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THE STORY OF **GOD**,
THE WORLD AND YOU

GLEN SCRIVENER

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First published in Great Britain in 2014

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-909611-94-8

Designed by Jeremy Poyner

Printed in the UK by CPI

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For you

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WELCOME

'I don't know [what I think about God]. We've never been introduced!'

—Noel Coward

'Come and see.'

—Jesus, *John 1:39*¹

You made it, well done! So glad you came out, especially at this hour. Let me take your coat. Yes, the signs are shocking around here; people are always missing the entrance. No, that's true, we forget how it looks from the outside. I know ... But you're here now and you're very welcome. What can I get you to drink?

If Christianity is a house, consider this book an exercise in hospitality. I'm inviting you to view Christian faith from within. I'm not interested in throwing stones at the other houses – bashing other belief systems. And I'm not trying to build stepping-stones that take you progressively from your house to ours. Actually I don't think it works like that – I'll say why in a minute. Call me lazy if you like but I'm just going to throw open the doors, stick on the kettle and see who comes.

Don't get me wrong, I don't expect you to *believe* in Christianity as we begin – far from it. I'm presuming you're *not* a Christian and that right now you consider it to be, to some degree, naive, nuts, nasty or naff. That's fine – we pretty much view ourselves that way, if the truth be told. All

I'm asking is that you let me give you 'the grand tour'. Let me show you Christianity from the inside.

As I make this invitation, I realise that I'm asking a lot. I'm aware that the view from the outside can be off-putting.

From the outside looking in

If you've peered into the yard, you've probably seen the household pets – a motley bunch. There's the:

- Labrador Pup Christian: excitable, exhausting, endless enthusiasm but – bless 'em – they seem happy.
- Scared-y Cat Christian: awkward to a fault, serious-minded, scrupulous, petrified of living but, still, they're no harm to anyone.
- Giant Tortoise Christian: ancient, slow-moving, with constantly raised eyebrows and superiority etched in their faces. But if we ever have to endure another Blitz, they'll show the way.
- Ostrich Christian: head in the sand lost in their own world of religio-babble, but it seems meaningful *to them*.
- Bearded Dragon Christian: thick skin, fire in their bellies, thumping their Bibles, praying for Armageddon. But hey, with them around, the rest of us can feel progressive.

I would love to tell you there is no truth to these caricatures. But we all know that caricatures have some basis in fact. Perhaps you have met one or two of these specimens? I've met several. But I assure you that most Christians are not like this. And faith in Jesus does not condemn you to a caricature. It ought to make you more truly yourself. One of the dangers, though, of viewing things 'from the outside' is the danger of stereotyping. If you stay at a distance, you won't understand Christians.

More than this, if you remain 'on the outside', you won't understand Christian beliefs either. Imagine piecing together your knowledge of Christian

faith using only your Internet news feed. You would be left with more questions than answers:

- Are Christians a majority pleading minority status? Or the other way around? Or both?
- Do they want their morality on the statute books? Or special exemptions for their churches? Or both?
- Do they want freedom of speech for themselves? Or blasphemy laws for the rest? Or both?
- Are their leaders desperately old fashioned? Or desperately trying to be 'relevant'? Or both?
- Are their men distressingly unmanly? Or distressingly anti-women? Or both?
- Are they priggish sex-deniers? Or obsessed by the subject? Or both?

The view from the outside can be confusing, ugly even. And beyond these mixed messages, what is the core of the faith? What comes through the cultural noise? Not a lot. Only arcane views of sex and society and a vague remembrance that somewhere, somehow it has to do with God – whoever God is.

The view from the outside is bleak. And to be honest, if that's Christian faith, I want no part of it. Not only do I find many of the views above objectionable, not only do I cringe at the contradictions in so much Christian communication, I also despair that any of these issues are considered the heart of the matter. In so many cases these issues relate to true Christian faith the way football hooligans relate to 'the beautiful game'. They are distractions at best if you want to understand the thing itself.

This is why I'm inviting you inside. None of those externals get at true Christianity. I assure you, when you enter the real thing, it looks quite different. But actually that's always the way. When it comes to anything important, the view from the inside is your best hope of understanding it.

