

JESUS

The Amazing True Story

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The Amazing True Story

From the stable to the cross
and what happened after that

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~ *John 20:31* ~

INTRODUCTION

You probably know a bit about Jesus. He's pretty famous, after all.

In the Christmas story he was the baby born in a stable. As an adult he died on the cross in the Easter story.

But what happened in between, and how did he end up being executed as a criminal? Where did it all go wrong... or did it?

And why do millions of people still follow his teaching 2000 years later, often risking their lives and all they have?

Four men called Matthew, Mark, Luke and John have the answers. They wrote the Gospels, the Bible records that tell us about him.

As well as these eyewitness accounts, there are other historical records that mention Jesus because he was the big celebrity of his day.

But it all came crashing down after just three years. Jesus was betrayed by a friend. He was arrested, tortured and executed with a couple of thieves. The end.

Only it wasn't. It was just the start.

What happened after that is still changing people's lives today.

1: A VERY STRANGE START IN LIFE

Jesus lived an extraordinary life. Even before he was born there were odd things going on: angels, dreams, ancient promises and a miracle pregnancy.

Among his first visitors were grubby shepherds, then a team of international scholars. But the king had already decided this baby had to die.

So what's the story behind the Christmas story?

At the time Jesus was born a census was taking place. In those days the only way to count the population was for everyone to register in person in their family's home town.

So large numbers were forced to travel and everyone was looking for accommodation.

It's unlikely this took place in the winter, despite the snowy scenes on millions of Christmas cards.

Newlyweds Joseph and Mary arrived in Bethlehem, where Joseph's family came from.

When they got there they couldn't find anywhere to stay, and to make matters worse Mary was going into labour.

That's how Jesus came to be born in a stable.

It was no doubt dark, dirty and smelly, so Mary wrapped him up and laid him in the cleanest thing she could find: the manger that the animals ate from.

The First Carol Concert

Meanwhile just outside Bethlehem something amazing was about to happen.

In the middle of the night, shepherds guarding their sheep on the hills had the shock of their lives when an angel suddenly appeared.

He said he had good news: a baby had just been born in Bethlehem who would be the Saviour of the world.

The angel called him *Christ*, or Messiah. This was a term for a king, but he said they would find the baby in a manger.

While they stared in shock and fear, many more angels appeared. Soon the night sky was full of them, all singing and praising God.

The shepherds were only human.

Once the sky grew dark again they abandoned their sheep and hurried down into

the city to see this baby for themselves. It was all just as the angel had said.

Men from the East

The next visitors we hear of were from the opposite end of the social scale. These were exotic travellers from a distant land who brought priceless gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Traditionally called *the three kings* or *wise men*, they were learned scholars who studied the night skies. The Bible doesn't say how many there were.

When they saw a strange star that appeared around the time of Jesus' birth, they believed it was a cosmic sign of a world-changing event – surely the birth of a new prince, a future world leader.

They decided to follow it, night by night, as it moved across the sky.

When they got near Jerusalem, they went to the royal palace to offer their gifts. They naturally thought a prince would be born in a palace.

Instead they found a very surprised King Herod.

Herod was shocked to hear about this new prince in his kingdom.

He soon began to wonder if it could be the Messiah, the Saviour who had been promised centuries earlier through the holy prophets.

Hundreds of predictions about the Messiah came true in Jesus. The chances of this happening in one random person are millions to one.

But no one knew what the Messiah would be like.

Many hoped he would be some kind of holy warrior who would deliver Israel from the Roman occupation.

Herod was taking no chances.

He didn't want to upset the Romans and lose everything. Better to get rid of this little rival, even if he might be the Messiah.

First he claimed he wanted to see the new prince too, but the wise men wisely failed to return with the address.

So he found another way.

Focusing on Bethlehem, the city mentioned by a prophet, he ordered that all baby boys under two should be killed.

The wise men probably arrived sometime after Christmas night, since Herod didn't single out newborn babies.

Nine Months Earlier

Before the soldiers arrived on their murderous mission, Joseph had a vivid dream where an angel warned him what Herod was going to do.

He decided to get his wife and baby son away as soon as possible. They escaped to Egypt and lived there until it was safe to return.

But this wasn't the first time Joseph had been told something in a dream. An earlier experience made him quick to follow the angel's message.

Nine months before Jesus was born, an angel visited a teenage village girl and told her she would have a special baby who would be the Saviour of the world.

