Jesus' life we find at the beginning of the New Testament. These accounts, or 'books' of the Bible are named Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Now you could be thinking, how can we trust the accounts of Jesus life written in the Bible? We've included books in our resource collection that answer this question in some depth, but for now hopefully the words of ancient historian John Dickson will suffice:

'It is no exaggeration to say that historians (no matter what their persuasion) universally regard the New Testament writings as the earliest, most plentiful and most reliable sources of information about

*the Jesus of history*¹

For this reason, our search for the real Jesus, the Jesus of History, rightly begins with the Gospels. In particular, the T.I.J course will focus primarily on the gospel of Luke.

Luke's gospel is a particularly good place to start for a couple of reasons. Firstly the author, Luke, was an historian who spent a great deal of time researching Jesus. At the beginning of his gospel he writes:

'Many have undertaken to draw an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses... with this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning I too decided to write an orderly account.' (Luke 1:1-2)

And secondly, like this course, Luke's Gospel was written in order to introduce one of his friends, a fellow named Theophilus, to the real Jesus, the Jesus of history.

So, each week we are going to explore what Luke's gospel tells us about Jesus. Our four-week course covers the following four topics:

Week 1: Jesus' life (Luke 1-9): who is this man Jesus? Was he a great teacher, a cool guy, a revolutionary, or something far more?

Week 2: Jesus' death (Luke 21-23): why did Jesus die? And what has that got to do with us?

Week 3: Jesus' resurrection (Luke 24): did it happen? And, what does it mean?

Week 4: Jesus' followers (Luke 10-20): so what is a Christian anyway?

1 Dickson John 2005, p48, *The Christ Files: How Historians Know What They Know About Jesus*, Zondervan.

Our four week course is comprised of four essential elements:

1. Talks: each Sunday there will be a talk based on Jesus' life, death, resurrection and followers.

2. Discussion Groups: you'll have an opportunity to discuss the talk, ask any questions you have and look at Luke's gospel in more detail in a weekly discussion group.²

3. 'This is Jesus' booklet (you are holding it now): your booklet contains questions, thoughts and explanations regarding the week's topic. The course will work best if you work through the booklet at home, answer the questions and underline anything you want to discuss in more detail.

4. Resource Collection: In addition to this the following resources will be available for loan or purchase each Sunday. They deal with some of the common barriers to faith.

The Reason for God, Tim Keller

A Doubter's Guide to the Bible, John Dickson

Mere Christianity, C.S. Lewis

The Christ files, John Dickson

So, listen to the talks, join a discussion group, use the booklet and tuck in to Luke's gospel. What have you got to lose? At the very least at the end of this course you can tell all your learned friends that you've read a 'primary historical text from the 1st century' and know a little more about Jesus than your average punter. Or, you may find that Jesus is someone you need to take a little more seriously. Either way you've not wasted your time.

² If you're here with a friend chat to them about joining their discussion group. If you're here on your lonesome we have a special discussion group facilitated by one of the pastors that runs on Monday night you can join. See one of the pastors for more details.

Jesus' life (Luke 1-9)

“The gentle figure of Christ, so patient, so kind, so loving, so full of forgiveness that he taught his followers not to retaliate when abused or struck, but to turn the other cheek, I thought it was a beautiful example of the perfect man...” (Ghandi)

Listen to talk 1 and read Luke 1-9. What stands out to you? What things do you not understand? What questions arise from your reading? What surprised you most about Jesus?

I've got a picture of Jesus

In Luke 9:20 Jesus asks the disciples a very pointed question ‘*who do you say that I am?*’ Below are 4 depictions of Jesus. Each one is an artistic attempt to answer the question ‘who is Jesus?’



(From left: buddy Jesus, BBC ordinary Galilean Jesus, religious Jesus, and revolutionary Jesus)

What does each picture say about the identity of Jesus? How do these depictions line up with modern peoples' view of who Jesus is and what he came to do?

Vandalising Jesus

The artistic talent of Spanish painter Batolome Murillo was first observed when as a young boy he vandalised his parents' painting of Jesus. The painting that held pride of place on his parents' wall depicted Jesus as a shepherd boy. His cheeks were rosy, his eyes

lifeless, his hair neat and kept. He stood bolt upright and had an obligatory halo around his head.

Batolome didn't accept the idea that the son of a carpenter from a backwater town like Nazareth would be so 'otherworldly', so he decided to 'fix it'. He took his brush and paints and set to work. He made Jesus look more hunched over, painted his eyes as playful and lively. He smeared dirt on his cheeks, roughed up his hair and transformed the limp lamb in his hands to a rugged dog. He made him look more human.

