

The Life of All Lives - 1

Introduction

I want to begin by welcoming you to this series of studies. It is my prayer that through them, God will bless you. In each study, we shall be focusing our thoughts almost exclusively on one Person. If we mention anyone other than this Person, it will only be to the extent that it helps our understanding of Him.

That Person is Jesus Christ. Let me say now that it is my conviction that He stands immeasurably higher than any other person who has ever lived or ever will. He has no rival, He is incomparable.

In a reference to Jesus, John the Baptist said to those who were listening to him: "Among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie." Jesus Christ is so indescribably great that nobody - not you, not me, not even John the Baptist - could presume to do for him the humble honour of untying his sandal. He is so high, and we are so low. Yet He does not stand aloof, at a distance. He has come near, and He invites us to draw near to Him.

It goes without saying that these studies cannot be exhaustive. At the end of his account of the life of Christ, John said that Jesus did many other things that he had not written down, and that if he had, the whole world would not have had room for the books that would be written. We must therefore be selective. What we aim to do with God's help is to focus on the key facts and the critical moments in His life and think about what the Bible tells us about them.

So we are going to take 12 central facts and events, and explore what Scripture has to say about them. As we do so, may it be our individual prayer that we shall be enabled to grow in our knowledge of Jesus Christ, "whom to know is life eternal."

Let me set out the reasons why we are devoting the whole of this series of studies to the Person of Christ.

The first is this: if Jesus is not the Person the Bible says He is, the whole foundation of the Christian faith disintegrates at once. Let there be no confusion about this, because on this point the Bible is clear. It reveals Jesus Christ as fully God, who became fully human, who was crucified and who rose again, literally and bodily, to save His people from their sins. That is a truly awesome claim, but take it - or any part of it - away, and all you are left with is a religious system, just one of many, that will come to nothing in the end.

All Christians are united in respect of these central facts about Christ. There are many divisions between Christians on other matters, which is regrettable; but there is complete unanimity on this issue.

Now perhaps you are thinking to yourself: how can he say that with such confidence? The answer is simple: anyone who does not believe these basic things is not truly Christian, whatever he may call himself. The Apostle John put this in robust terms in the second chapter of his first Epistle. He said, "Who is the liar? It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a man is the antichrist - he denies both the Father and the Son. No-one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also."

What this forthright language means is that the person who denies the biblically revealed truths about Jesus Christ is not neutral; he is antichrist – he is opposed to Christ – he is not truly Christian. It is as serious as that.

The second reason is that Christian conversion is essentially an encounter with the Person of Christ. Shortly before the crucifixion, Jesus was praying for Himself, for His disciples, and for all those who would come to trust in Him. We find that prayer recorded in John chapter 17. At the beginning He said, “Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.” Eternal life - the life of the age to come - can be enjoyed here and now. To have eternal life is to know Christ personally. Christian conversion always involves this encounter. It is to acknowledge Him as Scripture reveals Him - the eternal Word made flesh. It is to embrace Him as both Saviour and Lord. It is to trust Him - and Him alone - for salvation.

Thirdly, at the heart of Christian living is a day-to-day walk with Christ. When Jesus gave the disciples the great commission shortly before His ascension, he told them to “go and make disciples of all nations...teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” In other words, he gave them - as he gives us - work to do. But he brought that commission to an end with a great promise. He said, “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” And he has kept that promise.

Finally, the Christian hope is centred on Jesus Christ. When the Christian thinks of heaven, there may be many things that come to mind. It is a glorious place. There will be ‘a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.’ There will be no sorrow, and no sinning. Christian friends and relatives who have passed on before will all be there. These are wonderful things to look forward to, and we are right to do so. But they are not at the centre of our hope. The Apostle Paul said, “I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far.” In his great vision of the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21 and 22, the Apostle John wrote, “They shall see His face”. And that is just it: Paul knew it, John knew it. To see His face, to be in the immediate presence of Christ will be everything. For the Christian, it will mean that we are home.

We hope that you will join us on this journey through the life of all lives. If you already know Him as your Saviour, we pray that these studies will lead you into a closer relationship with Him and encourage you in your faith. Is there someone listening who simply cannot see what we see in Christ? If so, may God by His Holy Spirit open your eyes so you may see Him, and trust Him for salvation.

The Life of All Lives - 2

The Eternal Christ

In this study we consider the eternal pre-existence of the Lord Jesus Christ. The twelve disciples discovered that following Jesus was a challenging business. It was not a matter of watching a few miracles and basking in the reflected glory of popular acclaim. There were times when it was difficult, even dangerous.

Sometimes this was because of what He said about Himself. At other times it was what he said about other people – and particularly the respected leaders of the Jewish religious fraternity. During one frank exchange, recorded in John chapter 8, Jesus told them: “You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desire.” The Jews answered: “Aren’t we right in saying that you are a Samaritan and demon-possessed?”

Following Christ was not for the faint hearted then, any more than it is now. On the occasion we are thinking of, matters became even worse. Jesus told the Jews: “Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it, and was glad.”

The Jews immediately spotted the claim that was implicit in this statement and retorted: “You are not yet fifty years old, and you have seen Abraham!” At that, Jesus said something that seems to have been the final straw for these religious people. He replied: “I tell you the truth, before Abraham was, I am.”

These words may seem obscure to us today, but they were clear enough to those who were listening. They were sufficiently confident that they understood them – and were appalled at what they meant – that they immediately picked up stones, and would have stoned Jesus there and then had He not slipped away.

So what was He saying that these Jews found so offensive? Referring to Abraham, who had lived hundreds of years earlier, He said, “Before Abraham was, I am.” In using the present tense in this remarkable way, Jesus was claiming to have existed before He was born into the world, and before Abraham was born. Indeed, He was going even further than that if we understand His language correctly. He was saying that he had always existed; that there never was a time when He was not.

Only one Person can speak in those terms. No ordinary human ever could, without being guilty of the most blatant blasphemy. Only God is entitled to make such a claim, and Jesus was claiming to be God. That is why they picked up the stones.

This statement cannot be dismissed as a one-off. It is clear that Jesus was always very conscious of His eternal pre-existence. Towards the beginning of His public ministry, Jesus was speaking to a learned member of the Jewish ruling council. His name was Nicodemus. Jesus said, “No-one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven – the Son of Man.” He was clearly referring to Himself, and claiming that he had come from heaven.

Then again, later in His ministry, he had been saying things that were simply too much for some people to take, and they began to grumble. Some of them turned back from following Him. Jesus said to them, “Does this offend you? What if you see the Son of Man ascend to where He was before!” We may ask, before when? Before he descended, naturally!

And this consciousness continued right to the end. In John chapter 17, we find recorded the prayer that Jesus uttered shortly before the crucifixion. In it he spoke these words:

"And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began." These words are unmistakable in their implication. Jesus was asking his Father that He might return to what He enjoyed before the incarnation - an before the very creation itself.

This is the great truth that is plainly taught in Scripture and majestically asserted in the prologue to the Gospel according to John that, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.

