

Four Faces of Christ

by Ray C. Stedman

In our survey of the Scriptures we come now to the New Testament. When we came to the close of the Old Testament we were aware that a large portion of the prophetic sections is at least partially unfulfilled. Also, many of the sacrifices are not explained to us in the Old Testament. Thus, it is a book of unfulfilled prophecy and unexplained sacrifice. We discovered, further, that it is a book of unsatisfied longings. Men were crying out for God. In Psalm 42 David said, "As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God." And you find the heart cry of Job reflected on the lips of many men in the Old Testament: "Oh, that I knew where I might find him!"

When we turn to the pages of the New Testament we instantly begin to read about the One who comes in fulfillment of the prophecies, as an explanation of the sacrifices and in satisfaction of the longings which are there. The Lord Jesus Christ, of course, is that One. We have in the four Gospels the picture of the Person of Christ.

Now, it is improper to think of these four Gospels as four biographies of Christ. They are not. We do not have a biography of the Lord Jesus Christ in print anywhere today. It simply doesn't exist. John says, "There are also many other things which Jesus did; were every one of them to be written...the world itself could not contain the books that would be written," (John 21:15). And there certainly is no other record of him anywhere else. But we do have these four portraits – four penned pictures of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Many have asked, "Why is it necessary to have four Gospels? Why don't we have just one Gospel? Why couldn't one of these writers have gotten all the facts together and presented them for us?" Well, that would be like trying to make one photograph of a building adequately represent the entire structure. It would be impossible to take a picture which would show all four sides of the building at

one time. It is impossible to get a full, four-dimensional view of a house without having four different pictures. Similarly it is impossible to get a full, four-dimensional view of the Person of Christ without portraying his four fundamental aspects. There are many features which are similar, or the same, in these four Gospels, but the writers were not trying to do the same thing. In fact, there is a distinct aspect of Christ set forth in each of the four Gospels. We find a different portrait of Christ in each one. We have no conception of the fullness of his Person until we have seen all four of these. You can't get a clear, well-rounded picture of Christ until you have all four Gospels in view.

I think it would have been possible for a keen-minded, farsighted Hebrew to have foreseen from the Old Testament the fact that some day there would have to be four Gospels. I don't know that any ever did, but, now that we have these four, we can look back into the Old Testament and see anticipation provided by the Spirit of God that some day there would be given a fourfold picture of Christ. The Old Testament is filled with pictures of the coming Messiah. Take the book of Isaiah, for example. In its opening pages we sense at first a dim, shadowy portrait of someone in the background. As we move along in the book it grows clearer, until we come to the fortieth chapter; and from then on, the figure of the Messiah steps out into full glory. He fills the entire horizon of the book. We have there a picture of Christ second to none in all the Bible. There are many pictures of the Lord in the Old Testament, but all of them and all of the anticipations and prophecies can be categorized under four aspects of Christ – even in the Old Testament:

First, our Lord Jesus is pictured in many prophecies, like those of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Zechariah, as coming as the King – the King of Israel. And, of course, the nation of Israel has

loved that kind of a picture. That is the portrait they built up in their minds. And this is one of the basic reasons why Israel rejected the Lord when he did come. It is the answer to the question which is often asked: "Why did the Jews not know their Messiah when he came?" They had only one of his aspects in mind. They seized upon this idea of his coming as a great, triumphant Redeemer and King and Mighty One, moving against the nations who were their enemies. When he didn't do that, they felt he wasn't the One. There are prophecies that speak of it.

Second, we have other Old Testament pictures which speak of Messiah as the Servant, as the suffering One. Again, Isaiah is in the fore-view. There is also the typological fore-view that Joseph gives of the coming of One who is to suffer. The Hebrews were confused by these two kinds of pictures that many of the rabbis say in their writings that there must be two Messiahs. They called one "Messiah Ben-joseph," or Messiah the son of Joseph, and the other "Messiah Ben-david," or Messiah the son of David. Messiah Ben-david was said to be the kingly One, and Messiah Ben-joseph the suffering One. They didn't see even the twofold aspect of a single Messiah we have already discussed.