When his parents came home they were mortified at this sacrilege. As punishment they made him walk the streets of Seville with the painting bound to his back. That is where a local religious icon painter named Juan del Castillo discovered him. The rest, as they say, is history.³

In some ways that is what we hope to do in this session... to vandalise your picture of Jesus. We want to affirm that Jesus is your mate, he is the leader of a huge religion, he is a revolutionary and he is a human but he is also much, much more.

Luke's picture of Jesus

The whole of Luke's gospel is designed to answer the question, who is Jesus? But there are 3 encounters Jesus has in Luke 5 that are particularly instructive for us.

1. Jesus restores a social outcast (5:12-16)

Background

Leprosy was a blanket term referring to many different types of infectious skin diseases. Whilst leprosy was a physical disease, it had social and religious implications. Lepers were social and religious outcasts (*read Leviticus 13-14 for the background*) they were viewed in

³ Frost, 'Exiles' p28-29

their time much like people with AIDS were in the late 80s and early 90s, and perhaps like some people view asylum seekers today.

- What strikes you about the Leper?
- What does this story reveal about Jesus and what he came to do?

This story tells us numerous things about Jesus. Firstly he went out of his way to restore and accept the ‘least’ of all humans. Secondly, Jesus’ mission is to restore people not just spiritually but socially and even physically sometimes. Thirdly, the fact that Jesus touches someone no one else would touch (religious people especially) tells us Jesus is far more concerned with helping people than fitting in with social customs or pleasing the religious leaders.

2. Jesus claims to be God by forgiving and healing a paralysed man (5:17-26)

Background

The Pharisees were a non-professional but extremely influential religious group who demanded of themselves and others stringent obedience to the Law of Moses (the Old Testament). The Scribes were a group of theologians who tried to interpret and define the Mosaic Law. They were two of the most religious and ‘holy’ groups around.

- Why do you think rather than just healing the Paralysed man, Jesus tells him ‘*his sins are forgiven*’?

The Pharisees are right. The only one who can forgive sins is God because all sin has been committed against God. Bernhard Shlink, the author of ‘The Reader’, writing about post World War II guilt in Germany makes the observation that the historical way to find forgiveness of sins and release from guilt is to appeal to a forgiving, gracious God⁴

- When Jesus refers to himself as ‘the son of Man’ he is referring

4 Shlink Bernhard ‘Guilt About the Past’ p68-69

to a prophesy from Daniel 7. Look at Daniel 7: 13-14 what is Jesus claiming about himself by using the title 'son of Man'

- Why does the healing of this man prove that Jesus has authority to forgive sins?
- If this story is true how would it change the way we respond to Jesus?

Jesus has made some pretty huge claims about himself in this short story. He claims to have the authority of God. He claims to be able to forgive sins. He claims to have an everlasting kingdom and he claims that someday everyone will bow before him.

3. Jesus approves of a tax-collector and other drop kicks (v27-31)

Background

Tax collectors were amongst the most despised members of Jewish society in the 1st century. They were seen as traitors because they collected taxes for a foreign oppressive government. Most people believed they were thieves because they collected more tax than they needed, keeping the extra for themselves.

The other thing you need to know is that to have dinner with someone in the 1st century was to publicly approve of them.

- Who in this story do you identify with most? Why?
- What do Jesus' eating habits and comments in v31-32 tell us about what he/God values?
- How does this story affirm/challenge the images of Jesus presented at the beginning?

In this story we start to see why Jesus' teaching was so revolutionary and why his actions and teaching were offensive and perplexing for religious people. The Pharisees and the teachers of the Law had a very defined view of who was in and who was out; who was

acceptable to God and who was not. Jesus, through his words and actions, was completely redefining who was in and who was out, who was acceptable to God and who was not. Jesus is showing us that God loves even the most sinful people and that God is far more concerned with how you respond to Jesus than he is about your 'spiritual track record'.

Conclusion

Jesus was a revolutionary, he was a great guy and a good teacher, but given the evidence that we now have before us, we can say that Jesus claimed to be so much more than that. He seemed to believe he had the authority of God, that he could forgive sins and that all the powers of this earth would kneel before him. In the coming weeks we're going to examine more evidence for that claim, but for now, let's return to the question Jesus asked his disciples in Luke 9:20 - ***'who do you say that I am?'***

C.S Lewis outlined the possible answers to this question in his book 'Mere Christianity'. He said:

'A man who was merely a man and said the things Jesus said wouldn't be a great teacher, he'd either be a lunatic - on the level with a man who says that he's a poached egg - or else he'd be the devil of hell. Either this man was and is the Son of God, or else a mad man or something worse. You must make your choice. You can shut him up as a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon; or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God. But let us not come up with any patronising nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He hasn't left that option open to us'⁵

Somewhat surprisingly in an interview on American TV, Bono says something very similar:

'It's a defining question for a Christian. Who was Christ? And I don't think you're let off easily by saying he was a great thinker or great philosopher.'