It is probable that John is consciously using the language that echoes that of Genesis 1: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." He was saying that when everything in the created universe came into being, Christ - the Word - did not come into being. He already was in being. There was never a time when He was not in being. He is the Uncreated Creator.

Neither is this the testimony of John alone.

In Hebrews chapter 2:9 we read: "But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honour because He suffered death." He was 'made a little lower than the angels' - that is, this was not His original state, but the one that He assumed at His birth.

Again, listen to what the Apostle Paul says in 2 Corinthians chapter 8: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that we through His poverty might become rich." He became poor - and the word used indicates that this was something that happened not gradually, but suddenly. It refers to His incarnation. He had been rich - He had inhabited the glory of heaven for all eternity - but now that had changed.

What does this all mean, and why does it matter? It means that the child who was born in Bethlehem was fully human but differed from all others in this vital respect: he was also fully God. And why does that matter? It matters because whether anything was achieved on Calvary depends on who was on the centre cross. If it was just another human being like you or I - even a remarkable human being - then his death could never pay the penalty our sins deserve and accomplish our salvation.

His eternal pre-existence also enables us to begin to grasp what lay behind his cry from the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" The perfect unbroken fellowship of the Father and the Son enjoyed from all eternity had suddenly been ruptured, and for Christ it was excruciating agony.

The One who was rich became poor. He took upon Himself 'frail flesh'. He took upon Himself the poverty of the manger, the desolation of the cross, and the coldness of a borrowed tomb so that we, through that poverty, might be made rich. There was only one Person who could accomplish this, and there was only one way it could be done. "There was no other good enough to pay the price of sin: He only could unlock the door of heaven, and let us in."

The Life of All Lives - 3

The Annunciation to Mary

In our study today we shall reflect upon the annunciation of the birth of Jesus Christ. Only Luke gives us a record of this event, in the first chapter of his 'orderly account' of the life of Christ.

One of the many remarkable things about Jesus is that we run into controversy even before he is born. I cannot think of any other person of whom that is true. It is as if God has deliberately placed a test of faith right at the very threshold of the gospel narrative and then says to us, "If you can't take this, there is no point going any further."

Ignoring later human elaboration, the Biblical account goes like this. Mary was a young girl who lived in Nazareth. She was a virgin. She was pledged to be married to a man called Joseph. She was visited by the angel Gabriel and told that she was to have a child without the intervention of a human father. She was to give him the name Jesus, and he was to be called the Son of the Most High. When Mary asked how this could be, she was told, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God." Mary's response was to say, "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said."

Christians humbly accept the truth of what is set down in Luke's account, accepting without hesitation that 'nothing is impossible with God'.

However, many are unable to accept that events unfolded as the angel said. In particular, they cannot accept the supernatural nature of the conception of the Lord Jesus. So, by one means or another, they shave off those elements of the account that are unacceptable to them. The angel told Mary that nothing is impossible with God. She believed the angel. These people think themselves wiser than the unsophisticated Mary, and in claiming to be wise, they become fools. It is interesting to notice that this unbelief never seems to stop at the virgin birth.

In days when there are strident claims being asserted about 'a woman's right to choose' it is instructive to pay attention to Mary's reaction to what was revealed to her. She was being told that she was to experience a pregnancy that she had not chosen to have. She was not even given a choice of name, but there was no protest, no appeal to her supposed "rights", only humble, adoring submission to the God she recognised was sovereign and had every right to confer on her - without consultation - the incredible privilege of becoming the mother of the Saviour of the world.

Notice also that the story of Mary's pregnancy is interwoven with that of Elizabeth who was 6 months pregnant when Mary was visited by the angel. It is striking that whilst Elizabeth's pregnancy removed the disgrace of her childlessness, Mary's risked disgrace; but the response marked by grace is always the same: "May it be to me as you have said."

What does all this mean? Does it matter whether Mary was a virgin or not? It most certainly does!

First, the virgin birth was the means God used to unite full humanity and full deity in the Person of Jesus Christ. We may speculate that the God for whom nothing is impossible could have devised some other means. But it is impossible to think of any other route that would not have left a serious question mark over either His deity or His humanity. By the virgin birth, that essential truth is carefully preserved.

The heresies that troubled the Church in the first couple of centuries after Pentecost mostly related to either the true humanity or the true deity of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the New Testament answers them all. Modern liberal theories tend to be variations on old themes, and the answers are in the same place. Unbelief is neither novel nor imaginative.

Then also, the virgin birth of Christ tells us that salvation for sinful humanity could only be accomplished by the sovereign initiative of God, rather than from among its own ranks. Professor Donald MacLeod puts it like this: "The race needs a redeemer, but cannot itself produce one; not by its own decision or desire, not by the processes of education and civilisation, not as a precipitate of its own evolution. The redeemer must come from outside. Here, as elsewhere, 'all things are of God.'"

Finally, we may say that the virgin birth was the means by which Christ was able to assume true humanity without simultaneously inheriting the entail of human sin that afflicts us all by virtue of our descent from Adam. This does not mean that the transmission of human sin only occurs through the father. The Bible does not teach such a thing. It simply means that through this break in the line of descent from Adam, God provided that the Lord Jesus should be free from the inherited sinful nature that would have barred him out from becoming our redeemer.

By reason of the virgin birth, the stream of guilt that passed down the whole race from Adam did not infect the Lord Jesus. He was 'holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners.'" However, whilst he did not inherit that guilt, he assumed it. As we read in 2 Corinthians 5: "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

This statement helps us to understand why the things taught in the annunciation to Mary are foundational. What we need is righteousness. That is an impossible goal for us to attain by human effort, no matter how sustained it may be. God's solution was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah 700 hundred years before these events took place. "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel."

And so it is possible for a glorious exchange to take place. Our guilt has been borne by Christ on the cross; and his righteousness has been imputed to us. That righteousness is the very 'righteousness of God', imparted justly and freely by sovereign grace to repentant sinners who are united to Christ by faith.

The Life of All Lives - 3

The Birth of Christ

In this study we shall be reflecting upon the birth of Jesus Christ.

Matthew and Luke tell us about the factual circumstances of His birth – the wise men, the shepherds in the fields keeping watch over their flocks by night, how the evil plans of Herod were frustrated, the child wrapped in swaddling clothes lying in the manger because there was no room for them at the inn. The scenes are vivid and powerful, and may well be very familiar to you. However, for many people they are also overlaid with a great deal of sentimentality, and are called to mind only at a time of year when they are distracted by revelries from thinking about what it means.

John gives us none of these homely details, but goes straight to the underlying significance of it all. In chapter 1 verse 14 he puts it like this: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."

This is mysterious language to us today, and whole libraries have been written in the attempt to explore its full meaning. John is referring to the Lord Jesus as 'the Word' and says that this Word became flesh. What is he telling us about the Person of Christ?

The Greek word 'Logos' for which we read 'Word' carries with it two main levels of meaning.

