

# Savior of The World



Conversations on the deity of Christ, the resurrection, and the meaning of Christianity

Jesse Jost



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## **Preface**

The following is written in story form. But since I am not a novelist, the purpose of this little booklet is not to entertain you with a well-crafted story. Rather, I want you to wrestle with the ideas. I love using dialogue to explore an issue, because it allows me look at both sides of an issue and deal with objections the reader may be having. I do not claim that this dialogue is realistic or natural. The story line is paper thin and is meant to simply provide a context for the conversation.

For those who may be wondering, Paul is based on the Apostle Paul. In Acts, Paul is seen in the marketplace of ideas, daily reasoning with people about the truth of the incarnation and the resurrection of Christ, as well as trying to help people make sense of the message of Christianity. In these pages, I am trying to imitate Paul as he instructed in 1 Corinthians 4:16.

This booklet assumes that the reader believes in the existence of God. I have written a companion booklet, “The Source of Life”, that argues for the existence of God. Most of the arguments you will encounter here are not original with me, but rather are a composite of arguments that I have read over the years. I have not used any footnotes but I have included a list of the books that have shaped my thinking and contain forms of the arguments that I have used. Please look these titles up for further information:

*I Don't Have Enough Faith to be an Atheist* by Frank Turek and Norm Geisler

*Between Heaven and Hell* by Peter Kreeft

*The Case for the Resurrection* by Michael Licona and Gary Habermas

*The Case for Christ* by Lee Strobel

*The Case for the Real Jesus* by Lee Strobel

*Reasonable Faith* by William Lane Craig

*Handbook of Christian Apologetics* by Peter Kreeft and Ron Tacelli

*Jesus Under Fire* General Editors J.P. Moreland and Michael Wilkins

*Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis

## Introduction

My name is Skip Tecke. I really struggle with Christianity. I do a talk show that is heard on over 100 stations, but is based out of Ignoropolis on station JYRK 660 on your AM dial.

I doubt my show really appeals to the extreme religious right wing. I take a pretty hard stance on things. One year ago I decided to take on Christianity with all its irrational ideas and immoral implications. I read the following rant on my show.

“I have a real problem with Christianity. One of my biggest concerns with this religion and religion in general is their horrible emphasis on faith. ‘Just believe no matter what the evidence tells you’ is terrible advice. And there are thousands of men making easy money by telling their congregations to blindly swallow what they are told. Don’t get me wrong: I understand why these men need to ask people to just believe without questioning, because the some of the stuff Christians believe goes far beyond the bounds of what is rationally believable. I mean, think about it... a man who claims to be God, dies and rises from the dead, a man who walks on water, and a virgin birth. I know a few scared young teens who have tried to claim that last miracle! I guess if you grow up believing that stuff it may not sound that strange, but to an outsider, one who hasn’t been indoctrinated since birth, it’s outlandish! These poor souls just don’t get it. When it comes to examining the miracles in other religions, these Christians are tough-minded and scientific and rightly ignore such claims as ridiculous and impossible. But when it comes to their own faith, their brains suddenly go out the window.

“As bad as their pre-scientific credulity is in believing myth and legend to be true, that is not what is really bad about Christianity. I believe that some of their beliefs are immoral and have dangerous consequences. I have been witnessed to several times by zealous evangelists who tell me that Jesus died for my sins. Let me get this straight: God was full of wrath towards us for making some mistakes, so his solution is have a human sacrifice? And now, apparently I can commit whatever sin I feel like, and as long as I remember to ask forgiveness, and I can be forgiven because Jesus took my punishment! Anybody who really believes this is a truly dangerous threat to society. There is no longer any need to worry about consequences for wrongdoing... Jesus already paid for it all.

“Another huge danger in this religion is that not only do its people believe in a God, but they believe they know exactly what he wants from us, and they believe that God is on their side. Here is what is insidious about this notion: Anyone who doesn’t agree with them automatically becomes an enemy of God. They can slap a “God said it” label on any idea and

suddenly they think that they have divine authorization to do whatever they feel like. This belief, coupled with the fact that they think blind faith is a virtue, makes for a deadly combination. If they are told that God wants them to kill the Jews, they will feel like they are immoral if they don't obey. Or if you are a scared little boy and some priest says that God wants him to play a new game, and I'm not talking about Scrabble, then the boy will feel he has to obey God and the poor lad gets violated in the mean time...All in the name of God. I have heard men tell young women that it is God's will for them to marry. Now that is an effective pick-up line, if you have let this religion impair your brain, that is.

“I challenge any thinking Christian to come to me try and defend this irrational and immoral religion.”

This radio challenge of mine led to a couple of fascinating conversations that changed my life. I will try to recount these talks to the best of my memory. It all started after I left the station studio.



## Part 1: The Case for Christ

As I was walking home, I met a man who stood about five feet tall. You could tell he had been through a lot. The small man squinted at me. “Skip,” he said, “is that you?”

“Yes,” I said. “Why do you want to know?”

“My name is Paul, I heard your challenge on the radio. I would love to discuss Christianity with you if you are interested.” he said.

I love this sort of thing. It is one of life’s simple pleasures when I can expose the myths and irrationalities in a person’s faith.

“I would love to talk with you about your religion, but I want to get one thing straight. I have no interest in blind faith. I want reason and evidence.”

Paul smiled, “Good. That was the first thing I wanted to talk to you about. True Christianity deeply values the mind, and the importance of questioning an idea.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me, right?”

“No, Jesus said to love God with all you mind. In the Old Testament God says to ‘Come, let us reason together.’ In the New Testament we are commanded to ‘test all things’ and only hold fast to what is good. I don’t know where you get the idea that Christianity requires blind faith.”

“Well, I have enough nut cases calling in to my show who think that logic is a foreign language. When I try to question them all they can throw at me is that I ‘have to have faith.’”

Paul sighed, “I know. This is a source of frustration for me as well. I guess it is often easier to just believe rather than do the hard work of learning to think critically. I totally agree with you on the danger of blind faith.”

“This sounds great, Paul, but doesn’t the Bible say that we are supposed to walk by faith, not by sight? That doesn’t sound like critical thinking!”

“Yes, but I think what that means is there are times when it is more reasonable to trust an authority on a subject, than it is to trust our own eyes.”

That sent up a red flag. “For example?”

“We are told that the earth is round, not flat, yet few of us have been in space to see it with our own eyes. But it is more rational to believe the evidence than it is to deny it because of what we see with our eyes. There are times we have to take things on authority. If Jesus was God, his message is the truth, even if you can’t prove each point to be true. We humans have such a limited perspective on things that there are some things we need to take on faith.”

I cocked my head, uncomfortable with where this was going. “But if we take things on faith, what will prevent us from being duped into believing lies?”

“An excellent question. The way to avoid that dilemma is to make

sure that your source is reliable. And if the authority is trustworthy, it is far more reasonable to put our faith in the authority than it is to trust our own experience. If Jesus really was God in the flesh as he claimed, that would make him the most reliable authority in the history of the world.”

I was quiet for a bit. Then I blurted, “Okay, I admit that *logically* that would be true, but you have a long way to go to *prove* that Jesus was God. If Jesus was truly God and we knew what he actually said, then, yes, it would be foolish to not believe. However, I am not going to believe on blind faith alone this idea that Jesus was God. It is one thing to believe the word of a God, it is another thing to believe the claims of a fallible human being.”

“Don’t worry, Skip, I wouldn’t ask you to believe that Jesus is God simply because I said so. There are enough man-made religions each trying to claim divine status for their founder –”

I had to cut in, “But that’s what gets me! Each religion tries to claim that God is on their side and that they are the ones who have the truth! What makes Christianity different?”

“I will get to that, but I need to point out though, that just because each religion thinks they have the truth, it doesn’t naturally follow that nobody has the truth. The existence of counterfeit money does not prove that genuine money does not exist; it assumes that genuine money does exist.”

“I’ll grant that, but Christianity is so exclusive and arrogant in claiming it alone knows the truth about reality.”

Paul raised his hand, “Hold on a second. This exclusivity does not just belong to Christianity. Everyone who believes that they know the truth think that people who disagree are wrong. The atheist thinks that everyone who believes in a god is wrong. The agnostic believes that the person who thinks she knows the truth is really in error. This exclusivity is ingrained in the nature of things. If an idea is true – in other words, if the idea lines up with reality – then any idea that contradicts that idea has to be false.”

“But isn’t it arrogant to think that you are right and everyone else is wrong?”

“Are you saying you think we should be tolerant and that people who are exclusive about truth are wrong in doing so?”

“Yes, that is what I’m saying.”

“So you think you are right and the people who disagree with you about tolerance are wrong?”

“Yes.”

Paul smiled gently, “How come when Christians think they are right, they are arrogant, but when you think you are right, you’re just right?”

I had to laugh, “Okay, you got me there, Paul. But proving that truth exists is much easier than proving that you know the truth, wouldn’t you say?”

“Absolutely.”

“So, Paul, why do you think that Christianity is the correct religion?”

“Christianity takes on too many different forms for me to make the blanket statement that Christianity is the correct religion. A lot of man-made religious traditions, rules, and trappings have claimed the name of Christianity for themselves. No, the search for truth is much more complicated than a simple choice between religions.”

I was glad to hear him say that. I could already tell that this man was different from most of the Christians who I had encountered. He seemed willing to think for himself.

“Okay then, how can we know the truth? Are you saying we are free to just pick and choose whatever idea we like from the different religions?”

“Not at all, I’m saying the only reason we should believe an idea or a notion, is if it is true. If an idea does not line up with reality, then it’s not worth believing. I agree with C. S. Lewis when he stated something to the effect that ‘If you look for truth, you may find comfort in the end; if you look for comfort you will not get either comfort or truth, only soft soap and wishful thinking to begin, and in the end, despair.’”

I liked that! “On this point I couldn’t agree with you more,” I said, “but I don’t think you really have the truth. I mean, if you believe that Jesus is God and that He rose from the dead, that sounds a lot like – how did you put it? – soft soap and wishful thinking!”

Paul just laughed. “Skip, I am very eager to debate these things with you, but first I need to know if you really want to know the truth. Forgive me for being blunt, but do you want to face reality? It can be very painful and scary to leave the comfort of self-deception and the safety of a fantasy world and face the hard facts of life?”

“Are you kidding me? You ripped those lines off my radio show! That is a question you Christians need to answer, not me!”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to offend you; I simply want to know if you are going to investigate the evidence with an open mind. If your mind is already made up and nothing will change it, there’s not much point in me discussing this with you.”

“I have to be honest with you, I doubt you will be able to change my mind or get me to believe the impossible, but I will honestly consider what you have to say.”

“Thank you,” Paul said. “That is all I could ask.”

By this time it was getting dark and chilly, and my hunger pains were clouding my ability to reason. I offered to buy this Paul fellow some supper at the local greasy spoon. He accepted, and twenty minutes later, we were sitting down to chew the flab – literally. After Paul had bitten into his thick, juicy, mouth-watering, seasoned-to-perfection, grilled chicken sandwich (okay, recalling this is making me hungry – let me just wipe the drool from my lips), he picked up where we left off. “Everything I have to

say hinges on whether or not Jesus was who he said he was.”

“Can you explain?”

“A lot rides on who Jesus truly was. If he was a fraud, deceiving people about his identity, or if he himself was deceived about who he was, then he can be ignored without consequence. He deserves to lie at the bottom of the dustbin of history.”

Paul paused, his eyes boring holes into my thick skull. “*But*, if Jesus was who he said was, God in the flesh - then everything he says is true. All the world religions, wherever they disagree with him, are wrong. Because he said that he was the only way to be made right with God, then to reject him is to reject the only way of salvation and to condemn yourself to hell forever.”

I protested, “That seems so black and white. There have to be more alternatives than that! If there is a God, I can’t see him sending people to hell simply for rejecting someone. That is way too harsh.”

“Skip, it all comes down to whether or not Jesus is the real deal. This life is too short, our perspective too narrow, to have all the answers. We often see things different from the way they really are. If Jesus is really God, the Creator of life and the afterlife, then what he says is reality, whether we like it or not. His words, his assessment of life, his requirements for eternal life, are simply facts that every human must deal with, just like, say... gravity. You may not like the fact that gravity keeps you down, but it is a law we all have to deal with. We can revisit the topic of hell later, but for now, it all comes down to this issue – is Jesus fake or real?”

**Is what we know of Jesus only embellished legend? Can we trust the gospels?**

I couldn’t hold it in. “So much for critical thinking! You really want to base everything on a dead Jewish carpenter? Why, I’m not sure he even existed, but I am sure that there is so much legendary myth surrounding him that we can’t be sure of what he said. Jesus lived over two thousand years ago, and that’s a lot of time for legendary development. How do you know that the writers of the gospels didn’t fabricate the legendary miracles, or embellish the story of Jesus? Maybe the real Jesus never claimed to be God or performed miracles, and was really just some quaint country rabbi. I think the gospels are simply myths written years after the fact. If, as it appears to be, this is the case, then we’ll never know Jesus’ true identity.”

