



INTRODUCTION

WHY STORIES?

I often find myself telling stories. When I'm asked about suffering or why the world is in such a mess, it's a story that comes to mind. I don't have all the answers, of course, but I've met someone who speaks into these hard issues like no one else, and I want others to meet him too. And so I tell stories about Jesus.

There are many stories to choose from. In the Bible there are four accounts of Jesus's life, which are often called 'Gospels'. They're written by different people: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Matthew and John were direct eyewitnesses who followed Jesus every day for about three years, whereas Mark and Luke interviewed other eyewitnesses and wrote down their accounts very soon after Jesus's life. Each chapter in this book focuses

in on a person who meets Jesus and whose story can be found in one of the Gospels in the Bible.¹

I'd love to tell you first a story from Luke's Gospel which begins with a sycamore-fig tree on the outskirts of a dusty town in Palestine 2,000 years ago. It was a common enough tree, one of tens of thousands. One day a local man was curious to get a glimpse of a travelling preacher, Jesus, but being fairly short he found his view blocked by the large crowd surrounding the visitor. He hoisted himself up the fig tree, which is famously easy to climb, and peered down hoping to see him as he passed by. Zacchaeus watched as Jesus made his way up the road, moving slowly through the great number of people.

To Zacchaeus's surprise, when Jesus finally arrived at the tree, he stopped and moved directly under the branches. Looking up, Jesus spoke to him by name. *How does he know me?* thought Zacchaeus as he scrambled down. Before long, he was leading Jesus to his home and they spent the rest of the day together. Things were never the same again for Zacchaeus; he met with Jesus and his life changed forever.

This book aims to be like that tree. Neither the author nor the book is anything special – it's just one of tens of thousands of books published every year. But I hope, like the tree, these short chapters prove fairly easy to climb.

1 If you're not sure about the accuracy of the Gospels, a great book to read is *Can We Trust the Gospels?* by Dr Peter J. Williams (Crossway, 2018).

My aim is to give you a view of the man who appeared under the branches of the sycamore tree 2,000 years ago. His name is Jesus of Nazareth.

What motivated Zacchaeus to climb the tree? Curiosity! He'd heard something about Jesus and was intrigued. What was he like? Was he really able to do the amazing miracles people claimed? Did he really teach as nobody else had ever done? Did he really have answers to the struggles we face and the questions we ask? Zacchaeus was a busy man – as we shall see – but this little seed of curiosity was planted in his mind and he couldn't help but see for himself. He could have stayed in the office, he could have been put off by the crowds, but he climbed the tree and he never regretted discovering Jesus for himself.

I hope that his experience might be the same for you. I'd love you to meet Jesus.



1

HOW CAN WE KNOW GOD?

Simeon's story

So when Mary and Joseph came to present the baby Jesus to the Lord as the law required, Simeon was there. He took the child in his arms and praised God, saying, 'Sovereign Lord, now let your servant die in peace, as you have promised. I have seen your salvation, which you have prepared for all people. He is a light to reveal God to the nations, and he is the glory of your people Israel!' (Luke 2:27–32)

It might be that you feel sceptical about God's existence or, even if you believe in God, you might feel like he's distant and unknowable. I can sympathise with that! If there's a Creator God who made the whole universe, he must be so mighty and powerful that to try and get to know him by our own efforts or abilities is surely an

impossible task. I absolutely agree that we can't find him on our own. Instead, for us to be sure there's a God and know what he's like, he must find us and reveal himself to us. We need him to come down to our level.

Early in Luke's Gospel we read the baby Jesus was taken by his parents to the Temple in Jerusalem for them to perform the rites required by the Jewish religion. This was just forty days after Jesus was born and laid in the manger. All the excitement of shepherds and angels announcing Jesus to be the Messiah remained fresh in Mary and Joseph's minds.

It's unlikely one elderly man, Simeon, would have heard about these goings-on in the small town of Bethlehem. Simeon was a devout Jew living in Roman-occupied Jerusalem. He was convinced that God had shown himself to people through the Old Testament writings in the Bible.² He was very familiar with God's promise to send a Messiah – a Servant-Saviour King. Throughout their long history, the Jewish people of the ancient world had been waiting for God to send this special one who would rescue his people. Decades turned into centuries as the people waited, and many gave up hope. But some trusted the promise and kept waiting. Simeon was one such man. He passionately believed that the Creator God existed and hadn't abandoned his people. He trusted that

2 The Old Testament forms the first two-thirds of the Bible and was completed by the time Jesus was born.

when the Messiah, God's King, would come, he'd put everything right again.

It isn't unusual for Simeon to go to the Temple, but today he knows he absolutely must go. He makes his way through Jerusalem's streets and into the Temple courtyard. Unsure of the reason he needs to be there, he waits, and then he sees the young couple with a baby. Uncertainty flees as Simeon realises who this baby is. In awe, he takes the tiny Jesus in his arms and, filled with insight from God, announces to everyone not only that Jesus is the Messiah, but that he has come to reveal God to all humankind.

The Christian message is that God *wants* to know us personally – it's why he made us! It's why he sent Jesus. And when we look at Jesus, we see amazing things. The Bible tells us that Jesus is the glorious Son of God but that he chose to swap the wonder of heaven for his mother Mary's womb and then a manger. He is God come down to our level.

When Simeon takes him into his arms, Jesus is a helpless baby reliant on the care of others. At forty days old, he can't even support the weight of his own head. This is how much Jesus, the Son of God, shares our experience of being human – he lives it from the beginning! He becomes one of us. Even before he has uttered his first word, Jesus reveals a God who isn't distant and uncaring, but one who comes and lives with us, sharing in our hardships and struggles. God is a God who shows up and gets stuck in. He's a God who understands us and our lives.

As Simeon stands in the courtyard and marvels at the baby Jesus, God fills him with understanding about what Jesus has come to do. 'He is a light to reveal God to the nations,' announces Simeon to the startled onlookers. Simeon knows that God wants to know all people from all countries, and Jesus therefore has come to connect all of us to God. Many people wonder what God is like and whether we can have any connection with him. Simeon is convinced the answer to all our questions about God could be found in the baby he'd just handed back to Mary.

And what of us? It might be that you're not at all sure about God. The picture you have in your mind of what he's like might not be a very positive one. I'd encourage you to keep reading, and keep seeing what Jesus is like, because Jesus came to show us the truth about God. When he grew up, Jesus told his followers that if they had seen him, they'd seen God. He's like a reflection of God, doing the same things and having the same character and heart.

After Simeon praises God for sending Jesus, he turns to Mary and tells her that 'the deepest thoughts of many hearts will be revealed' as a result of her son's life. When God reveals himself to us through Jesus, it's as if someone turns the light on in a dark room – we see both God *and* ourselves as we really are. That can be scary and unsettling as we may find ourselves preferring to be in the dark about what we're really like. But Simeon knows that the God who comes close is a God of love

whom we can trust. Jesus, the revealer of God, shows us that at every turn.

Read the whole of Simeon's story: Luke 2:25–38



Listen to the whole of Simeon's story:

