



Bible Study Guide

No. 33

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Article selection by Terry Villiers
Text preparation and layout by Barry Austin
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Jesus' Resurrection Pictured in the Old Covenant

By Joseph Tkach

In the spring months of each year, our thoughts are directed toward the death and resurrection of our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Our spring celebrations are of "first importance" to us, for they remind us of the meaning of Jesus' death and the importance of his resurrection.

Because of God's great love for us, he sent his Son to die for us, to pay a ransom to redeem us from sin. This is a central truth of our lives as Christians. I hope that we never grow tired of celebrating and observing these monumental events. They should never become stale or routine.

As often as we observe the Lord's Supper, we should let it remind us afresh of God's love for us, a love that will never fail, a love that will never get smaller. Though humans may be unfaithful, God will never leave us or forsake us. Though we may struggle and stumble many times, God never abandons us. He is always ready to welcome us back.

As we commemorate Jesus' death, we are gloriously confident of God's love for us. We do not need to worry that our sins, no matter how many or how serious, have cut us off from him. God always welcomes his children.

Of course, we are also mindful that Jesus died because of sin. He went to the cross because humans chose to decide for themselves what is right and wrong. We have all done that, and we have all repented of that — many times. We seek to do God's will, not our own. We do not want to participate in self-willed life, for that is the approach to life that cut us off from God, sentenced us to death, and caused our Saviour's death. So the Lord's Supper is a reminder to us to humble ourselves (even as Jesus did, even unto death on a cross) and seek to serve others (Phil. 2:4-8).

I'm sure you know that each of us is woefully inadequate to the task set before us! It is so hard for us to put aside our own interests and serve others! It is impossible for us to escape this body of death! The good news is that God has provided the way, and it comes not only through the death of Jesus Christ, which reconciled us to God, but through his life (Rom. 5:10). For a balanced understanding of the Christian life, we must remember that our Saviour is a living Saviour, resurrected from the dead, ascended into glory, seated in a position of honour and power with God the Father. He intercedes for us, and he lives in us, and we in him. Because of his life, we walk in newness of life,

living in a state of forgiveness instead of condemnation.

We need to remember that Jesus died for our sins. We also need to remember that he was raised for our salvation. If he had not been raised, Paul said, we would still be in our sins (1 Cor. 15:17).

The Festival of Unleavened Bread

The Festival of Unleavened Bread was a reminder for the Jews of the haste with which they left Egypt. Just as the Passover pictured an escape from death, the Festival pictured an escape from slavery. And the Israelites pictured this by living without leaven in their diets for one week.

Spiritually, what do Christians escape from and live without? It is sin. When the Israelites ate unleavened bread, they pictured living without sin. Notice that the festival does not picture *us* putting sin out of our lives. The sin is removed *before* the Festival begins!

The Festival of Unleavened Bread does not picture the *removal* of sin — the Passover pictures that.

Only Jesus' death can remove sins from our lives.

Our role after that is to live a new life, a holy life in the presence of God. And how can we live a new life? Only by having Christ live in us —

symbolically portrayed in the old covenant by eating unleavened bread. Jesus Christ is the sinless bread of life. He must live in us.

Our old Holy Day booklet said that the Festival pictured the life and work of the risen Christ. It was true, but we unfortunately often neglected that aspect of the Festival and focused too much on our own works. But the Festival does indeed picture the risen Christ working in us.

How does it picture the risen Christ? One powerful symbolism can be seen in the wave-sheaf ritual, which was always done during the Festival of Unleavened Bread (Lev. 23:10-11). It was always done, according to the Bible, on "the morrow after the Sabbath." No grain could be eaten until this first sheaf had been waved toward heaven (v. 14).

This is the starting point for counting the day of Pentecost, so our focus on this ritual was often on *when* it was, and only incidentally on what it meant.

We recognized that it pictured the rising of Jesus Christ to his Father in heaven. None of the spiritual harvest can be done until the first-fruit, Jesus Christ, had been offered (1 Cor. 15:20-23). It is a rich symbolism.

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A yearly ritual

The old covenant had a yearly ritual regarding the rising of Jesus Christ. It is natural for Christians to have such a celebration, too, since we have a better understanding of what was being symbolized.

Today, Christians in some countries call this resurrection festival by a Greek term for the Jewish spring festival — "Pascha." After all, the resurrection celebration began in Greek-speaking areas when Jewish influence was still strong in the church.

In English, the celebration is named by an Anglo-Saxon word that is sometimes claimed to have a dubious origin — "Easter." But we do not need to throw out the celebration just because of the name that some people call it! We have many terms in English, such as "Saturday," that come from pagan names. We do not need to avoid such words. The meaning of a word is established by how people use it now, not by how they used it centuries ago!

There is no reason to condemn Christians who have an annual Sunday celebration of the resurrection of Jesus. Nor is there reason to condemn the name Easter.

Some people condemn the calendars by which Easter is calculated. It does give us the irony that some Christians celebrate the resurrection before other Christians commemorate his death! But that is not a reason to throw stones at other Christians. God has simply not given us *commands* on how to calculate an *optional* celebration!

The date of Easter is calculated not on the basis of the Roman calendar, but on a combination of equinox, phases of the moon, and the day of the week — similar in many respects to the way the date of the wave-sheaf ritual was selected. The early Christians simply calculated the calendar differently from the way the Jews did, and there is no sin in that.

Christians should remember Christ's resurrection just as we remember his death. The two go together. The New Testament does not require Christians to commemorate the resurrection in any particular manner or on any particular day. Yet millions of Christians throughout the centuries have found it helpful to do so. And the Bible does not forbid them to do so.

Historically, we stigmatized our members against celebrating Jesus' resurrection. We apologize for this, for much of what we said was wrong. We made accusations without really investigating to see whether they were true. Our rhetoric about pagan customs in northern Europe, for example, was really

irrelevant, because Christians were celebrating Jesus' resurrection long before northern European customs were involved.