His name would be Jesus, meaning *the Lord saves*.

Mary naturally asked about the father, but the angel explained that this would be a miracle pregnancy with no human partner.

The virgin birth was another ancient prophecy about the Messiah.

As well as being amazing and confusing, this was also very alarming. Mary was only young but she must have known what was likely to happen.

No one would believe her unlikely story, and a single mother in that culture was a scandal.

She would bring shame on her family, who would probably disown her, and of course she was likely to lose her fiancé, Joseph.

Her son would be called illegitimate, and as an immoral woman she would remain an outcast all her life.

But she was a young woman of faith, so she accepted the angel's message.

The angel later explained Mary's situation to Joseph in a dream. It was unbelievable, but the dream was so real he too accepted that God was at work and said he would still marry her.

Missing in Jerusalem

After Herod's death the little family returned home to Nazareth in Galilee. Another promise about the Messiah mentions this area.

Joseph was a carpenter. As Jesus grew he learned the trade and worked alongside him. No doubt he helped to teach his younger brothers in turn.

It seems that after Jesus was born Mary and Joseph had several children together, as the Bible mentions his mother, brothers and sisters.

But Joseph may have died while they were still young, because we only hear about him once more.

When Jesus was 12 he went missing in Jerusalem, where the family was visiting for a holy festival.

It took Mary and Joseph three days to track him down. They found him in the temple, debating with learned scholars and theologians.

He seemed surprised that they were looking for him.

“Didn’t you know I’d be here, in my Father’s house?” he asked.

This simple question shows that even as a child Jesus knew his spiritual identity. He didn’t just have some kind of religious awakening as an adult and decide on a life of good works.

Whenever it was Joseph died, Jesus as the eldest son became head of the household.

It would have been a heavy responsibility for a young man, supporting the whole family through his skill as a carpenter.

Jesus stayed at home until he was about 30, when his brothers would be old enough to provide for their mother.

Then he left home for a very different kind of life.

The time had come to begin his public ministry and change the course of history.

2: WHO IS THIS MAN?

Jesus was a simple carpenter from a small Jewish community. At first glance he probably seemed pretty ordinary, with nothing much going for him.

Yet almost singlehandedly he would turn the whole world upside down.

For three years he went through towns and villages, preaching in the synagogues and teaching in people's homes, or outdoors in the open air.

He made such an impact that soon large crowds flocked to hear him everywhere he went, hanging on his every word as he told them about the Kingdom of heaven.

The Good News

Israel was a religious country, under Roman occupation but also governed by the ancient Jewish law.

Jesus wasn't preaching a new religion but the right way to understand the old one.

What was different was the way he lived and taught and gave it meaning.

In fact, Jesus soon made it clear that it wasn't about religion at all but about relationship. Not about rules and regulations but about a Father's heart for lost humanity.

The crowds learned of a God who cares about the poor and the oppressed.

A God who hates injustice and hypocrisy and false religion that fails to care for people.

A God with impossibly high standards yet who freely offers forgiveness to those who seek him with all their hearts.

He called this the Good News, or *gospel*.

Our Father...

Jesus spoke about trusting like children in a loving heavenly Father who is able to provide for all our needs.

He pointed to the birds and wild flowers as examples of God's infinite care and attention, even for the most fragile things in creation.

In the same way, he used simple stories from everyday life to get his message across: a straying sheep, a man attacked by thieves.

A father watching for his missing boy to come home.

He compared the Kingdom of God to a woman cleaning every corner of her house to

find a lost coin, and a merchant who discovers a priceless pearl.

His stories were easy to remember and brought their ancient faith to life. The crowds drank in every word and came back for more.

But it wasn't only what he said. It was the way he said it, like someone with inside knowledge.

He didn't just know the facts; he seemed to know the Father he spoke about in a personal way.

It was no accident that when Jesus invented the world's most famous prayer it started *Our Father*...

He also lived what he preached.

When he taught about loving God and caring for others, people could see these were no empty words but a whole way of life.

He was full of kindness and compassion, going out of his way to engage with the outcasts of society: lepers, beggars, prostitutes.

He cared about poor, ordinary people, not just the rich and powerful. He welcomed little kids and old ladies. Everyone mattered.

Then there were the miracles. Hundreds of them.

Miracle Man

Miracles were a big part of Jesus' ministry and the reason why he became so famous so quickly. Everyone wanted to see one!

