

EVANGEL

The Good News of Jesus Christ



Is Heaven For Real?

Heaven is for real.

That's the title of a book published just a few months ago. Read it? Heard of it?

The subtitle summarizes it: A little boy's astounding story of his trip to heaven and back. The book is about a four year old, Colton Burpo, who was misdiagnosed with the flu. Actually his appendix had burst. On the edge of death, he was rushed to the hospital. And on the operating table he apparently journeyed to heaven.

His parents at first dismissed his story. But little Colton seemed to be able to talk about things he could have never known. He explains that God is a Trinity. He tells his mom, "I have two sisters." His parents had never told him that his mom had miscarried. "There were lots of people, and their heads were shining. There are thousands of colours we have never seen." And more.

What do you think? Believable? Does it prove to you heaven exists? Do you believe in the after-life? Why – or why not?

An old question

It's an ancient question. Two thousand years ago there were two Jewish groups that argued about the existence of the after-life. The Sadducees and the Pharisees. The Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection. That's why they were sad, you see? Sorry – old joke. The Pharisees did.

What if . . . ?

One day, the Sadducees come to Jesus and trot out one of their favourite arguments against the after-life. It seems to make the whole idea of a resurrection absurd.

It might sound a bit strange to us. But if you were Jewish it might make some sense.

It goes like this.

A couple gets married. But the husband shortly dies, without having any children. According to the law of Moses, continue the Sadducees, if there is an unmarried brother-in-law he has to marry the widow. (The Latin word for brother-in-law is *levir* – so this is sometimes called *levirate* marriage.) This was done so that there would be children to inherit the family farm etc. In an agriculturally based society, this is pretty important.

But the brother-in-law also dies without having a child. There happened to be, say the Sadducees, five more brothers in this family. They all are married to the woman, but all die. Without fathering a single child.

Then they pose their conundrum: "If there is a resurrection, whose husband will she be? All seven were married to her."

You can imagine the snicker. Just look at what a resurrection could mean. One wife with seven husbands!? One man with seven wives might be more acceptable in those days. But this is utterly ridiculous.

In the minds of the Sadducees, a clever and witty argument is all it takes. Their hypothetical situation is enough to convince them that the whole idea of an after-life, a resurrection, is absurd.

And it's no different today.

Sometimes all it takes is a little joke for us to push God away. "Where did Cain get his wife?" "The Bible talks about the "corners of the earth." You can't expect me to believe it, can you?"

Fightin' words

How does Jesus respond?

Christ cuts through their mock scenario, like a hot knife through butter.

"Aren't you in error," he says, "because you don't know the Scriptures or the power of God?"

Now those are fighting words. The Sadducees were intellectuals, even priests and theologians. They were the upper crust of Jewish society, wealthy and influential.

But knowledge and power have a way of blinding you to the knowledge and power of God. Then and now. Have our modern miracles blinded us to the miraculous power of God? Has all our knowledge made us as a society ignorant in the knowledge of God?

Those two things Jesus highlights – knowing the Scriptures and knowing the power of God also go together. If you want to truly know the Bible, you have to be open to the power of God. The Bible has to be read in faith. It's about God, after all, and if we only have our wimpy view of God, we will end up flattening it to fit our perspective. Without believing the power of God even the most learned theologian really knows nothing about the things of God.

Like angels

Then Jesus explains those two things a bit more.

First, the power of God. In the resurrection, says Jesus, people are like the angels. There is no more marriage.

Now notice carefully how Jesus compares the next life to angelic life. He doesn't say we become angels, that sprout wings and find our own cloud. In the next life, we are like the angels only in that there is no marriage.

When God created the world, he created a multitude of angels. Jewish thought put the number in the billions. There was no need to procreate in the angelic world. But there was only two humans, Adam and Eve.

God brought them together and commanded them to be fruitful and multiply.