It is not a sin to celebrate the resurrection, not a sin to use the word Easter, no matter what its origin.

It is not a sin to gather at sunrise to worship our Saviour. Easter is the spring celebration of Christians honoring the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Easter is not a time when Christians honor Eostre, an Anglo-Saxon goddess.

I encourage Christians to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Some may choose to do it one day, some on another, some perhaps on several days each year. Wonderful! Let good news be celebrated!

Christians should rejoice about the victory over sin and death that Jesus won.

Other customs

It is not a sin to paint eggs, or to search for and eat painted eggs. Nor is it a sin to eat chocolate eggs and chocolate rabbits. These things are no more pagan today than the names of the days of the week and month are. Whatever pagan associations these names may have once had are now gone. No one suspects that egg-dyers or egg-hunters are worshiping other gods.

I encourage people to celebrate Jesus' resurrection, but I am not exhorting people to immerse themselves in customs that have little or nothing to do with the resurrection. But neither do we superstitiously have to avoid those other customs. Some Christians will have nothing to do with such things; others will see no harm in participating in them.

Different people will "draw the line" in different places, and here I must ask that we live in peace with one another. Recognize that differences do exist, and that emotions can run high on this issue. So seek peace and pursue it. Those who participate in Easter customs need not flaunt it; those who refuse need not make a big deal about it.

Each of us must answer to the Lord, for it is to the Lord that we live and die — and we are not called to judge the Lord's other servants. We are each called to do the work God has called us to do, and we are to do it whether or not the other person is doing what he's supposed to be doing.

We need tolerance, not mutual criticism. We need grace, not more legislation. Let's celebrate and worship together!

By Joseph Tkach

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BORN TO DIE

The Christian faith proclaims that at a specific time and place, the Son of God became flesh and lived among us. However, Jesus was such a remarkable person that some people even wondered whether he was human at all. The Bible therefore goes out of its way to say that he was flesh, born of a woman, in very nature a human, made like us in every respect except for sin (John 1:14; Gal. 4:4; Phil. 2:7; Heb. 2:17). He was really human.

The incarnation of Jesus Christ is often celebrated on Christmas, even though the incarnation would have actually begun when the pregnancy began—by traditional calendars, on March 25, the Feast of the Annunciation (formerly called Festum Incarnationis, or Feast of the Incarnation).

Christ crucified

As important as the conception and birth of Jesus are to our faith, however, that is not the primary focus we carry to the world. When Paul preached in Corinth, he preached a much more provocative message: Christ crucified (1 Cor. 1:23).

The Greco-Roman world had many stories about deities being born, but they had never heard of one being crucified! It was preposterous—like saying that people could be saved by believing in some executed criminal. How could anybody be saved by a criminal?

Yet that was just the point—the Son of God died shamefully on a cross like a criminal, and only then was he resurrected to glory! Peter told the Sanhedrin: "The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead.... God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Saviour that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel" (Acts 5:30-31). Jesus was resurrected and taken to heaven so our sins could be removed.

But Peter did not omit the embarrassing part of the story: "whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree." The word *tree* would no doubt remind the Jewish leaders of Deuteronomy 21:23: "Anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse." Ouch! Why would Peter bring that up? Peter did not try to sweep the public relations problem under the rug. Rather, he made sure that he included it. The message said not only that Jesus died, but that he died in a shameful way. That was part of the message; in fact, it was essential to the message.

When Paul preached in Corinth, he characterized his message not merely as proclaiming that Christ died, but that Christ died by crucifixion (1 Cor. 1:23). In Galatia he may have used some visual aids: "Before your eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as

crucified" (Gal. 3:1). Why would Paul go out of his way to describe a hideous death that the Scriptures call a sure sign of God's curse?

Was it necessary?

Indeed, why had Jesus suffered such a horrible death? Paul had probably thought long and hard about that question. He had seen the risen Christ. He knew that God had approved this man as the Messiah. But why would God allow his Anointed One to suffer a death the Scriptures call cursed? (In a similar way, Muslims do not believe that Jesus was crucified. They believe he was a prophet, and God wouldn't allow that kind of treatment for a prophet. Muslims believe that someone else was crucified instead of Jesus.)

Jesus prayed in Gethsemane for some other way, but there was no other way. Herod and Pilate did only what God had already "decided beforehand should happen"—that he should die in this accursed way (Acts 4:28).

Why? Because Jesus died for us, for our sins, and we, because of our sins, came under a curse. Even our petty sins are as hideous to God as a crucifixion. All humanity is accursed because of sin. The good news, the gospel, is that "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us" (Gal. 3:13). Jesus was crucified for every one of us. He took the pain, and the shame, that we deserve.

Other analogies

But this is not the only analogy the Bible gives us, and Paul explains this particular view in only one of his letters. More often, he simply says that Jesus "died for us." At first glance, this phrase looks like a simple substitution: We deserved to die, Jesus volunteered to die instead of us, and now we don't have to.

But it is not quite so simple. For one thing, we still die. And from another perspective, we die with Christ (Rom. 6:3-5). In this analogy, Jesus' death was both representative (he died in our place) and participatory (we are included in his death by dying with him). The main point is quite clear: We are saved by the crucifixion of Jesus, and we can be saved in no other way than through the cross of Christ.

Another analogy, one that Jesus used, was that of a ransom: "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). It is like we were held captive by an enemy, and Jesus' death secured our freedom. Paul uses a similar analogy when he says we were

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redeemed. This word would remind some readers of the slave market, others of the Exodus. Slaves could be redeemed from slavery, and God redeemed Israel from Egypt. The Father paid a price by sending his Son. He absorbed the penalty of our sins.

Colossians 2:15 uses a different analogy: "And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he [Christ] made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross." The picture here is a victory parade: the victorious military leader brings the captives into town, disarmed, in chains, humiliated. The point in Colossians is that Jesus Christ, by means of his crucifixion, has broken the power of all our enemies and given us victory.