5 Lewis C.S 'Mere Christianity' p43

Because, actually, he went around saying he was the Messiah. That's why he was crucified. He was crucified because he said he was the Son of God.

So, he either, in my view, was the Son of God or he was nuts. Forget rock-and-roll messianic complexes. I mean Charlie Manson-type delirium. And I find it hard to accept that all the millions and millions of lives, half the Earth, for 2,000 years have been touched, have felt their lives touched and inspired by some nutter. I just don't believe it.⁶

If C.S Lewis and Bono are right, then the question 'who is Jesus?' is the most important question you will ever answer. So I'll ask you again, 'who is Jesus?'

⁶ <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/bristolpalin/2015/04/bono-said-what-about-jesus-2/#ixzz3XF3icJ3R>

Discussion questions: Jesus' life

(Use the following questions to help guide your discussion)

- What image of Jesus do you think is most prevalent in our society and why? What image is most attractive to you and why?
- What part of Jesus' life do you find most fascinating?
- What part do you find most confronting?
- Look at the following stories...
 - Calms the storm (Luke 8:22-25)
 - Heals the demon possessed man (Luke 8:26-39)
 - Heals those with diseases (For example Luke 4:40, 7:21)
 - Forgives sins (Luke 5:17-26)
- How do these stories 'vandalise' the common pictures of Jesus?
- There are many Christian scientists, historians, professors and intellectuals. What does this tell you about the reasons people do or do not believe Jesus was God?
- What things/experiences prevent you/people from examining the claims of Jesus more seriously?
- From your reading of Luke's gospel, the above material and the talk, what questions do you have about Jesus and his life?
- If you had to take a punt, what is Jesus more likely to be (a) Delusional (b) malicious or (c) actually something special? What makes you think that?

Jesus' Death (Luke 22-24)

'If Jesus of Nazareth had been one more innocent victim, like [Martin Luther] King, Mandela, Havel and Solzhenitsyn, he would have made his mark in history and faded from the scene. What changed history was the disciples dawning awareness that God himself chose the way of weakness. The cross defines God as the one who is willing to relinquish power for the sake of love'. (Philip Yancey)⁷

Listen to talk 2 and read Luke 22-24. What stands out to you? What things do you not understand? What questions arise from your reading? What surprised you most about Jesus?

My best piece of jewelry is my gold noose...

Imagine meeting someone who had a pendant in the shape of an electric chair, a noose or a lethal injection syringe on a chain around their neck for everyone to see. What might that pendant say about a person? It might say they are the kind of person who wants to kill kittens, listen to death metal and pierces odd parts of their body. And yet all around the world you will meet Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox Christians who do pretty much that. Christians all over the world wear dainty little silver chains with a symbol of torture and death as a pendant. A cross.

The cross has been the adopted symbol of the Christian church pretty much from its inception. This seems really odd to many people, and rightly so. The cross leaves hangings, electric chairs and lethal injections for dead (pun intended) in the Gold Logie contest for worst ways to be executed. The cross was the most gruesome and grotesque method of capital punishment in the first century. It was invented by the Greeks and perfected by the Romans and was designed to inflict the most pain and suffering possible on someone before they eventually died of asphyxiation, blood loss, dehydration or exhaustion. Death by crucifixion was reserved only for the most

⁷ Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, p204-205

violent, vile and despised criminals.

So the obvious question is why did the early Christians adopt this image of death and torture as the symbol of their religion? There were many other images that they could've used. Why did they choose a cross? Hopefully this study will help us answer this question.

The first thing we need to understand to answer that question is...

1. Who really killed Jesus?

Read Luke 22:47-23:25

- What strikes you about Jesus in this passage?
- According to this story who was responsible for Jesus' death? (Pilate, Herod, the Jews, Rome, Judas or someone else) explain.

You may not have realised but Jesus actually predicts his death three times in Luke's gospel (Luke 9:21-22, 9:43b-44, 18:31-33). He says something similar in John's gospel (John 10:17-18)

- According to these passages, who does Jesus think is responsible for his death?

When you read these passages about Jesus you would be forgiven for thinking that Jesus had a death wish. But it doesn't seem like he hated life and wanted out. Rather, it seems that Jesus felt God actually wanted him to die, or for some reason, needed him to die. So we have to ask ourselves again, why? Why did Jesus think he needed to die? Or to put it another way, what for Jesus is worth dying for?