But in the next life there will be a multitude saved by the blood of Jesus, redeemed from this fallen world. There is no need for marriage anymore.

Questions

The Sadducees had a very limited idea of what God could do. There will be no marriage – because God will raise us to an existence different, higher than this life. Marriage will be made obsolete. In all their theologizing, that critical detail was not part of their thinking.

Maybe you have your questions about the next life. Will we recognize others? Will everyone be saved? How can the earth fit them all? What about those that are not saved? Will they be remembered?

I wish I had answer to all of those questions. But I know this: we have to reckon with the immense power of God.

God can raise us to a kind of life where the questions we have in this life are no longer any questions any more. In fact, we have a promise in the Bible that He himself will wipe away every tear from our eyes. God has power to deal with all the evil and injustice that we have suffered or committed in this world. If you know the power of God, a resurrected life, in perfection, is not such a strange hope!

And Jesus will do more than just speak about God's power. He will bring it, embody it.

Look at his cross. There we see God has power to deal with our sin – which is over our head. That sin that separates us from God – Jesus carries it. At the cross, we see God has power to deal with Satan, who has the whole world in his grip. In Jesus, God deals with death. When we see Jesus, our small view of God has to disappear. God is far greater than we can imagine!

Lessons from Pharaoh

Secondly, Jesus says to the Sadducees that they do not know the scriptures.

He then quotes from the book of Exodus, where God appears to Moses at the burning bush. There God says to Moses, "I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." Abraham, Isaac and Jacob have been dead for centuries. But not to God!

Now consider the scene where God says this. The Israelites are in Egypt, slaves of Pharaoh. Pharaoh commanded all the Israelite baby boys to be drowned in the Nile. Death is a reality for them.

But God says to Moses, I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. I am the God who wants to have a relationship with human beings. (That's called a *covenant* in the Bible.) I see my people in Egypt, suffering, even dying. But I am not the God of the dead. I will deliver the Israelites, so I can have a people for myself.

And that's why there was this miraculous event called the Exodus. That's why there is, there must also be a resurrection, an after-life. God wants to have a people, who know him, who enjoy him forever!

God's Triumph

Look at Jesus. He also shows God's passion to have a people for himself.

In Jesus, we see the lengths God will go to save us, to bring us to himself. John 3:16 says, God sent his one and only Son so that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. If God's love compelled him to give up his One and only Son, what can get in its way? Can death or the devil?

How can it be that we live only for a moment, here today, gone tomorrow? Jesus, the cherished Son of God, has died for our salvation!

The resurrection does not

just mean there is an after-life. The resurrection is the triumph of God's purposes. That there will be creatures who know life again, in God's new world, as God's people, enjoying him and he enjoying them forever.

Just specs of dust?

I confess. Sometimes I wonder if God truly cares for me. Or even that he knows me. Who am I, after all? I'm only here for a moment. Maybe I will die and that will be it. Sometimes I'm tempted to be a Sadducee, too.

But Jesus challenges me. God said, I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God knows them by name. God is the God of individuals. The God who is bigger than the universe knows little specs of dust like you and me. By name!

God is not a God of generalities, abstractions. He's not some impersonal force. He is the God of love, of fellowship, of friendship. And Abraham is even called God's friend in scripture.

That's my reason for hope in the after-life. I don't believe in the after-life because I think I've got a soul that can't be destroyed or something like that. I believe in the after-life because I believe God knows my name! He wants to have friends! I will never be dead to him. He will never allow that! And I see that passion of God especially in Jesus.

The promise

Turn to God! Trust in Jesus, the power of God. Confess your sins, your unbelief, your hostility to God.

Don't try to live aloof from him. Live closely with your God day by day, in faith, in hope.

And you will be raised by the power of Jesus, given a place in his new creation, to live with God forever, as his friend!

Thanks for reading.

Why should I pray if God knows everything and has determined what He is going to do?