The Bible is giving us images of salvation, not precise formulas that we must insist on. Substitution sacrifice, for example, is only one of the many pictures that the Bible uses to get the point across. Just as sin is described in several ways, the work that Jesus did to remove our sins can also be described in several ways. If we think of sin as violations of law, we can think of the crucifixion as payment of a penalty. If we think of sin as a violation of God's holiness, then we can view Jesus as an atoning sacrifice. If sin makes us dirty, then Jesus' blood makes us clean. If sin is bondage, then Jesus is the redeemer, the victorious rescuer. If sin creates hostility, Jesus brings reconciliation. If we see sin as ignorance or stupidity, then Jesus is the one who enlightens us and makes us wise. All these images are helpful.

Appeasing God's wrath?

God has wrath against ungodliness, and there will be a "day of God's wrath" when he judges the world (Rom. 1:18; 2:5). People who "reject the truth" will be punished (v. 8). God loves them and would prefer that they change, but he punishes them if they are obstinate. If the truth of God's love and mercy is rejected, the result is punishment.

He is not like some angry human who needs his "pound of flesh" to calm down. He loves us and provided the means by which our sins could be forgiven. They were not simply wiped away—the sins were given to Jesus, and there were real consequences for them.

"God made him who had no sin to be sin for us" (2 Corinthians 5:21). Jesus became a curse for us, became sin for us. It's like our sins were given to him, and his righteousness was given to us "so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (same verse). We are given righteousness by God.

Righteousness of God displayed

The gospel reveals the righteousness of God—that he is righteous to forgive us instead of condemn us

(Rom. 1:17). He does not ignore our sins—he takes care of them through the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. The cross demonstrates God's justice (Rom. 3:25-26), and it demonstrates his love (5:8). It demonstrates justice because it is appropriate for sin to be punished by death; it demonstrates love because the person who forgives is accepting the pain.

Jesus paid the price of our sin—the personal price of pain and shame. He achieved reconciliation (a restoration of personal fellowship) through the cross (Col. 1:20). Even when we were enemies, he died for us (Rom. 5:8).

Righteousness involves more than legal requirements. The Good Samaritan did not have a law telling him to help the wounded man, but he acted righteously when he did so. When it is in our power to rescue a drowning person, we should do so. And when it was in God's power to rescue a sin-enslaved world, he did so by sending Jesus Christ. "He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2:2). He died for everyone, even while we were all sinners.

Through faith

In showing mercy, God is showing himself to be right. He is right to consider us righteous even though we are sinners. Why? Because he has made Christ to be our righteousness (1 Cor. 1:30). Because we are united to Christ, our sins are transferred to him, and his righteousness is given to us. The righteousness we have is not our own, but it comes from God and is given to us by faith (Phil. 3:9). "This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus" (Rom. 3:22-26).

Jesus' sacrifice was effective for everyone, but only those who have faith in Christ receive the benefits of his sacrifice. It is only when they accept the truth that they can experience the mercy. We see his death as ours (as a substitute and as something we participate in), we see his punishment as ours, and we see his victory and resurrection as ours. In this way God is true to his nature: merciful and righteous. Sin is not ignored, nor are sinners ignored.

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God's mercy triumphs over legal requirements (James 2:13).

Through the cross, Christ has reconciled the whole world (2 Cor. 5:19). Indeed, through the cross, the entire universe is being reconciled to God (Col. 1:20). The entire universe will experience redemption because of what Jesus has done (Rom. 8:21). That expands our understanding of the word salvation, doesn't it?

Born to die

The bottom line is that we are saved through the death of Jesus Christ. In fact, he became flesh for this very purpose. In bringing us to glory, it was fitting that God have Jesus suffer and die (Hebrews 2:10). Because he wanted to save us, he became like us, so he could save us by dying for us.

"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" (2:14-15). It was by God's grace that Jesus experienced death for everyone (2:9). "Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God" (1 Peter 3:18).

The Bible gives us many ways to think about what Jesus did for us on the cross. We do not understand exactly how all of it "works," but we accept that it does. Because he died, we can enjoy eternal life with God.

I'll close with one more way to think about the cross—as an example: "This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another" (1 John 4:9-11).

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Wanted: Christ-centered missionaries

Why Africa needs more mission, not less...

By James R. Henderson



But, some might say, has Africa not been evangelized more than any other continent and is now exporting missionaries to the West? Can the Africans not take care of their own redemptive needs?

Good questions. They include, however, some underlying assumptions—that the gospel has indeed been preached extensively in modern Africa, and that quality indigenous training programs exist for the balanced spiritual formation of pastors and church leaders.

In Africa, many false gospels are preached. This is a growing concern in evangelical circles. The impressive statistics about growth of Christianity in Africa may not reflect the depth of understanding of converts. In fact, many may not be converted to Christ at all, but rather to shadows of the Christian message.

A typical example of what has happened is in Cameroon. Note the words of Anatole Dlordon, a Christian worker who has been there, published in the August edition of the U.K.-based *Evangelical Times*: "Since the 1960s and '70s, Pentecostal and Charismatic groups have made great advances in the Cameroon, resulting in a multitude of 'lively' churches that lack teaching in the fundamental truths of the Bible.

"Added to the above problems, the churches have absorbed Cameroonian society's tribalism, paganism and low moral standards. Little wonder that extreme sects abound under the banner of Christianity."

This has been my own experience of working in Africa—"extreme sects abound." Sadly, the worst of the Western self-styled evangelists seem to have taken Africa by storm, and have led hundreds of thousands captive into whipped-up emotionalism and false hope.

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Men and women, young and old alike, sincere in their beliefs, inexperienced, some fresh from seminaries, and their minds often full of badly constructed theologies, have assaulted African spirituality with misinformation and garbled gospels that distort the grace of Christ.

Tite Tienou, a theologian born in Burkina Faso, adds his voice to the increasing number of Christian thinkers who express concern over what is regarded as a deep crisis in African Christianity. He refers to the “Health and Wealth” gospel exponents who feature so heavily on television, radio and through other media.