“There is much better historical documentation of the life of Christ, than you might think,” Paul countered. “I think this is an excellent place to start. Christianity is a religion that is rooted in history and evidence. It challenges people to check the historical records to verify if these things are true. Thankfully, we have a level of historical evidence for Christ that is extremely high by the standards of antiquity. For instance, we have four biographies of Christ that were written by first- or second-hand sources within the lifetimes of the eye-witnesses of Jesus Christ. The gospels were written too early and too close to the events that they describe for legend

and myth to develop, like you suggested.”

“How do you know that?” I asked.

“We have several internal indicators indicating that the gospels – and, in fact, the entire New Testament – were penned within forty years of Jesus’ death. For example, take the two books Luke wrote, Acts and Luke. Acts ends with a cliffhanger: Paul is sitting in a jail cell waiting to talk to Nero.”

“So?”

“Paul died in the mid AD 60’s. The only reason Luke wouldn’t have included a tidy ending is if it hadn’t happened yet. So that means Acts had to have been written in the early 60s. Luke said that his gospel was his former account, so that means that the gospel of Luke was written possibly in the late 50s. Luke mentions that he based his account on others who had written and it is clear that Luke borrows from Mark, so that means Mark was written in the mid- to late 50s at the latest. Are you following me?”

“Uh, yeah, I think so,” I said.

“Okay. Hang in there!” Paul continued, “So what I’m getting at is that we have strong proof that at least two gospels were written within 20-30 years of Jesus’ death. There would have been far too many eye-witnesses around to get away with myth-making. Legends don’t usually creep in till the eye-witnesses are gone.”

“What about the other two gospels, Matthew and John?” I asked.

“There is a strong case to be made that they were both written before AD 70, when the temple was destroyed.”

“Really?” I asked skeptically.

“Neither of them mentions the siege of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple – major events in Jewish history. Instead, both Matthew and Luke refer to Jerusalem as still standing. The intriguing thing is, Jesus predicted that the temple would be destroyed within a generation of his life. Now according to the Jews, if a prophecy did not come true, the prophet who made the claim was to be rejected as a false prophet. Don’t you think that if you are writing a gospel that is trying to proclaim the deity of your leader and this amazing prophecy had been fulfilled, you would at least mention it? Especially when it would add strength to your case that Jesus was God?”

“I guess so.”

“The only reason that it is not mentioned, I believe, is because these works were penned before AD 70. If you were reading a military history of Pearl Harbor that made no mention of the Japanese bombing, wouldn’t it be safe to assume that it was written before 1942? These two points, coupled with the fact that the Gospel writers show a verified familiarity with first century people, places and events, strongly suggest an early date of writing.”

I replied, “I’ll admit that is a strong case for the Gospels being written early, but let me ask you the question this time: How do you know

the gospels aren't myth or propaganda?

Paul didn't squirm like I had hoped; instead he straightened in his chair, smiled warmly. "Skip, have you read the gospels?"

### **What about the contradictions?**

"Parts of them. I read enough to see that they were full of contradictions, which makes me doubt their credibility."

"Were they contradictions, or merely complementary accounts? Do you have any examples of contradictions that can't be reconciled?"

I had to think for a moment. Honestly, I hadn't done much actual investigating myself, but I had seen some good examples at a certain website. I tried to remember a few.

"Let me see, I think there were quite a few contradictions in the accounts of the resurrection. One account says there was one angel and another one says there were two and a third one says it was two men that met the woman when they came to the tomb. And if you look at the lists of women they differ hopelessly. But there are lots more I'm sure."

"Skip, these accounts are not contradictory, they just complement each other. It is clear that there were angels that the women saw. Wherever there are two angels there is always one, and it is common in biblical accounts to refer to angels as men. And the lists of women differ but they can be reconciled. Actually, the fact that these accounts differ slightly is strong proof that these events actually happened."

"How is that?" I shot back.

"Well, it proves that a real event happened and was independently reported, as opposed to four writers getting together and making up a story. For example, in a court of law, when the eyewitness accounts are given, the lawyers will look for slight differences on the secondary issues, but agreement on the core issues. If the accounts are identical it looks suspiciously like the witnesses have been informed about how to answer. If three people really saw the same event, they each would remember different details. In the same way, if the accounts were identical, skeptics would have a case that these writers conspired together. However, these gospel accounts do have complete agreement on the core issues of Jesus' life."

I had to concede that point, but I was pretty sure there were some tougher contradictions. I would have to look into that further.

### **Are the gospels myth?**

"That makes some sense, but what if these authors didn't really think that they were writing history? What if they were simply writing myth like the Greek poet Homer did?"

"Let me be blunt. In asking that question, you either haven't read the Greek myths or you haven't read the gospels. The gospels have an entirely different tone and flavor. These accounts claim to have been written by people who actually saw the events, or had talked to people who had seen them. These writers claim they are writing real history; they mention the names of real historical figures and places, thus placing these

stories in a real time. Something else that sets these apart from the myths is that the writers make note of little details that don't play a key role in the story, but are recorded because they *happened*. These writers claim to be reporters, not myth-makers."

### **Biased propaganda?**

"Okay, but that still doesn't prove they were telling the truth." I leaned back and crossed my arms. "In fact, it seems like these men have an agenda, so perhaps they stretched the truth like the communists did to try and rally support. They seem so passionate about Jesus, that I doubt we can even trust them to be accurate unbiased sources."

Paul frowned, "Look, just because someone feels passionate about something does not mean that they can't be trusted. In fact, sometimes passion makes a person even more careful to be accurate, because the issue at hand so important to them. Take the Jewish historians who survived the Holocaust, for example. They certainly weren't unbiased, but they knew how important it was for people to know the truth about the German atrocities so that people could be warned. Their passion made them extra careful because they didn't want to lose credibility. Skip, it was the same way with the gospel writers."

I sighed out a breath of resignation. "You're right. But still, these events happened some two thousand years ago. How can we ever know if these writers were honest?"

"Actually, historians have a few ways of testing an author's honesty. The first one is to see if the writer loses credibility by getting certain verifiable facts wrong, for instance if a writer contradicts a known fact. The gospel writers give lots of historical details that can be verified or proven inaccurate by archaeology or other historians. But these writers pass with flying colors; there has yet to be an example where a historical discovery has contradicted these gospel accounts. I read once about a man named William Ramsey, and he noticed that Luke recorded so many historical details. He thought it would be easy to prove that Luke was making up the story. But he discovered that Luke was proven right on every point that he could be tested. He had to admit that Luke was a meticulous historian."

I replied, "I agree we can check them on the names and places, but what about the miracles and Jesus' claim to be God? We can't check those claims out by archaeology. How can we tell if they were making that up?"

"That is a good question," Paul said, "but first let me say that like in life, we should assume that a person is being honest until they lose our trust, not the other way around. And remember that these writers have shown to be reliable where they can be tested. But there is also another way to tell if a person is being honest. It is called the criterion of embarrassment."

### **The criterion of embarrassment**

I raised my eyebrows, "The what?"

"See, the reasoning goes that if a person records things that actually hurt their supposed agenda, then it follows that they wouldn't have made



that up. So because they are willing to include potentially harmful details, they must feel compelled to tell the truth, even if it hurts.”

“That makes sense,” I nodded.

“Well, these writers include lots of things they would have left out if they were willing to bend the truth.”

“For instance?”

Paul explained, “For one, the gospel writers include embarrassing thing about the disciples. If you read these accounts, the disciples are slow to get Jesus’ teachings, abandon him in his time of need, deny him, and even bicker about which of them is the greatest the week before Jesus is killed! Think about it: If you were starting a religion, and were writing a piece of propaganda, you are going to try to paint your leaders in the best possible light. Don’t you think?”

I nodded.

“Yet, these writers were brutally honest about their faults. Secondly, the writers include embarrassing and hard to understand things about Jesus. You asked if maybe these writers made up the claim to be God, that Jesus as God-man was fiction. Right?”

“Right.”

“Well, if the writers were making this up, then why do they include things like Jesus being unable to perform miracles at certain times, or his being baptized by a sinner, or him saying that the Father was greater than he, or even that he didn’t know the time of his return? Don’t get me wrong. These things *can* be explained theologically, but if you are willing to lie to create a legend about Jesus, why would you include them? The only reason I can see is that his followers felt compelled to write the truth even when they didn’t always understand.”

“I have to admit, you are making a strong case. I have never thought about the gospels that way. I do appreciate you giving me some good evidence that these men were credible instead of just asking me to believe because it’s in the Bible. But I still think that despite all this evidence, the very fact that the gospels contain miracles is proof that they aren’t reliable.”

### **Miracles and Myths**

“Why is that?” Paul probed.

“In the stories about Jesus, you have him doing impossible things like walking on the water, performing miracles, rising from the dead. With the scientific advances that we’ve made, it’s just not reasonable to believe that miracles are possible. So it makes sense to assume these things are myth.”

Paul smiled, “Let me ask you another question. You seem to imply that because you understand science better than the people of Jesus’ day, you know that miracles can’t happen. In other words, you believe that science has disproved miracles, is that correct?”

I nodded.



“But think about it, science is simply the observation of what *usually* happens. A miracle, by definition, is an event that is contrary to what usually happens, so how can science disprove a miracle?”

“Science has shown that miracles are impossible.”

“How?” Paul asked.

“Because we know that miracles have never happened.” I said, slightly annoyed.

Paul kept coming, “But how do you know that miracles have never happened? Have you talked to every person who ever lived? How do you know that the reports of miracles are untrue? It seems like you think that miracles are impossible because they never happen. But the only way you can be confident that miracles have never happened is because of your belief that miracles are impossible. That sounds like faith without evidence.”

“But we know more about natural laws. These laws can’t be suspended. You can’t turn gravity on and off.”

“You think these laws can’t be suspended?” asked Paul. He drank the last bit of coke from his glass and held it over the table. “If I drop this glass, gravity will pull it to the table, correct?”

“Yes.”

Paul dropped the cup, but just before it shattered on the table, Paul’s other hand shot out and caught the glass. “There,” he said, “gravity has been suspended. My hand has over-ruled the natural laws. A miracle.”

I rolled my eyes. “You have to be joking.”

But Paul was serious. “Not at all. If there is a God outside of nature, it is perfectly reasonable to think that he would be able to reach into our world and perform a miracle. If God can create this world of nothing, performing the miracles Jesus did would be easy. In fact, if God became a man, miracles would be strong proof of his divinity. So again I ask, what proof do you have that the miracles Jesus performed never happened? How do you know that Jesus was not who he claimed to be?”

I shrugged. “I just think it far more reasonable to conclude that Jesus was simply a good teacher than to think that he was God.”

“Why is that?”

“Because God becoming man is an impossibility.”

“Would you do me, and yourself, a favor by not ruling out the possibility of Jesus being God before we even look at the evidence? Because if he is God, this has some pretty serious implications!”

### **One God or Three?**

“Okay,” I began, “I believe it is impossible because God becoming man is incoherent. Supposedly Jesus is God *and* man. This makes him neither. If he’s man, then he has limitations and God is unlimited. It’s self-contradictory, like a married bachelor. It can’t be true.”

Paul answered, “You are right in the sense that the finite can

never enter the realm of the infinite. But why can't the infinite become finite? A character in a book could never enter the realm of the author. But the author can write himself into the book. Can't you see how it is theoretically possible for a character to enter the limitations of being in the book and still be fully aware and unlimited in his realm?"

"Interesting proposition. That would be possible, but here is an even tougher objection. It is your notion of the Trinity. You claim there is one God, right?"

Paul nodded.

I asked, "And you claim Jesus is God? You also claim the Holy Spirit is God. Which is it? One God or three?"

"There is only one God, but within this Godhead there are three persons."

"You can't just disguise your irrationality with fancy word play!"

"I'm not. I'll admit the Trinity goes beyond our understanding; it is not something we can grasp with our finite minds. But it is not, as you put it, a logical contradiction."

"Yeah?" I prompted.

Paul went on. "If we claimed there is one God *and* three Gods, that would be a contradiction. But God is one in essence and three in person. In other words, one *what* and three *who's*."

"But that seems so ridiculous – so far beyond me."

"This is exactly what you would expect if it was from an infinite God. The fact that it is so hard to grasp could even be seen as a proof that it is not a man-made doctrine. But let's get back to your objection that God becoming man is impossible. You really don't have proof for that assertion, do you?"

I didn't, so by implication it was possible. And if that was the case, I had better examine the evidence.

### **Was he just a good moral teacher...**

"So you have demonstrated that God becoming man is not an impossibility," I said. "But that's a long way from proving Jesus was God," I said. "I think he was just some thoughtful rabbi, a good moral teacher."

Paul's eyes narrowed, "That is not an option, and here's why. One of the facts about Jesus that we have to deal with is his claim to be God. This claim removed him from the category of the great moral teachers. Don't get me wrong: If he truly was God, that would make him the greatest moral teacher who ever lived. But if he is not God, there is no way He could be classified as great moral prophet."

"Why not?" I asked.

"Think about it! This claim only leaves us with three options. One, he knew he wasn't God, and still claimed to be. If this is the case, he was a liar of the cruelest order, asking people to die for him when he

knew he had nothing to offer them. The second option is that he wasn't God but thought he was, making him a lunatic. And to believe that you are the creator of the world and the one who will be the final judge of men's souls is no small delusion."