Why should I pray if God knows everything and has determined what He is going to do? Have you ever wondered about that? Perhaps, you had a Christian upbringing and when you were young, you used to pray. But now that you are older, you no longer do. You can't even remember when you stopped praying. All of a sudden you noticed you had. It just didn't make any sense to you. After all, if God knew everything and had determined everything, why should you pray anyway?

Prayer changes us

You know, you're not alone with this question. Many have wondered about this just like you. There is, however, a good answer to the question. Someone once said that God ordained prayer "no so much for his own sake as for ours." The person who said this meant that prayer is not so much meant to inform God or to get Him to change what He is going to, but meant to change us. We could also say that prayer is not meant so much to bring God close to us, but to bring us close to God. You see, God is always close to us because in Him we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28). But we are not always close to God. This changes, however, when we pray. Then we are as close to God as we will ever be in this world.

Why is it so important to have prayer change us more than having it change God? Why is it so important to stay close to the God who is already close to us anyway? This is important because we so

easily get distracted as to why we are here in this world and that God is closer to us than our own breath. Praying, however, serves as a sort of orienting act in reminding us of why we are here and that God is so close to us that He is perfectly able to provide us with what we need for doing what He wants us to do. This is especially the case when we consider the prayer the Lord Jesus Christ Himself taught us. I'm sure you are familiar with it. It's called The Lord's Prayer.

Our Father in heaven

The Lord's Prayer begins by addressing God as our Father. This reminds us that when we believe in Jesus Christ, we have become brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ Himself. And whereas God the Father is Jesus' natural father, He is now our adopted Father. And whereas the Father always loved Jesus as the apple of his eye and provided Him with what He needed for why He had come to this earth, so the Father also loves us as the apple of his eye and will always provide us with what we need for why we are here on this earth. What an encouragement this is!

And the encouragement continues when we add to the address "in heaven." This obviously does not mean that God is confined to a certain place called heaven because we already said that God is present everywhere (Acts 17:28). What it does mean is it reminds us of God's majesty and power. God is so majestic, so powerful and so great that He is not limited or bound by any earthly restraints.

Why we are here

After the address, the Lord's Prayer has six petitions or requests. The first three focus on why we are here. In the first petition, we are asking our Father to hallow his name. To hallow something is to set it apart as very special and precious. Thus, when we ask God to hallow his name, we are asking Him to set his name apart for us as very special or precious. But since this can only happen if we know God, in asking God to set his name apart for us as very special, we are in essence asking that He reveal Himself, manifest Himself, make Himself known and make Himself real to us through his actions in this world and in our lives. And because making Himself real to people is the Father's greatest passion, He will most certainly do this.

Yet, in the first petition or request, we are not only asking God to make Himself real to us. We are also asking Him to make Himself real through us. There are basically two reasons for this. First, God's name is often ignored, mocked, denied or blasphemed by those who are not Christians. Second, Christians sometimes ignore or blaspheme the name of God as well. Over against this, we are called to live such lives that God's name is always honored and praised because of who we are and what we do and do not do.

In the second petition, we are asking our Father that his kingdom would come. This is understandable because the coming of our Father's kingdom is the main theme of the Scriptures. Ever since the Fall into sin, the perfection of our Father's

kingdom disappeared from this earth. Yet, ever since that time, our Father has been working towards the restoration of his kingdom through Jesus Christ. One day, this will happen when Jesus Christ returns to make all things new. Then the Spirit of King Jesus will rule everyone on the new earth.

Yet, in the second petition we are not only asking God that Jesus would soon return to make all things new. We are also asking that while we are waiting for Jesus to come back, that we would be ruled by the Spirit of Jesus and show those who do not believe in Jesus what life looks like when it is ruled by the Spirit of King Jesus. Moreover, we are asking God that He would protect his churches and increase the number of his churches. Furthermore, we are asking God to destroy the opposition to the rule of King Jesus.

