

There is no more pressing question today than this: Why did Christ come to the earth? It is not enough to know who Jesus is. By and large the world knows what Christians believe about Jesus. But what the world wants to know is this: Why did he come and what difference does it make?

Many answers have been given to that question. Some argue that Jesus came to give us an example of God's love. Others say that he came to be the Perfect Man, the one shining example that can lift the rest of us up. Many people consider him the greatest teacher of all time. Still others believe he came to establish a new religion. Some scholars say that he was a reformist rabbi who wanted to start a movement to purify Israel.

Against all the theories of men we have the clear words of our Lord himself found in a familiar verse in Luke's gospel. It is a verse known to every Sunday School child. Most of us know it by heart. In one simple sentence we have the most sublime statement of the mission of Christ. It is utterly reliable for it was spoken by Jesus on the occasion of encountering Zacchaeus up a tree. Here are the words of our Lord:

"For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost" (Luke 19:10).

What do we have in this simple statement?

First, we have the most magnificent historical fact.

"The Son of Man came."

Jesus has come to earth, the Almighty has entered our world, the infinite has become finite, the eternal has invaded time. Theologians call it the Incarnation—God in human flesh. The Bible calls him Immanuel—God with us.

His birth differs from every other birth that he voluntarily came in obedience to the Father's will. That could not be said of you or me. We were born but we had no choice in the matter. We are here by the choices made by our parents. But Jesus "came" according to the plan of God. Galatians 4:4 "When the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son." Every detail was minutely planned in the courts of heaven. Nothing happened by chance.

He came from the light into the darkness.

He came from splendor into squalor.

He came from purity into a world of sin.

But still he came!

And not just any man has come—the Son of Man has come. Not an angel or some sort of extraterrestrial being. The term "Son of Man" emphasizes Jesus' humanity. God himself entered the human race in the form of a tiny baby. He is the Son of Man because he was first the Son of God. John 1:14 "And the Word (Christ) became flesh (human, incarnate) and tabernacled (fixed His tent of flesh, lived awhile) among us." A generation ago C. S. Lewis put this doctrine in its proper perspective:

The central miracle asserted by Christians is the Incarnation. They say that God became Man. Every other miracle prepares the way for this, or results from this.

He is entirely right about that. Sometimes we focus on peripheral questions (how did Jesus turn water into wine?) that distract us from the core issues. We believe God became a man. This is the central truth of our faith, and it is the point at which we part company with Islam and Judaism.

Both of those religions categorically reject the notion that God has a Son and that God could somehow become one of us. To Christians it is impossible to speak about God without speaking about Jesus because God became a man 2000 years ago. As Lewis says, every other miracle leads to the Incarnation or results from it.

At the heart of our faith is this certain truth: God has come down to us in the person of Jesus. Now we know what God is like for the Son of Man has made him plain to us.

Second, we have the most spiritually significant mission.

"The Son of Man came to seek and to save."

Jesus came looking for something, or rather I should say Jesus came looking for someone. What is our Lord like? He is like the woman who lost a coin and searched her house until she found it. He is like the man who lost one sheep and went out into the wilderness to find it. He is like the Father who welcomed his Prodigal Son home again.

He came seeking sinners up a tree, at midnight, and by Jacob's Well. Jesus came seeking those caught in adultery, blind beggars, lepers, and wild men living in the tombs. He even came seeking self-righteous Pharisees who thought they didn't need him. He came seeking fishermen, politicians, radicals, physicians, tax collectors, rich men at the top of the heap, and poor folks no one else would touch. He sought the prostitutes and drunkards, and they loved him for it. And when he was dying, he came seeking one hanging on a cross beside him.

Jesus came as the seeking Savior. We will never understand him unless we see this clearly.

Third, we have the most perfect description of the state of humanity.

“What was lost.”

The word “lost” has almost gone out of style in Christian circles. We talk of being estranged from God, of being confused about our purpose in life, about needing a new beginning. All of that is true, but it is hard to improve on the simple Bible word “lost.”

Search the pages of God’s book from cover to cover. Read everything from Adam’s great sin in Genesis to the final great battle in Revelation. Then pick up the morning newspaper and see if you don’t agree with Jesus.

Men are lost with God.

What does it mean to be lost? When I very young, we often went to visit the local shopping mall. Inevitably my mother was in the aisles of some great department store when I got bored and suddenly decide to go exploring. A few minutes would pass and then would come my cry from the next aisle, “Mom . . . Where are you?” We are all like that. Isaiah 53:6 reminds us that “**we have all strayed like sheep. Each one of us has turned to go his own way**”. We all by nature go our own way. No one has to teach us to run from God.

We were born running!

We all want to do our own thing!

We all go our own way!