That question is answered in what Jesus says at his last meal.

2. Jesus' last meal (Luke 22:7-20)

Background

The Passover was an annual celebration where the Jews remembered

how God rescued them from slavery in Egypt. The climax of that story (found in Exodus 1-10) is the first Passover. The night before the Israelites were freed from Egypt they are told that God's judgment is about to fall on the Egyptians for the horrendous way they had treated their slaves, the Jews. The Israelites are instructed to kill and eat a spotless lamb and place some of the blood on the door post of their houses. This was an act of trust and obedience, declaring they believed God would not punish them for their sins when he came in judgment on Egypt. When God came to judge the Egyptians for their sin God saw the blood on the door of the Israelites' houses and 'passed over them'. They were saved by the blood of a lamb.

Read Luke 22:7-20

- According to Jesus in this story, who is worth dying for?
- How is Jesus' death like the Passover?

A word on sin and our need for forgiveness.

You may be thinking, I'm a pretty good guy/gal why do I need forgiveness from sin? In our culture the word sin is minimized by some and distorted by others. It is *minimized* in the sense that some people speak about sin like they speak about chocolate cake. Sin, to many, is 'pleasurable naughtiness' - something that is harmless in small doses but destructive if over-indulged in. Others *distort* sin by using it only to refer to criminal activities like theft murder or rape.

If these are your definitions of sin its either something that we shouldn't be concerned about or something that doesn't concern most of us. But the biblical definition of sin is far more comprehensive and nuanced than either of these popular perceptions. At the heart of sin is the rejection of God as king and lord. Jesus suggests that sin is saying to God: 'you can't tell me what to do! I'm going to live the life I want to live. I am the master of my own destiny.' This simple decision is the root or cause of all evil, oppression, injustice and broken relationships. The decision to replace God with ourselves is the reason this world is so messed up. British intellectual Francis Spufford offers this helpful definition of sin... "sin is the human propensity to

[stuff] things up”⁸. Sin is humanities’ universal propensity to take something that is precious, valuable and untainted and destroy, taint and break those things.

Each one of us knows what it is like to break, destroy and taint a friendship, relationship or marriage. We all know what it’s like to unwittingly be in part responsible for; the rape and plunder of the oceans, the destruction of forests and the pollution of the atmosphere. If we are completely honest with ourselves, we know what it is like to stuff things up... we’ve cognitively and personally seen the effects of replacing God in our lives.

It’s when we finally come face to face with this reality that we can start to see our need for forgiveness of sins and salvation.

The Bible states that God, who is supremely loving and supremely just, *has* to punish sin. The idea of a God who punishes sin seems harsh to us... but when you think about it, it is absolutely necessary. The Christian Philosopher Miroslav Volf puts it like this:

‘One could object that it’s not worthy of God to wield the sword [judge]. Is God not love, long-suffering and all-powerful love? [However]... in a world of violence it would not be worthy of God not to wield a sword; if God were not angry at injustice and deception and did not make the final end to violence God would not be worthy of our worship.’⁹

So if we are all sinners, and God has to punish sin, we are in serious trouble. No one can stand before God’s judgment and not perish. This is where the death of Jesus comes in. Jesus, the only perfect human, takes the punishment and penalty for our sin. As a result, when God’s judgment comes, he can end violence, death, destruction, oppression and injustice – he can end sin - without ending you and I. We can now face God’s judgment and stand.

8 Spufford Francis, Unapologetic: how despite everything Christianity still makes surprising emotional sense, p45

9 Dickson John, Doubter’s Guide To The Bible, p97

- How might this new understanding of sin challenge some of our modern perceptions?
- How does the idea of God having to punish sin sit with you?

Hopefully you're beginning to see why the early Christians adopted the cross as their symbol. They did it because at the cross, Jesus bore the punishment for our sin. At the cross, Jesus shed his blood so God's judgment would 'Passover' us. At the cross, God showed the world how much he loves humanity, and the lengths he was willing to go to rescue them.

You may be wondering where to from here. Well, here is an example of how Jesus wants us to respond to this good news.

3. The criminal next to Jesus (23:39-43)

In the criminal on the cross we see a picture of how God wants us to respond to Jesus.

- What does the criminal understand about Jesus?
- How does the criminal see himself? Why might this be important?
- What do we learn from this criminal about what Jesus wants from us?

So here is the story according to Luke. Jesus knew he needed to die and willingly gave up his life. He did it so we can be forgiven of our innate propensity to stuff things up. Jesus saw his death much like that of the Passover lamb - his blood ensures God's judgment passes over us. He wants us to recognize our guilt, acknowledge him as king and join him in his kingdom. You can choose to believe it or not, but that is the message of the cross. According to Luke then, the symbol of the cross is the most radical, subversive and strangely comforting thing you could wear around your neck.