In the third petition, we are asking our Father that his will would be done on earth as it is done in heaven. This is understandable because if we want the Father to make himself real for us and through us, then his will needs to be done by us. In fact, then his will needs to be done by all people. This is further understandable because if we are to show what life looks like when we are ruled by the Spirit of King Jesus, then God's will needs to be done not only by us, but also by all people. Consequently, we pray for the denial of our will and obedience to the will of our Father which alone is good.

Again, this is understandable because it is precisely the assertion of our own will over against the will of our Father that that led to the disappearance of the perfection of God's kingdom here on earth and hinders us from showing others what life is like when it is ruled by the Spirit of King Jesus. Moreover, it is because of the assertion of our own will over against the will of our Father that God is often not real

for us and through us. What is true for us is also true for those who do not believe in Jesus. God is often not real for them precisely because they do not deny their own will and obey the will of God which alone is good.

And so you see, praying the first three petitions do not so much change God as they change us. They remind us of why we are here. We are here to make God real for those for whom He is not real. We are here to show what life looks like when it is ruled by the Spirit of Jesus. We are here to deny our own will and do the will of God which alone is good.

What we need

The second three petitions focus on what we need for making God real, showing what life looks like when it is ruled by the Spirit of King Jesus, denying our own will and obeying God's will which alone is good.

In the fourth petition or request we are asking God give us our daily bread. This is a reminder that we are not here to live a life of extravagance or luxury, but simply for what we need. At the same time, this petition is a reminder that this world is not our home, but that we are on our way to the new heaven and the new earth. That's why we are not here to live a life of extravagance or luxury, but moderation. Moreover, this petition is a reminder that our heavenly Father is the source and origin of every good and perfect gift. Thus, when we pray it, we are reminding ourselves of our complete dependence upon God.

In the fifth petition, we are asking God to forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors. We are here to make God real for those for whom He is not real. We are here to show what life looks like when it is ruled by the Spirit of Jesus. We are here to deny our own will and do the will of God

which alone is good. Because this is still so unnatural for us, we daily fall short of living the way God wants us to live. As a result, we incur a huge amount of debt with God and other human beings. Thus, what we need on our way to a new heaven and new earth is not only our daily bread. We also need the daily forgiveness of our debts.

In the fifth petition, we are not just asking our Father to forgive us our debts, but we are asking Him to forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors. Forgiving others their debts does not give us the reason why God forgives us our debts, but functions as a sort of test to determine how deeply conscious we are of being debtors with God and our neighbor. If we do not forgive our neighbor his or her debts, then we obviously are not conscious of our own debts with God and our neighbor.

In the sixth petition, we are asking God not to lead us into temptation, but to deliver us from the evil one. In this petition, we are not asking God to keep temptation away from us, but to uphold us in the temptations that come our way. Thus, this petition reminds us that we are engaged in a spiritual warfare while we live our lives here on this earth. At the same time, it reminds us of our utter dependence upon God for strength in this spiritual warfare.

And so you see, even though God knows everything and has determined what is going to happen, it still makes sense to pray. Prayer does not so much change God, but changes us for it reminds us why we are here and what we need. If you have stopped praying or pray very little, I would encourage you to begin praying again. Why not begin by daily praying the Lord's Prayer. Thanks for reading.

Dick Moes

Signs for Moses

Bible Story Based on Exodus 4

With wide-open eyes Moses kept gazing at the burning bush. God was still speaking to him from the flames. By now Moses understood that the flames were not real. They were the miraculous sign that God himself spoke to Moses from the bush. God's presence made even the ground holy. Moses had taken off his shoes out of respect for God's holiness.

The Lord just gave Moses a big task. He must lead his people out of Egypt. But Moses had many questions. Did he dare to go back to his people? Would they believe that the Lord had heard their cry for help? How would he lead them from their slavery in Egypt to a safe place? Would they even want to listen to him? He was not raised as a child of the Israelites, but as a prince in the palace of Pharaoh. And if they were willing to listen to him, would they believe that he had received the message from God himself?