Dumb sheep have nothing on us. We don't even know we are lost until someone comes from heaven seeking us out. There is an important principle for us to consider. If Christ did not come to us, we would never come to him. If we say, "Seek the Lord!" let us also recall that by nature no one truly "seeks" the Lord (Romans 3:11). Harry Ironside liked to tell about a newly-converted brother who gave his testimony at a Wednesday night meeting. The new convert gave great glory to God for his salvation. After the meeting, an older and supposedly wiser brother took the young man aside and said, "That was an excellent testimony, but you left out one thing." "What was that?" "You left out your part in salvation."

The new convert thought for a moment and then replied, "My part in salvation was to run from God as fast as I could. And the Lord's part was to run after me, find me, and save me." That is indeed the testimony of every child of God. We were lost until Jesus found us. Sometimes we encourage sinners to "come to Christ," which is entirely biblical. But if Jesus did not come to us first, we would never come to him at all.

That's what it means to be truly lost.

Lost without God.

Lost without hope.

Lost in a tangled web of sin.

Lost and trapped forever.

What, then, is our hope if we are so hopelessly lost? We find the answer in the words of Jesus who came to "to seek and to save what was lost."

He did not come as a tourist or a casual visitor or an educator or an itinerant philosopher. Jesus came as a Savior seeking to save the lost.

What are the implications of this great statement of the mission of Christ? Here are three for us to consider.

1. If Christ came, man's responsibility is increased.

In the spiritual realm the greater the privilege, the greater the responsibility. Sometimes we say "ignorance of the law is no excuse," but we rarely act that way. If a man deliberately breaks the law, we treat him more harshly than the man who unwittingly breaks the law. So it is with God. If Christ did come, then our responsibility is increased. Luke 12:48 Jesus said, "To whom much is given, from him much will be required".

If Jesus had never come to the earth, we would all go to hell condemned by our own guilty conscience. If God did nothing, the whole human race would perish because "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" Romans 3:23

But that is not the situation. Jesus has come to the earth and made God plain to us. He left heaven to make his home among us, to reveal God to us, to show us the true nature of the Father.

In him we see God's love.

In him we see God's mercy.

In him we see God's kindness.

In him we see God's justice.

In him we see God's holiness.

He came to us full of grace and truth, and what did we do to him?

We heard his words, saw his miracles, listened to his voice, considered his offer, and then we put him to death. We crucified the Lord of Glory!

We know about Jesus. We've heard his story over and over again. What will happen to us if we know about Jesus and still refuse him? What will be our end if having heard the truth, we yet neglect it?

I give you the scriptural answer. If we neglect Jesus after we know the truth, we will be condemned to hell forever. Here is a frightening fact. The same gospel that saves a man also condemns him. Consider the sun in the sky. To one plant it brings life; to another it brings death. If a branch has been cut off, the sun causes it to wither and die. As with the sun in the sky, so it is with the Son of Man from heaven. If a man will not come to Jesus to be saved, then Jesus will come to him for utter destruction. (What is the 2nd implication of this great statement of the mission of Christ? Jesus came as a Savior seeking to save the lost.)

2. If Christ came to save, then the sinner is without excuse.

What excuse could you give that would satisfy God? How would you explain your rejection of Jesus? What sufficient reason would you have for saying "no" to God's own Son? Think how clearly John 3:16 puts it:

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

That wonderful truth is followed two verses later by this solemn warning:

John 3:18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

“Condemned already.” That’s the state of the whole human race apart from Jesus Christ. It is “condemned already.” Recently I read about a pastor who lost his faith in hell and then found it again. When asked how a loving God could send amazingly good people to hell, he had a simple answer: “I don’t know any amazingly good people.” He added this for emphasis:

We are all fundamentally flawed at the core and it is only in our own hubris where we want to lift ourselves up. . . . I reject the idea that there are amazingly good people out there.

He’s exactly right. All those “amazingly good people” who somehow end up in hell turn out not to be so amazing after all. The best among us are just wretches in need of God’s grace, and as for the rest of us, we’re like wretches squared, if such a thing were possible.

How bad is the problem? Here is the bottom line. Sin has infected your mind, your emotions, your will, your intellect, your moral reasoning, your decision making, your words and your deeds. No part of your life is exempt from the debilitating effects of sin. As someone has said, “If sin were blue, we’d be blue all over.” Part would be dark blue, part would be sky blue, part would be light blue, but every part would be blue in one shade or another.

What sinners a need is salvation, not reformation. They need forgiveness, not lectures on morality. They need a new life, not a new leaf.

What sinners need, Jesus came to provide. When God gave his only Son to hang on a tree like a common criminal, he gave the very best he had.

But that means I am without excuse. Nothing will avail but Jesus. As the old song says,

What can wash away my sin?

Nothing but the Blood of Jesus.

What can make me whole again?

Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

3. If Christ came to save the lost, then the worst may be saved.

We all have a thousand skeletons rattling around in the closet. I sat with a group of men who had been badly shaken by the news that a friend of theirs had been arrested for a terrible crime. They were shaken because no one saw it coming. That man was in church not long ago singing with the congregation. Today his mug shot can be found on the Internet. In talking it over with the men, I told them to consider this. None of us has the full answer to the question, "Why did this happen?" But here's what we do know. Going to church in and of itself is not enough to keep a man from heinous sin. I do not say that to heap additional pain on anyone, but simply to remind us all that you never know what sin you might or might not commit.

"If we are not terrified by this," I said, "we ought to be."

That's what I mean by having a thousand skeletons in the closet. Things are rarely what they seem to be. You can't really tell by looking on the outside what is happening in the heart. I am reminded of the British novelist who remarked there is no man who, if all his thoughts were made public, would not deserve hanging twelve times a day. To which I respond, "Only twelve times?"

So let us repeat the solemn, joyful news of the gospel that Christ came to save sinners. Luke 19:10 puts no limits on the grace of God. As Corrie Ten Boom liked to say, "There is no pit so deep that the love of God is not deeper still." It has been said that today's Christians no longer believe in instantaneous conversion. We tend to talk about salvation as a process and a spiritual journey. We're much more comfortable with salvation coming a little at a time. Our spiritual ancestors had no problem with the concept of instantaneous conversion. They believed that a life could be radically changed in a moment. Certainly the Bible presents many examples of people whose lives were changed immediately. Perhaps in our reaction against certain emotional excesses, we have gone too far. While it's true that long-held patterns of behavior may not change overnight, and while we all need time for spiritual growth, it's also true that your sins can be forgiven immediately. I like to tell people, "You may have come to church without Jesus, but you don't have to leave here without him. You may have come guilty, but you can go home forgiven. You may have come dirty, but you can go home clean." That's the true power of the gospel to create a miracle of conversion inside the human heart.

God has more grace in his heart than you have sin in your life. Jesus is a better Savior than you are a sinner. You don't have to be a prisoner of your past. In Christ you can rise above your past to live a life that brings great glory to God. The gospel song To God Be the Glory contains this encouraging line:

The vilest offender who truly believes,

That moment from Jesus a pardon receives.

All I have been trying to say is wrapped up in that sentence. If we understand our sin as an offense against Almighty God, then we are all equally qualified as “the vilest offender.” When we believe in Jesus, that very moment (instantaneous conversion!) our sins are pardoned.

Sometimes it’s hard to believe that.

I have had thoughts that I would rather die than have spoken out loud. There are deeds I have done that I would never mention in public. But I am not alone in that. Who among us would be the first to say, “Play back the unedited transcript of my life”? No, there are things better left unsaid and thoughts better left unspoken.

We are all adrift in the same boat, and apart from the grace of God, that boat is going down. But I have some Good News that did not originate with me. Jesus came to seek and to save what was lost! He said so himself. If that is true, then the worst among us can be saved. And that includes you and me. We all labor under a terrible sense of sins committed this very week. Of duties left undone. Of careless, cutting words we wish we could take back. Of deliberate greed. Of foolish choices made in haste.

But it is the glory of the gospel that no matter how bad your sins may be, you can be saved right now. Your past does not determine your future when Jesus enters the picture.

If you qualify as lost, then you are an excellent candidate for salvation.

If you are a sinner, Christ came seeking you.

When Charles Spurgeon preached on this text, he quaintly imagined a sinner longing for salvation, waiting for the Lord to find him:

Do not give up in despair because Jesus seems so long in coming to find you. He has a piercing eye to see you, and a swift foot to leap o'er mountains after you, and a ready hand to grasp you, and strong shoulders on which to bear his wandering sheep home to the fold above.

There is hope for every person hearing these words, for Christ has come to seek and save the lost.

He has the power to save you.

He seeks you this very moment.

As preachers like to say during the invitation time, "Won't you come? Won't you come to Jesus?"

I pray that you will. When you come to Jesus, you will find that he has already come for you.

Heavenly Father,

Thank you for sending us your Son Jesus to be our Lord and Savior,

Have mercy on us, sinners that have violated your laws,

We believe in you and that your word is true,

We believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of the Living God,

And that he died on the cross so that we many now have

Forgiveness for our sins and eternal life.

We know that without you in our heart, life is meaningless.

We believe in our hearts that you, Lord God, raised Him from the dead.

Please Jesus forgive us, for every sin we have ever committed or done in our heart,

Please Lord Jesus forgive us and come into our hearts,

as our personal Lord and Savior today.

We need you to be our Father and our friend.

We give you our life and as you to take full control

From this moment on.

We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ.

Amen.