Yet they weren't a publicity stunt. Each miracle was clearly a personal intervention to show God's love in a time of need.

The first one we know of must surely have been one of the most popular.

Jesus was at a wedding feast where the wine had run out. His mother was there and warned the servants to do whatever he told them, no matter how strange it seemed.

So when he said to fill six massive stone jars with water and then pour some out for the host, they did.

The water had turned into wine – and not just any wine, but a great vintage that amazed the host and delighted the wedding guests.

Many of the miracles were healings. He healed every kind of disease and illness, sometimes remotely. He also brought at least three dead bodies back to life!

Often people were healed just by touching Jesus. No wonder there were crowds of four or five thousand following him.

Day after day, they poured out from the towns and cities into the countryside and pressed in all around.

Once a group of men, desperate to get to Jesus, tore open someone's roof so they could lower their paralysed friend down right in front of him. He honoured their faith and healed him.

But it wasn't just healings. He did many other strange things.

Jesus could look into people's hearts, knew about their private lives and often predicted the future. He could even control the natural world and the laws of science.

He walked on water. He turned a boy's lunch into a picnic for 5000 people. He spoke to a fig tree and made it dry up. He even ordered a violent storm to stop – and it did.

Those who saw it happen couldn't believe their eyes.

"Who is this man?" they whispered to each other. "Even the weather does what he says!"

The Team of Twelve

Many people followed Jesus as his disciples, but he chose 12 young men to become his core group of students.

As they watched and learned, he answered their questions, explained his stories and helped them understand what they were seeing.

They didn't know it, but they were being trained to take over one day. The future would rest with them.

These men were a very mixed bunch and didn't get on well.

At least four were fishermen out of their comfort zone. One was a hated tax collector. Another was a political activist who wanted to see the Romans overthrown.

Simon Peter was bold and impulsive. Thomas was cautious and pessimistic. Brothers James and John had a violent temper, and the treasurer was helping himself to the petty cash.

Life on the road must have been pretty interesting.

Learning Curve

The Twelve were only human and made heaps of mistakes.

They shooed away mums and kids when Jesus wanted to bless them. They tried to send off a foreign lady who needed help. They misunderstood a lot of what he said.

And they didn't have much faith, so sometimes they got things very wrong. They constantly underrated Jesus and what he could do.

Jesus didn't mind the mistakes so much, but he wasn't happy with this lack of faith that often led to confusion, fear and even panic.

What's more, the disciples didn't have a great attitude to public service. They were always arguing about which of them was the best and why they should get the top seat in heaven!

They didn't realise that the rules are different in the Kingdom of God, where things often seem back to front from our point of view.

Jesus told them that instead the greatest is the one who serves. He even stripped down and washed their feet like a servant to make his point.

But it wasn't all theory. After a while it was time for a practical assignment.

Jesus sent them out in pairs to preach and heal the sick in the towns and villages, just as they had seen him do.

They weren't allowed to take anything with them, but had to rely on God to provide for their needs through the people they met.

As assignments go it was quite a challenge, yet to their surprise it worked. People welcomed them, listened to their message and even got healed!

By the time they returned with their stories they were over the moon with excitement. They still had a lot to learn, but they were getting there.

So word continued to spread and the people kept on coming.

But not everyone was a fan.

3: HAZARDS AHEAD

Among the crowds were some very annoyed men.

These were the religious leaders, a powerful and influential group who enforced the strict Jewish law.

Many of the people who came to Jesus realised they needed help. Often they had something wrong with them and sensed he could make them better.

Others were drawn to him for something more.

“If you're tired and weary,” Jesus said, “come close to me and find rest.”

They found it was true; his words gave them new hope and strength and faith in God.

But these men felt they were pretty much perfect. They didn't want his help.

Jesus was a threat.

Like everyone else, at first they wondered and even hoped that the Messiah had come at last. Who else could work such amazing miracles?

But they didn't like the tone of some of the teaching. In fact, it wasn't long before they realised Jesus was being pretty critical.

Of them.

They didn't like what he said and they didn't approve of some of the things he did, like healing people on the Sabbath, a day of rest.

But then he didn't like what they were doing either – and he wasn't afraid to say so.

Restoring Relationship

These religious leaders had the task of teaching and upholding the Jewish law.

The law had been passed down centuries earlier, when God gave Moses a long list of commandments.