The view from within

Lots of things are only understood from within. The future is a good example.

In 1878 the Chief Engineer of the British Post Office, Sir William Preece, made this confident assertion: 'The Americans have need of the telephone, but we do not. We have plenty of messenger boys.'

Seven decades later here's the Chairman of IBM, Thomas Watson, with a similarly poor prediction: 'I think there is a world market for maybe five computers.'

Half a century on Clifford Stoll wrote a, now famous, 1995 *Newsweek* article about another newfangled technology. It was entitled 'Internet? Bah!'

It's easy to laugh at predictions made in the past. It's much more difficult to put ourselves in their shoes. How could they have foreseen the new world ahead? Actually you have to enter that world to understand it.

There are other 'new worlds' that are like this. Do you remember your childhood views of love and relationships? How does a seven-year-old grasp 'falling in love'? Typical parental advice goes something like: 'You'll know it when it happens.' This rarely satisfies the seven-year-old, but it's true nonetheless. These things must be entered to be understood.

I suggest to you that beliefs are very much like this. If I tell you Jesus has turned my world upside down, that now I see God, the world and myself in a new light, how does that sound to you? Some will say, 'Glen's got religion.' Others will cry, 'Brainwashed!' Still others will think, 'That's a nice crutch if you need it.' But, from where I'm sitting, none of those descriptions fit. From my perspective I've entered a new world, seen the future, fallen in love, that kind of thing.

So if you ask me about my Christianity, I'm liable to give some infuriating answers:

- 'What's the Christian position on such and such?' you ask. 'Let me tell you a story,' I'll say.
- 'Why should I trust it?' you ask. 'Try it on for size and you'll see,' I'll say.
- 'Can't you just give me an overview of Christianity?' you ask. 'You ought to view it from within,' I'll say.

Going inside out

Before you throw your hands up in exasperation, let me reassure you. I'm not trying to flee reality and take refuge in a Christian bubble. I have found – as have millions of others – that this story gives you an expanded vision of the world, not a diminished one. You see the Christian story claims to be *the* story – the one that explains every other.

It's a tale that begins before every other beginning. A God who is three and one. A cosmos born of community. A catastrophe unleashed at a stroke. A tragedy entered by love. A Creator made creature and killed. A Corpse conquering death by dying. A Lord with scars, rising to rule. A world invited to share God's life. A universe renewed and redeemed.

This is certainly a strange story and you might think that belief in this tale condemns you to the loony fringe. But actually the story at the heart of Christianity is *every* story. There's a golden age of innocence; mistrust; betrayal; unrequited love; a fall from grace; murder and intrigue; a pit of despair; a Hero's epic journey; a fight to the death; victory through sacrifice; and a happy ending complete with wedding and singing. That's like all our stories. But the Bible says it's God's story too. In fact – here's the claim I want you to consider – the Bible says it was God's story first. And this story makes sense of our little stories. Push through the strangeness and you'll find that everything becomes more familiar. Come into the

Christian story and it will send you out again with renewed passion and engagement.

Could that be true? Well here's the invitation – come on over. You won't understand it from a distance, so take the tour. Enter the story and figure out whether you think *this* is the Story of stories. Look to the Hero and decide whether he might be the Hero of heroes. If he is, then you haven't shrunk your world; you've opened it out.

Look to the Hero and decide whether he might be the Hero of heroes. If he is, then you haven't shrunk your world; you've opened it out.

Let me also reassure you, as you 'take the tour', that I'm not trying to avoid your objections. This is not a bold attempt to silence dissent from the outset. Actually I want to take your questions seriously. You'll notice from the contents page that I devote the last chunk of the book to addressing frequently asked questions. We'll be thinking about the following:

- OK, but is it true?
- Is the Bible trustworthy?
- How does a good God fit with evil and suffering?
- How does a loving God fit with judgement?
- How can anyone join the church with all its hate, its history and its hypocrisy?
- What about other faiths?
- Why are Christians so weird about sex and sexuality?
- Aren't believers anti-science?

These questions – and dozens more – are great to ask. But they're difficult to answer when we're both stood outside, so I'm inviting you in. Hopefully you will see how the Christian story itself answers the questions, maybe

alters the questions, maybe even alters the questioner. But, first things first, let's explore the basics of the Christian faith.