"That's for sure," I half-laughed.

Paul carried on, "The final option is that He was God in the flesh and *he knew it*. So you see, Skip, he can't simply be a good moral prophet, because if he lies so wickedly to deceive men, he can't be good and moral. And if he is so deluded about reality he can't even get his own identity straight, he can't be a reliable teacher. In short, Jesus is either a cruel demon of a liar, a hopelessly deluded lunatic, or he really was who he claimed to be - the Lord of the Universe."

I had heard this line of argument before and I was ready to challenge it on several levels. I answered coyly, keeping my cards close to my chest. "I guess when faced with those options, I would have to think that Jesus was a lunatic."

Paul didn't get defensive. Instead, he asked another question, "Ok, let's look at this option. Why do you think Jesus was insane?"

"What more evidence do you need than the fact that He claimed to be God?"

Paul smiled. "You are assuming again that he wasn't God. His *claim* to be God is what we are discussing, so you're going to need some evidence outside of this claim."

I demanded, "But why? If a man walked into this dinner and claimed to be God, why would you immediately assume that he was severely deluded and yet give Jesus a free ride? What's the difference?"

"That is exactly the point!" Paul said emphatically. "People who claimed to be God have a divinity complex, and those who have this complex all share several characteristics. They're very boring, they recite old clichés, they have no new insight into life, and they are stuck on themselves, really believing that the world revolves around them. When you meet someone so deluded, you feel uncomfortable around them because they seem so inferior to you, you feel pity for them. They don't inspire you and they don't impress."

"I hear you," I said. "I've met some people like this. Poor souls. But how does this prove Jesus wasn't insane?"

"Skip, none of these characteristics of lunacy describe Jesus. Jesus was not boring. Instead of old clichés, Jesus taught with an authority that astounded people. His insight into life and morality has continued to be admired by saints and philosophers alike. Jesus also showed a tremendous grasp of logic when his enemies tried (and failed miserably) to trap him with difficult dilemmas. And instead of being a narcissist, or self-serving, Jesus was the quintessential example of self-sacrifice. He came not to be served but to serve. Jesus never used his claim to deity for selfish gain. And finally, no one felt for Jesus the uncomfortable pity

one feels for a lunatic. People either felt terror, hatred, or adoration. Jesus demonstrated a firm grasp of reality that has never been seen to quite the same degree in anyone else. To call Jesus a lunatic reveals ignorance about Jesus or lunacy in general.”

Paul stopped to let me think about it for a bit and finished eating the last bit of his sandwich.

I had to concede that whoever Jesus was, he certainly wasn't crazy, at least not in the normal sense of the word. But I was nowhere near conceding that He could be God. From what I knew about the teachings of Jesus, I knew that he had a tremendous intellect. Perhaps that's what it was. I regrouped and formed another argument.

### **... or brilliant fraud?**

“Okay, Paul, I admit it does seem a bit ridiculous to call Jesus a lunatic. But what seems far more plausible than Jesus being divine is that Jesus was simply brilliant and that he pulled off one of the most fantastic hoaxes of all time.”

Paul shook his head. “There are many problems with such a theory. The first one is motive. When accusing someone of fraud, you always have to look for a motive. What motive would he have had?”

I thought for a moment. “Power, maybe, or a large following.”

“Exactly,” Paul pounced on it. “The only reason you attempt such a fraud is for earthly gain. But if this is what Jesus was after, why did he refuse when they tried to crown him king? Why did he make things difficult for those who wanted to follow him? If his motive was for selfish gain, he would have recanted at the cross. Instead, he made no effort save his own life. He was determined to fulfill the mission for which he was sent.”

I was still processing this, while Paul plowed ahead. “Second, if Jesus was trying to pull off a hoax, he attempted it in the wrong part of the world. The Jews were strict monotheists; there is no way they would have been sucked in by such a ‘lie’ that Jesus was God Himself. In fact, that is why they crucified Jesus – for blasphemy.”

“Hmm, good point.” I mused.

Paul continued, “Third, to bring yourself to commit such an evil fraud would require you to have a seriously impaired conscience. You would think little about making compromises or using people to achieve your goal. Yet Jesus was completely the opposite. Jesus made himself the servant of all. Far from being power-hungry, Jesus refused the offer to be made king. He never accumulated wealth or demanded respect. Sure, he required that those who would follow him obey a strict moral code and lay down their lives for his service, but he always left the final choice with his disciples. He always gave those who followed him freedom to walk away, and he himself set the ultimate example of laying his life down. When they arrested him and He stood before the Jewish council, He did not use his divine status as a reason he should be allowed to live,

yet he also didn't deny it, even though claiming to be God cost him his life. Does this sound like a self-serving, power-hungry conspirator?"

I shook my head, silenced by the force of this argument.

"Skip, no one could convict Jesus of sin. He lived an impeccable life. In Jesus' entire life, no one was ever able to convict him of a single sin. There is not another person that I know of in history who does not have a record of sin. Jesus taught the highest moral order ever known and called himself the Truth. The Jewish leaders failed in their attempt to convict him of true wrongdoing. It was only the claim to be God that got him killed. The Jews made the same mistake that many make today: They ruled out the possibility that Jesus' claim could be true. I think it is simply absurd to accuse the man who taught and lived by the highest ethical standard, of lying about his own identity and not recanting even in death."

I stared out the diner window at the darkening street. What Paul was saying was making sense. I was getting uncomfortable. Time for more questioning.

### **Did Jesus really think he was God?**

I suggested, "Maybe Jesus didn't really claim to be God. Perhaps his followers simply misunderstood him?"

"If Jesus was not God, being the humble servant that he was, he would have gone to great lengths to make sure people knew he was not God. Yet he never denied that he was God, even when it was that claim to deity that got him killed! They didn't crucify him for being a good moral teacher. He was sentenced to death on charges of claiming to be God. If he didn't see himself as God, then all he had to do was deny it and his life would have been saved. Skip, if he never claimed to be God, what got him killed?"

"Hmm, that is a good question. I'm not sure."

Paul continued earnestly, "It wasn't just that he didn't deny it. He did several things that demonstrated that *he* believed he was God."

"For instance?"

"Jesus allowed people to worship him."

"So?! We have celebrities who love being worshipped."

"But, remember, Jesus was a devout Jew. To the Jewish mind, God alone is to be worshipped. Jesus also forgave sins; this in itself is not significant. It is a common thing to forgive someone when they commit a sin against you, but Jesus forgave the sins of people He had never met before. He took the place of God by forgiving these sins. He also identified with God by choosing twelve disciples just like God chose the twelve tribes of Israel. Jesus also claimed the divine prerogative of being the final judge. In one of his parables, he claims that he will be the one who determines men's final destination of heaven or hell."

I was feeling overwhelmed but needed to know more. "You said that Jesus never denied being God, but did he ever explicitly state that

he was God?”

“He did when he claimed to be one *with* God. He also said he was the ‘I AM’, a term which the Jews understood to be the name of God. I think the evidence is very clear that Jesus both claimed and understood that he was God.”

I felt like the diner was getting smaller. Paul picked up his metaphorical battering ram again. The guy was unbelievable!

### **Jesus is Unique!**

“Skip, let me ask you another question. How many other people can you think of who taught and lived by such a high moral code and yet also claimed to be God?”

I couldn’t think of any. In fact, the people I could think of – Moses, Confucius, Plato, Billy Graham – they all would have been deeply offended if anyone worshipped them as God.

Paul continued, “See, we could say there are four categories of people. The first group of people are those who don’t claim to be God, but neither do they exhibit great wisdom or moral insight. Most of the world falls into this category. The second group of people is those who don’t claim to be God yet have great wisdom, profound insight into life, and moral character. There aren’t many in this group but Moses, Socrates, and Solomon come to mind. The third group contains those who claim to be God, but don’t have the wisdom or the moral character to back up this claim. In this category are lunatics and liars such as the Pharaohs, the Caesars, and other dictators. There is only one other category. It is those who claim to be God and also have the wisdom, insight, and moral character to go with it. There is only one person in the history of the world who fits that category.”

“But what about the eastern gurus who claim to be God and also have great wisdom and insight, people like Deepak Chopra?”

“When the eastern mystics claim to be God, they only do so in the pantheistic sense that all is God. They don’t believe that God is a person with a mind and a will; they only believe in an impersonal force.”

“Well how do you know that when Jesus claimed to be God he didn’t mean it in this pantheistic sense? I did hear someone suggest that Jesus traveled to India before he started his ministry.”

“There is no evidence for that. Jesus was a Jew, so his claim has to be understood in context. Plus, Jesus taught several things that don’t fit into a pantheistic understanding of the world, things like creation, a relationship with God, forgiveness of sins, etc. Jesus remains alone in that fourth and final category.”

“That’s interesting, but I’m still not convinced,” I said with some swagger, but inwardly I was in turmoil. If this Jesus wasn’t God, He was history’s biggest mystery. But history’s biggest mystery still made more sense than calling Jesus God. This Jesus was rapidly becoming an

enigma. I was not enjoying this feeling of have my ideas mowed down. I much preferred my radio conversations where I could hit a button and cut the person off before I lost an argument. However, another part of me wanted to continue and know the truth about this significant man.

### **It all hinges on the resurrection**

I ran my fingers through my thick, wavy black hair, “Paul, I still need some convincing on this Jesus-being-God thing. I just can’t bring myself to believe that a man could also be God.”

“I understand. I was the same way. I thought it was blasphemy to believe that Jesus was God. I had heard about Jesus’ miracles and his claims, but I still didn’t believe. I needed more than claims to know that Jesus was God. It was the same for the disciples, It wasn’t any easier back then to believe that a man was God. When Jesus died, not one person thought that he was God, and they had all the evidence that I gave you. No, it was one other thing that combined with everything else that inspired the world-changing revolution. In fact, even with all I’ve told you, Jesus’ identity still is vindicated or proven a fraud based on this one thing.”

“What was that?” I asked.

“His resurrection from the dead.”

“Really?” I asked surprised. “You are really willing to risk your case for Christ’s deity on the resurrection? It seems to me that it would make more sense to try and convert people based on Jesus’ teachings than on a miracle like the resurrection. Why would you be willing to do that?”

Paul answered earnestly, “Christianity is not just a new set of morals or unique insight into life. It is a relationship with a living Jesus Christ, who is God-become-man. Christianity is a hope of eternal life, victory over death. This hope is based on the proof that God gave us, the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

“Skip, if Christ is still in the grave, Christianity is a fraud, it is nothing more than an empty set of propositions. The Christians who have given their lives for this Jesus are to be pitied more than all men because they died for a lie. *But*, if Christ is risen, if the resurrection is a historical reality, then Christianity is true, Jesus is alive, and his teachings about God and the afterlife are true.”

I sat in silence, mulling over the implications of what Paul said. I have had a lot of discussions with people dismissing the idea that a man could rise from the dead, but I never realized how much was at stake. In fact, I had never seriously considered the possibility that the Easter myth could have actually happened. I was ready to give the idea some serious scrutiny.

I started with all modesty, “Paul, do you realize that I am one of the foremost authorities on proving that the resurrection never happened? Did you know I just finished a show on that subject?”



“Yes, and I wanted to talk to you about that. I thought your evidence was rather weak.”

“Okay, since you have already heard some of my thoughts on the subject, why don’t you give me your case that Jesus actually rose from the dead?”

“I would love to.”

### **Did Jesus actually die?**

“Great, but Paul, before you begin we have to settle something. If Jesus didn’t actually die, all your other evidence for his being alive becomes meaningless. So tell me how you know Jesus even died on the cross? I mean, I know the story, and Pilate and everybody were surprised when they saw how quickly Jesus died. Don’t you think its possible Jesus just passed out and they mistook it for death? Then when he revived in the tomb he decided to play up this whole resurrection bit.”

“Skip, it’s not that hard to kill someone, especially when you make your living killing people, and when you know that bungling an execution could cost you your life. This was the plight of the Roman soldiers who crucified Jesus. Yes, they were surprised that he was dead already, so one of the soldiers pierced Jesus’ heart with a spear. If he had just passed out, that spear would have killed him. Pilate had him examined to make sure he was dead. Then his friends embalmed and carefully wrapped his body in burial clothes. Don’t you think if he was still living, they would have noticed and tried to resuscitate him?”

I nodded.

“There’s more,” Paul continued, “Jesus had lost a lot of blood. He had his shoulders dislocated, and his feet had spikes driven through them. His back and legs were ripped to shreds. He was a mess. Even if by some crazy means there was still a spark of life in him, he would have died very quickly in the tomb. But your case gets worse. Again, even if he did somehow survive till Sunday morning, and remember, the possibility of this is less than 0 %, he wouldn’t have had the strength to open the tomb from the inside. And if he somehow did that, the guards would have killed him. And if...boy, this is really ridiculous by now – if Jesus did get by the guards and came to the disciples, do you think that looking at the weak, bloody mess of a man would have inspired them to come out of hiding and hail this pitiful man as the conqueror of death?”

I had to admit it was ridiculous, but then again, so was the whole idea of a resurrection.