Discussion questions: Jesus' Death

(Use the following questions to help guide your discussion)

- What is the nicest thing you've ever broken?
- What do you think about the definition of sin as 'the human propensity to stuff things up?'
 - How does it challenge your previous ideas of 'sin'?
 - Does it help you understand this world or God better?
- What do you think is at the centre of all 'sin'?
- *'The decision to replace God with ourselves is the reason this world is so messed up.'* Do you agree? Why or why not?
- Do humans have a tendency to minimize their own sin? How might the story of Jesus' death enable people to stop minimizing it?
- Is it important for us to recognize our own sin? Why or why not?
- *'Without justice there can be no mercy.'* Discuss.
- How does the idea of a God who punishes sin sit with you? Why?
- What questions do you have about why Jesus had to die?
- Who or what in this world is worth dying for? For Jesus, who or what in the world is worth dying for?
- The criminal on the cross had a very limited knowledge of Jesus, may have never attended church or ever read his bible, but he was saved by Jesus. How does that compare to what you've heard before about Jesus and salvation? What does it say about what we need to do to be saved by Jesus?

Jesus' Resurrection (Luke 24)

'...if there were no resurrection we would have no consolation or hope, and everything else that Christ did or suffered would be futile.' (Martin Luther)¹⁰

Listen to talk 3 and Read Luke 22-24. What stands out to you? What things do you not understand? What questions arise from your reading? What surprised you most about Jesus?

'If Jesus didn't rise from the dead we all may as well become complete hedonists'

... is pretty much the line that came out of my theological college principal's mouth at a chapel service in 2008. It was around about the time James Cameron released the TV documentary entitled 'the tomb of Jesus'. In the documentary Cameron *claimed* to find a tomb that **'may have been'** where Jesus and his family were buried.¹¹ The principal's point was that if Cameron was correct and it could be proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that Jesus was not raised from the dead, then the Christian message would be falsifiable and utterly useless. Indeed he went further than that. He was saying that if Christianity is not historically true and the resurrection was a hoax, we may as well live the most pleasurable and selfish life possible because this life is all there is.

However, the principal then went on to explain why he, as a former lawyer, is convinced the resurrection actually happened. His claim was basically this - that there is a resurrection shaped dent in history.

10 Martin Luther quoted in Clifford & Johnson, *The Cross is Not Enough*, p21

11 In case you're just about to put down this course and track down an online copy of Cameron's film let me put your heart at rest. A quick look at the Wikipedia page about the film will show you that most historians think the film is a joke. 'When interviewed about the upcoming documentary, Amos Kloner, who oversaw the original archaeological dig of this tomb in 1980 said: "It makes a great story for a TV film, but it's completely impossible. It's nonsense!" (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Lost_Tomb_of_Jesus)

In other words, there is all the historical evidence that you would expect to find if the resurrection of Jesus did take place, and far too much historical evidence if it didn't take place.

So, in the study to follow, we want to do two things. Firstly we want to outline the historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus. And secondly, we want to look at what it means for us if Jesus was actually raised from the dead.

1. The resurrection in history

We'll look first at the resurrection account in Luke's gospel and then turn to some other New Testament documents.

Read Luke 24:1-12

- Who were the first witnesses to Jesus' resurrection? Why is this significant?
- Jesus told the disciples numerous times that he 'would rise again'. What does the fact that they initially doubted that it had happened indicate?

Read 1 Corinthians 15:1-8¹²

- Why do you think Paul included the line 'most of whom are still living'?

Read Matthew 28:11-15

- The high priests and the soldier did not claim that 'Jesus' body was still in the tomb' but that his body had been stolen. What does this tell us about the disciples' claim that Jesus was resurrected?

Along with this evidence you can add:

- The idea that an individual would be raised from the dead at that time was completely antithetical to both Jewish and Roman beliefs. The claim that Jesus was raised would've been an

12 Even the most critical biblical scholars suggest that these 8 sentences were composed about 10 years after Jesus death and resurrection.

entirely alien concept that would entail the denunciation of long established and deep-rooted beliefs and traditions.

- The disciples, although doubting originally that Jesus was raised from the dead, would later suffer horrific and excruciating deaths for that belief. It is extremely unlikely that they would die for what they knew was a lie.