There were various social rules to establish an orderly, peaceful community. Then there were religious laws that explained how God wanted them to approach him.

These laws were meant to help people get to know God in a loving, respectful way, not make him distant and unknowable.

But over the centuries things had changed.

Instead of bringing people to God, traditions and add-ons had led to a very long list of dos and don'ts.

Organised religion had taken the place of personal relationship. And now the people in charge didn't like what they were hearing.

These wealthy, powerful men didn't care about issues like poverty and injustice.

When they gave to charity, it was only to make themselves look good. They said long prayers in public so people could admire them.

For a Father with relationship on his heart, this kind of religion was nothing like enough.

So it was only a matter of time before they clashed head on with Jesus.

He was angry at their hypocrisy and their hard hearts. They only cared about their saintly reputation, not about the poor and needy around them.

Obedying the rules was more important to them than showing kindness or mercy.

So Jesus told the crowds to do what they said, not what they did.

The people listened with delight. But the religious leaders were fuming.

Who Is He?

They weren't just unhappy about what he said. It went deeper than that.

They wanted answers to the whole question of his identity.

Like everyone else, they were looking out for the promised Messiah to be sent from heaven. But Jesus didn't fit their idea of him at all.

Yes, he was clearly a gifted teacher and a healer. The miracles were amazing, surely a sign that he was a holy man.

But when he healed he had a habit of telling people that their sins were forgiven too. They told him not to say it, because only God can forgive sins.

Yet he still did.

Jesus also knew the Scriptures inside out. He could quote long passages and respond to every challenge they set.

He just looked at things in a totally different way, leaving them completely wrongfooted.

They didn't like it, but they couldn't fault his theology.

Jesus knew it was dangerous to confront the authorities. The strict blasphemy laws carried the death penalty.

But he boldly challenged their thinking and openly spoke of himself as God's Son in front of them, making himself equal with God.

They were furious... but still unsure. So their thoughts went round in circles and the arguments went on.

In the end, they decided that if he truly came from God he would know the kind of people who surrounded him, 'sinners' like corrupt tax collectors and prostitutes.

And if he knew who they were, he'd have nothing to do with them.

The fact that he not only accepted them but positively welcomed them was shocking.

It never occurred to them that God would do that. They thought God was like them.

Midnight Meeting

But one of them was privately having doubts about their doubts.

Nicodemus was rich and influential, a member of the ruling council. He wanted to know more, but he ran a big risk meeting up with Jesus.

He had to be careful.

So one night he waited till after dark. Then he made his way in secret to the place where Jesus was staying.

He may have hoped to remain anonymous but Jesus, who could look into people's hearts,

knew a lot more about his visitor than Nicodemus realised.

So, instead of wasting time, he came straight to the point with a single sentence that has since been preached all over the world.

“I’m telling you the truth: you’ll never see the Kingdom of God unless you are born again.”

Nicodemus was confused. His expertise in religious law didn’t begin to cover this kind of thing.

“Surely you don’t mean that someone has to enter their mother’s womb and be born all over again?” he wondered. The idea was ridiculous.

But Jesus said he was talking about a spiritual rebirth, a new beginning.

Starting Again

Being born again is about making a choice; a decision to believe, turn away from all kinds of wrongdoing and a life without God, and start again.

Then we find one of the most famous verses in the Bible.

“God loves us all so much that he gave up his only Son to save us. Anyone who puts their faith in him won’t really die but will live forever with him!”

We don't know whether Nicodemus decided that night. In any case, he kept it a secret and continued with his daily life among the ruling elite.

But he never forgot his meeting with Jesus.

Later, after Jesus died, Nicodemus came forward to help with the burial arrangements. He provided over 30 kilos of perfumed ointment and helped to wrap Jesus' body for the tomb.

It may have remained a secret until then, but finally Nicodemus had made his choice.

4: CONSPIRACY TO KILL

Eventually the religious authorities decided they'd had enough.

Thousands of people were flocking to Jesus, and it was time to put an end to it all before it got completely out of hand.

There was also the political issue. If the people tried to make Jesus king the Romans would crack down hard.

But there was the problem: the adoring crowds. They might not all believe he was the Messiah, but he was so well known that there would be a riot if they arrested him.

Unless there was clear evidence of wrongdoing, of course.

So they set out to get the evidence – one way or another.

First they set spies to watch him and tried to trap him into publicly saying something against the law of God, but that didn't work.