Looking straight into fire Moses took a deep breath. Boldly he put his question before the Lord.

"Lord, what if they don't believe me? What if they mock me?"

The Lord answered by giving Moses a sign.

"What do you have in your hand?" he asked.

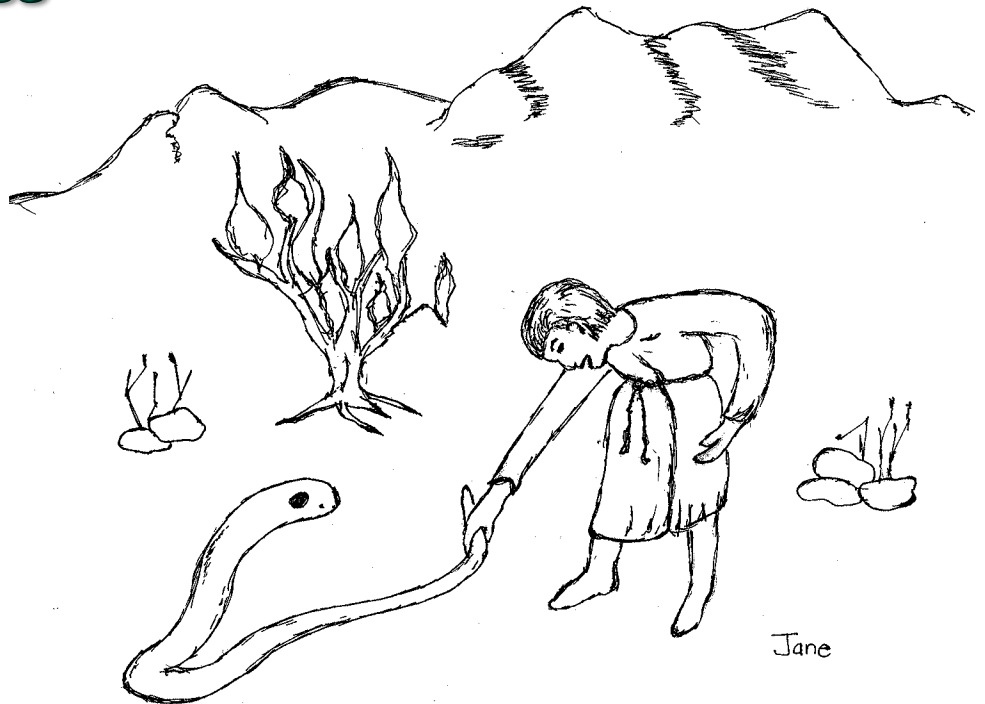
"My staff," Moses answered promptly.

"Throw it on the ground," the Lord commanded.

Immediately Moses let his staff slip from his hand. To his horror the staff turned into a vicious snake! It writhed on the ground and slithered at his bare feet. Dead-scared Moses jumped up and started to run away.

"Stop!" the Lord called. "Grab its tail!"

Moses did. Immediately the snake turned back into his staff.



"Do this sign in front of my people," God said. "It will prove to them that you were sent by the God of their fathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Now put your hand inside your coat."

Again Moses obeyed willingly. But when he pulled his hand out, he was terrified! His hand was completely covered with leprosy. The deadly disease had turned the skin of his hand into white, scaly spots.

"Put your hand inside your coat again," the Lord said. And yes! When Moses took his hand out the second time, it was completely healthy again.

"Do these signs if my people do not believe you. If they are still in doubt, you can take some water from the river Nile and pour it out. As soon as it touches the ground, it will turn into blood."

But even with these signs Moses was not ready to take on the task of leading God's people. He was still fearful.

"Lord, I am not a good speaker. My words come out with great difficulty."

"Don't you think I know that?" the Lord answered him. "I made you like that. Go! I will help you."

Still Moses resisted the Lord.