“Numerous preachers have convinced multitudes of Africans that prosperity awaits them if they join the Christian faith. No wonder there is little by way of serious reflection on suffering... Telling Africans they deserve to be rich is ... the proclamation of a truncated gospel” (from “The State of the Gospel in Africa,” by Tite Tienou, *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, April 2001, page 161).

Some doubt whether sufficient consideration has been given to consistently ground believers in the faith. Perhaps for many who received the missionary messages, it was just an outward transfer of religious allegiance for reasons other than personal conviction of sin, repentance and acceptance of Christ’s sacrifice.

Cultural, economic and safety factors were relevant. In a pluralist society, such as Africa is and also such as is now dominant in the West, it is easy to add fragments of Christianity to one’s personal faith mix.

Rene Daidanso ma Djongwe, a theologian from Chad, writes: “Africa has many problems, but God is working... One of the problems in Africa is that many church leaders are really pagan at heart.... I’m not afraid to preach this to members, pastors or bishops.... The great commission also says to make disciples.”

He notes the fact that little concerted effort has been made to instruct new believers. This has caused African Christians to become more susceptible to every wind of doctrine that blows in from the North Atlantic (from “Africa: the Hopeless Continent,” by W. Harold Fuller, in *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, April 2001, page 158).

What can the Worldwide Church of God do about this? Well, we can join in the cry of alarm, and we have done this and continue to do so.

Groups and individuals contact us and ask us to come and preach balanced doctrine to them. Often they have read of us on the main WCG website or on the African site (www.wcg.org/africa/).

For example, some independent churches in northern Rwanda and also in Liberia, intrigued by our stance against the dualistic nonsense preached by most deliverance and spiritual mapping ministries, have asked us to come and address their own assemblies on the subject of sound practical theology.

The Worldwide Church of God finds itself in a seemingly unique position. Few denominations have undergone a transformation from an error-laden sect to a liberated instrument for Christ and lived to tell the tale. This enables us to see clearly other groups trapped in heresy and legalism.

Anatole DJordan notes that “doctrines of grace are little understood and are ignored by most churches, in spite of such doctrines being in their traditional creeds.... Charismatic practices and Catholic dogma contrary to Scripture remain unchallenged....

“The most urgent need—and the key to the future health of the church—remains in establishing proper theological training for those leading the churches. The task facing us here is enormous” (*Evangelical Times*, August 2005, page 16).

The WCG conducts major conferences around Africa, such as the one that took place near Johannesburg, South Africa, in June, with Joseph and Tammy Tkach.

Not only do our own people get reminded of the fundamentals of Christian teaching, but pastors and teachers from other groups also receive instruction. We are devoted to training as a means of preserving the flock, which was a priority for Paul, Peter and the other New Testament writers.

The growth in the WCG is modest compared to the published growth of Christianity in general in Africa. However, new churches and new converts do come into our fold, as well as new affiliations. I want to assure you that these new people are not being enticed by some unbiblical promises, but to them we preach an undiluted “Christ crucified,” and our aim is to nurture them and build them in the faith of our Lord and Savior.

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The Jonah Syndrome

- or -

“How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Meet the Assyrians”



by
Neil Earle

Peter said; “show proper respect to everyone; love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honour the king” (1 Peter 2:17). This is a great code to live by, but much easier said than done. And why? Perhaps because our jaded society tends to make us suspicious and fearful of people different from ourselves and that can’t help but short-circuit human relationships. Numerous studies show that the gospel is carried to new people most effectively by personal contact. Fuller Seminary’s mission expert Charles Van Engen has written: “The world is ever more a stew-pot of people of very diverse cultures, religions and world-views working and living side by side.” For this reason, Van Engen argues, “the local body of believers is the primary agent for crossing cultural barriers and experiencing reconciliation in Christ.”

Your Muslim or Buddhist neighbours may question your religion, but they cannot overlook the fact that you, John or Joanne Q. Christian, are different from other people on the block. Or at least we should be.

This is why at a time when Christians are asked to consider the importance of personal evangelism to the basic mission of the church, we need to reacquaint ourselves with the book of Jonah. As we seek to reach out to the world on a more personal level, the experiences of this Old Testament prophet can at the very least help show us how *not* to do mission.

Called to mission

Romans 15:4 tells us that everything written in the past, that is, in the Old Testament, “was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures, we might have hope.”

What is immediately hopeful about Jonah’s story is that it shows us in stark terms that the source of genuine mission and outreach springs from the kindness and mercy of the great heart of God. Near the end of the book of Jonah, God asks Jonah the core question: “Should I not be concerned about that great city?” (Jonah 4:11). That gets to the heart of effective biblically based mission. Yes, indeed. God was concerned about the cities of Jonah’s day as he is concerned about the people in our cities today.

The biblical witness is consistent. Abraham pleaded for the life of Sodom (Genesis 18:23-32). Jeremiah urged his countrymen in Babylon to “seek the peace of the city.” Jesus wept over Jerusalem (Luke 19:41-44), and Jonah ... well, Jonah had some lessons to learn.

God had a challenging new assignment for Jonah, one that totally upset the prophet’s comfortable worldview: “The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai: ‘Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me’ “(Jonah 1:1). Jonah’s reaction was far from exemplary—”Welllllllll... Not me, Lord—find someone else, please!”

‘Calculated terror’

What is going on here? A little background helps. Up till now Jonah had been a successful prophet. His ministry had gone well.

Sometime in the long and prosperous reign of King Jeroboam II (c. 793-753 B.C.) God had given Jonah the opportunity to announce the good news that Israel would expand its borders (2 Kings 14:23-25). As a native of Gath-heper, a town in the area later known as the Galilee, Jonah was overjoyed to proclaim that his nation would expand northward. Perhaps this expansion would

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secure a buffer zone between Israel and the dreaded Assyrians to the north.