First, it relates to the powerful, creative word of God by which the heavens and the earth were brought into being. It takes us back to Genesis chapter 1 where we read: "And God said, 'Let there be light'; and the refrain 'And God said' continues throughout the rest of that chapter. Again, we read in Psalm 33:6, "By the word of the Lord were the heavens made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth."

Secondly, Greek readers would think that John was talking about the rational principle of the universe, the thing that held it all together and caused it all to make sense. One of the startling things about John's statement, therefore, is that it not only says that this principle was personalised, but that in the Person of Jesus Christ it became incarnate.

Here, John tells us something vital about this 'Word'. He tells us that the 'Word' became flesh. At a specific point in time, the eternal Word became something that he had never been before, yet did not cease to be that which He had always been.

The two essential emphases of the incarnation are, first, that Christ took upon Himself a true human body; and second, that he took a reasonable human soul. Let's briefly explore what these statements mean.

First, he took a true human body. His body was made of precisely the same stuff as yours and mine. As Paul wrote to the Colossians, 'in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form.' Jesus was born in the normal way. Strictly speaking, it was His conception that was miraculous, not His birth. He also grew up and developed naturally. He knew what it was to be hungry and thirsty. He experienced tiredness. When cruel men abused Him, he suffered and bled, and died.

The significance of the fact that He had a fully human body is that it associates Him with the physical creation in general and with suffering humanity in particular. He is not something – or somebody – removed, different, distant. Sin apart, He became one of us.

Secondly, he took a reasonable human soul. This means that just as He had a fully human body, so He had a fully human psychological makeup. He had a human mind, with the power of perception, memory, and reason. His mind developed, as any human mind develops. He 'grew in wisdom'. He observed, he learnt, he remembered. He was not born with an implanted body of infinite knowledge or wisdom, but acquired knowledge and wisdom by the normal processes of human development.

Now while it is right to emphasise the naturalness of His development, we must give proper weight to the passages of Scripture that indicate a supernatural element to His knowledge. The eminent scholars in the Temple were amazed at his understanding and answers when He was only 12 years old; He knew that the woman of Samaria had had 5 husbands when she had not told Him; He knew that Lazarus was dead before He reached the home in Bethany. But whilst these things are true, they must not be allowed to detract from the important fact that Jesus took upon Himself a human soul with that this means.

The writer of the epistle to the Hebrews both asserts these facts and explains their significance. In chapter 2:14 he writes: "Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death – that is, the devil – and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death."

We have already briefly explored the first part of this statement: "He...shared in their humanity." But why did He?

The first answer is that it was in order to die. That is what the text says: "...he too shared in their humanity so that by his death..."

It is extraordinary to claim that a person was born in order to die. People are born in order to live, you may think. But Jesus was born – he shared in our humanity – in order to die.

Again, we are driven to ask: why? And again, the text answers the question. "He...shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death – that is, the devil – and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death." So his death had two purposes. First, it was to destroy; second, it was to deliver.

He died to destroy the devil. His final doom is inevitable – it is only a matter of time. He also died to deliver us from the terrible bondage of the fear of death. Men do not like to admit they are not free, but they are not free to think about death. They will not because they dare not. The good news is that the only One who was not bound by the fear of death willingly endured its horrors so that we who face its awful inevitability may do so without fear. That is the joyous position of all who are united to Him by faith.

The Life of All Lives - 5

The Baptism of Christ

This is our fifth study in the life of Christ, and today our attention focuses on His baptism, which occurred when Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee to John the Baptist, who was baptising in the river Jordan.

Matthew, Mark and Luke each give us a description of the event, while John identifies to its significance for John the Baptist personally. Apart from the death of Christ, and the events immediately surrounding it, this is the only one of these major events in His life that each of the four writers refer to. That in itself is perhaps a testament to its importance.

Matthew is the only writer who tells us of John's reticence when approached for baptism by Jesus. "I need to be baptised by you, and do you come to me?" John asked. Jesus replied in words that we shall think about later: "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfil all righteousness."

Mark's account is the briefest of them all, and he emphasises the fact that the baptism of Jesus was followed 'at once' by the temptation.

Luke's account is similar to Mark's, but he prefaces his version with the statement that "When all the people were being baptised, Jesus was baptised too." Again, we shall think later about the significance of that seemingly small detail.

Now to you and I today, the fact that Jesus was baptised at all may present a problem. In our minds, baptism is closely related to conversion. It is understood – quite correctly – as a public witness to the fact that, as Paul put it in Romans chapter 6, we 'died to sin' and, being united to Christ in both His death and His resurrection, 'we too may live a new life.' And here lies our difficulty: why should the perfect Son of God do something like this? To make matters worse, the explanation that Jesus gave to John is not easy to grasp.

One thing we must be clear about is that Jesus' baptism was entirely different to Christian baptism. For a start, Jesus received the baptism of John, and this was something different to that which is practised by the Christian church. John's baptism was preparatory – it was practised in the context of urging people to repentance in readiness for the coming Messiah, of whom John was the forerunner.

More importantly, Jesus' relationship to God is fundamentally different to ours. He was not baptised to mark his repentance since he never had anything to repent of.

So, to investigate the reason why Jesus was baptised, we return to what he said to John. John was conscious of the moral superiority of Jesus and protested that if anything, he needed to be baptised by Jesus. However, as we have seen, Jesus gently insisted with the words, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfil all righteousness."

What exactly did He mean by this? Now we can't be absolutely dogmatic about it, but let's take the word 'fulfil' as a starting point. Matthew uses the word often. He is keen to point out whenever he can that Jesus fulfilled many of the prophecies contained in what we know as the Old Testament. One of the prophets he was particularly given to alluding to was Isaiah, where we find the 'Servant Songs'.

In what sense was Jesus fulfilling 'all righteousness'? Well, in Isaiah chapter 53:11, in words that are looking forward to the Suffering Servant who was to come, we read: "by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities."

The point is this: Jesus could have stood where John was, separate from the crowd and calling on the masses to repent, from his standpoint of moral and spiritual superiority. But he didn't. Instead, he stood with the people. He stood alongside them, in solidarity with them, and was baptised too. He was identifying himself with them. Isaiah makes the very same point later in chapter 53 when he says that Jesus "was numbered with the transgressors." We tend to see this as an allusion to the thieves who were crucified with Jesus, but perhaps we should not limit the reference in such a way.

Do you remember the point that Luke brought out – that Jesus was baptised 'when all the people were being baptised'? Maybe you are beginning to see the importance of that seemingly small detail. One of the great emphases in Luke is the universal scope of the gospel. Jesus' baptism was not held in private, still less in secret. It was not undertaken before a specially invited audience. He publicly and openly stood with whoever was present – he stood with the crowds that flocked out into the desert to hear the preaching of John – he stood with the sinners of all shades; he stood with the brazenly immoral and the religiously self-righteous, with every traitor, crook and conman who made his way to the Jordan – he stood alongside sinful humanity and identified himself with them.