"Lord, please send someone else."

Then the Lord became angry with his Moses.

"Moses! You must go, in my name. But don't worry. I have sent your brother Aaron to help you. He can speak well. You can put my words into his mouth. He can proclaim them to my people. But now go. And take this staff with you so that you can show the miraculous signs."

Moses gathered his flock of sheep and traveled back to the household of Jethro, his father-in-law. He told Jethro that he needed to go back to his people immediately. Soon Moses was on his way to Egypt. Many years ago he had fled Egypt as a young prince. Now, as he traveled back with his wife and two sons, he was preparing himself for his important task. God had chosen him to lead the Israelites out of Egypt.

It was no easy task. But the Lord would help him. Moses firmly clutched the special staff. With this staff he would show the people that he was truly sent by the Lord to deliver them from their slavery. There was no need for doubt. God had prepared salvation for his people.

Jane

Activity Page

SIGNS TO KNOW GOD

We cannot see God with our eyes. But often people like to see something before they can believe. God understands that need. At certain moments he gives signs that show his care and his power. Those signs strengthen our faith. We can only see the meaning of those signs with eyes of faith.

In his love God does not only give us signs, but he also gives us eyes of faith to recognize these signs.

SIGNS FOR THE RETURN OF JESUS

The Lord also uses signs as preparation for important events. When Jesus was born, the angel gave the shepherds a sign: the newborn Saviour was lying in a manger, wrapped in swaddling clothes. When Jesus will return on the clouds of heaven, there will again be a sign: the trumpet will sound. At that moment our sorrow will turn into joy. The sound of the trumpet will herald the new beginning of perfect peace between God and his people. Finally we will fully understand all the signs the Lord has given us. Our believing will come seeing.

FROM THE BIBLE

Jesus did many miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, so that you may believe that he is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name. (John 20:30 and 31)

COME TO THE SAVIOR ALL

*Come to the Savior, all,
Whate'er your burdens be;
Hear now His loving call,
"Cast all your care on Me."*

(John Murch Wigner, 1871)

MIRACULOUS SIGNS

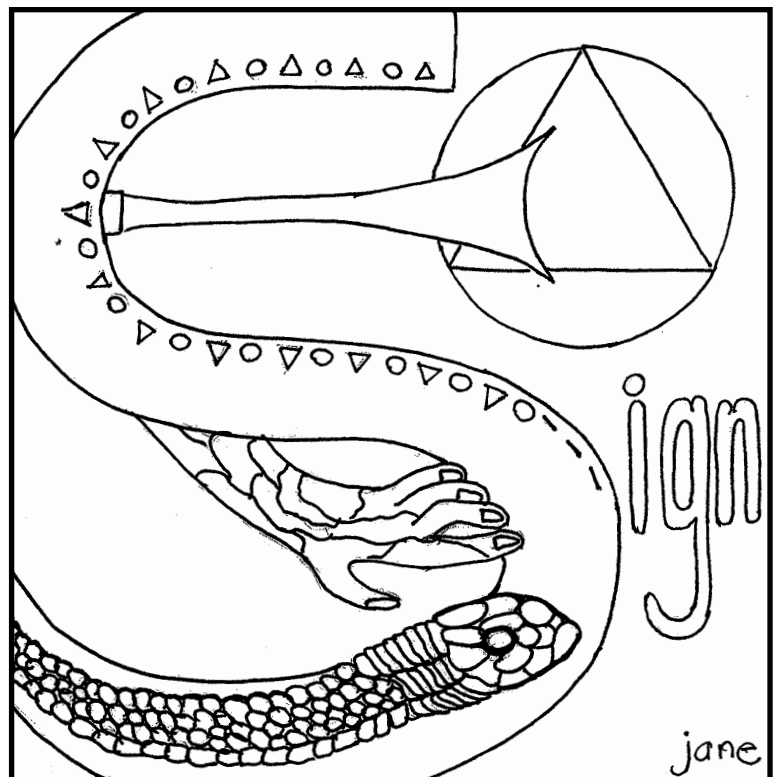
God uses miracles as a sign of his care and power. Often these miracles show that the Lord can heal people's sickness, or that he can control the waves of the sea. They are miraculous signs that show God's care for his people. He lifts their burdens.