The Assyrians—now there was a name to reckon with. These fearsome practitioners of the art of war had already made their reputation with raids into Israelite territory in the previous century. Assyria's King Shalmaneser III (858-824 B.C.) had received tribute from Israel around 841 B.C., and Adad-Nirari was banging at the gates of Damascus in 804 (Lasor, Hubbard and Bush, *Old Testament Survey*, page 207). Cunning and cruel, Assyria's swift-moving legions were the most dreaded military force in Jonah's day and Nineveh was the capital of Assyria!

The Assyrians believed in a policy of calculated terror. The Assyrian king Ashur-Nasir-Pal II (883-859 B.C.) inscribed his tactics on a stone monument: "I stormed the mountain peaks and took them ... with their blood I dyed the mountains red like wool.... The heads of their warriors I cut off, and I formed them into a pillar over against their city, their young men and their maidens I burned in the fire" (Finegan, *Light from the Ancient Past*, pages 202-203).

Ugh! How gruesome can it get! And God was asking Jonah to preach to these people? Impossible. Inconceivable! Jonah, like everyone else in the Ancient Near East, was all too familiar with the sins of Nineveh, its "evil ways and ... violence" (Jonah 3:8). This was too much for Jonah to handle. "A mission to Nineveh, to the Assyrians? Lord, you must be kidding," we can almost hear Jonah saying.

Fight and flight

In times of stress, psychologists tell us, we react with either fight or flight. Perhaps Finegan's words give us a partial insight into Jonah's flight reaction to God's calling: "But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the Lord" (Jonah 1:3).

What a strange turn of events. A prophet trying to escape God's presence by leaving the territory of Israel! And the irony is he leaves from the exact same seaport where God will send the apostle Peter to start the gentiles on the road to salvation (Acts 10:5-6).

So now the lessons from Jonah begin to accumulate. For openers, the prophet seems to have had a rather limited concept of God. Whether from a panicky fear of the Assyrians or from the shattering of his comfortable assumption that God was working only with Israel—he

hightailed it to Tarshish, perhaps in the Western Mediterranean.

He was about to learn that God was a lot bigger than the Mediterranean. He would be faced with the uncomfortable fact that this God he served loved all people—yes, even the dreaded Assyrians.

The action continues: "Then the Lord sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up" (Jonah 1:4). Where was Jonah during this storm? Incredibly, he was in the hold of the ship fast asleep (verses 5-6). What was going through his mind? Was he totally uninterested in the fate of the ship or—as seems more likely—was he still in shock over God's shaking up of his neat and tidy division of the world into good guys and bad guys? Some expositors picture Jonah down in the hold in utter shock, perhaps curled up in a fetal position. Perhaps it was fear and loathing toward the Assyrians, or perhaps it was the trauma of a shattered worldview, but Jonah was in deep, emotional disturbance.

We can almost hear him pondering down in the darkness of the cargo hatch: "Isn't Israel God's nation? Aren't they a special treasure above all nations (Exodus 19:5)? Why is God sending me to the wicked Assyrians? No, no, it can't be ... can it? ... Does God love Israel's enemies as much as he loves Israel?"

Deep down, Jonah may have suspected that this was the case (Jonah 4:2-3). But he has to work out this shattering new formula in his mind. Jonah had misread his country's history. God had called Israel to be "a kingdom of priests" (Exodus 19:6). Their founding father had been commissioned for an international mission of mercy—"all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:3).

Missing the boat!

Israel was to be a missionary nation (Isaiah 49:6). Jonah was being challenged to stretch his thinking; to be inclusive, not exclusive; to be generously ecumenical, not religiously self-satisfied; to be sharing the light, not narrowly looking down on others.

Jonah may well have known all this, but he needed time to process the shock. He may have been on a vessel but he was missing the boat. No wonder he is too distracted to notice that they're all about to drown!

And here is where the narrative gets deliciously ironic. The gentile sailors are terrified of the storm. They have "done something religious"—they have been calling out to their gods, a

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common procedure when in trouble (Psalm 107:23-37). The captain shakes Jonah awake: “How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us, and we will not perish” (Jonah 1:6).

Nope. Jonah remains obdurate. When it becomes clear that all this is his fault, he self-righteously boasts: “I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land” (v. 9). This would sound comical if so much was not at stake. The pagan sailors could well have asked: “If your God created the sea why did you think you could escape him on a boat?”

Ah—a logical question. But Jonah isn’t thinking logically. Neither do we in times of great mental and emotional turmoil. You can almost visualize Jonah thinking of his next move, his mind moving at the speed of light. He responds impulsively: “Throw me into the sea. All this is my fault!”

Incredibly, those pagan sailors refuse. They have more respect for human life than the so-called man of God. Ironic, isn’t it? Finally, events force them to do the deed, but with great reluctance. They do it respectfully, reverently, invoking God’s name (v. 14). So look who’s religious! Further, when the storm subsides they offer sacrifices to God (v. 16). What potential converts these rough seamen might have made. But Jonah is oblivious to such thoughts. Into the sea he goes. Tragically, he chooses self-extinction rather than accept God’s mission.

We all know what happens next. Mercifully, God wasn’t through with his servant yet. A great fish swallowed up Jonah, the man of God. A man of God, all right, but a man who had head knowledge without corresponding heart knowledge.

But he was still Yahweh’s servant and, with his back to the wall, inside the great fish, Jonah prayed a beautiful prayer of repentance (Jonah 2:1-9). Notice the lessons here. His “death” in the sea reconciled the sailors to God (Jonah 1:16). His “resurrection” from the belly of the fish would result in the salvation of Nineveh (Jonah 3:10). In all of this, the recalcitrant Hebrew was an amazing foreshadowing of the Messiah, also from Galilee, Jesus the Christ (Matthew 12:40).