As we have said, John spells out the significance of the baptism of Jesus for John the Baptist personally. In John chapter 1:32 we read: "Then John gave this testimony: "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptise with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptise with the Holy Spirit.' I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God."

Now remember that John was related to Jesus, and had been born 6 months earlier. When John said 'I would not have known him' it is unlikely that he meant that he had never seen him before and had no idea that this was his relative. It is quite likely that on a human level he knew Jesus very well indeed – well enough to have already realised, as Matthew tells us, that Jesus was morally superior to him.

John was saying that he did not recognise Jesus as the Son of God until it was supernaturally revealed to him at his baptism. And this leads us to our last point: human insight alone will never lead anyone to recognise Jesus for who he really is. Even John the Baptist could not spot it until God revealed it to him. When Peter later confessed that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God, Jesus told him: "this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven." May He by His Spirit reveal it to you today.

The Life of All Lives - 6

The Temptation of Christ

In this sixth study in the life of Christ, we turn our attention to the temptation.

At his baptism, which immediately preceded the temptation, the emphasis was on his deity. The Holy Spirit appeared in the form of a dove, and the Father declared "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

However, at the temptation the emphasis is on his true humanity. Jesus was only capable of being tempted because he was truly human. John is the only evangelist who makes no reference to the temptation, probably because his purpose is to present Jesus as the eternal Son of God, and God cannot be tempted.

The first thing we should say about what we popularly call 'the temptation' is that it may be better to refer to 'the temptations' because three are recorded. Perhaps that seems slightly pedantic, because anyone vaguely familiar with the gospels knows that, but it is worth noting.

A more important preliminary point is that the temptations recorded here were not the only ones that Jesus experienced. The writer to the Hebrews says in chapter 4:15, "we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet without sin." The verdict of the Father that was pronounced at his baptism reflected, at least in part, his satisfaction that in his years of seclusion Jesus had met and conquered every temptation common to man.

Let us also keep in mind that just as the first Adam faced temptation, so here does the last Adam, and the contrast is striking. The first Adam faced the tempter in ideal surroundings. He was in a garden filled with every good thing that he could ever need. The last Adam faced the tempter in a wilderness. Yet while our first parents fell despite the ideal circumstances, the last Adam stood firm amid the desolation of the desert.

The next point we should bear in mind is that what is temptation for one person may not be for another. I can pass the chocolate counter without giving it a glance; you may find it magnetically attractive. And what is true of the healthy pleasure of eating is also true in the unhealthy matter of temptation to sin.

The significance of this is that the temptations Jesus faced were real temptations, and they were real not least because they deliberately attacked him as a human who was also fully divine. They were purpose built temptations, carefully honed by Satan to be most capable of securing the desired result.

It is wise to remember that Satan attacks us in exactly the same way. He is not indiscriminate with respect to whom he tempts, and with what. Yet we should not allow this to reduce us to spiritual nervous wrecks, nor do we have any excuse for fatalistically yielding on the spurious ground that we are no match for the adversary.

It is true that left to ourselves, we are no match; but we are not left to ourselves. As Paul said in 1 Corinthians chapter 10:13, "God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it." What is more, as Paul said in Ephesians chapter 6, we are able to 'put on the whole armour of God' so that we can take our stand against the devil's schemes.

The Christian life is a battlefield that is completely beyond the experience of unbelievers. The new birth opens our eyes to see things that we were once completely blind to, and it throws us into struggles that we never knew before. It is a warfare that is the peculiar lot of the Christian, and it is not an easy one. That is the bad news; the good news is that it is immeasurably better to be embroiled in that warfare equipped by God for the battle, than it is to be helplessly bound by Satan and unaware of it.

The first temptation was nothing if not subtle. Jesus was hungry, and there is nothing wrong with eating bread when you are hungry. There are no bakeries in deserts, so why should he not use his divine power to turn a stone into bread and satisfy his hunger?

Jesus instantly recognised that this temptation struck at the very purpose for which he was there: that is, to demonstrate that 'man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'

Men have long been enslaved to the notion that material satisfaction brings fulfilment and happiness, and that it is therefore legitimate to do whatever is necessary to bring about that end, even if the means are questionable. So it is that despite the fact that gambling is unhealthy, it is legitimised in state-run lotteries. Consciences are stifled by providing small financial benefits for charitable causes, in the interests of letting millions of people spend money they can ill afford in order to chase the grand delusion.

In the second temptation, Jesus was incited to cast himself down from the pinnacle of the Temple, urged on by a selective quotation from Psalm 91, lifted out of its context. Did you know that Satan is able to quote – and misquote – Scripture? Jesus responded instantly with a quotation of his own from what seems to have been his favourite book – Deuteronomy. I wonder how many Christians are as familiar with that book as Jesus was?

He answered: "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" We are not to deliberately put ourselves in danger and then expect God to spectacularly deliver us.

In the final temptation, Satan offers Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour if only he would bow down and worship him. It was a quick route to cheap glory, and men and women sell themselves down that route every day.

The path Jesus chose was obedience to God. Again quoting from Deuteronomy, he said, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only." The crown he received was made from thorns, and the throne men gave him was a cross. But in the end he came into a kingdom more glorious and durable than Satan could offer him, which he will share with those who submit to his rule. "Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our "God is a consuming fire."

The Life of All Lives - 7

The Transfiguration of Christ

In this study we turn to what is perhaps one of the most obscure events in the life of Christ. Even the name the Bible gives it seems to shroud it in mystery: the 'transfiguration'. Whilst the descriptions given by the evangelists tell us something of what happened, we are still left wondering what was the meaning of it all.

Taking Luke's account as our source, the facts are these: Jesus took Peter, James and John up a high mountain in order to pray. While he was praying, 'the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning'.

Moses and Elijah then appeared 'in glorious splendour', talking with Jesus. Only Luke tells us what they were talking about – it was 'his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfilment at Jerusalem'. Peter, ever the spokesman and ever impetuous, blurted out the suggestion that they should erect three shelters – one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.

A cloud then enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud declared: "This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him."

Now I have deliberately omitted a small detail that Luke gives us, but as with many small details it is important. In fact, it gives us a vital clue as to the significance of the whole event. Luke begins his account of the transfiguration with the words, "About eight days after Jesus said this..."

About eight days after he said what?

Well, it was eight days after he had spoken with the disciples and asked them, "Who do you say I am?" which led to Peter's great confession, "You are the Christ of God." Jesus immediately began to tell the disciples that he had to suffer many things and be rejected, and must be killed, and that on the third day he would be raised to life.

In this conversation, two crucial truths were established – two truths that the disciples found extremely difficult to hold together. First, there was the fact of his deity, confessed by Peter. Second, there was the necessity of his death, spoken to by Jesus himself. We should not criticise them for their slowness to take it in – you and I would have been no different had we been in their shoes.

On the mount of transfiguration, the three disciples were enabled to see how these two seemingly irreconcilable things – deity and death – could both be true. Jesus was seen in the splendour of his deity speaking about his departure, his exodus, that was about to take place but from which the disciples recoiled.