So here are the facts my friends

*'... the tomb must have been empty. No one in Jerusalem would have believed the preaching for a minute if the tomb was not empty. Skeptics could have easily produced Jesus' rotting corpse. Also [the new testament writers] could not be telling people in a public document that there were scores of eyewitnesses alive if there were not. We can't permit ourselves the luxury of thinking that the resurrection accounts were only fabricated years later. Whatever else happened the tomb of Jesus must've been empty and hundreds of witnesses must have claimed that they saw him bodily raised.'*¹³

We are not claiming that all this evidence is proof positive that Jesus is alive, we are simply suggesting that the accounts have all the hallmarks of being historically reliable.

Christian skeptic and historian Michael Grant writes *'if we apply the same sort of criteria that we would apply to other ancient literary sources, the evidence is firm and plausible enough to necessitate the conclusion that the tomb was indeed found empty.'*¹⁴

The question you have to answer is why was it empty? Is it possible that Jesus was raised from the dead and really is God? And what would it mean for you if he really did rise?

That final question is what we're going to look at in the rest of this study.

13 Keller Tim, The Reason for God, p207

14 (Cited in) Ankerberg & Weldon, The Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, p4

2. The resurrection and us

Read Luke 24:36-49

Luke seems to go out of his way to show us that Jesus was not a spirit being like a ghost but a real life flesh and blood person. He shows the disciples his hands and feet, he asks them to touch his flesh and he eats a piece of broiled fish.

- Why do you think Luke includes these details?

This belief that Jesus was raised physically has huge implications for us.

(a) The resurrection and life beyond death

Lets see how the resurrection of Jesus speaks to one of humanity's greatest questions, what happens after you die?

Paul, one of the most famous Jesus followers,¹⁵ talks about the significance of Jesus' resurrection in a letter he wrote to a bunch of Christians living in Asia Minor (modern day Turkey).

Read 1 Corinthians 15:20 -22

Background

The 'first fruits' in farming lingo are literally the first fruits that appear on a vine/tree. The moment these fruits appear the farmer knows that it's just a matter of time before the whole vineyard/orchard is full of delicious fruit.

- What is Paul trying to say by calling Jesus the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep?

The logic is really, really simple. Because death wasn't the end for Jesus, death won't be the end for those who trust in him. But more than that, Paul is saying that just like Jesus was raised with a physical

15 Paul is the guy who wrote about half of the New Testament

body those who trust in him will also be raised with a physical body.

- How does this picture of life after death compare to other popular pictures of life after death?

(b) The resurrection and now

The ancient Greek philosophers taught that the physical world was evil and temporal and the spiritual world was good and eternal. The implication was that the physical world doesn't matter - what really matters is the spiritual. That means you can do whatever you want to your body and the environment because it will all be destroyed eventually anyway. However, Jesus' physical resurrection from the dead proves that this idea is entirely alien to Christianity. For Christians, the physical world, the environment and our own physical needs, are good and eternal and therefore they matter.

Ross Clifford, a former lawyer and principal at one of Australia's foremost theological colleges writes: *'The resurrection of Jesus demonstrates that God cares for the whole person and this holistic understanding of how God sees us applies not just in the future but also now.'*¹⁶

- What impact does the belief that Jesus was physically raised from the dead, and that one day we will be like him, have on our view of human rights? The environment?

What we've tried to do in this chapter is to make an historical case for the resurrection of Jesus and suggest two ways this impacts you personally. You may have noticed that the picture we've painted of life after death is remarkably different from the 'Christian' one presented to us in the media i.e. there are no harps, crowns or gold streets. That is because the picture presented in the media is a distortion of what Jesus taught. C.S Lewis put it well:

16 Clifford and Johnson, *The Cross is Not Enough*, p45

*'There is no need to be worried by facetious people who try and make the Christian hope... ridiculous by saying they do not want 'to spend eternity playing harps'. The answer to such people is that if they can not understand books written for grown-ups they shouldn't talk about them. All the scriptural imagery... is of course a merely symbolic attempt to express the inexpressible. Musical instruments are mentioned because for many music is the thing known for ecstasy and infinity. Crowns are mentioned to suggest the fact that those who are united with God in eternity share his splendor and power and joy. Gold is mentioned to suggest the timelessness of heaven and the preciousness of it. People who take these symbols literally might as well think that when Christ told us to be like doves he meant that we were to lay eggs.'*¹⁷

Jesus' physical resurrection means that for the Christian, life after death is not sitting up in the clouds playing harps and singing songs to God but rather 'flesh and blood' humans renewed and restored living in perfect unity with God and each other for all eternity.