The still, small voice

But the repentance of Nineveh brought out the worst in this hot-headed prophet. Habits of a lifetime are not so easily overcome. He resented God’s grace and mercy (Jonah 4:1-3) and erupted with one of the most ironic requests ever made by a biblical rarity: a successful prophet: “Now, O

Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live” (Jonah 4:3).

God does not respond in kind (just as well for Jonah!). In this experience and in the incident with the worm and the vine (verses 5-8), God twice approached Jonah in the soothing tones of a skilled Counselor: “My friend Jonah, come on now, be reasonable. Do you have a right to be angry about all this? Don’t you see what I’m doing here?” (Jonah 4:9-10).

What great lessons for us today, we New Testament Christians who are continually challenged to keep growing, to keep breaking new ground in our relationship with God. Perhaps we can all relate to Jonah—a sincere servant of God with a successful track record who still had so much to learn about the depths of God’s goodness and grace.

Yes, we need to stay humble before God’s overwhelmingly unfathomable love. God’s mission of mercy is for everyone who will hear—including the Assyrians. It is so splendidly all-encompassing.

This supreme reminder from the book of Jonah was stated more powerfully by another prophet, Isaiah. He too passed on a message about the greatness of God, about his loving concern for all people, all nations. And he reflected: “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:9).

God goes ahead of us

Perhaps Jonah was so busy being a prophet to Israel that he forgot the purpose of his nation’s existence—to be a nation of priests to the whole world, regardless of color, creed or birth. Perhaps his involvement in his own country’s liturgy and service—the true religion of God—had blinded him to the fact that God looks on the heart.

The sinning Assyrians, idolaters, not commandment-keepers, found that God could be reached through attitudes of repentance and faith rather than religious ritual. Yes, even heathen sailors could turn to God once given a chance. You never know where God might be working. These are profound lessons to ponder as the challenging 21st century unfolds. God wants us to expand our horizons, to be always ready for new opportunities that lie around us. From Jonah we learn that God is always ahead of us—the Creator of all wants to be the Redeemer of all (Ephesians 1:9-10).

In that hope we can recommit ourselves to the mission of making disciples—“of all the nations” (Matthew 28:18-20). God is already there ahead

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of us just as he was already working with ancient Nineveh before Jonah appeared, just as he later prepared the ground for Philip (Acts 8:26-40). God wants us to succeed in our mission, for really the mission is his. He wants to use us to help

spread more of his light to a dark world and ... avoid the Jonah Syndrome.

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Perfect Results

A Study of Hebrews 10

The book of Hebrews has explained that Jesus Christ is the perfect priest and the perfect sacrifice. Chapter 10 concludes this section of the book by discussing the perfect results of Jesus' priestly work.

The law was not effective

Verse 1 begins with a conclusion: "The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves." This conclusion follows chapter 9, which sketched the rituals of the Levitical high priest and stated that Jesus did far better, offering a perfect sacrifice (himself) in a perfect place (heaven). The Levitical rituals had to be continually repeated, but Jesus' sacrifice was fully effective and therefore did not have to be done again.

Just as the tabernacle was a copy of the true holy place in heaven (8:5), so also the rituals were copies or shadows of the real sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The tabernacle and its rituals (all included in the word "law") represented good things, but could not bring them about. The law talked about cleansing and forgiveness, but could not cleanse or forgive.

Are the "good things" already here, or are they yet future? The grammar in this verse could be understood in either way, but Hebrews 9:11 makes it clear: Christ is the "high priest of the good things that are already here." Forgiveness and cleansing and relationship with God are already possible through Jesus Christ, and the old covenant is obsolete because the new covenant has already been established. There are better things yet to come (9:28), but the author's stress in chapter 10 is on things that Christ has already brought.

The law is only a shadow, not the spiritual reality. "For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship" (10:1). No matter how many animals were killed, no matter how much water was used, the law could never achieve the forgiveness that the new covenant now offers.

The word "perfect" can create unrealistic ideas. Faith in Christ does not make people morally perfect. We still sin, and we still fall short of what we ought to be. The Greek word could also be translated as "complete," and this may be a better translation. We

are completely forgiven by Christ, completely cleansed, and therefore perfectly qualified to worship God, perfectly able to have a relationship with him.

The context shows what the author has in mind: the removal of sin (v. 4) and a cleansed conscience (v. 2), so that we can approach God to worship him (v. 1b). The author seems to view all of these as the same basic concept. The old covenant could picture forgiveness, but could not achieve it.

If the law could qualify the people for worship, then there would be no more need for sacrifices. If the sacrifices could achieve what they pictured, "would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins" (v. 2). The logic is this: If the sacrifices completely prepared people for worship, then further sacrifices would not be needed. The people would no longer have a guilty conscience, and would not feel any need to offer sacrifices (at least not sin sacrifices). The law was inadequate, and the author implies that the new covenant gives what the old could not: a cleansed conscience. Through faith in the effectiveness of Christ's sacrifice, we do not feel guilty. Rather, we feel forgiven, cleansed, and accepted by God. Rather than being excluded from the holy place, we are invited in.

The author then summarizes the argument against the old covenant system: The sacrifices, instead of cleansing the people, "are annual reminders of sins, because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins" (vs. 3-4). A physical substance, such as blood, cannot remove a spiritual stain. The old covenant was designed to picture forgiveness, not to actually bring it.

The Old Testament saints were forgiven their sins, of course, but it was done on the basis of faith and God's grace, not because they had paid a big enough price or earned it. Forgiveness was available, but it was not through the old covenant. The sacrifices had a shadow of forgiveness—they spoke about forgiveness and they pictured forgiveness—but they were not the way that forgiveness actually comes.

Christ is the answer

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The author begins verse 5 with the word "therefore," meaning "because of what I have just said." In this case, we might paraphrase it like this: "Because the old covenant could not bring forgiveness, Christ came into the world and said..." and then follows a quote from the Greek version of Psalm 40:6-8: "Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased. Then I said, 'Here I am—it is written about me in the scroll—I have come to do your will, O God'" (Heb. 10:5-7). In this psalm, our author has found one of several Old Testament passages that foreshadow the end of the sacrificial system. He rephrases the psalm to emphasize his point, and he begins by giving the label "first" to a point that he will come back to shortly: "First he said, 'Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire, nor were you pleased with them.'"