What does Scripture mean when it says that Jesus was 'transfigured'? The original Greek word is metamorphosis, which means a change of form. Persons and objects have two essential elements: form, and substance. Form is the appearance of a thing; substance is what it is made of. At the transfiguration, Jesus' form was changed, but not his substance. Indeed, he underwent a change of form, of appearance, which was intended to reveal to the disciples the truth about his substance – that is, that he was fully divine.

I want to lift three points from the account of the transfiguration that may be helpful to you in your daily Christian life.

The first is the fact – again only recorded by Luke – that Peter and his companions were very sleepy.

We are not told why this was so. Maybe it was the exertion of climbing the mountain, followed by the attempt at prayer that made their eyes heavy with sleep. Have you ever tried to pray after a hard day at work? Moreover, it was not to be the last momentous occasion on which these three disciples fell asleep. As Jesus wrestled in the Garden of Gethsemane with his impending ordeal, the disciples repeatedly fell asleep.

The sleepiness of the disciples did not reflect their lack of interest in what was taking place or any lack of commitment to Christ. Rather, it was a reflection of the fact that, as Jesus said in the Garden, “the spirit is willing but the body is weak.”

Secondly, we note Peter’s suggestion that three shelters should be constructed. Luke tells us that he didn’t know what he was saying. He said it with the best of intentions, but without real thought. Peter’s suggestion put Jesus in the same category as Moses and Elijah, when the glory they had was only what they derived from Christ.

It also betrayed a very human tendency to want to make monuments of moments in our spiritual experience that are past. There is nothing wrong in savouring such experiences, but isn’t it easy to start living in the past and spend our days looking always backwards and never forwards?

Perhaps this is a danger with the common practice of Christians ‘giving their testimony’ – that is, recounting the manner and circumstances of their conversion. Which is more important: the fact that I had a conversion experience at a particular moment in the past; or the fact that I am living for Christ today, and showing clear evidence of a work of grace in my life now? We are all prone to this urge to build monuments, and we need to be careful to get the balance right.

Finally, Luke tells us that a cloud enveloped them, and from the cloud the voice was heard. From within the cloud, God the Father said, “This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him.”

What can we learn from this?

Well, we are prone to thinking that it would be so much better if we could have some kind of special vision or revelation of the kind the disciples had. Surely our faith would be firmer and our spiritual life enhanced if we could?

However, it is significant that the revelation that “This is my Son” came when the cloud obscured the disciples’ natural vision. The timing illustrates a persistent Biblical emphasis on hearing as against seeing.

If you had been on the mountain with them, what would have made more impression on you – what you saw, or what you heard?

Well, Peter recalled this transfiguration experience in 1 Peter chapter 1:18: “We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain.” It was what he heard that seems to have had more impact.

This should deter us from chasing after special visions and experiences, and encourage us to ‘preach the word’, since that is God’s appointed way of bringing men and women to faith. As Paul said in Romans 10:17, “faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.”

The Crucifixion of Christ

If our last study dealt with an obscure event in the life of the Lord Jesus – the transfiguration – this study looks at what is surely the most prominent – the crucifixion. The very structure of the gospel narratives shows how important the four evangelists considered it to be, because of the amount of detail they go into when describing the cross and the events leading up to it. Indeed, one commentator is perhaps guilty of only slight exaggeration when he describes one of the four accounts as ‘a passion narrative with an extended introduction’.

The intelligent reader of the Bible begins to pick up the monumental importance of the cross from the threshold of the Old Testament. Right from the beginning, there are signposts that point unmistakably towards it. These signposts come in different forms.

First, there are historical signposts. For example, you may be familiar with the story of Abraham and Isaac in Genesis chapter 22, in the course of which we hear Abraham saying to Isaac, “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” Those words are heavy with meaning and take us forward hundreds of years to the moment when John the Baptist declared, as he saw Jesus walking by, “Look, the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.”

So, when we read the story of Abraham being willing, in faith, to lay down the life of his son (confident, as we read in Hebrews chapter 11, that God could raise the dead), we are meant to go forward in our minds to another sacrifice to which Abraham’s actions pointed, when, as we read in Romans chapter 8, God ‘did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all’.

Then secondly, there are what we may call ceremonial signposts. For example, in Leviticus chapter 16 we read of the Day of Atonement, which occurred once a year. Part of the ceremony that happened on that day involved two goats. They both began the day alive and well, but the destiny of one was very different to the other. One was sacrificed, and its blood was taken right into the holiest of all inside the tabernacle, where God lived among His people, and it was then sprinkled on the atonement cover and in front of it. As for the other goat, the high priest was to place his hands on its head and ‘confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites – all their sins – and put them on the goat’s head.’ That goat was then taken and banished to a solitary place in the desert.

By this graphic and symbolic ceremony, the cross of Christ was anticipated. First, his sacrifice reached into heaven itself; as the writer to the Hebrews puts it in chapter 9:11, “he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not man-made, that is to say, not a part of this creation. He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves, but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption.”

Then also, like the other goat, he was banished to the wilderness. The writer to the Hebrews tells us in chapter 13 that ‘Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through His own blood.’ The One who had from all eternity known unbroken fellowship with his Father knew what it was to be abandoned to the outer darkness, wringing from Him the cry, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’

Finally, there were prophetic signposts. The best known is Isaiah chapter 53, which speaks of the Suffering Servant. About 700 years before the events to which they refer took place, Isaiah wrote these words: “But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by

his wounds we are healed. We all like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”

There are two questions we should ask about the crucifixion. The first is: did it really happen? And the second is: if it really happened, why did it happen?

We can deal with the first question quite briefly, but without complacently assuming that everyone believes the Biblical claim that Jesus was crucified. However, the evidence for the crucifixion is very powerful; it lies not only in the Bible, which Christians accept as authoritative, but within secular sources too. The evidence for the historical fact of the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus Christ is overwhelming.

So we turn to the second question: exactly why did Jesus die? And it is to answer this point that we shall turn in particular to the words of Isaiah.

Now there are many who argue that the crucifixion was the unfortunate death of a good man that represents a demonstration of selfless love and devotion, which should spur us on by its subjective effect upon us as we reflect upon it. There is no doubt that the cross is capable of having this effect. However, it doesn't come anywhere near a full explanation of the reason for the crucifixion.

So why did Jesus die? The answer is found in that little word 'for' that we read in Isaiah: he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities. That is, He died not for his own sins, for He had none. No, when Jesus died, He died for His people's sins. He died as their substitute. He paid a debt that He did not owe but we did, and which we could not pay, nor ever could even if we had a whole eternity in which to try. He bore the penalty that was ours, and so made it possible for God to justly forgive the sins of those who trust Christ for salvation.

We have listened to Isaiah from the Old Testament. Let us now listen to Peter from the New, in chapter 3 of his first letter: 'He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by His wounds you have been healed.'