Then they tried to trick him into saying something against the Emperor.

That didn't work either.

So they decided to silence him anyway. They started plotting to kill him.

Of course this was breaking every rule in the book. But it wasn't long before they realised they could get the Romans to do the dirty work for them.

They began to watch for an opportunity, and the big Passover festival in Jerusalem looked to be ideal.

The Plan

The authorities thought they were secretly planning an execution, but actually it was neither a secret nor an execution.

Jesus already knew all about it.

His death was not some awful, tragic mistake. It didn't take him by surprise.

He could have walked away from the dangerous confrontations that led to this point.

He went into it with his eyes open. It was part of a plan.

A very old plan.

Many of the ancient promises said God's holy servant would suffer and die to bear the sins of the people and make a way back to God.

In fact, Jesus had been openly talking about his death for some time. He would voluntarily

give his life to save others from God's punishment for sin.

Jesus didn't long for death.

He wasn't looking for fame or glory. He had nothing to prove. But he was a man on a mission.

So later, on the night he was arrested, he struggled to come to terms with the suffering that lay ahead, but he remained committed to carrying out his Father's plan.

As well as talking to the crowds about it, in private Jesus had already been preparing his disciples for what was going to happen.

By this stage he had told them three times that he would soon be arrested and killed. He even told them when, where and how.

He described how he would be betrayed and handed over to his enemies in Jerusalem, where he would be abused, flogged and executed. Three days later he would rise again.

He wanted them to be prepared for the horrors ahead, but they still didn't get it. It was unthinkable that the Messiah would be treated like that. They just couldn't grasp it.

And none of them noticed he kept telling them about rising again on the third day.

Betrayal

The religious leaders had made their decision, but they still had to work out the details.

The trickiest bit would be to seize Jesus when he was on his own to avoid causing a riot.

But to their delight this was solved in the most surprising way.

With Jesus and his followers now in Jerusalem ahead of the big Passover celebrations, one of the Twelve went to meet with the authorities in secret.

It was Judas Iscariot, the dodgy treasurer who used to help himself to the petty cash.

He was after richer pickings this time. He asked how much they would pay him to hand over Jesus.

It was ideal! He knew where to find Jesus after dark and could approach him without putting him on guard.

They promised him 30 pieces of silver, and Judas agreed to lead them to the right place and greet him so there could be no mistake.

On the Thursday evening Jesus and the Twelve shared their final meal together.

Just 24 hours later two of them would be dead and the rest in hiding.

During the meal Judas realised two things: Jesus knew his plans, and he wasn't going to stop him.

John describes how Jesus and Judas looked at each other for a moment across the table.

"Do it quickly, now you've decided," Jesus said.

John and the others didn't understand. Even at this late stage, the door was open for Judas to change his mind and no one would ever know.

But instead he walked away and arranged to betray his friend that night.

When he came back with the soldiers after dark, Jesus identified himself to the commander and told him to let the others go.

But the disciples were taking no chances and fled in fear, leaving him alone.

And although Simon Peter did follow him at a distance, when challenged he panicked and said he didn't even know Jesus – not once but three times!

Jesus had told him earlier that this would happen, but Peter had just argued.

Now, too late, he remembered and broke down in tears.

Death Sentence

Jesus was taken to the religious court, where he was questioned for hours that night about his preaching and his identity.

But to their surprise he said nothing and made no attempt to defend himself.

Finally they asked him under oath, "Are you the Messiah, Son of the Living God?"

"Yes, I am," Jesus replied. "And one day you'll find out for yourselves when you see me in heaven with the Father."

This was blasphemy! Instead of believing him because of all the amazing miracles, they promptly took him to the Roman governor to ask that Jesus be put to death.

Judas may not have thought things would go that far.

When he realised Jesus would die he went back to the authorities and tried to undo the damage, but it was too late.

"I've betrayed an innocent man!" he cried.

"So what? Your choice, your problem," they sneered.

Judas threw down the silver coins and went off to hang himself.

Would Jesus have forgiven him? Absolutely.

Pilate Washes his Hands

The Roman official, Pontius Pilate, also found Jesus to be innocent.

He tried to release him but by then the crowd was baying for blood, stirred up by the religious leaders.

“Crucify! Crucify!” they screamed.

Pilate was afraid of a riot, so he gave in. He called for water and symbolically washed his hands in front of them to distance himself from the verdict.

After that he signed the death warrant and had Jesus flogged.