### **Empty tomb?**

“Okay so he was actually dead, I’ll grant you that, but what’s your evidence that he was alive?”

“The first piece of evidence is the empty tomb.”

I had to jump in, “I know you Christians get all excited about the fact that the tomb was empty. Well, there are many theories that explain that empty tomb that are more plausible than the simple cop-out answer



that Jesus rose from the dead. How do you even know there was a tomb? I've read that most crucifixion victims were simply thrown into large pits. So some wild dogs ate the body – that explains the missing body. Then perhaps the church simply made up the whole tomb legend to add credibility to the resurrection myth.”

Paul was unflappable. You've raised some good points, but your ideas have several difficulties...”

I couldn't resist, “And yours don't? If we're going to going to settle this debate by tallying up difficulties, I'll win hands down, don't forget what you're suggesting- that a dead man came back to life!”

Paul just smiled. “Before we go any further, I need to make something clear. I'm not suggesting the resurrection happened by some fluke of nature with no outside help. I admit, that if there is no power outside the universe, if the material realm is all there is, then you are right, any explanation is more plausible than the resurrection. But if there is a God, then that changes the probability factor immensely. So before you rule out the resurrection on philosophical grounds, let's examine the history. Okay?”

I nodded thoughtfully. Paul continued, “Now, back to your made-up-tomb theory. First, Jesus was no ordinary criminal; He was a beloved rabbi who had amassed a large following. The Jews were very respectful of the human body and would have sought to make sure Jesus received a proper burial. Second, the Jewish tradition states that the disciples stole the body. If there was no tomb, and Jesus was eaten by wild dogs, then there would be no reason to complain about the disciples stealing the body. Third, the gospels state that Jesus was laid in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea. This is noteworthy because Joseph was a member of the Jewish judicial court (the Sanhedrin) that condemned Jesus to death. This was not a popular group with the early Christians. If the tomb story was made up, it is unlikely the church would have picked a member of the enemy to portray as the hero. Finally, all the empty tomb accounts have women discovering the empty tomb...”

“Okay?” I cut in.

Paul explained, “Society in the time of Jesus had an extremely low view of women. Women were seen as habitual liars. A man could not be convicted on the testimony of a woman. So, again if the tomb story is a hoax, you most definitely are not going to make up the fact that women discovered the empty tomb. This fact hurts your credibility. I think when you put the evidence to together, there is a strong case to be made that not only was Jesus laid in a tomb, but also that the tomb was found empty later. So my question for you is, what happened to the body?”

“Look, I admit I don't know... maybe the women went to the wrong tomb?” I felt foolish even suggesting that.

“Yeah, and unfortunately for the Jews and the Romans who wanted to squash Christianity, they couldn't find the right tomb either.

You know, Skip, all the Jews would have to do is to parade the dead body through the streets and that would have been the end of Christianity.”

“Actually, that is another thing. The way I understand it, Christianity didn’t really take off till at least forty days after he died. By that time the body would have decomposed so much it wouldn’t have been recognizable.”

“I’ve heard that objection before and you’re right, there’s a lot of characteristics that would be unrecognizable. But the height of the person, the hair color, the wounds from the crucifixion, there would have been enough left to identify Jesus and cast doubt on the whole thing.”

**Look, a hoax is possible. A resurrection isn’t.**

“Okay, I think you’ve convinced me that Jesus died, and that He was laid in a tomb, and the body mysteriously disappeared, but what about the possibility that disciples stole the body?”

“Why would they have done that?” Paul asked.

I replied, “They wanted to prove that Jesus was who he said was. They remembered the prophecy about the resurrection, so they stole the body and then proclaimed a risen Lord!”

“So, your theory is that the resurrection was simply a hoax? The disciples fabricated the whole thing?”

“Absolutely,” I said emphatically. “I always say go with the theory that makes more sense. The way I see it, a resurrection is impossible, or should I say, extremely unlikely. On the other hand, a fabrication isn’t. It happens all the time. So I think it is far more reasonable to conclude that this was a hoax.”

“You posited a hoax theory. This theory does not hold water. It is full of holes.”

“Like what?”

Paul explained, “You have eleven scared men who are in hiding. When Jesus was arrested, these men fled. Peter denied that he even knew Jesus. The disciples thought that because Jesus died on a cross he was cursed by God.”

“What do you mean?”

“These men were Jews. They would only be faithful to a man whom they believed had God’s blessing. They were not going to follow a man simply for his own sake. They knew that they would have to face God on judgment day. Their first priority was to God. They thought the cross was a sign that God was against Christ.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because in their Scriptures, God said, ‘Cursed is anyone who hangs on a tree.’ So they gave up on Jesus. They were very confused and in despair because the one who had claimed to be the Life was now dead. These men were in no frame of mind to come out of hiding, steal the body, and then proclaim a risen Lord!”

That was a point I hadn’t considered.

Paul kept coming at me with more. “Next you have to look at motives. What did they gain from such a lie? They were tortured, imprisoned, lost the support of friends and family, became social outcasts, and, finally, they died for this cause. Not exactly good reasons for keeping up a hoax, especially when you consider that life would have become easier for these men if they had come clean. Ten of these men were killed because they insisted on proclaiming that Jesus was God and that He rose from the dead. Not one of them said, ‘Wait! I was only kidding about this whole resurrection thing. I’ll show you the body!’ Skip, people will die for a lie, but not for what they *know* to be a lie.”

I knew he was right. In this light, my hoax theory was looking pretty weak. I reviewed my position. Paul had given me pretty irrefutable evidence that Jesus truly died, and this ruled out the swoon theory. Jesus’ tomb was empty. The people who wanted Christianity proven false obviously didn’t have the body or they would have shown it. And the disciples didn’t take the body because they had no motive to, plus no one in all the turbulent years following ever admitted fraud. I was running out of options, but I wasn’t about to give up.

**A missing body still doesn’t prove a resurrection!**

“Look, maybe someone like Joseph of Arimathea took the body. Or maybe the disciples went to the wrong tomb. Who knows? Maybe some wild lion took the body!” With bravado I added, “A missing body does not prove a resurrection!”

“No, you’re right, it doesn’t. But it wasn’t just the empty tomb that transformed the disciples from timid cowards into bold courageous men who transformed the world! Rather, it was seeing and touching the risen Christ that made the difference. There are a couple more critical pieces of evidence.”

Paul swallowed the last of his refilled Mountain Dew and continued. “First, let me ask you a question.”

“Fire away.”

“Skip, what would it take to convince you that your brother was God?”

Now *that* was ridiculous. “That guy may think he’s God the way he bosses me around, but he certainly is no God! But what’s your point?”

“James, the brother of Jesus, was embarrassed by him. I’m sure it was tough living with a perfect brother who claimed to be one with God, but something happened that changed James’ mind. The Jewish historian, Josephus, records that James ended up dying for his belief that Jesus, his brother, was God! It took a whole lot more than an empty to tomb to convince him of that! It was the physical appearances of Jesus that transformed these men. When they saw that Jesus had power even over death, and that his claim to be God was vindicated, they realized that death was no longer something to be afraid of. They took to heart Jesus’

exhortation about not fearing men who can destroy the body, but rather God who can destroy the soul.”

### **Hallucinations?**

“But don’t you think it was more likely that these appearances were mere hallucinations?”

“Jesus appeared to over five hundred people at once! Five hundred people don’t have the same dream! Look, suppose all of the men and women who saw the resurrected Christ were brought before the jury in a court of law, and you cross-examined each of them for ten minutes. If you did this for eight hours a day, you would have over ten days of testimony!

Paul went on, “But one of the biggest problems with the hallucination theory, is that you only hallucinate what you expect to see. It could be argued that one of the disciples under the extreme grief and stress could have hallucinated seeing Christ. But that doesn’t account for the conversion of the skeptical James or the apostle Paul.”

### **Mistaken identity?**

“Then perhaps the appearances were done by some imposter who looked like Jesus, maybe an identical twin.”

Paul smiled, “The look-alike theory doesn’t account for the empty tomb. Also, if it was an imposter the hostile Jews would have exposed it. James, the brother of Jesus, would not have been fooled by an imposter. And if the “resurrected Christ” were only a mere man masquerading as the risen Lord, rather than be transformed, Paul would have killed him!”

I said, “Wait just a second, Paul. Maybe these appearances were simply legends that crept into the story over time. This happens all the time. Given enough time, you can turn anyone into a miracle-performing superman.”

“You said it, Skip, legends take time to formulate. You have to wait till the men who saw the person in question die out, so they can’t refute your claim. But secular historians record that people were dying for the belief that Jesus was God in the area that Jesus lived and died, and within a few decades of Jesus’ death.”

### **The Resurrection: a plagiarized myth?**

I took a long slow suck on my chocolate shake, then wiped the corners of my mouth. “Paul, let’s look at this thing from a slightly different angle. I think that the whole resurrection story is a cheap plagiarizing of pagan myths. I’ve read that this theme of dying and rising gods was quite common in ancient mythology. In some of these myths the god is born to a virgin, has twelve disciples, does miracles, and ascends into heaven and is coming back again.”

“You sound like a meticulous internet researcher. If the info comes from a www-dot-com it must be true, eh?”

“Cut the garbage, Paul, I take this info with a grain of salt. Don’t

sidestep this issue.”

“Okay, did your research also show that all but one of these dying and rising god stories only appear after Jesus’ resurrection?”

“What about the Egyptian myth of Osiris, that was before Christ?”

“That is the only one that predates Christianity, and it hardly seems like a close parallel. Osiris is chopped up into fourteen pieces and his wife can only find thirteen so instead of a resurrection, Osiris becomes the lord of the underworld. As far as the myths that closely parallel the life of Jesus, I do think that there is plagiarizing going on, but I think it was the pagans doing the stealing, not the other way around. Or perhaps people tried to blend the stories of Jesus with their own gods.”

“But why should we reject these other stories as myth but not the story of Jesus?” I asked.

“Look, I’ve already given you the historical evidence for Christ,” Paul patiently explained. “In contrast, these myths are written hundreds of years after the character supposedly lived, so there is no eye-witness testimony, and there are not multiple independent sources to verify these stories, as there are with the Gospel accounts.”

### **Did the Church tamper with the text?**

“Paul, I just don’t think we can really trust the New Testament as much you would like. I still think you are giving way too much credence to the New Testament writings. I’ve read that the Catholic Church has really tampered with the text. I’ve also read that the church only chose the Gospels that made Jesus look like he claimed to be God and then doctored them up.”

“You know, I have done a ton of reading about Church History and have found it fascinating! But my question to you would be, when did the Church make these changes?”

I answered, “When Christianity became the state religion of Rome, under Constantine.”

“Then, are you aware that we have complete copies of the New Testament that date back to before Constantine?”

“Uh, no,” I said.

“And were you also aware that we have more than 5000 Greek manuscripts of the New Testament, and over 19,000 manuscripts written in other languages? These manuscripts can be compared side by side and by examining the ages of the manuscripts and where they came from, we can reconstruct, with a high degree of certainty, what the originals said.”

“But I’ve read that these manuscripts contain hundreds of thousands of variations. How in the world can we hope to know which are authentic?”

“I’ve read that too,” Paul agreed, “but that statistic is a misnomer because of the way these variations are counted and also due to the enormous number of manuscripts. Slight spelling errors or omitted

words all count as variations. In fact, differences in spelling make up 70 to 80 percent of the variations. Even still, textual critics say that over 96 percent of what the original New Testament said is not in doubt. And not a single doctrine rests on the 4 percent that is in doubt. By the time Constantine came to power there would have been too many copies in circulation to make changes.”

“That is impressive,” I admitted, “but I still think it’s possible that the Church embellished Jesus to make him claim to be God and rise from the dead.”

Paul’s eyes narrowed, “Skip, there is a real chicken or egg fallacy in that idea. If Jesus was a mere man who never claimed to be God, who never rose from the dead, how then did the church even come into existence? Where did the idea come from that Jesus was God?”

Paul got more and more animated as he kept hitting me with an unreal barrage of questions. “Look, in the first century there were many who claimed to be the messiah. During their lives they amassed a following, but when these counterfeit messiahs died, their followers disbanded, and the movement came to an end. How do you account for the emergence of the early church? It wasn’t for money or power, because joining the church meant a loss of these things. How do you account for the transformation of the disciples from cowards in to fearless world changers? How do you account for the transformation of Paul from bitter antagonist to staunch defender? It simply will not do to suggest that the church is responsible for turning Jesus into the God-Man. Such an assertion needs to give an explanation of the origin of the church.”

I sat there stunned. I had few answers at this point and my head was beginning to hurt. Paul let me regroup for a moment, and then moved in for the kill.

### **Five historical facts**

“You reject the gospels as unreliable, even though a strong case can be made that it is very reliable. We have enough copies to be able to accurately reconstruct the originals. Impressive evidence from archeology suggests that gospels were written within 20-40 years after Jesus’ death, far too little time for legend to corrupt them. And they are full of the earmarks of men who are passionate about telling the truth, even when it hurts. But, you can make a strong case for the resurrection even apart from the gospels.”

“Really?” I asked somewhat skeptical.