Third, we have frequent Old Testament pictures of Christ's coming as Man. He was to be born of a virgin, grow up in Bethlehem, walk among men. There are pictures of his childhood, youth and young manhood.

Finally, we have those pictures which speak of him as God, the Everlasting One. Micah says, "Out of Bethlehem shall come he who is to be the ruler of Israel, whose going forth is from everlasting." And there are many other pictures of him as God.

So all of these Old Testament prophecies and pictures can be placed under these four headings: King, Servant, Man, and God. When you come to the Gospels, you find that these represent exactly the fourfold way in which Christ is pictured. Interestingly enough, in four places in the Old Testament (in the King James Version) the word *behold* is used in connection with these four pictures. In Zechariah 9:9 God says to the daughters of Zion and Jerusalem, "behold, thy King cometh..." That prophecy was fulfilled when our Lord entered Jerusalem in triumph. Then in Isaiah 42:1 God says, "Behold my servant..." It is not "thy servant" but

"my servant." Christ is not the servant of man but the servant of God, of Jehovah. In Zechariah 6:12 the Lord says, "Behold, the man..." He is speaking about the Messiah. And in Isaiah 40:9 he says, "say unto the cities of Judah, Behold your God!" Four times that phrase is used – each time in connection with a different aspect of the Person of Christ. Thus we can see something of the marvelous pattern which underlies the Scriptures. All this was woven into the warp and woof of the Old Testament, long before Christ ever appeared on earth, and yet it forms a basis for the four Gospels which were to be written some 500 to 1000 years later.

Before we look at the four Gospels individually, it is important to recognize that it is impossible, really, for anybody to give us a true "harmony" of them, because they are not chronological accounts. So don't try to reconcile the sequence of all the different places, times and occurrences – because you can't do it. These men did not sit down and record in chronological order what Jesus did. Each was quite evidently led by the Spirit of God to present for us a picture of a certain aspect of the ministry of Christ. In order to do that, each one of these men, for example, took a message which our Lord delivered later in his ministry and recorded it earlier. Now, there is nothing deceitful about this, because they do not claim to be recording in any chronological sequence. We sometimes merely assume that – quite improperly. And we will also find that our Lord evidently delivered the same message on two or three different occasions, so it is recorded in two or three different connections. Thus, it is impossible for us to harmonize all parts of these accounts. But there is no real, underlying disharmony between them if we recognize the fact that the chronology is not absolute. However, if we carefully compare the Gospels we can derive a fairly accurate sequence – especially if we rely upon John's Gospel, which is the most chronological of them all.

Now let's take the Gospels in their order:

Matthew's Gospel, of course, is the Gospel of Christ as King. There are a number of characteristics which mark it as distinctive in this way. His effort is to depict Christ as the King of Israel. He accomplishes this right away, because the first thing he does is to give us Christ's genealogy. A genealogy is very necessary for a king. Every king is very, very careful to keep his genealogy intact so

that we can be sure he is of the royal family. Matthew traces the genealogy of the Lord Jesus back through King David to Abraham, who was the father of the nation Israel. Christ's royal genealogy is complete.

Then we notice that, throughout Matthew, our Lord speaks as King and acts as King; he speaks with authority and acts with authority. In the Sermon on the Mount he says to the people, "Moses said to you so and so, but I say to you such and such." He speaks with the authority of Moses and more. To the Jews, Moses was the great authority. Nobody had ever spoken more authoritatively than Moses, but here came One who gave additional teaching beyond what Moses said. And our Lord acts authoritatively. He dismisses the evil spirits and commands them to leave. He heals the sick, makes the blind to see. He passes judgment upon the officials of the nation as a king would do. He says, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!" And, in majestic, straightforward, commanding dignity, he pronounces the rejection of the entire nation in the latter part of the book.