The Romans used a whip of leather strips embedded with metal shards to inflict maximum pain and damage.

Then the whole company of soldiers had fun abusing their prisoner.

They dressed him up as a king to mock him, twisting a crown out of thorns. Then they blindfolded him, slapped him, spat in his face and beat him around the head with a stick.

“Tell us who hit you, Messiah!” they taunted.

Finally they led him out to be crucified, carrying the heavy cross.

It was the day we call Good Friday.

As they hammered in the nails, Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them; they don't understand."

Pilate had a sign fixed to the cross to identify Jesus to the crowds passing by. The religious leaders were dismayed by his choice of words, but he refused to change them.

It read in three languages: *Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.*

5: DEATH OF DEATH

The Roman soldiers had seen it all before.

Having crucified Jesus and the two thieves sentenced with him, they sat on the ground and divided up their clothes, rolling dice to see who would get what.

That was in a prophecy too.

Centuries earlier, long before the Romans, King David described the crucifixion in horrible detail: the mocking, the nails, even the gambling for clothes.

But the soldiers knew nothing about that. They sat around joking and gambling while above them the dying men gasped for breath.

Sometimes they shouted insults at Jesus and jeered at him to come down and save himself if he was really God.

But a few hours later they suddenly changed their tune.

The Torn Curtain

Around midday it began to get strangely dark and stayed like that for around three hours.

Then Jesus cried out, "It is finished!" and died.

At that moment there was an earthquake. Tombs split open and some of the dead bodies came back to life, shocking all who saw them.

At the same time, the great curtain in the temple was split in two from top to bottom.

This curtain had always blocked the way to the holiest part of the temple. It was so sacred that only the high priest was allowed to enter, once a year, to offer a sacrifice for sins.

Anyone else who entered would die on the spot.

But now the curtain was ripped apart and the way back to God was wide open. The sacrifice had been made once and for all.

The soldiers and onlookers didn't realise all that at the time. Their attention was on the strange darkness and the earthquake, and they were appalled and terrified. What was going on?

By now they were having second thoughts. "Clearly he was the Son of God after all!" they cried.

The Jewish authorities wanted the bodies removed before the Sabbath began at sunset. So

the soldiers jabbed Jesus with a spear to check he was dead.

One of the onlookers, John, describes seeing a gush of blood and water. This means the heart had already stopped and the blood was separating.

Pilate gave permission for Jesus' body to be removed, and Nicodemus and another man took care of the burial arrangements.

As it was almost sunset they wrapped it in a shroud and laid it in a new tomb nearby. Then they rolled a large rock in front of the entrance.

Those who had followed Jesus all the way to Jerusalem went away heartbroken.

They had witnessed amazing miracles. They had heard the Good News of forgiveness and redemption, and believed Jesus was the promised Messiah.

Then they had watched this amazing man die a cruel and painful death.

It was all over.

Surprise!

The next day was a Sabbath, when no one could do anything. It must have been the longest and saddest day of their lives.

But at last the next morning arrived, which we call Easter Sunday.

Some of the women followers set off before dawn to finish the burial rites. On the way they remembered the large rock and wondered how they could move it.

But as they approached the tomb they found someone else had got there first and rolled the stone away.

What's more, as they nervously peered in they found Jesus' body was missing.

Instead there was an angel with some amazing news.

Soon after, the 11 disciples were woken by the women banging on the door in great excitement. The tomb was empty and an angel had told them Jesus had risen from the dead!

The men rushed off as fast as they could and found it was true.

They were stunned. They couldn't believe it. No one had seen it coming, despite all the times Jesus had told them he would rise again on the third day.

All that day stories came in about people seeing him.

He appeared to Mary. He appeared to Simon Peter. He turned up unexpectedly on a country

road and walked along with a couple of travellers.

That evening the Eleven were discussing these things together with the door locked. They were afraid they might be arrested next.

But instead Jesus came in.

They thought he was a ghost and nearly died of fright, so he ate some of their supper to prove he wasn't.

Thomas Learns the Truth

Thomas wasn't there at the time and refused to believe it. Not that he didn't want to, but it was so unlikely, too good to be true.

He said he'd only accept that it really was Jesus if he could touch the nail marks and the wound made by the spear.

A whole week went by before he got his chance – a week when Jesus kept appearing to various other people.

Thomas must have been wondering when his turn would come.