“I went over most of these before, but for the sake of review there are five key facts that can be established with a high degree of historical certainty even without the gospels. **The first one is that Jesus died by crucifixion.** Paul’s writings testify to this as do several other non-Christian sources. There really isn’t much of a debate here historically. **Second, Jesus was laid in a tomb that was later found empty.** This is confirmed by the fact that the Christianity began in Israel, where Jesus

was laid. If the body was still in the tomb, it would have squashed the budding church. The fact that the Jewish Talmud accuses the disciples of stealing the body also strongly implies that the Jews themselves didn't know where the body was. **Third, the disciples believed that Jesus appeared to them.** Paul records in his epistle to the Corinthians that he received a creed when he joined the church few years after Jesus' death. This creed states that Jesus appeared to Peter, the Twelve, James, to 500 people, and then Paul adds that Jesus appeared to him as well. This creed dates to within a few years of Jesus' resurrection, not near enough time for legend to creep in. **Fourth, James the skeptical brother was converted,** and died for his faith. Remember Josephus records this. **Finally, the conversion of the Apostle Paul,** which is one of the most heavily documented facts of Christianity. When you put it all together, the only explanation that accounts for all five of these facts is the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Imposters and hallucinations can't account for the empty tomb, nor for the conversion of James and Paul. And the hoax theory doesn't account for the disciples' willingness to be martyred, or again, the change in James and Paul. Skip, let me ask you again, what do you think happened to the body?"

I sat there in silence. I had never felt the full force of these arguments so strongly. I was confused. I wasn't too sure what to make of things. Paul was chopping down the arguments that had formed my wall of protection against the claims and, more importantly, the requirements of Christianity. Funny how, a few hours ago, I was having no problem debunking the so-called resurrection myth, and now I couldn't find a way around these inescapable conclusions.

Finally, I spoke up, "I don't know. You've made a strong case that at least it's an unsolved mystery. But 'unsolved mystery' does not prove that Jesus is God!"

Paul sat in silence for a minute. He looked me in the eye; his look was so intense it was a wonder that his eyelashes weren't singed.

"Skip, this is not some random mystery, some unexplained occurrence. You have to look at the context of this resurrection event. The context is the life of Jesus Christ. Jesus stands alone in several categories. He alone fulfills the Old Testament prophecies. There are supernatural fingerprints all over his life. Jesus predicted his resurrection as a proof that his claims were true. Not too many people are willing to risk their credentials on a miracle of this magnitude. This is what sets Christianity apart from the other world religions. Moses is dead, Mohamed is dead, Confucius is dead, Joseph Smith is dead, Marx is dead. Only Jesus has conquered the grave. In my opinion this gives him more credibility and authority to speak for God than anyone else who has ever lived."

### **The Problem of a Human Sacrifice**

I sighed in surrender, "I'll admit, there is far more to this Jesus fellow than I had thought. But there is something about Christianity that

really bothers me.”

“What is that?”

“You Christians claim that Jesus is the Savior of the world. But how does that work? Let me get this straight. Humans are miserable down here on earth for thousands, some would say hundreds of thousands of years, starving to death, killing each other, getting desecrated by disease, then finally God does something about it, and God’s brilliant solution is a human sacrifice? What’s up with that?!”

“That, my friend, is a complex issue. We’ve covered a lot tonight. I think I’m too tired to give that subject the thoroughness it deserves. Is it okay if we meet here after work again tomorrow?”

“Absolutely!” I said, brushing some crumbs from my lap. I was mentally shot as well, but I definitely wanted to hear more.



## Part 2: The Hope of Christianity

Needless to say, I didn't have my same edge during my radio show the next day. I guess you could blame it on my lack of sleep. I spent most of the night wrestling with Paul's evidence. I had to admit this much – Jesus was in a category by himself. If Jesus really was God in the flesh, I wanted to know more of what he had to say about the meaning of life and why he came to earth. I wasn't ready to buy, but I was a lot more curious about the product.

Paul met me on schedule. We ordered and made very little small talk. After my heartburn the night before, I went for something a little easier on my esophagus and ordered a chicken salad, Paul was very enthusiastic about the milk shake and ordered a large strawberry shake.

While we waited for our food to come, I jumped back in, where we'd left off. "So Paul, why, in your opinion, did Jesus have to die?"

### **Man's basic problem**

"Skip, before you can understand a solution, you have to understand the problem. So let me first ask you a question. What is man's basic problem?"

"Hmm, that is a heavy question. There have been lots of ideas suggested. Some people think that if the wealth could be more evenly distributed, that would solve a lot of problems. I personally think that if we could get rid of religion that would solve even more problems."

"Get rid of religion? You mean like Hitler's Germany, and Stalin's Russia did? That led to the greatest loss of blood in the history of mankind. I'll admit that religion has done a lot of harm, especially the man-made religions, but I think man's problem is much deeper than religion or economics."

"You're probably right. This is one screwed-up planet; everywhere you look you see betrayal, envy, hatred, exploitation. Man acts just like an animal, except that's probably an insult to the animal kingdom."

Paul nodded, "You're right, something is very wrong. This is not the way this world was supposed to be."

"But Paul, what if there is no right 'way' this world was supposed to be? What if this whole planet is the result of some freak accident?"

Paul raised his eyebrows and shook his head, "I don't think that idea makes sense of the all the available data. I mean, we all have this strong sense of right and wrong. We are constantly telling other people what they should or shouldn't do, aren't we?"

"Yeah, but maybe this feeling of right and wrong is just the product of evolution. Perhaps the tribes that felt this moral obligation survived while the ones who didn't died out."

Paul looked at me sternly, "Look if there is no God, and this

world is just the accidental by-product of a cosmic burp, then you would be right. But, Skip, you need to be careful with that thought. If that is the case, then there is no real moral obligation in the world, and I don't think you can really live like that. I can't conclusively prove that there is real moral obligation in this world, but I do know that when people are wronged, they all feel very strongly that the action against them was truly wrong, not just something they didn't like. We all feel this hunger for justice, and we despair when it seems like there is no one to bring about justice. I think it is far more reasonable to conclude that this sense of justice is real, rather than a mere chemical imbalance."

I nodded thoughtfully. Paul continued, "And for everything that is lousy about this world, there are thousands of wonders and marvels, good things that can't be explained by a fluke accident. Things like the wonders of the human body, the miracle of human birth, the amazing sacrifices that humanity makes every day. To go along with the horrors and ugliness of humanity, there is also a tremendous beauty and nobility to man. I think the message Jesus taught makes sense of both aspects of humanity. Would you be interested in hearing what Jesus taught?"

"Sure," I said, as I shifted in my seat.

Paul also straightened, "I would love to tell you, but please keep in mind that for now I don't want to prove each point of Christianity; I simply want to tell you what the message of Jesus was, okay?"

"Sure, give it to me."

Just then, the waiter brought us our meals. Paul took a long slow suck on his shake. "Unbeatable!" He wiped his mouth. "Skip, Jesus taught that the world was created by God, and that mankind was created in the image of God. God created man to be in a relationship with him. God created everything good, which explains the wonders of this life. But God also gave man the power of choice. I guess he wanted man to enjoy real love. But for love to be real, it has to be volitional. Without the power of choice, mutual love is not possible. God could have created robots or puppets, but he didn't. He gave us choice."

"That was taking quite a risk, wasn't it? I mean the power of choice means you can make a bad choice." I said as I poured dressing over my salad. From the color of that chicken, it appeared I was also taking a risk.

"You're right, Skip. And that is exactly what happened. Man has made wrong choices, and we have suffered the consequences ever since. Jesus taught that God made this life to operate on certain principles. If these principles are followed, things will go smoothly. However, when the guidelines are ignored, chaos follows. Much of the chaos and ruin we see in this planet is our fault for going against God's design. Let me give you analogy. Let's take your vehicle for an example, in order for it to run smoothly, you have to follow the owner's instruction manual. If you put the wrong kinds of fuel in, or damage certain wires, your car won't work

properly. But is this malfunction the car manufacturer's fault?"

I shook my head.

"Exactly," Paul said. "It's your fault. It's the same way with traffic laws. In order for traffic to flow smoothly, people have to obey the traffic rules. If they don't there will be traffic chaos, there will be road rage, and frequent accidents. Is this the fault of those who built the roads? Or the way the traffic is laid out?"

"No, of course not."

"Do you see how, in both of those instances, the chaos and break down is caused by wrong choices and a refusal to follow the rules the designer built into the system? In the same way, God built a system for his creation. God designed a wonderful world for man to enjoy, but it had guidelines for the way life was supposed to be lived. Man used his free choice to rebel against God, and this has resulted in the social breakdown that we see. So just like in the traffic examples, the problem is not with the system, or with the designer; the problem lies with willful destructive choices, which Jesus called sin."

I swallowed a lump of what I thought was chicken and washed it down with a swig of water. "So, Paul, you're saying that the problem with the world is sin. Correct? So how does a human sacrifice fix the problem of our wrong choices?"

"I'm getting to that. Man's rebellion ruined our relationship with God."

I cut in, "How did it do that? Are you saying that God couldn't forgive our little mistakes?"

Paul frowned, "The problem is much deeper than that. God designed us to be in a relationship with him, which means that we have an incredible hunger and longing within us that can only be satisfied when we are in a right relationship with God. We were made to worship. Have you noticed the way people idolize musicians, actors, and celebrities?"

"Yes, and it has always puzzled me."

"This hunger to worship reveals our hunger for God. We were designed to find our identity, purpose, and sense of worth in our relationship with God. Apart from Him, nothing will ultimately satisfy. History has shown this repeatedly. Those who are fortunate enough to accomplish all that they set out for – wealth, power, and fame – find that in the end it doesn't satisfy. This hunger, this restless boredom with life, seems universal. People often try to drown out this feeling with work and pleasure. Those who can't drown out this emptiness often choose to end this life. C.S. Lewis argued something to the effect that it is reasonable to conclude that if we find a universal desire, there must be something that will satisfy it. We thirst, and find that there is such a thing as drink. We feel sexual desire and find that there is such a thing as sex. If we find a longing that nothing in this natural realm can satisfy, it must mean that that there is something more, perhaps in a supernatural realm, that can

satisfy it. Jesus taught that a relationship with God is what we are longing for.”

“I think that is a weak argument,” I said, eyeing my salad distastefully. “I mean, just because I have a desire to meet Superman does not mean that Superman exists. I also want to fly, but that doesn’t mean there are people who can!”

“No, it doesn’t, but those desires are not innate or universal. Those are conditioned desires. But this longing for something more seems to be universal. Even if people don’t admit it, their actions demonstrate this hunger. To also confirm this point is the fact that there are many people who have been satisfied by a restored relationship with God. Saint Augustine, who lived in the fourth century, was always hungry for more. He tried to satisfy this desire with licentious living. But he eventually found God and wrote in a prayer to him, ‘Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.’ Jesus invites us to be satisfied by God. But we can only be satisfied by God – when we are in a right relationship with Him, when He is in control of our life, and we are worshipping him. But since the rebellion, man wants to be in control of his own life.”

“Is there something wrong with that?”

“Yes, because it goes against the design of the universe. We did not create life; we have no life in and of ourselves. We are dependent on God, but in order to be in a life-giving, soul satisfying relationship, we have to be submitted to Him.”

“Why is that?” I asked.

“God designed the Creator-creature relationship to function with God as the one in charge. Our role as the created ones is to obey and be satisfied by him.”

“So are you saying God is some kind of control freak?”

Paul smiled and took another sip of his shake, “No, but like in the traffic illustration, things cannot go smoothly until people follow the laws. Skip, you have children right?”

“Yes, three of them.”

“Well, when you try to get them to eat healthy foods, or stay away from sharp knives, or not drink poison, are you being a control freak?”

“No, I guess not.”

“What motivates you to interfere with your kids and tell them what to do?”

“I do it because I love them and I want what is best for them.” I felt like I was being led into a logic trap.

“Exactly. Your children don’t always know what is best for them, so you give them rules. In that same way, God understands the way this life works, and the intricacies of life, far better than we do. His laws are for our good. When we violate them, we bring harm to ourselves, but we also bring harm to others. Our sinful choices have made a mess of

this planet.”

“I’ll agree with you there, but I’m still lost as to how a human sacrifice is supposed help all this.”

### **The holy goodness of God**

Paul held up his hands. “Patience, good friend. There is something else to this whole matter that you need to understand first, and that is the pure goodness of God. Jesus taught that God is completely untainted by evil, and that He hates evil.”

I looked up. “I thought God was love?”

“He is, and that is why he hates evil. Sin is not just some arbitrary fun that God doesn’t want us to enjoy; sin is destructive! It is because God loves mankind so much that He hates what destroys us. But God’s goodness also includes his justice, which means that he will judge the earth by a perfect standard. God has given us a conscience that warns us of punishment when we do wrong. Deep down, we know we have sinned and committed terrible crimes against God and our fellow man.”

I felt offended at this comment. “Hey, I wouldn’t say I’m a bad man. I know I’m not perfect, but I’m not a criminal.”

“Skip, when you evaluate your goodness, by whose standard do you judge yourself?”

“Well compared to some other guys I know, I’m pretty good.”

