

Chapter 10

The greatest story ever told

The Gideons International is an organisation that distributes free Bibles, for example to hotels and hospitals. I was once present when a senior member of hospital administration was given his own attractive copy. ‘Thank you’, he said politely as he took the gift, adding, ‘I’ll put it safely in the cupboard with my other Bible.’ I hoped that he would easily be able to take one out to read.

Although the Bible is still a world bestseller, many people never pick one up or read it attentively. I recently heard of a young woman, English to the core, whose daughter had to do a school project on the Good Samaritan. This story told by Jesus described the practical kindness of a Samaritan towards a man he would not normally have mixed with, but found half dead on the road after being beaten up. The stranger had stopped to help and then paid for the victim’s care and accommodation. The girl’s mother had looked in vain on the internet for information to help her daughter. When someone suggested that it would be easier to read the story in the Bible¹ she admitted that she did not own one.

This would once have been unheard of in Britain and it seems likely that there will be many others, including many from overseas, who do not know the Bible’s good news. Perhaps some newcomers think of the Christian faith as a foreigners’ religion, but know little about the person of Jesus and do not often meet people to enlighten them. If you have a Bible, I hope that it does not stay safely shut up in a cupboard and, if you don’t have one, that you’ll find a way to read the story for yourself. The internet may help if there are none immediately available, or cultural tradition makes it unsafe to be found with a copy. Yet it has rightly been called the word of God and, as he speaks, his voice can still be heard by those with ears ready to listen.

The importance of a detailed history

I once attended the funeral of a doctor friend who was in her eighties, and long since retired from practice. As we heard about her former achievements, some of us learned things about her unknown to us before and would have been interested to discuss with her in person. It need not be so with Jesus, for his is surely the greatest story ever told, and much of it is fully recorded for us to learn from. Even better, if we ask him, we are promised that his Spirit will be with us and will help us to understand it.

Like someone reading the news, I have so far given a few headlines concerning the person of Jesus as told by those who wrote about him, but we'll now go into more detail. We shall look more carefully at the reason for his coming to earth and how he steadily pursued that purpose. The amazing events that followed his death complete the story, changing it from a seeming tragedy to an amazing triumph. Best of all, we are promised that one day he will return to claim his faithful people and bring peace to our troubled world. This story has been preserved to tell us who Jesus was and how he explained God's purposes for mankind – so let's look at it more closely.

The coming of Jesus

Two of Jesus' historians, Matthew and Luke, start their Gospels with the antenatal record of Mary, a pure young village girl living in Nazareth, who found that she was pregnant. Her fiancé, Joseph the local carpenter, knew that this could not be his child but the tale she told him about the pregnancy was very strange indeed. She spoke of a visit from an angel who had said that she would conceive through an act of God, that the child would be called the ('the', not 'a') Son of God and that he would save his people from their sins. She knew what a great privilege this would be and had humbly responded, 'May it be to me as you have said'.

Joseph was faced with a big problem. He loved the girl and did not want her to be publicly disgraced, as an unmarried girl would be in their Jewish culture. Even so, he wondered whether he ought to break

off the engagement. Perhaps he should send her away to have the baby somewhere else, well away from those who knew them. Thankfully abortion was not an option in those days.

For a time Mary chose to go away to the hill country of Judea to visit her elderly cousin Elizabeth. This must have been a lonely and difficult journey for a young girl, but she found Elizabeth also rejoicing in a remarkable pregnancy. Today, as an elderly woman pregnant for the first time, she would be given close antenatal care. Yet she was sure that as God had given this baby to her and her aged husband Zechariah, he could be trusted to care for them all. The promise had been that the child would be forerunner to the Lord^{2,3} and she understood at once that young Mary's miraculous pregnancy identified her as the mother of this Lord, their long-awaited Messiah. According to Luke's timetable, Mary could even have greeted the infant John before she went back home, now certain of her own pregnancy.

By then Joseph had experienced a strange dream, confirming to him that the father of Mary's child was truly the Spirit of God, not another man, and that he should not wait to marry the girl. By now she would be well over three months pregnant, and he was to take care of her as husband in name only until the baby was born. They were to give him the name 'Jesus,' meaning 'the Lord saves', for he would save his people from their sins. Through the activity of his Spirit in Mary, God was coming to be with them in human form as this special child.⁴ It is hard for our limited understanding to grasp, but this child would be both fully God and fully human, united in one person. He came to earth through the Spirit, in form a human being while also sharing the nature of his Father, God.⁵

His birth and infancy

Jesus' birth took place in Bethlehem. His parents had come to take part in a census but the city was already so overcrowded that they could only find a most unsuitable place for Mary to give birth. Yet in the second chapter of both their gospels Matthew and Luke record amazing events happening there. The first visitors were humble shepherds who had been given a remarkable message about this special baby. Probably

much later, wise men arrived with kingly gifts for him. On the way they had not so wisely called on King Herod in Jerusalem. By innocently asking him the way to find one born 'to be King of the Jews' they made Herod so worried about a possible rival that he gave orders for all the infants in the same age-group as Jesus to be killed. An angel warned Joseph to escape to Egypt so the little family left that same night.

