

Discover Bible Studies

#4: A Plan for Your Life

After a minister had spoken on the subject, "Why I Believe in Jesus," a well-dressed young man paid him a visit in his study and remarked, "Your talk tonight was interesting, but everything you said about Christ came out of your Bible. Tell me, if Jesus ever lived on this earth, why doesn't history tell about Him?"

"That's a fair question," the minister answered as he turned and took down several books. "But as a matter of fact, history does tell about Jesus Christ."

"That I'd like to see for myself," the young man responded.

"Well here is Letter 97 of Book 10 of Letters of Pliny the Younger, Roman proconsul in Bithynia, a province of old Asia Minor. Pliny wrote to the Roman Emperor, Trajan, telling him about events in his province. See, here he is asking counsel on how he should handle a new sect, the Christians. He tells of their rapid growth and of how they sang hymns composed to their leader, Christ. Pliny sent his letter about A.D. 110. The letter by Pliny offers historical evidence of the man, Christ, and of the spread of His faith in the days of His apostles."

As the minister thumbed through another book, he added, "Another historian, contemporary with Pliny, was Tacitus. In his Annals (Book 15, chapter 44) he tells of Nero's hatred for, and persecution of, the Christians at the time of the burning of Rome. Tacitus explains that the term 'Christian' comes from the name 'Christ.' He mentions that Jesus Christ, the founder of the Christian religion, had been put to death by Pontius Pilate, Procurator of Judea, during the reign of Emperor Tiberius. All these details that Tacitus gives us match exactly the events, names, and places given in the Bible."

"Pastor, I never knew things like that were in secular history!" the visitor exclaimed.

The minister added, "I want you to notice that about A.D. 180 Celsus wrote a book attacking Christians, indicating that Christianity by that time had become a force to reckon with."

"If you are still in doubt, remember that the four Gospels are just as much history as these secular books."

When this young man realized that both sacred and secular history agree that Jesus did live as a man on earth, he went away convinced that Jesus Christ was a real, historical figure.

1. CHRIST EXISTED FROM ETERNITY

Jesus was not merely a good man, He was also God. What claim did Jesus Himself make concerning His divinity?

"If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him. . . . Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father." -John 14:7-9. (Unless otherwise noted, all Scriptural texts in the DISCOVER guides are from the New International Version of the Bible [NIV].)

If you wish to know the answer to the questions, "Who is God? What is He like?" just look at Jesus, who declared,

"I and the Father are one."-John 10:30.

God the Father and Jesus the Son have existed together from eternity (Hebrews 1:8). There never was a time when Jesus was not one with the Father. The Father shares the same love and care for each person that Jesus demonstrated during His human life on earth.

2. CHRIST, THE HEART OF HISTORY AND PROPHECY

Since Christ's life story is a fulfilment of prophecy, His life story was written before He was born. Old Testament prophecies present a clear outline of Christ's life, death, and resurrection in advance. The New Testament is His life story told in fulfilment.

Living from five hundred to fifteen hundred years before Christ's birth, the Old Testament prophets made scores of very specific predictions about the life of the Messiah. And at the very beginning of Christ's earthly ministry, as people compared His life with Old Testament prophecies, what did they conclude?

"We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." -John 1:45.

Our Saviour appealed to fulfilled prophecies to establish His identity:

"And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the [Old Testament] Scriptures concerning himself." -Luke 24:25-27.

Fulfilled prophecies give convincing evidence that Jesus is the promised Messiah.

3. CHRIST'S LIFE A FULFILLMENT OF PROPHECY

Let's look at a few of these prophetic passages from the Old Testament-and their fulfilment in the New Testament record.

His Place of Birth

The Old Testament Prophecy:

"But you, BETHLEHEM Ephrathah . . . out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be Ruler in Israel, whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting." -Micah 5:2, NKJV.

The New Testament Fulfilment:

"Jesus was born in BETHLEHEM in Judea." -Matthew 2:1.

His Virgin Birth

The Old Testament Prophecy:

"The VIRGIN will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel [God with us]." -Isaiah 7:14.

The New Testament Fulfilment:

"Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because WHAT IS CONCEIVED IN HER IS FROM THE HOLY SPIRIT. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus [the LORD saves]." -Matthew 1:20-23.

His Lineage from the Tribe of Judah

The Old Testament Prophecy:

"THE SCEPTER WILL NOT DEPART FROM JUDAH . . . until he comes to whom it belongs." Genesis 49:10.

The New Testament Fulfilment:

"For it is clear that OUR LORD DESCENDED FROM JUDAH."-Hebrews 7:14.

His Rejection

The Old Testament Prophecy:

"He was despised and REJECTED by men." -Isaiah 53:3.

The New Testament Fulfilment:

"He came to that which was his own, but HIS OWN DID NOT RECEIVE HIM."-John 1:11.

His Betrayal and the Fee Paid His Traitor

The Old Testament Prophecy:

"Even MY CLOSE FRIEND, whom I trusted, he who shared my bread, has lifted up his heel against me." -Psalm 41:9.

"I told them, 'If you think it best, give me my pay; but if not, keep it.' So they paid me THIRTY PIECES OF SILVER."-Zechariah 11:12.

The New Testament Fulfilment:

"Then one of the Twelve-the one called Judas Iscariot-went to the chief priests and asked, 'What are you willing to give me if I hand him over to you?' So they counted out for him THIRTY SILVER COINS."-Matthew 26:14, 15.