And if you think you have heard those words somewhere else, you are quite right. Peter was drawing upon the very words of Isaiah that we have been thinking about. But notice this: the Christian not only knows the joy of sins forgiven, but will 'die to sins and live for righteousness'. The only sure test of true Christian faith is holiness of life.

The Life of All Lives - 9

The Resurrection of Christ

In this study we turn to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. We are not going to spend any time setting out the evidence in support of the facts. That task has been ably performed many times over. So, rather than try to prove the resurrection, we shall reflect on what the resurrection proves.

In doing so, we shall focus on two passages of Scripture: first, Romans chapter 4; secondly, Acts chapter 17.

In Romans chapter 4, we shall see that the resurrection establishes that men and women can be made right with God here and now.

In Acts chapter 17, we shall see that the resurrection proves that there is a judgment to come.

These two facts are closely linked together. If there is a judgment to come, nobody in his right mind would be careless as to how he stands before the judge on that day. And you and I have a double problem. We have a past that is unchangeable, and a future judgment that is inevitable. We need someone who can deal with our past so that we can face the future with confidence.

God's answer is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is the only answer that fully meets our need and solves our double problem. Let's think about each of them in turn.

First, we examine how God deals with our past, and in particular the problem of our sin. In Romans chapter 4, Paul develops his great argument about justification by showing that Abraham was not justified by works, but by faith. He shows how Abraham believed the promise of God that he would have a son when he and Sarah were well past the natural age for having children. In reproductive terms, their bodies were 'as good as dead', but Abraham 'did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God'. He was 'fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.' And so it was that Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.

Then Paul goes on to teach that these words 'it was credited to him' were not just written for Abraham. They were also written 'for us, to whom God will credit righteousness – for us (he promises) who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.'

Notice carefully who is identified as the object of our faith. Paul does not speak of 'us who believe in God', though of course it is God of whom he is speaking. No, he speaks of 'us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.'

The majority of people will tell you, when asked, that they believe in God. However, such a statement is virtually meaningless without defining the terms used. In his book 'Does God believe in Atheists', John Blanchard points out that in a major survey of ten countries in Western Europe, 75% of those interviewed said that they believed in God. However, when just one qualification was added – as to whether they believed in a personal God as opposed to an impersonal force – the figure dropped from 75% to 32%!

The tragedy is that when many people claim to 'believe in God', what they are referring to is a god of their own invention, far removed from the God who reveals Himself in the Bible. He will usually be a god who agrees with them and shares their perspective, a god who will applaud their virtues while overlooking their faults – but not necessarily other people's. He is non-existent, but they believe in him anyway.

The Bible makes it plain that saving faith is to take God at his word, and to turn in repentance and faith to trust in God as he is revealed in Scripture – and he is there revealed as the God who ‘raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.’

At the end of Romans chapter 4, we read, ‘He was delivered over to death for our sins, and was raised to life for our justification.’ Let us not underestimate the place the resurrection plays in our salvation. If we think only in terms of the cross, we do not have the full picture. Paul puts it bluntly in 1 Corinthians chapter 15: “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins.” The resurrection is God’s answer to our first problem: our past.

So now we turn to how the resurrection affects the future.

A God who raises the dead is enough to give anyone a sleepless night. If there is such a thing as resurrection, then who knows where it might lead? Before long, we shall be having to face up to the suggestion that we might just be accountable, and – perish the thought – that there might be a judgement!

This line of thinking is not just my rambling, which you could easily ignore. The Apostle Paul once addressed the people of Athens – and they had invented more gods than you could shake a stick at. Paul’s address is recorded in Acts chapter 17. He brought his argument to its conclusion with these words: “For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.”

Now there you have it in black and white! There is a link between the resurrection of Jesus Christ in history and the judgement of the world that lies in the future. The one guarantees the other. The resurrection of Jesus Christ proves that there is a judgement to come.

Have you ever wondered why so much human ingenuity is invested in futile attempts to prove that Jesus did not really rise from the dead? Never assume that refusal to believe in the resurrection is a mark of intellectual integrity or that it arises from a position of neutrality. People reject it – whether the manner of doing so is sophisticated, or crude – because of its implications, not because of the evidence. They reach an answer before they ask the question. The resurrection means judgement. Judgement means accountability. Accountability is unpalatable. Solution: reject the Biblical truth of the resurrection.

The glory of the Gospel is that the resurrection is the solution, not the problem. Christ has paid sin’s penalty on the cross, and broken its power by his resurrection. Those who look to Him – and Him alone – for salvation can sing these well-known words with joyful conviction: “Because He lives I can face tomorrow; because He lives all fear is gone; because I know He holds the future, and life is worth the living just because He lives.”

The Life of All Lives - 10

The Ascension of Christ

It has never been part of Christian teaching that after his resurrection, Jesus remained on the earth, whether permanently or for an indefinite period. On the contrary, the account given in Acts chapter 1 is that after a period of 40 days, he ascended back to heaven.

This was in accordance with what Jesus himself had told his disciples before the crucifixion. In John chapter 14, it is recorded that he said to them, "In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you." Later, he told them, "I came from the Father and entered the world; now I am leaving the world and going back to the Father."

Why did Jesus ascend back to heaven? Would it not have been more effective for him to remain on the earth and be seen by thousands and millions of people; to go on a global 'comeback' tour, performing miracles and confounding those who had rejected him? Would not this have led to the instant, universal acceptance of the Christian gospel by all, and relegated unbelief to a thing of the past?

Perhaps this is how it would have been if men had written the script, but two astonishing facts cut the ground from underneath such a notion.

The first is that miracles did not bring about universal faith when Jesus performed them. The second is that the Christian church grew with astonishing speed anyway!

We'll think about these two facts for a moment.

The most vivid illustration of the first is the raising of Lazarus from the dead, which is recorded in John chapter 11. Few would dispute that raising a person from the dead is just about the most dramatic and compelling event anyone could ever witness. Here, in the small town of Bethany, Jesus raised a man who had been dead for several days. We read that many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and seen what Jesus did, put their faith in him – but by no means all of them. Some went to the Pharisees (who they knew hated Jesus) and told them what Jesus had done.

What was their reaction? Did they shrug their shoulders philosophically, acknowledge that Jesus must be who he claimed to be after all, and put their faith in him? Not a bit of it! They immediately called a meeting of the ruling council, and we read "from that day on they plotted to take his life." The miracle resulted in their attitude hardening, not softening. As the saying goes, 'The heat that melts the wax hardens the clay.'

Notice the interesting fact that the Pharisees didn't doubt the account of the raising of Lazarus. The people who had brought the story to them were hardly likely to make it up. It wasn't the fact of the resurrection that was the problem – it was what it meant that was the problem!

Our second point is that the Christian church grew with great speed despite the ascension of Jesus back to heaven. The Acts of the Apostles describes how the gospel spread from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria and 'to the ends of the earth.'