The Grand Tour

Here's the structure of the book. In the next chapter I'm going to introduce you to the Christ at the heart of Christianity. Maybe you've grown up learning Bible stories, or maybe you've never clapped eyes on a Bible. I'm going to assume no knowledge so we can allow the Jesus story to strike us afresh.



**GOD
THE WORLD
AND YOU**

Once we refocus on Jesus, I want to show how he recasts our vision of God, the world and ourselves. In particular, we will major on God's THREE-ness, the world's TWO-ness and our ONE-ness. That probably won't make a lot of sense right now, but you'll pick it up as we go along.

To stretch the 'house' analogy to breaking point, Jesus will be our entry-way, 3-2-1 will be the highlights of the grand tour and then we'll sit down with a cuppa so you can ask your questions. Is that OK?

Well then, let's begin at the beginning. In the case of Christianity, the clue is in the name. We must begin with Christ.

• COMING UP IN CHAPTER 2 •



GOD
THE WORLD
AND YOU

The next chapter is a bit like a drive through the country. I'm taking you through the life of Jesus at speed. If you focus on the close-up details, it will all be a blur. If you breathe in the air and look to the horizon, you should enjoy the ride.

As we travel along you may have a bunch of questions, like 'Who does Jesus think he is?' or 'Why on earth does he do this?' or 'What is the point of that?' But those questions are for later. THREE will answer the 'Who?' question, TWO will answer the 'Why?' question and ONE will answer the 'So what?' question. This chapter is simply about the 'What' – what is the Jesus story? There won't be a lot of interpretation or commentary. The point is not to get a grip of everything but to get a feel for it.

Everything I say is found in the Bible's four biographies of Jesus – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. At points the quotes are slightly more paraphrase than translation, but only slightly. The references are in the footnotes – please do look them up and read them for yourself. Luke 15:11, for example, means that the Bible quote can be found in the book of Luke, chapter 15, verse 11.

There's a lot of ground to cover and not much time, so buckle up, here we go ...

JESUS: THE WAY INTO THE STORY



If God is not like Jesus Christ, he ought to be.

—Lord Byron

The Son is the image of the invisible God.

—St Paul, *Colossians 1:15*

Starting in the stable

Born in a shed, laid in a feeding trough, Jesus began his earthly life as he meant to go on. The Christmas scene is so strange. But it's the perfect introduction to the strangeness of Christ.

If the ancient prophecies can be trusted, there in the manger – the feeding trough – lies the infant God. His newborn flesh is smacked to elicit that precious first breath. A mess of mucus, blood and wriggling limbs, he is wrapped in rags and placed on the straw, ready to receive his worshipping visitors – foreign dignitaries and farm labourers alike.¹

Others are threatened by the competition. King Herod orders a mini-

genocide to destroy any rivals to the throne. His teenage parents must act quickly. Scooping up the King of Kings, they flee to Egypt.²

After years on the run, this dirt-poor family settles back in Galilee, a northern backwater of Israel – a tiny oppressed nation under the thumb of mighty Rome. The people are downtrodden but proud. Some speak of a military coup. Others, more schooled in the Scriptures, hope for the Messiah – the true King – to bring God’s long-promised kingdom. But what could possibly overpower the reigning empire?

From what we know of the time, Jesus would have walked along roads sometimes lined with Roman crosses. On them hung his countrymen: a warning about what rebels can expect. Such was the end for many a would-be Messiah.

Joseph, his adoptive father, taught Jesus his trade. He was a builder, and Jesus worked at that for the great majority of his adult life. Then, aged 30, this unschooled nobody from Galilee makes a public announcement. In his distinctive northern accent he proclaims that the long-promised kingdom has come. And he’s it.³

He quickly assembles an unlikely following of no-hopers and miscreants: ill-educated fishermen; despised tax collectors; prostitutes; criminals; political zealots; and notorious ‘sinners’. Within a few short years he has changed the world forever.