“Yes, but Jesus warned that a day is coming when we will all be judged, not by the standard of sinful humanity, but by the perfect standard of God. God has revealed his law in the Ten Commandments. That is the standard we will be judged by. Let me ask you some questions to see how you will do on judgment day.”

“Fire away,” I said with bravado.

“Have you ever lied?”

“Yes.”

“Have you ever used God’s name in vain?”

“Welllllll...yes.”

“Have you ever stolen anything?”

“May be some little things.”

“Have you ever looked with lust on a woman you were not married to?”

“Of course,” I said defensively, “who hasn’t?”

“Skip, we’ve only looked at four commandments, and by your own admission you are a lying, thieving, blasphemous, adulterer at heart. How well do you think you will do on judgment day?”

“Not very well if God is as harsh and nitpicky as you say He is!”

Paul let out a gentle sigh, and said firmly, “God is pure goodness. For him to overlook certain wrong deeds would make him less perfect.”

“I don’t follow.”

“Look at it this way. Who is the more loving father: the one

who is kind but firm with his children and doesn't allow them to lie or steal things, or the one who is seemingly loving but totally apathetic to the morality of his children, and lets them get away with whatever they want?"

"Well, obviously the first the father who is strict. But you can go too far the other way as well. It's a lousy father who beats his kids for picking their noses!"

"That is true, but sin is far more devastating than nostril-fishing. The two most common complaints against God are that He lets people get away with too much, and that He is too strict. When terrorists strike, or we hear about serial killers, people ask why God would allow this and why doesn't he bring such people to justice? But when anybody talks about hell or judgment day, the compliant becomes that God is too strict. Our problem is that we want justice but not for ourselves. We want God to judge based on *our* standard. But we are the created ones; we have no choice but to submit to God's standard. Just because we try to make ourselves feel better by comparing ourselves with others who are worse than us, does not change the fact that we are guilty. Can you imagine how you would feel if a man raped your daughter? But then the pervert pleads with the judge to be let go because he is not a serial rapist like the next guy. What would you think if the judge said, 'You know, you're right, and because I'm a loving judge, I'm gonna let you go.'"

I sighed, "I would think him a corrupt judge."

"There is another aspect here," Paul said. "Our problem is not just that God must punish sin, but also that our being in his holy presence reveals to us how sinful we really are. Just because we soothe our guilt by forgetting, doesn't mean these wrong actions are gone or that we are clean again. When we get close to God, we feel our guilt and we run from him. God is the one we need so we can live and be satisfied, but our guilt makes us run from him!"

Paul was gripped with a growing intensity, "Because we push God away, we lose more of his strength to do what is right and we move closer towards self-destruction. Look around, Skip. Parents are abusing and neglecting their children, husbands and wives are destroying each other. Teens are throwing away their lives with drugs and abusive relationships. Everywhere you look, you see pain and heartache because man has walked away from his Creator. Man has declared himself king, and is suffering the consequences. Do you see the problem? God is a righteous judge who, because of his own perfect goodness, must bring about justice. And we live in guilt and fear because we know we have done wrong, and our guilt is causing us to run from the only One who can bring healing – God!"

I sat there in silence. It was a bleak picture Paul painted. All my skepticism about the Bible and religion was hidden by this depressing view of humanity. "You're right, Paul; this is an ugly mess. Who can

save us from it?”

### **God's Solution**

“This is where the message of Jesus Christ becomes exciting. Man has totally messed up the beautiful world God created. But God in his mercy has begun the process of reconciling the world to himself through his becoming one of us. First he will reconcile all willing humans and then he will restore the entire universe. Jesus said His purpose of coming to earth was to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

“And how exactly did Jesus accomplish these things?” At this point I was feeling a genuine longing for some good news.

Paul leaned forward in his seat, apparently eager to tell me. “He is accomplishing these things in four ways. The first three He has already done, and the fourth He will do in the future.

#### **1. Jesus' teaching**

“The first way was His teaching. Jesus gave us the owner's manual instructions on how to live life.”

I broke in, “You mean God waited thousands of years before giving us the instructions on how to live?”

“No, actually God wrote these instructions in our heart. We have them written in our soul – we call it our conscience. This is why there is so much similarity in the moral codes of the different cultures. The problem was that man had ignored these divine laws and set up his own way of doing things. While Jesus walked this earth, he taught the kingdom of God or the rule of God. Jesus spent three and a half years explaining what a person who is reconciled to God will look like. Jesus warned against the things that sever our relationship with God, things like lust, infidelity, self-righteousness, covetousness, unforgiveness, worry, pride, insensitivity to others. He taught about things that bring us closer to God, such as humility, prayer, dependence on him, confession, gratitude, and trust. He also taught us that if we really love God, we will love humanity. He taught us what that love will look like: forgiveness, having a servant's attitude, self-sacrificing, fidelity, and treating others the way we want to be treated. Jesus' teachings are the instructions for how turn this planet around and restore harmony.”

I was feeling inclined to agree with much of those teachings, but I thought of some things I had been reading in my online skeptics' forum. “This sounds well and good, Paul, but didn't Jesus say he didn't come to bring peace, but a sword? And that he was going to turn father against son, and that whoever did not hate father or mother was not worthy of him? That doesn't sound like Jesus came to bring harmony!”

Paul didn't seem put off by my sharp question. “Jesus understood the root problem of humanity is our separation from God, who is the source of all goodness. The only way to restore this planet is for people



to be reconciled to God. When a person surrenders to the rule of God, he is going to have conflict with someone who is in rebellion to the ways of God. It's similar to an army; the only way it can be successful is if everybody is acting in accordance with the game plan of the general. If there is a rebel who is acting by his own agenda, he is going to be in conflict with everyone else. But the only way the regiment can be successful is not by seeking peace with the rebel at all costs, but rather by staying faithful to the course, even if it means letting go of the person who will not cooperate. Jesus knew that the only way to ultimately have peace on this planet was for everyone to be surrendered to the ways of God. He was realistic about the division this would cause. But history has borne this out, that when a family or a nation obeys the teachings of Christ, there is more peace and harmony."

"How can you say that, Paul? Don't you know your history?"

"I have been spending a lot of time studying it, yes."

"Then what about the crusades and the inquisitions? It seems like when the church is in control our freedoms dissolve and good people suffer."

Paul slumped in his chair like he had been hit. "I know, Skip. I've been saddened to read about how much damage has been done in the name of Christ. But you have to keep in mind that just because something is done in the name of a certain person, it does not mean that person is to blame. The crusades and the inquisition were in direct opposition to the teachings of Christ. He taught us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. Jesus was against the advancing his ideas by force. He taught that the only way to change a person was from the inside out. Even though there have been crusades done in the name of Christ, there have been far more examples of lives being transformed for the better when a person becomes a follower of Christ. I would encourage you to look at the teachings of Christ, and let him speak for himself."

## **2. Jesus' death**

Paul continued, "This brings us to the second thing Jesus did – his death on the cross."

"Finally! So, why do you think he died and what did he hope to accomplish?"

"Jesus' death accomplished many things, but Jesus said the primary reason for his death was to reconcile us to God. Like I said earlier, our willful rebellion and sinful acts have created a terrible separation from God. The cross brings atonement, or at-one-ment, to that rift."

"So how did it do that?" I asked curiously.

"Before we go on, I need to admit that much of *how* the atonement works is a mystery. There are several possible theories that attempt to explain it. Some see the Cross as God's way of defeating the power of Satan; others see it as an example to follow. Some see it as the ultimate demonstration of God's love, and that seeing the sacrifice Jesus



made softens our rebellious hearts. Each of these theories tells a part of the story but none of them are sufficient in themselves. But Scripture is very clear about what the cross accomplished. Jesus has defeated sin and death, destroyed the works of the Devil, and made it possible for us to be reconciled to God by taking away our sins.”

“How did he do that?”

“Jesus mysteriously became sin for us, and suffered all the guilt and fear and humiliation that being separated from God entails. On the cross, Jesus took our place. He, who had never committed a single crime or done anything wrong, felt the shame and bitter pain of being punished. The consequence of sin is death. By being crucified, Jesus took the consequences of the sins so we don’t have to.”

“Let me get this straight. You are saying that God punished Jesus so that we wouldn’t have to be punished? I thought you said God was just! How does punishing an innocent man satisfy God’s justice? Isn’t punishing the innocent immoral?”

“It is, but remember that Jesus was God in the flesh. The cross is not the Judge punishing an innocent bystander, but rather the Judge taking the punishment on himself.”

“I still don’t get it – why did Jesus have to die? Why couldn’t God just forgive us?”

Paul gazed down thoughtfully before responding. “Jesus wondered the same thing the night before he was crucified. In the garden of Gethsemane, he pleaded with God, ‘Isn’t there another way?’ But then he ended it by saying, ‘Not my will, but your will be done.’”

“But why did there have to be a death before God could forgive? I mean, doesn’t God tell us to just forgive?”

“Skip, when someone sins, damage has been done. If there is going to be restoration, someone will have to pay for the damages. For example, let’s say someone vandalizes your house and breaks all the windows. Now if you forgive the offender and let him off the hook, you still have to pay for the new windows. Similarly, if someone wrongs you – say they go around spreading slander about you – you have two choices. One, you can make that person pay. You hold a grudge until that person can restore your good name. The second choice is to forgive that person. In so doing, you absorb the damage into yourself. You will have to pay the cost of restoring your good name.”

Paul paused for a moment and stared out the window as he formulated another illustration, then continued. “Here is another way to look at it. Imagine you lived in a country that had strict laws of an-eye-for-an-eye. Let’s say you took a saw and cut off an innocent man’s arm. An arm is missing. The judge is benevolent and wants to see the arm restored. In order to replace the missing arm, another arm has to come from somewhere; it is going to cost someone dearly. Either you will lose the arm as justice demands or someone else will have to sacrifice one, or

the one-armed man will stay maimed. Now imagine that the judge offers to have his own arm sawn off so it can be attached to the one-armed man. The one-armed man is then restored, and you no longer have to lose your arm. But the one who really suffers the consequences is the judge. He is the one without an arm. I admit it is a crude and ugly analogy, but this is what Jesus did for us. Our sins have cut us off from God; they have severed our union with him. But, rather than brush us off and tell us to live with our stupidity, he took the consequences of our sins.

“When we sinned against God and our fellow man, we did great damage. Now God could have just forgotten about the whole thing and let it go. But then there would not have been restoration. We would be stuck in our sins, and our relationship with God would be forever ruined. But because God is love, He loves us with a tender love. He was not willing that we should stay ruined forever. He wanted to restore us. But restoring things is costly. The cross is the price God had to pay to restore us.”

“I’m afraid I still don’t get it,” I said. “I hear you saying that Jesus took the consequences of sins, but I look around and this is still one messed-up planet. There still seem to be plenty of consequences, so what exactly did Jesus accomplish?”

Paul answered, “Jesus said that he came to destroy the works of the Devil and to take away our sins. You see, Jesus taught that Satan exists and seeks to destroy us. The Bible teaches that Satan’s primary power is that of deception. Satan’s two most powerful and destructive lies are that sin is pleasurable and that God is not really good. When God chose the way he would die, he chose a very graphic and public form of execution. The Romans invented the cross to warn others of the consequences of what would happen if people rebelled against the state. Crucifixions took place along public roads so that many people would see it and be warned. When Jesus was crucified, he was in effect showing people the consequences of sin. We think rebellion against God is harmless because this is what Satan leads us to believe. But when we see the battered and broken body of Jesus we see sin unmasked. We see how destructive it is. On the cross Jesus faced the pain of betrayal, mockery, humiliation, injustice. He suffered because we had done wrong. But the cross also reveals that God is one who is truly loving. Jesus showed that God would rather die than live without us. Meditating on the cross has a profound moral influence on us and destroys the power of Satan’s lies. The cross is a powerful demonstration of God’s love.”

“So the cross defeated Satan by Jesus demonstrating God’s love for us?”

“Yes, but it was not just a demonstration of God’s love that the cross accomplished. If that was the case, then the cross would have been a waste. If a father said, “Son, I love you so much and to show it, I will kill myself.” Such a demonstration would be a needless waste. But if that father shows his love to his child by sacrificing his life to save his son

from a charging bear, such an act of self-sacrifice is heroic because the father was saving the son from a real problem. Jesus' death was more than a demonstration of love; it saved us from real consequences, and this is the other way the cross defeated Satan – it removed our sins. You see, once Satan tempts us to sin, he then torments us with the threat of God's rightful justice. Satan loves to point out that God's justice must be satisfied and that all sin must be punished. Our fear and guilt keeps us in Satan's clutches and prevents us from coming to God. But now that God has punished these sins and removed them by taking them upon himself, just like the judge who bore the cost of the restoration of the one-armed man, Satan can no longer torment us with the threat of future judgment. Jesus has taken our rightful punishment: he endured separation from God so that we don't have to!"

I responded, "Sorry, Paul, but I can't see how this supposed removal of our sins helps all that much."