We can actually say that the Christian church spread far and wide, and with great speed, not despite the ascension of Jesus, but because of it. Let me explain why. I remind you of what Jesus said to his disciples shortly before the crucifixion. It is recorded in John chapter 16. He said, "Now I am going to him who sent me, yet none of

you asks me, 'Where are you going?' Because I have said these things, you are filled with grief. But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go, the Counsellor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment: in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me; in regard to righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and in regard to judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned."

When Jesus spoke of the 'Counsellor' he was referring to the Holy Spirit. He was telling them that the Holy Spirit would not be sent unless he went away. When the Holy Spirit came, he was to have a specific role, and that role would not be limited geographically as the ministry of Jesus was. He would have a worldwide ministry. He would convict of sin, righteousness and judgment. He would guide them into all truth. He would tell them 'what is to come' – that is, he would reveal the underlying principles of God's plan for the future.

Jesus said the Holy Spirit would bring glory to him by 'taking from what is mine and making it known to you.' The great ministry of the Holy Spirit is to glorify Christ in the world by opening blind eyes to the truth of the gospel, imparting new life to men and women 'dead in trespasses and sins', and enabling them to believe savingly in Christ.

What a phenomenal ministry that is! And what a mission he is accomplishing! Men, women and children in droves have been – and are still being – brought into the Kingdom of God, and not one of them without the vital, gracious ministry of the Holy Spirit.

Maybe we can now begin to make sense of the words of Christ in John chapter 16 that perhaps took us by surprise at first: 'It is for your good that I am going away.' How could that possibly be so? It is true because the ascension of Jesus to heaven was the necessary precursor to the descent of the Holy Spirit. That happened on the day of Pentecost, which we read of in Acts chapter 2.

You see, the truth is that Jesus is still at work in the world today. At the beginning of Acts, Luke tells us that in the gospel that bears his name he wrote about 'all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven'. Did you notice that word 'began'? The four evangelists only tell us the beginning of the story. The work goes on, and the evidence is there for us to see. The ascension was a necessary step in God's great plan of redemption, a plan that is still being worked out in the world today.

What Christ Is Doing Now

We have spent the last ten studies considering what Jesus has done in the past. A later study focuses upon what he is going to do in the future. But what exactly is he doing now?

The letter to the Hebrews gives us a good deal of help with this question. It is perhaps understandable that it should. It was written to people who had been brought up within Judaism. It had been engrained in them. They were mindful of their great history, of the fact that God had chosen them above all nations and that he had revealed himself especially to them. They were used to the sights and sounds of the Temple and the synagogues. It was part of the warp and woof of their lives. But suddenly this had all changed. They had come to trust in Christ, whom the leaders of their people had rejected and crucified. As a result they had to leave all that they had once cherished to follow him.

They had been quite prepared to do that. After all, Jesus had promised to return. They had that great hope to cling to. However, things had taken a terrible turn for the worse. They had started to face severe persecution. It had become a very costly business to be associated with the name of Christ.

Maybe someone listening to these studies is in just that situation now. If you are, it may be helpful for you to know that others have been that way before you. You may even be thinking what they thought: should I give it up and return to the familiar comfort zone?

The answer that was given to these Hebrew believers was – in part – to tell them about what their Saviour was doing for them there and then, even as they endured this suffering on his account. Yes, he had returned to heaven, but that did not mean that he was remote, inactive, aloof from their suffering. The very opposite was true.

The big question in their minds was: is Jesus able to save us? It was easy to be confident about that when everything was going well, but what about now when things are difficult?

Listen to what the writer says in chapter 7: "Now there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; but because Jesus lives for ever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them."

Do you notice how the writer shows how Jesus is greater than what they were used to? The priests they had known had many limitations, but one stood out above all of them: they died, and so ceased to be priests. But Jesus was different. He had conquered death, and was therefore able to serve as their Great High Priest forever. Because of that he is able to save them completely. He would surely finish the task, and was actively engaged on their behalf bringing about their final salvation.

They may have asked – and you may be asking now – from what position is he engaged in this task? Is he engaged in a struggle, the outcome of which is yet to be determined?

Listen to what the writer to the Hebrews tells them in chapter 8: "We have such a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven, and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by man."

In case the point had not been made clearly enough, he continues in chapter 10 with these words: "But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God."

What do these statements tell us about what the Lord Jesus is doing now?

Well, first of all they tell us that he is in the position of supreme authority. That is what is meant by the reference to him having 'sat down at the right hand of God.' Some Christians are terribly literal folk, and perhaps imagine that the Lord Jesus has been sitting down for the last 2000 years. Of course that is not what it means! It is telling us in vivid but symbolic terms that he now occupies, by absolute unchallenged right, the highest place in heaven.

In his vision described in Revelation chapter 5, John saw 'a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the centre of the throne.' Is he standing, or is he sitting? Can they both be true? Of course they can! He is seated; that image representing the fact that he has completed a work. Calvary will never be repeated because it need not be repeated. He has suffered 'once for all'. But he is also standing in the centre of the throne because he is actively exerting his absolute sovereign power to bring to completion the salvation of his people.

It is a great comfort to all Christians in all circumstances to constantly be mindful that the Lord Jesus Christ is presently and eternally the sole, unchallengeable occupant of the throne of heaven. He is working his purposes out as year succeeds to year. As Paul wrote to the Ephesians in chapter 1, "In him we were chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will.' And everything means everything!

Later in the same letter, Paul speaks of something else that the Lord Jesus is engaged in doing at the present time. In chapter 4 he says: "But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. This is why it says, "When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men."" Paul then goes on to speak of the various gifts that Christ gives in his church – apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers – so that the body of Christ may be built up 'until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.'

Let me ask you this: can you see in your life a gradual process of growth towards spiritual maturity – imperfect and faltering, but unmistakable? Again, let me ask you: in your church can you see men and women learning (sometimes painfully) to use the gifts they have been endowed with by the Holy Spirit to build up the church? If you can see these things, then rejoice at seeing Christ at work today in his church!

The Life of All Lives - 6

The Return of Christ

When Jesus was taken up into heaven, the believers who were looking intently into the sky suddenly realised they were being spoken to. Two angelic visitors appeared and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."

It is to this hope that we turn in our study today. The angels were only confirming what Jesus himself had taught the disciples. "If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am." With these words Jesus comforted his disciples shortly before his crucifixion.

The 'Second Coming' of Christ (as it is often called) lies at the heart of the Christian hope for the future. This world has not seen the last of Jesus. That is what we believe. It is deeply embedded in the teaching of Christ, in the teaching of the apostles, and it should be embedded in the convictions of Christian people.

It is to be lamented that few areas of Christian teaching have provoked more controversy – not (this time) with non-Christians, but among Christians themselves. Believers question the fundamental faithfulness of other believers simply because they take a slightly different view of what the Bible teaches about future events. It is remarkable, but it is true!

One of the main causes of this problem is that we fail to understand the main purpose of the prophetic passages in the Bible. Many leap to the conclusion that they are there to enable students to devise a chronological scheme of future events. Great industry and imagination are expended in the effort to demonstrate how alleged 'proof texts' really do support the favoured scheme, which will then be said to be 'obvious' to anyone with half a grain of spiritual intelligence.