This travelling preacher never graduated from the recognised academies, never accepted political office, never entered religious orders, never joined the military. He never founded a school, never fathered a dynasty, never wrote a book, never lead an army, never had an ounce of earthly power. He was butchered as a blasphemer in his thirties yet today he commands more allegiance than any human has or could. Billions call him Lord. Not bad for a kid born in a shed.

An unlikely launch

Jesus was a public relations disaster area. Anyone employed to maintain the brand integrity of 'Messiah Ministries™' would soon resign with nervous exhaustion.

For his launch onto the world stage he chooses a National Failures Convention. We'll see more on this in the next chapter but, in brief, let's picture the scene. Crowds are lining the banks of the Jordan River and Jesus' cousin, John, is baptising waifs and strays. 'Baptising' means giving someone a ritual wash. It's a sign of the spiritual cleansing we all need deep down. The only qualification for this washing is the acknowledgement that you need it.⁴

Jesus shows up to the Failures Convention and promptly dives in the water. It's a marketing disaster for Team Jesus. It looks for all the world like he too is a spiritual failure. But he doesn't seem to mind. He's happy to be counted among the messy people. This is his idea of a launch event.⁵

His inaugural address is just as strange. Back in his local synagogue, Jesus is invited to give the Bible reading. As the scroll of the prophet Isaiah is handed to him, he chooses a section where the Messiah is speaking:

God's life-giving Spirit flows through me to proclaim good news to the poor, freedom for the prisoners, sight for the blind, liberation for the oppressed. All God's grace and blessings are available through me.⁶

How do you follow such a reading? Jesus simply says, 'The wait is over. Here I am!'⁷

The people are thrilled. The Messiah has come. But soon they realise this is not the Messiah they had wanted. He's far too gracious for their liking. As Jesus begins preaching, he declares just how far God's blessings extend. The Spirit flowing from *this* Messiah is for the poor and the pariah – even those of the surrounding nations.⁸

The people are furious. There are limits to the love of God, surely. They don't want a Messiah overflowing to the nations, to the unclean, to outcasts. This Messiah demolishes their carefully maintained systems. They can't have that.⁹

The congregation soon turns lynch mob and Jesus' inaugural address ends with him escaping an early martyrdom. It's a sign of things to come. Jesus brings to the world an unbounded offer of life and liberation. To the poor, the prisoners, the blind and the oppressed he is received gladly. To the rich, the strong, the religious and the comfortable he provokes anger and violence.

Something's building

Undeterred, Jesus sets about recruiting for his kingdom – first stop: the docks. He picks three fishermen, renaming one of them Peter, meaning 'the rock'. Peter was anything but a rock – he was impulsive and bullish. Yet within a few years Peter will be Christ's chief spokesman – chosen not from a house of prayer or a house of learning, but chosen from a fishing boat.¹⁰

Jesus' next recruit? A leper. According to the ancient Scriptures this man was spiritually unclean and contagiously so. Day after day the world flees from this man. Jesus reaches out and says, 'Be clean.' He doesn't run from bad contagions; he spreads good ones.¹¹

Something is building. Here is the long-promised kingdom: a builder-turned-rabbi, three unemployed fishermen and an ex-leper. Who's next?

Jesus is teaching in a house bursting at the seams with fascinated enquirers.¹² The religious policemen – called Pharisees – catch wind of this new kid on the block. They travel from miles around, some from the capital, Jerusalem, to investigate. Pushing their way through the crowd, they sit at the front. Picture the room – a heaving crowd of common folk and these

elder statesmen, seated, cross-legged, cross-armed, their whole posture screaming: ‘Alright Galilean, what have you got?’

At that moment, pieces of roof cave in and four faces peer down. They’ve brought their paralysed friend to see Jesus. This was the only way through. So they lower their friend on a mat through this makeshift skylight.

We’re not told whether the Pharisees rose to make room. But if they were scandalised by the cheek of the roof-crashers, they are outraged by Jesus’ response. Seeing the desperation of these men, Jesus declares, ‘Friend, your sins are forgiven.’¹³

Wherever Jesus sees faith (or desperation – it all seems the same to him), he has forgiveness on a hair trigger. There and then he unloads a heaven of blessings on the man. It’s much more than the paralysed man bargained for and far more than the Pharisees could stomach: ‘Only God can forgive. Who does he think he is?’¹⁴

Yet Jesus not only claims to dispense the blessings of God, he delivers in full view of them. ‘Up you get,’ he tells the man. ‘Safe journey home. Don’t forget your mat.’¹⁵ The crowd are astonished as the man rises and walks out into the sunshine.

