



MEETING CHRIST'S CHALLENGE

Jesus Christ was an extraordinary man!

A strong dynamic personality, not at all the mild spineless individual that so many imagine, Jesus was a man who stood out from the crowd, a man of action.

You can list all the great men you can think of. Let it include famous persons, good-living Christians and even martyrs, yet every one will be but a poor imitation of the man whose life is a challenge.

This booklet is about that man.

In the three-and-a-half years of his ministry Jesus walked over 3,000 miles. They were years of persistent demands on his time as a preacher and healer. As a young man in the carpenter's shop he had learned to handle with ease and skill the heavy tools of those days and his strength and stamina stood him in good stead.

But Jesus was also the Son of God, whose conviction and authority struck fear into the heart of many a would-be enemy.

This booklet is about that Jesus.

Throwing them out

Begin by reading the second chapter of the Gospel of John and you will be surprised by the man you meet.

Jesus had just arrived in Jerusalem from the north. Because of his north-country dialect he was quickly singled out and some no doubt regarded him with scorn as a country lad.

He came to the temple, that magnificent building which gleamed gold in the sun. He had been here as a boy of 12 and many times since. This was the centre of the Jews'

religion, the place where the true God was worshipped. Jesus was God's Son, so it was like home to him.

But the scene inside the gate on this occasion really made his blood pressure rise. Here were men changing ordinary currency for the special temple money and getting a good rake-off too. And the courtyard was filled with stalls, dozens of them, their owners selling animals and birds for people to buy and sacrifice at the altar. Some of the specimens were not even fit to be offered to God and the whole place looked more like a market for unholy profiteering than a holy temple for worship.

Lots of people wondered about this. But, after all, it was convenient and it had been going on for a long time. Besides, the priests and elders had encouraged it, so why worry? It needed a lot of courage to stand up to them and say something in the face of such respected opinion.

Jesus had that courage.

Armed with only a short whip he waded in. Over went the money tables, coins rolling everywhere. He drove out the animals and made the stallholders take the birds away.

And no-one stood up to him! No-one! They just went.

What was there about the personality of this Man of Nazareth that he could do such things without any resistance?

Certainly, Jesus was extraordinary.

Whose authority?

Of course, there were bound to be questions asked and when everything had quietened down, people began demanding an explanation. They wanted to know what right Jesus had to interfere with the running of the temple and to cause such chaos.

Jesus gave them a strange answer which they did not understand just then. He spoke of the temple being destroyed and re-built in three days, but his words were really a parable about himself. His disciples remembered this after he had been crucified and raised to life again three days later. The temple would indeed be destroyed, but sincere men and women who wanted to find and worship the true God would still be able to do so through him.

Later, he was a marked man and the elders of the temple still anxious to know what authority Jesus had, sent a representative to try and find out.

He was Nicodemus and, to avoid a further confrontation in front of the crowd, he came to Jesus after dark.

“We know that you are a teacher sent by God; no-one could perform these signs of yours unless God were with him” (John 3:2).

But if he was expecting a “thank-you-very-much-nice-of-you-to-say-so” Nicodemus

was disappointed. Jesus knew too much about him. He knew exactly what he wanted, and began to tell him a few home truths.

He told him that he needed to repent, turn round, begin a new way of life. Even a man as old and experienced and religious as Nicodemus needed to start life afresh — differently.

“In very truth I tell you, unless a man has been born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3).

Poor Nicodemus!

It was a challenge that was too much for him just then. It meant giving up so much: his position that he had worked hard for, the reputation he had earned, and all his fine friends. It was too hard a road and he went away—back into the night.

Not like the teachers

But if it was too much for Nicodemus, there were others who were prepared to accept the challenge of Jesus squarely and to try to meet the demands that it made on them. Jesus could not water down his standards; he lived that new and better kind of life himself, and any who wanted his company must do the same. The men of the temple preferred the profits of the temple, but Jesus gave his life to the service of God, and called others to obey God too.

Today obedience is almost a dirty word. It has been made to mean making yourself miserable doing what you do not want to do. Yet Jesus was obedient to God, the only man who ever was, perfectly and completely. But Jesus’ life was neither boring nor dull. The Bible accounts of his life are not sentimental stories of some weak individual with a handsome smile and lots of pious talk.

Jesus was a man of authority and action. His teaching throbbed with life, his message was dynamic and powerful. Even tough hard-bitten soldiers were moved by it. On one occasion, when sent to arrest him, they returned empty-handed and could only nervously offer the lame excuse: “No man ever talked like he does” (John 7:46).

The people thought so too. What a refreshing change he was from the religious tradition of their learned teachers! *They* were steeped in tradition and proud of their knowledge. *They* referred to this great rabbi and that famous teacher and quoted books and opinions by the score. And then they added their own pet theories too. By the time they had finished, you really did not know what to believe.

Jesus was so different! He just told them. A plain direct message in which he explained the Bible with authority, leaving them in no doubt as to just what he meant. He told them exactly what God wanted them to do.

They were amazed.

“The people were astounded at his teaching; unlike their own teachers, he taught with a note of authority” (Matthew 7:29).

But authority only has any meaning when we accept it. If the word of Jesus has authority, and if the Bible has authority, they must be followed! But mostly people do not follow them.