In extreme cases, such Christians will delight in trying to show how world events fit into their scheme, and some are even tempted to become date-setters. The new millennium and the shocking events of September 11th 2001 provided a field day for such people. It is a very human failing with a very long history. Even the disciples showed signs of it. Matthew chapter 24 records that Jesus made a remark about the future of the temple in Jerusalem. The disciples were soon asking, "Tell us, when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?"

Why do so many go so wrong? They go wrong because they fail to learn that the prophetic passages of the Bible are there principally to tell us how to live for God now in the light of what is to come in the future. It would have been perfectly simple for God to give us a step-by-step description of the precise sequence and timing of future events, but he hasn't. And don't believe anyone who claims that he has!

So we are going to explore some of the practical implications of the Second Coming of Christ. However, before we do that it is only right that we say something about the competing views that have developed. Is there a general principle to keep in mind when we are evaluating them and forming our own conclusions?

I believe there is, and that principle is this: The Second Coming of the Lord Jesus is always presented in Scripture as the great, final, climactic event of world history. It brings the present age to an end and ushers in the final judgment and the age to come when there will be 'a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.'

We must allow this great event to have the place that the Bible gives it, and so we must treat with the greatest caution any scheme that reduces the Second Coming to a mere staging post. Many problems in Biblical interpretation are caused by failing to get the broad picture before going for the detail, and this is the broad picture that the Bible paints.

What then are the main practical implications of the return of the Lord Jesus?

The first is that it is a powerful incentive to holiness. In 2 Peter chapter 3, in which Peter has been telling his readers about the coming day of the Lord, he says, "So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him." A similar thought is expressed in 1 John chapter 2: "Dear children, continue in him, so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming." The return of Christ is a powerful antidote to worldliness.

The second practical significance of the Second Coming is that it is a great source of comfort and encouragement to believers. In 1 Thessalonians chapter 4, Paul has been addressing the concerns that these recent converts had about their fellow-believers who had died. He explained that they would certainly not miss out on this great event, but that the 'dead in Christ will rise first'. He then says: "Therefore, encourage each other with these words." Again in chapter 5, he says, "Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing." These things were taught not to turn these believers into glorified fortune-tellers, but to help them in their day-to-day Christian lives.

The third point is that the return of Christ should prompt us to watchfulness. In Matthew chapter 24 Jesus said, "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come." We are not to become so absorbed with the things of this world – even the good and legitimate things – that we lose sight of the great perspective that the Christian hope brings. We should always remember and never forget that the best is yet to come!

Finally, we may say that the Christian's vision of the future should spur him on to prayer. The final book of the Bible, the Revelation of Jesus Christ, draws to a conclusion with these words: "The Spirit and the bride say, "Come!". The image is of the Holy Spirit and the Church in unison praying for the Lord Jesus to return in splendour and bring God's purposes to their great conclusion. And as John lays down his pen, he writes, "He who testifies to these things says, "Yes, I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus. The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's people. Amen."

The Life of All Lives - 6

The Mystery of Godliness

We are going to bring our series of studies in the Life of All Lives to a conclusion with the words of what was probably an early Christian hymn about the Lord Jesus Christ that the Apostle Paul incorporated into his first letter to Timothy chapter 3. He wrote this: "Beyond all question, the mystery of godliness is great: He appeared in a body, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory."

In this statement, Paul sets out a list of facts about the person and the work of Christ that he says are 'beyond all question'. They are not set out as debating points. He is not asking for Timothy's – or our – opinions on them. He is laying them down as things that are certain and beyond doubt.

As we bring these studies to a close, it is important that we assert with all due grace but without coyness that the Christian faith has at its heart a body of teaching that it holds to be absolute truth.

It is important because the notion of absolute truth is quite unfashionable in the world today. In the popular mind, truth is what is true for you; and I have no right to say that another man's truth is in fact false. It is a philosophy that is ultimately absurd and cuts its own throat, but that hasn't prevented it from being popular.

The doctrine of the person of Christ that we have been exploring together forms part of that irreducible body of truth that lies at the core of our faith. If we take any part of it away, whatever is left cannot be called the Christian faith. Because our faith is centred upon a person, the identity of that person and the nature of what he accomplished is crucial. That is why what we believe about the person of Christ really does matter.

What are the key features of the statement that Paul makes about him here?

Well, the first thing to notice is that this hymn – and thus our faith – focuses on facts. He appeared; he was vindicated; he was seen; he was preached; he was believed on; he was taken up. And here lies a vitally important characteristic of the Christian faith. It is not merely a set of ideas or ethical principles, though it is full of ideas and contains the very highest ethics. Fundamentally, it rests on simple, hard, insistent facts.

This is the nature of the Christian gospel. Listen to how Paul addressed the Corinthians in chapter 15 of his first epistle: "For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born."

Here is the greatest gospel preacher that the Church has ever known reminding these early converts of the content of the message he preached, and it was simply a recital of the facts, which he described as being 'of first importance.' Referring to these facts, he said, "this is what we preach, and this is what you believed."

The second thing that we should notice is that the facts that Paul speaks of – whether it is in his letter to Timothy, or the Corinthians – are all related to the Person of Christ. It is here that we start, and it is here that we must get it right. Christians may reasonably disagree about matters of church government or obscure issues of prophetic truth, but

while these things – and others like them – have their place in the overall body of Christian doctrine, we must give them their proper perspective.

Christ is central. He is central to your salvation. He should be central to your theology, to your worship, to your personal life and to your church life, to your thoughts, to your priorities, to your hopes and ambitions, so that – as Paul wrote to the Colossians in chapter 1 – ‘in everything he might have the supremacy.’

The late Ron Dunn once said that in the lives of all Christians Christ is present; in the lives of some Christians Christ is prominent; but in the lives of how many Christians is Christ pre-eminent? Let us all search our hearts and lives, in all honesty before God today, to find out whether he has the place that he should rightly occupy.

The third and final point I want us to notice is that Paul expresses these truths as a hymn. What is the significance of that? Well, some have the idea that doctrine is a dry, dusty thing, the preserve of theologians and academics, perhaps because of the way it is often presented. But it is nothing of the sort! Doctrine should always lead to doxology!

No book of the Bible has more concentrated, sustained doctrine than Paul’s epistle to the Romans. In it he explores with magisterial skill the marvel of the gospel. There is no fuller analysis of God’s plan of salvation to be found anywhere in Scripture. For chapter after chapter he explores and expounds these great doctrines. And then what? At the end of chapter 11 he simply bursts out into adoring praise, which is his personal and natural response to what he has been speaking of. “Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgements, and his paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counsellor? Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory for ever! Amen.”

These studies may have increased your knowledge, but our prayer is that they will do more than that. As you meditate upon the Life of All Lives, may your response be to worship Him, and to ‘offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship.’

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.