By then Jesus was probably around two years old. We can imagine him, perhaps travelling wide-eyed under a starry sky and safely held by Joseph or Mary on their donkey, or in the cool of the day holding onto a parent's hand as he toddled alongside to stretch his legs. It was a long journey, in the opposite direction from the route taken out of Egypt by Moses and the Israelites. The child would not yet know that important piece of national history, and had no idea of the cruel infanticide left behind in Judah. Like so many today, the little family lived as refugees until it was safe to leave Egypt and return to their homeland. They resettled in Nazareth where Joseph set up business as a carpenter. As Jesus grew up he would hear the Old Testament Scriptures regularly read in the local synagogue, no doubt reinforcing lessons learned at his mother's knee.

Growing up

The years passed and the boy grew up. Luke describes an episode when he was twelve years old. With a crowd of other worshippers, he and his family had gone to celebrate Passover in Jerusalem. On the way back home, his alarmed parents realised that Jesus was missing and looked desperately for him for three whole days. He was then found back in the temple at Jerusalem in thoughtful conversation with the religious teachers there. He explained to his mother that he was 'in my Father's house'. This is the only clue we have of his early awareness of a close relationship with God, and the only recorded episode from the days of his youth. We are told that he had other brothers and sisters⁶ but otherwise we know very little of Jesus' early life. It is clear from his teaching, however, that during these years he immersed himself in the Scriptures. His baptism by John in the Jordan River marked the beginning of his public ministry. By then he would have been about 30 years old.

Outwardly Jesus would have looked like any other Jewish young man, and certainly was not the blue-eyed blond portrayed by many western artists. If he had helped Joseph, the carpenter, he is likely to have been physically strong. Hands sensitive enough to feel imperfections in wood would later bring healing and comfort to many sick people. Although carpentry was a valued craft, his was not a wealthy home. We know this because when his parents had first presented the infant Jesus in the temple, they took the least expensive offering allowed. There were times in his adult life when he was without ready cash. Although he was brought up as a working man, people would later find him gracious in speech and astonishing in what he said and did.⁷ In the days before loud speakers or microphones he must have had a good strong voice, sometimes heard by thousands at once. His growing popularity with ordinary people (and possibly his north-country accent) upset the religious leaders. Especially in southern Judea, they became jealous and plotted against him.

Leaving home and being baptised

We do not know how much Mary and Elizabeth had told their sons about the unusual circumstances of their birth. Perhaps at some stage the boys would compare notes and wonder about their future lives, until gradually each of them accepted his calling and they possibly drifted apart. By the time Jesus left home, his cousin John the Baptist, although only a few months older, was by now probably orphaned and had gone to live in the wilderness, aware by now that he was forerunner to the Messiah. He was very eccentric in dress and lifestyle, which was perhaps how he attracted the attention of so many people.⁸ He told them to repent, baptising those who did so, explaining that a mightier one than he was on the way.

When Jesus joined the queue for baptism, John knew that he was that expected mighty one and was therefore reluctant to baptise him. Jesus insisted that he should do so, although he had no need to repent. In this way he showed his identification with humanity and his total consecration to God. As Jesus came up out of the water, what looked like a dove came and landed on him and the voice of God was heard identifying him as his beloved Son. The 'dove' represented the Spirit of

God, preparing Jesus to take up his lifework. Once again Father, Son and Holy Spirit came together at the start of his public life.⁹

The Spirit next led him to the wilderness where he fasted for over six weeks. When at his weakest, the devil arrived to test him with temptations directed at body, mind and spirit. He suggested that he turned stones into bread to satisfy his hunger, that he throw himself from a high place to prove that God would save him and finally urged him to worship the devil and be rewarded for it with great kingdoms (not, of course, Satan's to give!). Jesus found perfect answers in the words of Scripture to overcome each of these attempts to throw him off course.¹⁰

By this Jesus not only silenced the enemy but also showed us the importance of hiding God's word in the heart, to be drawn on for guidance and strength during all kinds of testing times. It follows that we need to read and learn the Scriptures ourselves if we are to find appropriate thoughts popping into our minds when under spiritual attack, or to learn that a verse quoted to a needy friend had hit just the right spot. Jesus knew exactly what passages to repeat to overcome all temptation by the enemy of souls and we can learn to do the same.

Jesus' relationship with God affected all that he did

As we read the life of Christ, recorded in all four Gospels, the characteristic that stands out is his practice of selfless love. Jesus went about doing only what was good. He especially cared for the sick, weak and needy, including untouchables such as lepers. By mixing with others seen by the super-religious as outcasts, he turned upside down the accepted order of things. It is not surprising that by keeping company with those whom many others despised, the 'tax collectors and sinners', he upset those who thought such people were beneath them. Instead Jesus took note of their needs and showed them great understanding. We need to recall his example when tempted by today's emphasis on status symbols. We'll look next at some of the people he helped by showing love in action whatever their social standing. He was no snob!

For further thought

- The Bible tells us all we need to know about the life of Jesus.
- It is better to read it than to rely entirely on someone else's opinion about him.
- In Jesus we will find a good model, but he offers even more than that.

Further resources

- May P. *The greatest person*. London: Christian Medical Fellowship, 1996
- Stott J. *The incomparable Christ*. Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2001.
- Yancey P. *The Jesus I never knew*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2002.

References

1. Luke 10:25-37
2. Isaiah 40:3
3. Luke 1:17, 76
4. Matthew 1:18-23
5. John 10:30
6. Matthew 13:53-56
7. Luke 4:22
8. Matthew 3:4-5
9. Matthew 3:13-17
10. Matthew 4:1-12