But sometimes the Lord gives a miraculous sign that scares us. In the story of Moses he turned a staff into a snake. He also made Moses' healthy hand very sick. Why would he do that?

This question becomes clear when we see what happened next. The Lord turned the snake back into a staff. He also made Moses' hand healthy again. Clearly, God is stronger than evil! He uses it for his purpose. Moreover, he teaches his people that they do not have to be afraid of evil. He will make them incredibly strong!

Word Picture

The fierce snake and the sick hand show that our world is evil and sick. But God is stronger than evil. He turns evil into good things. At the sound of the trumpet all broken things will be restored to perfect harmony. This harmony reflects God himself.



Dawn

To Believe is not Madness

*“You are out of your mind, Paul!” he shouted.
“Your great learning is driving you insane.”*

Acts 26:24

Victor was motivated to solve the mystery of life and to conquer death. His mother had died while trying to nurse another woman whom he loved back from some disease. Victor was so deeply grieved by his mother’s death that he devoted his life to science. He attended university and learned about human anatomy, chemistry and electricity. This was in the early 1800’s. Armed with this knowledge Victor salvaged fresh body parts from cemeteries, and animal parts from slaughter houses, and assembled these into a monster, over eight feet tall. He pumped chemicals into the veins of this monster and applied electrical current to its heart, and it began to beat, and the monster became alive!

Victor had created life!

What do you think? Is it fact or fiction? Of course, it is fiction. Victor’s full name is Victor Frankenstein. It is a book written by Mary Shelly in 1812. Only a mad person would actually believe that what she wrote was true.

Paul had heard about a man named Jesus who had been killed. Stories circulated that Jesus was alive. *It’s madness*, he decided, and worse, *It is dangerous to believe this*. He came to hate those who said Jesus had risen from the dead. He tried to make people stop believing in Jesus. He arrested many, he helped to kill some and he harassed as many as he could.

One day, Paul was traveling to Damascus and Jesus himself met

him. He appeared in a bright light from heaven.

“Who are you, Lord?” Paul asked.

“I am Jesus”, he replied.

Then Paul knew that the Christians were not mad after all. Jesus was alive. They were right all the long. Jesus had conquered death and he could give life to anyone he wanted. He had overcome death by the power of his goodness and love. He died a good man, and death has no hold on a good man, for death is the wages of sin. God’s gift to all who love him and obey him is life. Jesus was the first and only truly good man, who loved God with all his heart and obeyed him without ever failing.

Paul was telling all this to the governor because Governor Festus wanted to know why people hated him and had tried to kill him. “It is because I preach Jesus, crucified and raised from the dead”, Paul explained. Governor Festus listened with great interest as Paul described Jesus, the hero who had conquered humanities most feared enemy,

death. But at a certain point, the governor could take no more and he cried out – he shouted – “Paul, you are insane! Your great learning has driven you mad.”

Now, you would be mad to believe that Frankenstein could actually create the monster. Why, even the author admits that she had made it all up in her head. But Paul knows what he saw. He saw Jesus raised from the dead. He saw Jesus – the exact fulfilment of all that the prophets foretold. He saw the true solution to the mystery of life. By rising from the dead, Jesus has the power to give anyone life, anyone who believes in him.

And if you go to church, and listen to the preaching of the Bible, you will see him too. The Holy Spirit shows Jesus to everyone who listens to the gospel and who put their faith in him. You won’t believe anymore because I told you. You will believe because God told you. He will fill you with the conviction that Jesus lives, and you will too, forever.

Paul Aasman

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