His Death on a Cross

The Old Testament Prophecy:

"They have PIERCED MY HANDS and my feet." -Psalm 22:16.

The New Testament Fulfillment:

"When they came to the place called the Skull, there THEY CRUCIFIED him."-Luke 23:33. (See also John 20:25.)

His Escape from the Tomb

The Old Testament Prophecy:

"Because YOU WILL NOT ABANDON ME TO THE GRAVE, nor will you let your Holy One see decay." -Psalm 16:10.

The New Testament Fulfillment:

"Seeing what was ahead, he spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that HE WAS NOT ABANDONED TO THE GRAVE, nor did his body see decay. God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact."-Acts 2:31, 32.

The evidence is strong that Jesus didn't just happen to fit a few predictions. His biography was indeed written beforehand by supernatural means. Truly, Jesus is the Son of God.

After looking at the evidence, we need to make a prayerful decision about who is going to be Lord in our lives. If you have not already done so, will you place your life in Jesus' hands?

4. A GOD-PLANNED LIFE

Jesus lived a God-planned life, one outlined hundreds of years before His birth. Always conscious of this fact, He remained sensitive to God's leading. Christ said:

"I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me. . . . for I always do what pleases him." -John 8:28, 29.

God planned the human life of Jesus before His birth, and God also has a plan for every human being. He knows how each of us can fulfil our deepest desires and find an abundant life.

Ray wasn't always so sure he wanted to submit to God's plan. But when he faced a big decision about where to go to college, he decided for the first time in his life to seek divine

guidance on the subject. He prayed for several days and tried to listen for some answer. After a while he seemed to get very clear reasons on why he should choose Option B: a less expensive, but huge and impersonal university. Soon after starting classes he got acquainted with some wonderful Christians who belonged to Campus Crusade for Christ. His experience with them during the next two years radically changed his life.

When Ray looks back today, he notes that every time he has faced a major decision and sought divine guidance, "God opened up a whole new area of my life."

How can you know God's plan for your life? God guides in several ways:

(1) THE BIBLE.

According to the psalmist, what is life's Guidebook?

"Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path." -Psalm 119:105.

God's Word renews our minds and gives us insight (Romans 12:2, Psalm 119:99). A regular time of prayerful study in Scripture is the best way to get our priorities straight.

(2) PROVIDENTIAL CIRCUMSTANCES.

God also guides us by divinely-directed circumstances. Psalm 23 pictures Him as the Good Shepherd. A shepherd leads his sheep through lush valleys as well as through rocky ravines. He is capable of helping his charges benefit and learn from every experience. We have a Shepherd who sticks close by our side.

(3) DIRECT COMMUNICATION OF GOD TO THE HEART.

God also guides us by speaking to our conscience. The Spirit can enlighten "the eyes of your heart" (Ephesians 1:18). The more consistently we practice communicating with God, the more He is able to guide us. He moulds both our inner impressions and our reasoning and judgment so we can see clearly the next step we need to take.

5. THE GUIDES MUST HARMONIZE

It's possible, of course, to assume you are living a God-directed life when you are merely following your own inclinations and impulses (Proverbs 16:25). Our feelings must harmonize with Bible teaching. It's not safe to conclude that God is leading us unless all three of the guides harmonize.

Take Jake, for example. He had a lovely wife and two children, but had an affair with another woman. He told his friends: "I've prayed about it and I feel it's God's will."

Jake's emotions and "inner impressions" clearly sent him down the wrong path. He imagined that it was "providential" that he'd met this other woman and didn't step back to look at the Bible commands against adultery. And the Bible, "the law and the testimony," is the authoritative guidebook, the final judge for determining a right course of action

(Isaiah 8:20). We must never allow any impression or apparently providential circumstance lead us away from a biblical principle.

6. SUBMITTING TO GOD'S PLAN

When the Devil came to tempt Jesus in the wilderness, he suggested, "If you will only forego the painful sacrifices your Father has planned for you, I'll give you the world in the palm of your hand with fame, fortune, and a comfortable lifestyle." Satan even quoted Scripture in an attempt to lead Jesus astray. But each time Jesus fought him off with the words, "It is written" (Matthew 4:1-11).

One powerful lesson we can learn from the life of Jesus is submission to the Father's will. Even amid the terrible agony of Gethsemane, He cried out, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will" (Matthew 26:39). After three years of His ministry, living day by day in harmony with the Father's plan, Christ's dying words were: "It is finished" (John 19:30). Jesus was really saying, "My God-planned life is now complete and fulfilled."

As you begin to hear God's voice speaking coherently through His Word, providential circumstances, and direct impressions, you can learn to accept His guidance wholeheartedly. You too can discover the joy of a God-planned and a God-guided life.

Sources for the above historical material and a more detailed history appear in the following books:

- Documents of the Christian Church, selected and edited by Henry Bettenson (London, Oxford University Press);
- Joseph Cullen Ayer, A Source Book for Ancient Church History (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1931, 1941);
- Origen: Contra Celsum, translated by Henry Chadwick (Cambridge: University Press, 1965);
- F. F. Bruce, The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable? 5th edition, revised (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1960; and
- R. T. France, The Evidence for Jesus (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1986).

The last two books come in inexpensive paperback editions and should be available through most religious bookstores. If the first three books are not available in your local library, those in the United States can ask the librarian to order them through inter-library loan.

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