"Actually," Paul said, "the implications of our sins being removed are rich and life-changing! Before our sins are removed, look at the predicament we are in. We feel guilt, because we know we deserve punishment. We feel fear and anxiety because we no longer see God as a loving Father who is in control, but as an enemy that we have angered. We feel shame and embarrassment before our Creator. We feel empty and meaningless, because we can no longer fulfill the purpose for which we were made - to enjoy God by worshipping him forever. Our guilt makes us hide from our Creator. We are like a boy who feels guilty and knows that he has a spanking coming, so he wants to hide. But when the threat is gone, he is free to enter his father's presence. This is what it is like in our relationship with God. Jesus lived a perfect life, and he offers us the most amazing, selfless deal imaginable. He offers to give us the rewards and benefits of the perfect life he lived and in exchange, he will take the consequences for the sinful life we have lived. Now that our sins have been removed, we can come before God with a clear conscience. We can look at the cross and know we are forgiven. God is no longer an enemy to be feared, but rather a loving Father. He offers you a clean slate."

"He'll do this for free?" I asked incredulously. "No strings attached? Man, if that is the case, you Christians must be the most dangerous people around, because you know that you can do whatever you want and you will be forgiven!"

"Oh no, Skip! You misunderstand. Jesus didn't die to give us free passes to sin! Yes, we are given a clean slate when we receive his free gift, but the gift is a restored relationship with God. In order to receive the rewards of Jesus' life, we have to give him our life. In other words, we have to die figuratively with Christ. It's called repentance. Before we meet Christ, we are living in rebellion, trying to be in control of our life. To become a Christian is to let that self-willed part of us die, and surrender to the authority of God. We resolve to live by the owner's

manual that Jesus taught us.”

“So you’re saying we are saved by good deeds?” I asked.

Paul quickly clarified, “No, and this is a critical point: there are not enough good deeds we can do to cancel out the bad deeds. Our problem is that we are cut off from God. And there is nothing we can do to fix that on our own. But Jesus solves the problem by taking away our sins and offering us a clean slate and brand new start. Because of what Jesus did, we can be reconciled to God. The broken relationship is fixed because of what Jesus accomplished.”

“So where do these good deeds you were mentioning fit in?”

“There is not a restored relationship with God until He is back in control. If we have not surrendered our life to God, we are still in rebellion – we are still cut off from God. Being truly surrendered to God means that we will seek to live the way He designed us to live. We will seek to obey Him in every area of our life.”

I objected, “Isn’t that kind of oppressive? It sounds like slavery to me!”

“It isn’t when you consider that God’s rules are for our good. The reason God commands us to do something is because we will be better off for doing it. And the reason God tells us to avoid certain things is because they will harm us.”

“I like the way you see it,” I responded, “but I still think you’re way out in left field. I remember when I was in college, while we were having a blast livin’ it up, and playing the field, if you know what I mean, there were these Christian kids who were so concerned about obeying God that they couldn’t have any fun!”

“Skip, as a parent you know there are times when you know better what is good for your children than they do. For example, when they want to stuff themselves on candy and ice cream, you know that that will make them sick and be hard on their bodies. The most loving thing you can do in that case is to prevent them from having all the fun that they want so they won’t damage themselves. But what you need to remember is that God is the one who created fun and pleasure. He is the one who gave us those desires. The good things we crave were God’s idea. He is the one who knows how to get maximum enjoyment out of something. Take sex for instance. God is very clear that sex is only to be enjoyed between one man and one woman in the context of lifelong commitment. These are his instructions so that sex will perform the function he designed it to have – to be a pleasurable glue that will keep a marriage together. A strong family requires a strong marriage. And a strong society requires a strong family unit.”

“I’ll grant you some of that,” I said shamelessly, “but I have had married sex and single sex, and I found it so much more fun and exciting as a single person.”

“Sin is often pleasurable, but it is short-term gain, long-term

loss. Just like gluttony may be fun in the moment, but I don't know too many obese people who love their body and the difficulties that come with carrying far too much weight around. Just like you have to deny your kids certain things for their benefit, God asks us to deny ourselves certain things for our long-term benefit. But even when we may evaluate disobedience to be more pleasurable than obedience, we have to keep in mind that the only thing that really satisfies is a right relationship with God."

I was squirming a bit inside and ready to change subjects. "Let's get back to the crucifixion; I really want to understand this. So you are saying that at the cross Jesus was simply removing our sins?"

### **3. Jesus' resurrection and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit**

"That is the primary thing accomplished at the cross, yes, but Jesus' death covered much more than just the clearing of our ledgers. Jesus didn't just die to save us from the punishment of our sins, but also from the sins themselves. I mentioned the fact that Jesus taught us how to live, and died to give us a clean start. But it would be a pretty bleak picture if this is where it ends. The problem is not just that we have messed up in the past, but that sin keeps us enslaved and causes us to do things that we hate. I'm sure no father who holds his newborn child wants to end up abusing his child, but so many do. No husband looks into the eyes of his new bride and wants to hurt her through infidelity, but infidelity happens all the time. Sin has a power over us that causes us to keep doing the things we hate. But the good news is that Jesus did not stay dead. On the third day he rose from the dead and conquered the power of sin. This is the third thing Jesus has done for us. His death and resurrection also gives us a pattern to follow in defeating sin."

"How so?"

"Jesus said that if anyone wanted to follow him he had to take up his cross. He wasn't talking about a life-long burden; he was talking about becoming like him in his death. His disciple Peter said that Jesus died to give us an example for *how to live*. If we want to find freedom from our sins, we must identify with Jesus' death. We must be crucified with Christ. Like I said earlier, when we become a Christian, we crucify the old part of us that was in rebellion to God. We repent, which means we change our mindset from that of 'I am the one in charge,' to that of humble surrender to God. Paul summed up what it means to be a Christian when he said that he was crucified with Christ and it was no longer Paul who lived but Christ who lived through him. To be a Christian means to be like Christ, one whose life motto is not 'my will be done,' but rather 'God's will be done.'"

### **Isn't unquestioning surrender to "God's will" dangerous?**

"Okay, time out," I interrupted. "Before you continue, I need something cleared up. This talk of surrender to God's will scares me. This mindless unquestioning commitment to do God's will has the potential

to cause such great harm and it has! It's this same attitude that leads to suicide bombings or doing other wicked things like offering up your children for sacrifice. I mean, if someone tells you that God said it, you now feel like you have to do regardless of whether it seems right or not. On the other side, there is no reasoning with a person who feels they are following God's will. I'll show you how morally bankrupt this system of ethics is by asking you a question: If God asked you to kill me, would you do it?"

"Skip, something you seem to have missed is that true obedience to God is not mindless or unquestioning. Jesus warned about Satan's ability to deceive us; he also warned that our own hearts are deceitful. Yes, we are to do God will, but we are also told to be discerning about what God's will actually is. God's moral will is not a mysterious arbitrary code only known to the spiritually elite and it is also not open to human opinion. God has made his will clear through our conscience, the Ten Commandments, and the teachings of Christ and the apostles. God knows how easily we are deceived and led astray. This is why He became one of us and why he left us a written record of his commands, so that we could objectively test whether an action is God's will or not. So for example, if I heard a voice that I thought was God telling me to kill you, I would first test this idea in light of the teachings of Christ. He said to love our enemies and said that those who live by the sword will die by the sword. The New Testament says that only the government has the right to kill, so in light of these teachings, I would choose not to kill you and ignore the voice as from Satan."

"Okay, I can live with that," I laughed. Then, growing serious again, "But I still think it is dangerous to submit to someone else's will rather than simply thinking for yourself. Look at history and how terrible it has been when the church is in charge of society! There is torturing and witch hunts and people getting burned at the stake."

Paul answered, "Look, I am not saying that anyone who says they are doing God's will is actually doing God's will. Quite the opposite! I agree with you that one of the worst sins is to do your own thing and then say that it is God's will and it is even worse to try to control people by telling them you have God's authority when you don't. The only time we have any God-sanctioned authority over another human being is when that authority is from God, such as a parent over a child or a government official over a civilian, and even then we are not free to use that authority any way we please but only as God has given us directions. Much harm has been done in the name of God. However, the real damage has been done when atheists have been in power. The godless regimes of Communism and Nazism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century were responsible for the deaths of almost one hundred million people! You say it is dangerous for someone who thinks they have God on their side because then they can do whatever they want, but this is exactly the mindset of one who

thinks there is no God. If a person does not believe in God, they believe they are accountable only to themselves, and they are free to do as they wish. With no threat of final justice or a future judgment day, the atheists' freedom to do evil will be unrestrained."

"Whoa there... are you saying that all atheists would become Stalins or Hitlers if they had the power?"

"Not at all," Paul explained, "Many atheists choose to follow their consciences and live respectfully. But someone who does not see himself accountable to God is potentially far more dangerous than the man who lives with the fear of God."

"But don't you think that even this whole idea that we can know God's will is rather arrogant and presumptuous?"

"Not if Jesus is truly God in the flesh. If this is the case, then Jesus' commands are the clearest expression of God's will and what is arrogant is to set up our own moral law when God has already revealed what his is."

I asked, "But how can we really know what God's will is, even if we want to surrender to it?"

"Skip, God is real and He promises to make his will clear to the person who really wants to know. Our problem is not that we don't know what is right but often that we *do* know – we just don't want to do it. But I need to make clear that this area of knowing God's will is not a mysterious process that relies on subjective, easily misunderstood inner feelings. No, the way to know God's will is to renew our mind and learn to think critically. It means reading and memorizing the commands of Christ and trying to understand how they apply to our unique situations. To really follow Christ and be reconciled to God is to surrender to God's revealed will and seek to obey it."

I raised my hand, as if in class, and asked, "So then are you saying that to become a Christian, all you must do is seek to obey God better? How is that different from the other religions? Isn't that what all religions teach: that to be saved we must become more ethical?"

"I'm glad you asked that. There are two main differences that set true Christianity apart from the other religions. The first is that we don't have to be anxious about whether we have done enough good deeds or whether we are good enough for God. When we surrender to Christ, we receive Christ's perfection. God did for us what we couldn't do for ourselves. We don't trust our good deeds to make us right with God; we trust the finished work of Christ."

"What is the other difference?"

"Christianity is not just about the death to self, or the cross, it is about the resurrection and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Jesus is alive today and promises to send His Holy Spirit to empower whoever will surrender their life to Him. When we are in a restored relationship with God, He comes to live inside us and empowers us to live the way we are



supposed to. If you look through history, you see the testimony of millions of lives that have been transformed by Jesus Christ. It's undeniable. It may be a mystery how the Holy Spirit indwells the believer, but what is certain and clear is the love, joy, hope, peace, and selflessness that marks those who are filled with the Holy Spirit."

"You make a good case, Paul, but it doesn't prove much to argue from experience. All religions have testimonies of changed lives."

"Skip, I didn't try to prove the truth of Christianity merely from experience. I base my claims on the person of Jesus Christ. People are always complaining that God doesn't give us enough evidence to prove his existence. But God took on human flesh and lived among us. This isn't some cleverly devised fable or legend. There were eye-witnesses. Jesus has left an indelible fingerprint on this planet. God showed his love for humanity by becoming one of us and dying so that the gap between sinful humanity and a righteous God could be bridged. God is in the process of restoring this planet, and some day He will do the fourth and final thing I mentioned.

#### **4. Jesus' Second coming and final restoration**

Paul went on, "Jesus will return and defeat all evil. This sin-scarred planet will be purged and rebuilt, and all who have ceased their rebellion and surrendered to the rule of God, will live in a beautiful, incorruptible new heaven and new earth."

##### **What about hell?**

"What about those who chose not to surrender?" I asked.

"Jesus spoke more about hell than heaven. I know critics have called Jesus cruel and heartless for his teachings on hell, but I think I think His warnings are a sign of his love."

I bristled at this. "How can you call it 'loving' to torment people with the threat of everlasting damnation?"

"Because if the threat is real, then to say nothing would be cruel!"

"But I still don't get how you persist in thinking of God as loving, when you also believe in an eternal sinner roast. Come on!" I was getting really upset. "Hitler burned the Jews for a few hours and we call him a wicked despot, but what you are saying God will do makes Hitler look like Mother Teresa!"

"Skip, you are misunderstanding the nature of Hell. Hell is the inescapable result of the fact that God cannot change who He is. He will continue to be a perfect, all-good, holy God. Each human can either decide to quit striving against his creator and surrender, or he can persist in rebellion. If God let everyone into the new heaven and earth, the rebellious ones would corrupt it and bring great destruction just like they have in this life. God will do everything within the boundaries of His character to reconcile everyone to Him. But the thing that makes love possible, our free choice, also makes it possible for us to reject God. To



reject God is to reject the source of all love, truth, beauty and pleasure. We are lifeless apart from God. We have our lifetime to surrender to God's plan, but if we refuse to accept God's pardon, if we refuse to surrender, God will honor our choice."

"But doesn't the punishment of hell seem a little extreme to you?" I probed.

"We don't know the exact nature of hell. We can't accuse God of hell being too harsh, or for allowing too many people there, because we just don't know the final count or what it will be like. But I think the punishment fits the crime, because the crime *is* the punishment."

"What? Come again?"

"Yes," Paul said, "the punishment fits because the crime (separating yourself from God) is the punishment (separation from God). In the person of Jesus Christ we see God's answer to the objections that God is too lenient or too strict. On the one hand, Jesus promises to come again as judge and we can be assured that those who are perverse and corrupt will receive justice. But because of what Jesus did on the cross, God also shows his unfathomable grace, and no repentant person will be judged, because Jesus offered to suffer in their place."