“All that I ever did”

There are exceptions. Jesus met a woman at a well in Samaria, and talked to her. She was about as unpromising as anybody he was likely to meet—a worldly woman, far too free with the men of the place, and well known for her loose living. Yet once again the vitality of his message left its mark.

Once again his challenge made demands. No more of this loose living. Instead, a new and different life, a life given to pleasing God.

The effect on her was startling. She ran back to the village, the waterpot forgotten.

“Come” she said, “and see a man that told me everything I ever did!” That was no sweet story. Everything she ever did would have made a best-seller, but now she had risen to the challenge and was ready to face its claims on her life. From now on her life was changed.

The Backward Disciple

The claims Jesus makes are great.

Some people did not always appreciate how great they are. “Lord, I will follow you” said one man, and was shaken by the reply he received. In the emotion of the moment, with excited and enthusiastic crowds thronging round, it looked so easy, but the fickleness of the people would quickly change those same crowds, as Jesus well knew, into a mob chanting: “Crucify him, crucify him;” and then following Jesus would not be so attractive and the challenge of the life he lived not so easy.

Another blithe volunteer was too much wrapped up in his family and he asked for time to go back and see them (Luke 9:61). It is a common fault—that attitude of looking back at what we are required to forsake instead of forwards to where our real hope lies. Jesus knew that this man was not really with him. He knew that home ties would prove too strong:

“No-one who sets his hand to the plough and then keeps looking back is fit for the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:62).

“Follow me” said Jesus to another.

Well yes, he would; he would love to, but if he could just put it off until his father had died and was buried ...

It was an excuse! And Jesus had a hard word for that man. Not that he was without compassion for the dead, but this man’s father wasn’t, at least not then. The follower wanted to wait until he was; he wanted to see the estate divided, he was more

interested in getting his share of the inheritance. “Let the dead bury their dead” said Jesus. Those are dead in the eyes of God who care more for wealth and possessions than for following Jesus. They are dead whose real interest is with this world’s affairs more than with seeking and worshipping God. They are dead who are more in love with self than with Christ.

Actions speak louder

In another place Jesus said that the only way to alter this very natural tendency is to forget self and put him first.

“If anyone wishes to be a follower of mine, he must leave self behind; he must take up his cross and come with me” (Matthew 16:24).

Self must be left behind; we must take our cross and go with Jesus. Go where? There is only one answer to that —to be crucified.

That is where Jesus went, and this is the point of it all. The challenge of Christ is not *just* his dynamic and powerful teaching, demanding though that is. It is not *just* the challenge of his wonderful and perfect life, although that too presents us with something that is hard to face. It is both of these, but the challenge of Christ is also the challenge of the cross, the challenge of his death when he willingly gave himself so that those who truly seek God may find forgiveness through him.

Actions speak louder than words and Jesus gave up his life to achieve what no-one else could have done in submitting to that cruel death. He not only said “Take up the cross” but he did it first.

But how are *we* crucified?

Paul answers that when he tells us quite plainly that *we are* not living the right sort of lives. We need to ‘die’ and to start life again as different people, he says, and the proper beginning is a true Christian baptism. At baptism we declare that we desire to die to our old way of life. Then we start a new life before God.

“We know that the man we once were has been crucified with Christ for the destruction of the sinful self. By baptism we were buried with him and lay dead, in order that, as Christ was raised from the dead in the splendour of the Father, so also we might set our feet upon the new path of life” (Romans 6:6 and 4).

Almost too late

And that, you may remember was the challenge of Christ to Nicodemus —be “born again” be “born of water” the old self dying so that a new person may emerge from the waters of baptism.

It was almost too late when Nicodemus came back, but he did come. He could not resist the challenge. It nagged at him all the time—the extraordinary life of this great man, and most of all his willing death.

It took Nicodemus three years, but finally he gave up his high position, his fine friends, and his big reputation. When at last he came to Jesus he found him already on the cross, and dead, but he was just in time to help take down the corpse and lovingly prepare it for the tomb. For a long time he had tried to follow Jesus secretly but that was no good. Now at last he had answered the challenge, had come out into the open and associated himself with Jesus. It was no easy decision for him, but at last he had done it.

A hard road

Let no-one persuade you that being a Christian is easy. It is not. The true Christian way of life is a hard and a narrow road. It will make claims on you and take every ounce of strength and effort you can muster to live it properly and successfully and to follow in the footsteps of Jesus. Even then you will need the help that only God can provide in answer to prayer.

But it is worth it.

Jesus did it. Now, in heaven, he shares the holiness and splendour of God. Soon he will come back to the earth to make it into one world-wide kingdom and to rule it for God.

Then our faith and trust in God and our dedicated effort to serve Him will be rewarded with a new and glorious life —helping Jesus in a cleansed and beautiful world. There are clear signs that the Lord's return will be soon. It is a hope worth looking forward to. Even now, in this evil time, the believer has wonderful blessings of peace of mind and contentment. Confidence in God makes life a lot easier. Responding to the challenge of Christ brings its own reward.

Remember, Jesus Christ was a real man. He wants no cotton-wool Christians. He calls for manly obedience and hard work. "Take up the cross;" he says, "and begin to live!"

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*Quotations are from the New English Bible, Second Edition © 1970,
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