Finally, when the disciples were together again inside the locked room, Jesus came back. He held out his hands to Thomas and invited him to examine the wounds.

“Stop your doubting and believe!” he told him.

Thomas was stunned. It was true! And not only was it really Jesus, but Jesus in a way he’d never seen him before.

Suddenly his usual caution and pessimism were swept away in a glorious new certainty.

“My Lord and my God!” he cried out.

Jesus said, “You believe because you see me, but those who believe without seeing are truly blessed!”

Did you notice? Thomas called him *God*, but Jesus didn’t disagree or correct him.

At last the disciples understood the amazing truth: God had come to earth as a human and died for them.

Jesus opened the way back to heaven by paying the penalty for all the world’s wrongdoing.

Not only that, but by rising again he proved he was stronger than death.

He had defeated the grave and all the powers of darkness.

Seeing Jesus as just a holy man may be easier to get our heads round, but it’s only a tiny part of the story.

The Promise

For several more weeks Jesus continued to appear to the Eleven as well as to other disciples. One day more than 500 followers saw him at the same time.

On another occasion, when the men went off for a spot of night fishing, Jesus turned up at dawn and invited them to a barbecue breakfast on the beach.

But eventually it was time for him to leave and return to heaven. For now.

On a hill outside Jerusalem Jesus blessed his disciples for the last time and gave them final instructions.

They were to tell others everything they had seen and heard so the Good News would continue to spread, first in their own country and eventually right round the world.

It would be very hard and they would face terrible danger and suffering, so they had to wait for God's power to come on them to give them strength.

But Jesus wasn't going to leave them on their own. They just wouldn't see him.

"I'll always be with you, right up to the end of time," he promised.

Then he began to rise up into the air in front of them. A few moments later he was hidden in the clouds.

Second Coming

They were still staring up, trying to catch a last glimpse of him, when two men in white clothes appeared beside them.

They told them Jesus had been taken into heaven.

“But one day,” they said, “he’ll come back in just the same way he left.”

Jesus had told them about this earlier: he will return some day, appearing from heaven in great power and glory.

This is called the Second Coming. No one knows when it will be, but it won’t be like the first time when he came as a baby.

He won’t be someone already living here on earth, either. Any cult leader who claims to be the Messiah is lying!

Instead he will appear from heaven as a majestic, beautiful, glorious figure, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

It will be mind-blowing. Unbelievable, awesome and terrifying.

In fact, it will be so overwhelming that everyone on earth will find themselves falling on their knees in front of him.

Even those who didn't believe. They won't have a choice.

6: WHAT HAPPENED NEXT

If the story ended there it would all be pretty amazing. But it didn't, and one of the most surprising things was what happened to the disciples after that.

For a few more days they continued to hide away behind locked doors, no longer grieving but still scared the authorities would come looking for them.

Then, during a worship service with other followers, the Spirit of God came down on them all and they were changed forever.

This was the power Jesus had told them to wait for. He knew that without the Holy Spirit they would be just a mixed bunch struggling on without him.

They would need something more if they were to go out and change the world, and now they had it!

Within minutes of this supernatural encounter, Simon Peter was no longer scared but out on the street preaching his first ever sermon.

He spoke so powerfully about Jesus that vast crowds of people believed his message. In just one day 3000 people joined the new Church.

This is called the Day of Pentecost, and it was the start of something that would change the world for all time.

Christianity.

Dangerous Times

Not everyone was happy about this.

There was great opposition from the religious leaders, who were dismayed that the movement was growing despite Jesus' death.

They thought they had dealt with the problem by getting rid of Jesus.

Now they were determined to crush it once and for all.

Other people also saw it as a threat to their ancient religion and way of life, and began to oppose the believers.

When a wave of murderous attacks broke out in Jerusalem, the new Church began to disperse as Christians fled to other cities.

In this way the Good News spread across the country and beyond.

Even so, as Jesus had warned, life became very dangerous. Many believers were flogged

and jailed, while others died painful and cruel deaths, or were sent into exile.

Simon Peter was arrested and put in prison awaiting trial. One night he was sleeping in chains between two guards, with his trial due to start the next day.

Suddenly an angel appeared in his cell and woke him up. "Quick, get up!" he said.

Peter thought he was dreaming, or seeing a vision. It felt unreal.

His chains fell off and the angel led him out through the prison, walking right past two sets of guards.