And to make another point, he inserts an additional comment: "although the law required them to be made" (v. 8). The author is making a contrast between what the law required, and what God ultimately wanted. (Jeremiah 7:22-23 has a similar contrast.) God gave the law not as a permanent ideal, but as a temporary system that would prepare the way for the reality, which is Christ. The old covenant law was not the final word on what God wanted.

What did he want? Verse 9 says, "Here I am, I have come to do your will." God wanted the people to obey him—but only Christ did it perfectly. The early church apparently understood this psalm as a messianic psalm because Jesus fulfilled its words in a way that no psalm-writer could.

Then comes a powerful conclusion: "He sets aside the first to establish the second" (v. 9). What is the "first"? In the immediate context, it is sacrifices and offerings, but our writer has also used the word "first" five times to refer to the old covenant. The covenant with its sacrifices and rituals has been set aside.

And what has been established? The doing of God's will. The word "establish" was also used for covenants, and the word "second" was also used for the new covenant (8:7). Our author is making a literary parallel here, using Psalm 40 as a miniature picture of the change in covenants. Because the old covenant could not bring forgiveness, Christ said, Out with the old, and in with the new! The new covenant been established by the obedience of Jesus Christ. He is the answer to the deficiency of the old covenant.

Verse 10 begins, "And by that will..." Whose will are we talking about—God's will, or Christ's willingness to obey it? It is not clear; perhaps our

author left it ambiguous because both meanings are true. Since Christ conformed his will to God's, they had the same will. It is by God's choice, and by Christ's obedience, that "we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

We have been made holy—this is another way of describing the results of the new covenant. Our sins are removed, our conscience is cleared, and we are made holy, so we can approach God to worship. How is it done? Through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ—a sacrifice that involved both his will and his body, both his mind and his flesh. Further, we do God's will when we accept this as our means of sanctification.

Jesus bridges the gap between heaven and earth, between spirit and matter, in a way that nothing else could. Only he could make an offering on earth that was acceptable in heaven. The flesh and blood of his body was no different than the flesh and blood of any other crucified man, but it was effective for our sanctification and our forgiveness because Jesus was perfectly obedient, because there was a perfect will in that person.

Humans are both physical and spiritual, and we sin in the flesh and in the mind. The salvation that we have in Christ redeems our bodies and our minds, sanctifying both for true worship of God. We are not saved by a purely physical sacrifice, nor by a purely spiritual one. A physical body had to be willingly given, because the spiritual sacrifice had to be expressed in the physical world.

In Christ, we are assured that we have been completely redeemed. His will and his body were given for us, and it was fully effective, once for all time.

Perfect forever

Our acceptance by God does not depend on the performance of rituals (either ancient or modern)—it depends on what Christ has already done, and it is therefore guaranteed.

This is contrasted with the ineffective work of the old covenant priests: "Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins" (v. 11). Was it an exercise in futility? No, it was a picture, a drama that was worth repeating until Christ fulfilled it.

"But when this priest [Christ] had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God" (v. 12). The Levitical priests stood while they worked; Christ is able to sit (figuratively speaking) because his work is now done. There will be more in the future (v. 13), but for now he sits, "because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy" (v. 14).

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The work of sanctification is done (v. 10), and it is still being done (v. 14). Christ is still working in our lives, but the work is based on the sacrifice that was done once for all time. He has completely cleansed us, made us qualified to be in God's presence. That does not change.

As evidence, he quotes Jeremiah 31:33 again, the prophecy of the new covenant: "This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds" (Heb. 10:16). This is the work now being done as we "are being made holy." Then our author skips down to the last part of Jeremiah 31:34: "Then he adds: 'Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more'" (Heb. 10:17). And he draws this conclusion: "And where these have been forgiven, there is no longer any sacrifice for sin" (v. 18).

This is the grand finale: Our sins are forgiven; there is no need for sin sacrifices. To us, this may seem a minor point, an anticlimax, something we take for granted. But to our author, this is a major point, the point he has been hammering away at for four chapters. The sacrificial system is not needed any more. The old covenant has been set aside. It never was effective, and Christ has set us free from it. Apparently the audience of Hebrews found the sacrificial system attractive. It was a God-given pattern of worship, and the people saw no reason to give it up. Even if God allowed other forms of worship, wouldn't it be better to stick to the original plan? Wouldn't this assure us that we were doing something that God likes?

No, our author is explaining. God does not necessarily like now what he commanded centuries ago. He didn't like it in Jeremiah's day, or when Psalm 40 was written. The law was good for a time, but its time is past.

In the early church, when Jewish people first believed in Jesus as the Messiah, many of them continued to participate in the temple rituals, either in person or through the offerings collected in the synagogues. At first this seemed harmless, and the people were allowed to continue their customs. However, as time went on, it became clear that the rituals were a competitor to Christ. They were an enemy of faith. People were looking to the rituals for assurance, rather than to Christ. In their minds, their relationship with God was based partly on their participation in the rituals. They probably thought, Doesn't this make us more obedient, more pleasing to God? Even if the laws were optional, wouldn't it be *better* to continue them? And, aren't those who continue better than those who don't? The rituals could easily lead to judgmentalism.

So our author argues, chapter after chapter, that the rituals are obsolete imitations. This is not the better way—this is the inferior way. Rituals do not achieve anything. Our standing with God is based on what Christ has done, and he has set aside the old covenant.

Throughout the book, Christ is compared to various aspects of the old covenant, and Christ is always better. Does our author want his people to participate in the sacrifices and rituals? Probably not. Does he command them to quit? No, not directly, but he probably wants them to come to that decision themselves.