17 Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p137

Discussion questions: Jesus' Resurrection

(Use the following questions to help guide your discussion)

- What are the major opinions about life after death? What one/s do you find most compelling? Why?
- What kind of things can and cannot be proved scientifically? What does this mean for the things we should demand scientific proof for?
- What evidence presented do you find most convincing/unconvincing? Why?
- How might your preconceived ideas about what is possible and impossible influence the way you read the evidence?
- Let's just assume that Jesus was raised from the dead. What would this mean for:
 - Jesus' identity
 - The Bible
 - The way we relate to him
 - The way we approach death
- Many people today claim to know Jesus personally - what would make them say that?
- If Ross is right and Jesus' resurrection proves that God cares for people holistically, what impact might this have on the way we live our lives?
- How might the idea that Jesus was raised physically from the dead challenge popular pictures of 'life after death' (heaven)?
- How might the belief in Jesus' resurrection be a comfort and a challenge to us?
- What questions do you have about the resurrection of Jesus and/or life after death?

Following Jesus (Luke 10-21)

'All other religions have founders who show the way of salvation. Only Jesus claimed to actually be the way of salvation himself. This difference is so great that, even though Christianity can certainly be called a religion in a broader sense... the term religion... [refers to] salvation through moral effort and the gospel [refers to] salvation through grace.'
(Tim Keller)¹⁸

Listen to talk 4 and read Luke 10-21. What stands out to you? What things do you not understand? What questions arise from your reading? What surprised you most about Jesus?

Christianity as ANTI-religion

In the late 90s it was really common to hear Christians say 'Christianity is not a religion it is a relationship'. I swallowed it hook line and sinker (mostly because alliteration is rock solid proof of accuracy). But then I looked at the Wikipedia definition of a religion - *'belief in, or the worship of, a god or gods' or the "service and worship of God or the supernatural"*.¹⁹ According to this definition Christianity is a religion. It is belief and worship of a God. But in another sense the statement Christianity is not a religion but a relationship is really insightful. Most people, when they think of religions, think of a set of rules or guidelines that will help you please God and live a good life. If that's what you mean by religion then Christianity is the anti-religion. Christianity says there is nothing you can do to make God love you or to earn favor with God. As we've already seen in week 2, human beings are universally sinful and cannot, on our own accord, please God. We are pleasing to God and forgiven because of Jesus.

So if Christianity isn't a set of rules and practices that help you please God... what is it? Or, to phrase the question another way, what does it look like to follow Jesus?

¹⁸ Keller Tim, The Reason for God, p174

¹⁹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion>

You may have realised that we missed 11 chapters of Luke's gospel. That wasn't an oversight, we did it on purpose. We left the disciples proclaiming that Jesus is 'the Christ the Son of God' in Luke 9. What follows (Luke 9-21) is a picture of what it looks like to follow Jesus the Christ.

Whilst the whole of the gospel outlines what it looks like to follow Jesus, two encounters Jesus has with his would be followers are particularly instructive for us here.

1. Love God more than anything and everything (Luke 18:18-24)

- Jesus lists 5 of the Ten Commandments found in Exodus 20. These were the rules that the Jews sought to live by. What commandments are notably missing? Why do you think Jesus omitted them?
- What does v23 tell us about the priorities of this man?
- What things in this world do people value and love more than God?
- What would it look like if you valued and loved God above everything else?

This story really gets to the heart of what it is to follow Jesus. It declares that avoiding sin and living a righteous life is of no value unless it is done out of a sincere love for God. God is less interested in your obedience than he is in your affection.

Perhaps this illustration might help us understand this. Imagine it's Valentines Day and two men buy their partners the same bunch of flowers. They are beautiful flowers worth who knows how much money. Attached to the flowers is a note. The note attached to the first man's flowers reads:

'Happy Valentines Day.

I bought these beautiful flowers for you for 3 reasons. Firstly all my friends were getting their partners something and I didn't want to be the odd one out. Secondly I know that you were probably expecting a gift and I don't

want it to be awkward for the next couple of days. Finally I was walking past the flower shop just as they were closing and the lady offered me this bunch at COST PRICE! What a bargain! So here you go. Enjoy.'

The note attached to the second man's flowers reads:

*'To the love of my life,
Happy Valentines Day. I know we said we weren't going to do anything for Valentines Day this year but I couldn't help myself. I want to make you happy. I absolutely adore you. I want these flowers to be a reminder to you of how much you mean to me. When you look at them I want you to know that when I am not with you I am constantly thinking about you. I love you more than a tradie loves meat pies or a cop loves doughnuts... which is a lot. Love always, your adoring husband.'*

What is the difference between the gifts of these two men? The gifts are essentially the same, a bunch of expensive flowers with a note attached. But what the gift says is entirely different. The first man's gift is given out of fear, expectation and duty. It says to his partner 'I'm giving you these because I have to, if I don't there will be bad consequences and/or because it was convenient'. The second man's gift is an overflow of his love. It says to his partner 'I would do anything for you because I love you'. Any thinking and feeling human would prefer the latter to the former. In this regard God is like us, or should I say we are like God. God doesn't want you to slavishly obey his commands out of fear, expectation or duty. He wants you to overflow with love for him.