Jesus simply speaks and new life springs up. Here is a serious contender for Messiah. The people are delighted. The Pharisees are livid. Nonetheless, the kingdom bursts in – relentless and unmanageable. It crash-lands on planet earth as a builder-turned-rabbi, three unemployed fishermen, an ex-leper and a former paralytic. Who’s next?

This is a real shock. Jesus spots the most hated man in the province – a turn-coat villain called Levi, later known as Matthew. As an ancient ‘tax collector’, Levi was about as depraved as it’s possible to be: socially, morally and spiritually. *Socially* he was a collaborator with the Romans; *morally* he was a white-collar criminal, stealing from his own people; *spiritually* he

had betrayed the God of Israel. The masses despised him as a traitor. The religious denounced him as ‘unclean’. Jesus recruits him without a second thought. ‘Follow me,’ he says, and now everyone is scandalised.¹⁶

What kind of recruitment policy is this? Jesus’ kingdom is unlike any seen before. There is nothing careful, calculating or containable about this movement. Frankly it looks like an almighty free-for-all.

That night Levi holds a dinner party to celebrate his new path. Jesus is the guest of honour. The house is filled with outcasts of every stripe. Outraged, the Pharisees gatecrash the party to complain about the guest list (which is an odd tactic for gatecrashers). They ask: ‘Why do you eat with tax collectors and sinners?’

From the heart of the room, Jesus replies, ‘It’s not the healthy who need a doctor; it’s the sick. I haven’t come for “the righteous”; I’ve come for “sinners”.¹⁷

Now press pause. Study the scene. The religious police are trying to get in on Jesus’ party. They want to make sure he is enforcing proper recruitment procedures. They want the riff-raff out. Jesus remains resolutely at the heart of the party and it is *he* who pronounces the judgement. He is for the outcast, the marginalised and the deprived. And he stands against the most respectable men of the day.

If the religious do not recognise their own sickness, they can slink away. And when they go, press play, let the music strike up again. They leave God’s Messiah to feast with sinners.

Why? Because Jesus is a Doctor for the sick, a Liberator for the oppressed,

*Jesus is a Doctor
for the sick, a
Liberator for
the oppressed, a
Saviour for sinners.*

a Saviour for sinners. That's the kind of kingdom he reveals. That's the kind of King he is.

If you want to find Jesus, look for a dinner party. 'I have come eating and drinking' is one of his mottos. 'Heaven is a feast,' he's saying. 'And I'm extending the invitation.'¹⁸

The last are first – the first are last

At one dinner Jesus is the guest of a Pharisee called Simon.¹⁹ In walks a prostitute. She knows Jesus. She loves Jesus. Everyone can see there has been a history between them. It's not what they think, nothing scandalous has happened, but *something* has gone on. And the prostitute is overwhelmed with gratitude. Ignoring the other guests, she rushes towards him and falls at his feet, a blubbing wreck. She kisses his feet, washes them with her tears, dries them with her hair and perfumes them with the most expensive ointment. No-one knows where to look – except Jesus. He simply receives her gift.

Jesus has no thought for his reputation. He doesn't seek to 'set the record straight' though all eyes are on him. He doesn't, for a second, distance himself from this woman. He is not ashamed of her and he refuses to embarrass her, though she has made the whole room squirm.

To an outraged Simon, Jesus has only words of challenge. To the woman, there's only blessing, forgiveness and salvation. 'This man welcomes sinners, and eats with them!' cry his enemies.²⁰ He's 'a friend of ... sinners!' they splutter.²¹ The Pharisees consider these to be slurs. Jesus wears the accusations with pride.

Here is the kingdom foretold by the prophets: a realm for the poor, the oppressed, the blind and the lame. Here is the King who comes for the uneducated, the unclean and the unnoticed. Here is Jesus, exploding all



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