What he commands them is to look to Jesus. Old covenant rituals are ineffective. They are shadows—copies. Jesus is the reality, and he is fully effective. There is no need for obsolete rituals. They are not a badge of better Christianity—they are an unnecessary burden that can block our view of Christ.

Practical exhortations

Hebrews is a practical book. After each chapter or so of doctrinal explanation, the author will put in a "therefore," and point out how the believers should respond to the truth about Christ. At several points in the book, the author says, "Therefore, let us do such and such."

At 10:19, after several chapters of doctrine, the author comes to an exhortation passage. This one is a climactic point in the book. It has five exhortations. Since the old covenant is done away, and since we are forgiven by Christ, what are we supposed to do?

The author begins these exhortations by reminding us that we have two major benefits in Christ: 1) "We have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus" and 2) "We have a great priest over the house of God" (vs. 19-21). Since we have these two benefits, he says, we should respond in four ways:

- 1) "Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith" (v. 22). We should accept the cleansing that Christ has given us, and use it for its purpose: that we draw closer to God. The rituals of the old covenant symbolized separation; the coming of Jesus Christ emphasizes the approachability of God.
- 2) "Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess" (v. 23). Christ is faithful toward us, so we must be faithful toward him, keeping him central in our thoughts.
- 3) "Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds." Notice the focus. It is not that each person should do good. That is true, but the focus here is on encouraging *others* to do good. And not just exhorting others, but thinking

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about how we might do it better. The good deeds will be multiplied. Our relationship with God will have results in our the way we interact with each other.

4) "Let us not give up meeting together" (v. 25). It seems that some first-century Jewish Christians were no longer meeting together. Perhaps they were pressured by the Jewish community. Perhaps they were disappointed that Christ had not yet returned. Perhaps they felt that Christianity was a "gentile" religion. They were more interested in their Jewish distinctive than they were in Christ. So the author urges, "Don't drop out! If you don't meet with one another, you can't show love".

5) "Let us encourage one another" (v. 25). Repetition emphasizes. The first-century Jewish Christians needed to encourage one another; mutual encouragement helps everyone stay in the faith. This advice is still true today. We need to encourage one another in the faith, and in doing good—"all the more as you see the Day approaching." Christ will return, and we will be called into account for how we responded to his message, for what our focus was. He will "bring salvation to those who are waiting for him" (9:28)—and not just waiting, but working in faith as well.

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Lessons from Mark

Lesson 25 - Mark 4:30-34

A lesson about lessons

Again he said, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade."

With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.

What is the smallest seed in the world?

If you said, "The mustard seed," you wouldn't be alone. That's a pretty common belief among Christian Bible readers. But, as surprising as it may seem, it's not true.

"Wait just a minute," you might be tempted to say. "Doesn't the Bible say that the mustard seed is the smallest seed in the world?"

No, it doesn't. I used to think it did, just as many people still do.

Missing the point

A little study into horticulture will show that the mustard seed is not the smallest seed in the world. Poppy seeds, for example, are smaller than mustard seeds, as shown in the photo at left. For some people, those are fighting words, because they think it means that someone is calling Jesus a liar. But Jesus did not say that the mustard seed is the smallest seed in the world. Jesus was giving a parable, and just as it has always been with his parables, the typical human response is to miss the point.

The point of the parable is not mustard seeds; the point is the kingdom of God. Mustard seeds are only part of the stage decoration Jesus used in getting across the point he was making about the kingdom. Parables use imaginary scenarios involving mundane things to make a point about something else—something spiritual and unseen.

Parables are not literal, historical stories. That's what makes them parables. They are imaginary stories created to help listeners or readers understand a deeper concept about something else. The teller expects his listeners to know that parables should be understood as beginning with: "Imagine this."

In Jesus' case, he told parables to give insight into the kingdom of God. In this parable of the mustard seed, he is asking the listeners to imagine a mustard seed that is smaller than all other seeds, but then that tiny, insignificant seed grows into something so big that it can provide shelter for the birds.

Jesus was not saying that mustard seeds are the smallest seeds in the world. He was saying that the kingdom of God can be likened to a mustard seed, an imaginary one (remember, it's a parable), that is the smallest seed you could possibly plant, but then

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it grows to become the largest plant in the whole garden. He was talking about the kingdom of God, not giving a science lesson.

Miraculous and amazing

Jesus wanted us to know that the advance of the kingdom of God begins in a small, practically unnoticed way with a baby born in a stable to a poor woman in an occupied country. That baby grows up to be rejected and despised by the leaders of his own people and crucified like a criminal on a Roman cross. But despite that weak, apparently insignificant beginning, he was raised from the dead and seated at the right hand of God the Father as Savior and Lord, both Creator and Redeemer of all the universe (compare Colossians 1:15-20).

Speaking of both his death and his resurrection, he said, "But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself" (John 12:32). From smallest seed to sheltering tree.

Look for the lesson

Jesus built his parables around common, ordinary things that people knew about, farming, business, poor people, rich people, powerful people, weak people. But parables have a point, a lesson that goes beyond the mere details of the story. And the lesson

is usually made through a surprising twist, an unusual aspect that lifts the details of the story from the ordinary to the amazing.

No wonder Jesus used parables. The kingdom of God and the grace of God are amazing. But if we spend our time trying to turn the details of Jesus' parables into science and history textbooks, we will miss the lesson.

After reading *Animal Farm*, would we argue over whether pigs could really talk? After reading *Les Miserables*, would we scurry to French prison records to find whether there really was a Prisoner 24601? Do we get hung up on whether it was scientifically possible for things to turn to gold when King Midas touched them? Or do we simply think about the stories, ponder the analogies and learn the lessons?

Jesus told stories, good ones, that illustrated important aspects of the kingdom of God. Truth has to do with communicating a true message, and often that is done with creative stories, analogies, metaphors, similes, poems and songs. And Jesus was a master at it.

Imagine that.

Mike Fezell
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Mooroolbark Christian Fellowship

Tel. (03) 9726 8898