2. Your love for God is evidenced by love for people (Luke 10:25-37)

- What are the two essentials according to the expert in the law?
- Who is our neighbour?
- How do we commonly try and 'justify' not loving our neighbour?

Read 1 John 4:19-21

- What does this passage say about the importance of loving others?

This passage perfectly summarises what it looks like to follow Jesus. Jesus followers are to love God more than anything, and that love for God motivates and compels them to love others.

The sting in the tail of this passage is the ending. Jesus has gone out of his way to say that loving God and loving your neighbour are what it takes to inherit eternal life. He's told a story that strongly suggests that our neighbour is anyone we see with a need. And then Jesus has told us to go and do likewise. It's logical but impossible. We cannot possibly provide for the needs of everyone we come across. We don't have the spiritual, physical or emotional resources and there are way too many needy people out there. So Jesus is basically saying it's impossible to please God and inherit eternal life.

In many ways that is what this whole course has been getting at. You cannot be good enough to please God... you are pleasing to God because Jesus was good enough. Jesus took the penalty and punishment for your lack of love for God and failure to provide for your neighbour so that you don't have to slavishly follow the rules hoping all the while that your good might outweigh your bad. You are saved by grace not by works.

Bono was asked on Larry King Live what makes Christianity different from the other religions in the world? Bono paused and answered calmly:

*'All the other religions in they world in one way or another teach karma. Only Jesus offers grace. In all other religions of the world people end up having to pay the penalty for their sins. Only Jesus Christ by his grace, makes it possible for people to be delivered from the consequences of their sins...'*²⁰

'I get it...' I hear you say. 'If we can't please God by living a good life why even bother being good?' The answer is simple. Love. You don't

20 Campolo Tony, Stories That Feed Your Soul, p25

obey God because it earns you brownie points, you obey him because you love him.

One last story might help us here.

A preacher was riding a train sitting opposite two men who seemed to be in their late thirties. Out of nowhere one of the men started to have an epileptic seizure, his eyes rolled back in his head, he slid off his seat and started convulsing. His friend calmly cradled his head, rolled up his newspaper and inserted it between his teeth to stop him from biting his tongue and stroked his forehead. The man turned to the preacher and apologised; 'I hope that didn't upset you too much.' He said, 'We never know when these seizures are going to occur. We were both seriously injured in Vietnam. I lost my leg and he had half of his chest blown away by a grenade. The chopper that was supposed to collect us was shot out of the sky. It seemed hopeless. It was at that moment that my friend here somehow got to his feet. He reached down and grabbed hold of my shirt and began to drag me through the jungle. He screamed in pain every step that he took. I screamed for him to leave me and save himself. I'll never forget him saying, 'If you die in the forest I'm going to die with you.' He pulled me out of that mess and saved my life.

A year ago I found out he had this condition and needed someone with him 24hrs a day. So, I sold my house and car and came over here to look after him. I hope you understand.'

The preacher was stunned and said 'that is an amazing story.' The man frowned and said '*I hope you're not amazed by me... after what he did for me, there isn't anything I wouldn't do for him.*'²¹

People who follow Jesus see themselves in this story. To follow Jesus is to be so overwhelmed with gratitude for the way he has loved you that there isn't anything you wouldn't do for him. It's to love

21 Adapted from Tony Campolo

God with all your heart, soul and mind, and love your neighbour as yourself, not to earn credit or to make up for your sin, but simply because you love him.

Discussion questions: Following Jesus

(Use the following questions to help guide your discussion)

- Why do people follow the rules?
 - At home, at work, in society?
- How do most people judge whether or not they are living a morally upright life? Does that differ to Christians?
- Before this course, how would you describe the Christian life? Has that opinion been challenged?
- Giving examples, have Christians throughout history been good at following Jesus? Why might this be the case?
- Why is it that some of the people who felt most comfortable around Jesus (prostitutes, thieves and the morally corrupt) feel the least comfortable in the church?
- In your experience, do Christians feel they are morally superior to others? Why should this be, or not be the case?
- What reason/s is there to be good if it doesn't win you credit points with God?
- Why should loving God lead to loving others?
- How do we, like the lawyer in the story, seek to justify our lack of love?
- What questions do you have about what it looks like to follow Jesus?