"I do see the need for ultimate justice, but why does hell have to be so miserable?"

"Skip, just like a car was designed to run on gasoline, we were designed to 'run' on a relationship with God. If we reject God, we reject our life source. God is not to blame for the misery of Hell. You can only begin to imagine the lengths God has gone to save us. We have no one to blame but ourselves if we reject his salvation."

I asked, "Then why did God choose a method of salvation that only reaches a few people? I mean, think of all those people who have died without ever hearing about Jesus!"

"Jesus' death on the cross was necessary for our salvation, but I don't think you necessarily have to know about the cross to be saved by it. God is outside of time. Peter said that Jesus was the lamb slain before the foundations of the world. God can apply the effects of the cross to all who are willing. All that is required to be saved is to know that you need God and to call out to him. All who call on the name of the Lord will be saved. Salvation is as simple as a person on their deathbed calling out like a baby, 'save me.' But true salvation also is very costly, because every day after you call out, you belong to King Jesus. He is now your Lord and master who demands total obedience."

"The way you put it, he sounds like a dictator. No wonder people rebel!"

"Skip, we've already been over this. People rebel because they are deceived. Jesus taught that there was a dark side to the spiritual realm – fallen angels who deceive and destroy God's creation. You may not believe in Satan and demons, but we have the word of Jesus about them

and believing that they exist makes sense of a lot of the wickedness in the world. Satan is the one who lies to us about the character of God. Satan casts a spell on us and makes disobedience look pleasurable and obedience look painful.

But God loves us like a Father; he desires what is best for us, even though, just like an earthly father, God sometimes has to deny us a pleasure in the present for a long-term benefit. If we could really see the goodness of God, we wouldn't see him as a dictator to rebel against, but as a loving father."

I reacted, "I'm a dad, and I don't demand total obedience, and I certainly wouldn't send a child to hell simply because he didn't obey my every whim!"

"No, but imagine you have several children and your oldest one refuses to live by the rules of the house. He is bringing drugs into the house and injecting your younger children. Your rebellious child will be a cancer in your house. Even though you never stop loving your oldest child, don't you think, for the sake of the other children, you would be forced to tell your child to move out and tell him that living in the house is a privilege and if he wants to, he must abide by the rules?"

"You're right," I admitted, "but asking a child to leave the house is sure different from eternal damnation!"

"Hell is simply the removal of the privileges of knowing God. The eternal part is the fault of the refusal of the sinner to repent. Anyone who spends an eternity in hell does so because of a refusal to surrender. I do believe hell is locked from the inside, not the outside."

"When you put it like that, I have to admit that hell makes a lot more sense, but I still don't like it!"

"You think *you* dislike hell! No one hates hell as much as God does! Far fewer people are going to hell because Jesus has the final say than if you or I did. God wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth; we only want the people we like to be saved. And, Skip, no one can accuse God of not doing enough to save everyone. We can only begin to imagine the sacrifice Jesus made. Think about it: the Creator of the world leaving the comforts of heaven and entering the pain and hurt of this sin-scarred planet. He endured the consequences of our mistakes. *He* took the pain that our rebellion caused! Look at the battered and bloody man hanging from the cross. He is beaten so badly you can hardly recognize his face. But the real pain is from the feelings of guilt, shame, and fear – the torture of feeling separated from God. He could have cried, 'God, this is not my fault. I haven't done anything wrong!' But all he said was, 'Father, forgive them, for they don't what they are doing.' Jesus did this for love! He could have looked down and watched us self-destruct and said, 'It's not my problem,' but he didn't. We can hardly fathom the depths of love that would cause Jesus to endure the pain. He leaves it up to us to receive his gift with gratitude, and surrender

to his love.”

“Honestly, Paul, I’m having a hard time not feeling moved by the story of Christ. I can’t believe that I would actually feel this way. But I don’t want to be manipulated into believing something because of my feelings.”

“You are very wise in this,” Paul said. “I wish more people realized how important truth is. Too many people are choosing their beliefs based on whether or not they like it or how it makes them feel. But the truth is that there is a reality out there that each of us will have to come to grips with. I so often hear people say that ‘to me God is such and such.’ But it doesn’t matter what their conjured-up ‘god’ is like. Such a god is merely a work of fiction; he has no bearing on reality. What *will* matter is if there is a real God out there that each of us will someday stand before and have to give an account to of how we lived this life he gave us.”

### **How can we know which religion is correct?**

“But how can we know the truth? I mean look there are hundreds of religions out there, and each one claims to be the only correct one!”

Paul countered, “But just because each one claims to be right, doesn’t mean that none of them are right.”

“True, I’ll grant you that, but how can we know which one is right?”

“If a person is really wanting to know the truth and not just using such an argument as a smokescreen, there are ways of discerning. Examine each religion and see if there is one that has the stamp of divine approval.”

“But they all claim to have that stamp of approval.”

“It is one thing to claim it, but it is another to actually have it.”

Paul paused and scratched his nose, “Look at it this way. Suppose there is a God and this God wanted to communicate with his creation. Perhaps warn them about the afterlife, or invite them to enjoy a relationship with him. One of the best ways to do this would be to become one of us. Take a look at history and see if that happened. Ask the question, ‘What would we expect to see if God did become man?’

I knew where he was going with this, but it was an interesting angle.

Paul carried on, “Don’t you think this God-man would be sinless, since sin is violating God’s moral standard?”

I gave a non-committal nod.

“He would have power over the forces of nature. He would have the ability to perform miracles, have profound insight into life, and have a life-changing effect on people. He would have power over death and he would have a lasting impact on history. Do you agree, Skip?”

“Yes,” I said thoughtfully.

“Jesus did every one of the things I just mentioned. Here is an

amazing thing to ponder: Jesus never amassed an army, never wrote a book, and died only owning the cloak on his back, and yet he has had more impact on this world than any dictator, scientist, philosopher, or other person of influence and power. Why do you think this is? How can you account for this if Jesus was not who he claimed to be?"

I sat there pondering this, while Paul got more excited.

"Skip, there has been only one man in the history of the world that had the combination of both claiming to be God *and* having sage-like qualities that were consistent with that claim. He prophesied his death and resurrection as further proof of his divinity. Since then, his life has continued to make the kind of impact you would expect if Jesus was truly God. As God, Jesus is still alive today, transforming the hearts and lives of those who trust him. At the beginning of our conversation yesterday, we discussed the afterlife and whether there was any way we could know what was coming. If Jesus is really God, and there is a ton of evidence to prove that he is, then he is the ultimate authority on the subject. What he says is truth. No one else has the credentials that Jesus does."

This whole message of Christianity was making more sense than ever, but I still hated the thought of surrendering my right to do what I wanted to.

"Paul, I'm having real trouble with this thought of someone else running my life. I just don't like it!"

"So how much control do you have right now? You have no idea what keeps your heart beating or when it will quit, you don't know if one of your children will be killed, or if you will lose your job. God is in control of your life already. The question is, are you going to fight him till you die and then suffer the consequences? Or are you going to surrender to God's control and find peace in this life, and eternal joy and bliss in the next life?"

"Are you saying that if I become a Christian everything will go smoothly? I've got a neighbor who is a Christian. He is suffering daily from multiple sclerosis and he just lost a wife to cancer. That doesn't sound like bliss!"

"God's ways are beyond us. He does things that don't make any sense to us, just like a dog doesn't understand why he is being tormented when porcupine quills are being pulled from his nose. An amputation seems cruel until you hear that that is necessary to save a person's life. God does have a purpose in all the suffering that happens to us. He doesn't tell us why, but he does offer us comfort in the midst of our pain."

"I still can't fathom how you think there can be all-good, all powerful God, when there is so much garbage in this world. Like you were saying, this is one screwed-up planet. If God were really all powerful, he would have the power to rid this world of evil. If he were all good, he would have the desire. But there is still evil, so which is lacking, Paul? His goodness or his power?"

“Neither, Skip, and remember, the reason this world is messed up is directly related to the wrong choices of humanity. Before the fall of man, there was no pain or heartache. It is not the fault of the designer, when people are hurt by the misuse of the product.”

“Wait just a second, I can see how the pain caused by rape and theft and greed is humanity’s fault, but what about earthquakes, tornados, and cancer? These aren’t the fault of humanity!”

At this point, Paul threw restraint to the wind and went on to give an impassioned and unrealistically long answer. “Skip, God made the world a paradise for us to enjoy, and he made us the caretakers. When we rebelled and cut ourselves off from our Creator, we brought death into the world. This earth was subjected to a curse; the fact that we live in a world that is scarred by death and disease is the result of the rebellion of man. But as harsh as this message is, the message of Jesus Christ is one of tremendous hope. You said that if God were all-good and all-loving, then there would be no evil. Yet we see that by allowing evil, God achieved the greater good of volitional love. But your argument can be stood on its head. God is all-good and all-powerful, therefore he will be able to defeat evil. When Jesus died on the cross, he began the restoration of this planet. His death and resurrection reconciled humanity to God. He is now in the process of making all things new. Anyone who is truly a believer and is surrendered to the will of God will partake in this divine mission. This is the role of the believer, to bring Christ’s healing to the nations. But first we have to be made whole ourselves. Then we bring this healing to our immediate relationships. Because we have been forgiven by God, we have the freedom to forgive those who hurt us. We can repent and follow God’s design and bring healing to our marriages and other family relationships. Because we now have a clear conscience before God, we will no longer feel the need to tear down other people so that we can feel better about ourselves. And because we are satisfied by God we can now serve people selflessly instead of using people for our own selfish purposes. As individuals repent and receive God’s grace, forgiveness, and healing, then whole communities can begin to find healing. This is the purpose of our life. But here is the great hope of the believer: Jesus will come again and recreate this heaven and earth. We will receive restored bodies at the resurrection. This whole decaying planet will be resurrected, and all who live in the new heaven and new earth will be surrendered to the will of God. They will freely obey God’s design and will no longer inflict pain on themselves and each other. There will be no more pain or disease. This is the Christian hope!

“Skip, God offers you new life. He will be your ever-present help in time of need. He can fill your heart with joy and peace even in the midst of trouble. He really does love you more than you can know. But he will not force himself on you. You can reject him. You can ignore him. You can walk away. But the reality is that there will be consequences for rejecting God. God is love, but God also is a consuming fire. On judgment day, you will give an account of your life. If you have not surrendered your life to Christ, and

received his perfection, then you will be cut off from God. Don't say you weren't warned. I believe God has sent me here to you today to warn you of the consequences to come, but also to show you the way of escape and the eternal riches that he's offering you in a relationship with his Son."

By this time, the restaurant was closing. Before us stood a haggard-looking waitress whose mascara was smeared blackly below her eyes, probably the consequence of watching the latest episode of "Young Stomachs Churning," or something like that. She told us she was closing up and we had better get out. I love these warm friendly joints where the heartburn is warmer than the welcome.

I was still curious about who this Paul fellow was. "Who are you really?"

"I told you. I'm Paul."

"Paul who?"

"Just Paul."

## **Your eternal destiny is at stake**

With that, he disappeared down the street. My mind was still reeling from our long talk. As I drove home, I tried to process what he had said. I still didn't know what to make of Jesus Christ. He was a mystery I had to investigate further, because if he was God, I had some serious decisions to make. I'm not a Christian yet, but I see now that there is an intellectual basis for Christianity. Paul gave me much to think about. I have many questions still. But I know one thing for sure; I have to know who this Jesus really is. My eternal destiny is at stake.



*"My name is Skip Tecke. I do a talk show that is heard on over 100 stations, but is based out of Ignoropolis on station JYRK 660 on your AM dial. I have a real problem with Christianity and its message of 'just have faith'. I understand why its followers need to ask people to just believe without questioning, because the some of the stuff Christians believe goes far beyond the bounds of what is rationally believable. I mean, think about it... a man who claims to be God, dies and rises from the dead, a man who walks on water, and a virgin birth. I guess if you grow up believing that stuff it may not sound that strange, but to an outsider it's outlandish! These poor souls just don't get it. When it comes to examining the miracles claimed by other religions, these Christians are tough-minded and scientific and rightly ignore such claims as ridiculous and impossible. But when it comes to their own faith, their brains suddenly go out the window..."*

*"I challenge any thinking Christian to come to me try and defend this irrational and immoral religion."*

Did Jesus really claim to be God? Is there historical evidence for his resurrection? Did the church tamper with the text to convey its own agenda? Do the miracle claims discredit the reliability of the gospels? What is man's basic problem? Why did Jesus have to die? Is God harsh for demanding total obedience? How could a loving God banish someone to an eternity in hell?

In *Savior of the World*, these questions are debated by radio host Skip Tecke and a stranger named Paul. Has God provided a Savior or must we look for another? Listen in and weigh the evidence for yourself.



Jesse Jost lives in sunny southern Alberta with his beautiful wife Heidi and son John-Michael.

Since graduation Jesse has extensively studied church history and apologetics. He loves speaking to youth groups and camps about his passion to discover God's truth and make it known.