The city gate opened by itself and they went down the street. Then the angel disappeared and Peter realised what had just happened.

Road to Damascus

So there were amazing miracles and the church kept growing despite the dangers. Soon it was no longer only about Jews, but for everyone.

Saul was a young man from a top Jewish religious class. He had studied the ancient law for many years and was passionate about following the traditions of his faith.

He hated Christians.

When one of the disciples was stoned to death in the street he watched in approval. He even minded the killers' coats.

Then he began to hunt down other believers and have them arrested – first in Jerusalem, later in other cities.

But on his way to Damascus to arrest Christians there, Saul had his own encounter with the power of God.

A dazzling light suddenly flashed around him; he fell to the ground and heard a voice speaking.

“Who are you, Lord?” he stammered.

The voice replied, “I’m Jesus, the one you’re persecuting!”

This dramatic encounter turned his life upside down. Saul changed his name to Paul and joined the people he’d tried to wipe out.

For the rest of his life Paul would travel far and wide to preach the Good News, mainly to non-Jews.

He was constantly in danger and many times he suffered beatings, stoning, flogging and imprisonment for his new beliefs.

But that didn’t stop him.

At his trial he shared the Good News with all those present, including the Roman governor and later even the king!

Every time he was chained up in prison Paul continued to work, writing letters to teach and encourage the new churches.

Those letters are now part of the Bible and are still used for teaching in churches today.

So What About Now?

The global Church has made some big mistakes since those early days.

Sadly, many of its decisions and doctrines over the centuries have failed to meet the standards God set.

Jesus told his followers to love and care for each other just as he did. If you've been damaged by someone in the Church, it's a tragedy that should never have happened.

It wasn't God's idea and he's not okay with it. Too many vulnerable people have suffered in this way.

The opposite is also true. Even today in countries around the world Christians are persecuted, denied their basic rights, tortured and killed.

In some places they face discrimination even when it comes to life-saving medical treatment.

In others they risk having their children taken away to prevent 'brainwashing'.

They are often shunned by their communities and can't find work or even get food.

There are false allegations of all kinds and miscarriages of justice that see them imprisoned without trial.

Many are sent to labour camps for years; sometimes they are never heard of again.

The pressure to give up their faith for an easy life is immense.

Love Stronger than Death

Yet the Church is still growing.

In fact, it's growing fastest in those countries that try hardest to stamp it out.

They may have to meet in secret, they might not even have a Bible, but believers are still bravely spreading the Good News.

So why, like Jesus' first disciples, do they hold firm? Faced with such danger, why would they risk everything?

Clearly it's not just about a set of religious beliefs. That can only get you so far, as we've seen.

Instead they have found forgiveness and a new start, like Nicodemus and Saul so long ago.

They know Jesus still cares about ordinary people, just as he always did.

They have a relationship, not a religion.

And they have experienced their own encounter with the power of God, and a love that's stronger than death.

Ready for Some Good News?

Need a fresh start or
want to get to know this God
who loves you so much?

THE GOOD NEWS

Jesus said God the Father loves us so much he even knows how many hairs we have on our heads!

But the things we do wrong – our sins – have made a great rift between us and holy God. We are all guilty and fall short of his standard, and one day we'll all face judgment.

God isn't finished with us when we're dead! There's always a price to pay for sin. And being a good person isn't enough to make him change his mind.

There's a chasm we'll never be able to cross by our own efforts, no matter how hard we try.

But God loves us, so he came up with an amazing rescue plan.

Jesus came down to earth and died on the cross to take the punishment for us. Because of him, we can be forgiven and come back to God.

He also takes all our hurt and pain, our loneliness, fear and anxiety. He died for all that too so we could be free.

No matter what you've done, or what you've been through, he'll never turn you away.

He knows it all and still loves you.

Prayer

If you want to know God's forgiveness and have a fresh start like Nicodemus and Saul, you may like to use this simple prayer.

Jesus, thank you for dying on the cross in my place so I can come back to God.

I'm so sorry for everything I've done wrong. Please forgive me and wash me clean.

I'm giving my life to you. Come into my heart right now and help me to live for you from this moment on.

Amen.

If you've prayed that and meant it, everything you've done in the past has been forgiven.

You've been washed clean, and your new life with Jesus starts right now!

Sin leads only to death,
but God's gift to us
is life for ever
through Jesus Christ.

Holy Bible, Romans 6:23

*

~ THE BEGINNING ~