The key phrase of this book is "the kingdom of heaven." It occurs thirty-two times in Matthew, but only twice any place else in the New Testament. Matthew is constantly referring to the kingdom of heaven and the King. Even in his account of the birth of our Lord, Matthew says that Christ was born King of the Jews, and that when he died he was crucified as King of the Jews. In Matthew's Gospel there is no account of the ascension of Christ. Why? Well, because the King of the Jews belongs on earth. Thus, Matthew gives us a thoroughly kingly emphasis. By way of contrast, Luke doesn't say Jesus was born to be King of the Jews; he says he was born to be the Savior. Luke doesn't say Jesus was crucified because he was King of the Jews, but because he "made himself to be like God." And, of course, Luke's account of the ascension is in Chapter 1 of The Acts, here the emphasis is distinctly other than on the kingdom.

Mark, the second Gospel, pictures Christ as the Servant. We discover this immediately, because there is no genealogy at all. Who cares about the genealogy of a servant? Nobody.

I remember reading some time ago about a young man from Boston who went to Chicago to get a job. (In Boston people place great stock in

their ancestry – their genealogy, their family background.) Perhaps you have heard the little rhyme:

I am from the city of Boston,
the place of the bean and the cod,
where the Cabots speak only to Lowells,
and the Lowells speak only to God.

The young man gave as references to a prospective employer some of his friends back home. The employer wrote to them and received long letters in reply listing this young man's family tree clear back to the Mayflower. The practical-minded employer wrote back little notes that said, "Thank you for the family history and genealogy you sent, but we want to inform you we are interested in this young man not for breeding purposes but for employment!"

So, you see, no one is interested in a servant's genealogy. And in Mark's Gospel our Lord simply appears on the scene. But do you know what we get in place of a genealogy? We get credentials. That is what we are looking for in a servant, isn't it? We want to know what his credentials are. And in the first chapter of Mark we are given Christ's credentials and his references. His first reference is John the Baptist, who gives him a good character reference. And then you have the reference of his Father and the witness of the Spirit.

The key word in this Gospel is *immediately*. That is the word of a servant, isn't it? When you give a servant an order, you want it carried out immediately, not ten minutes later. "Immediately Jesus did so and so" is repeated many, many times in Mark.

Whereas Luke is filled with parables, and Matthew has a great many, there are only four parables in Mark. Each of them is a parable of service. They represent the Servant of Jehovah – the suffering Servant whom Isaiah pictures in his 53rd chapter.

And in Mark, Jesus is never called "Lord" until after the resurrection – another mark of his servanthood.

Mark 13:32 is a verse which has puzzled many. Our Lord says of his second coming:

"But of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." {Mark 13:32 RSV}

Men have wondered how Jesus could be omnipotent God and still not know the time of his own coming. But this is explained by the character of Mark's Gospel. As John tells us, "the servant knoweth not what his Lord doeth." Even the Son, in his Servant aspect, does not know when he is returning. So Mark gives us the picture of the suffering Servant of Jehovah.

Luke gives us the picture of Christ as Man. Here he is seen in the perfection of his manhood – the glory, beauty, strength, and dignity of his manhood. And, as we would expect, Luke also begins with Christ's genealogy. If Jesus is to be presented as Man, we want to know that he belongs to the human race, don't we? Notice to whom Luke traces his genealogy – clear back to Adam. He thus links him directly with our race.

In Luke we find most of the references having to do with Christ praying. If you want to see Jesus at prayer, read the Gospel of Luke. Prayer is a picture of man's proper relationship to God – dependence upon a sovereign, omnipotent God. That is why you see Christ in the act of prayer many, many times throughout the Gospel of Luke.

In Matthew 10, when Jesus sends the disciples out, he tells them, "Don't go into any of the towns of the Gentiles but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But when he sends them out in Luke 9, they go everywhere to preach the gospel. This is indicative that here he has in view the entire human race. In Luke you have the reflection of his human sympathy. He wept over the city of Jerusalem; he healed the man whose ear Peter had cut off when they arrested Jesus in the garden. No other Gospel tells us about these two incidents. But Luke gives us the sympathetic, human aspect of our Lord.

In Luke we also have the fullest account of Christ's agony in the garden of Gethsemane. There he sweats blood as he enters into the sorrows of humanity. That is our Lord as a man, feeling our own infirmities, entering into our trials, being tempted as we are. Luke gives us this picture all the way through his Gospel.

Then, **John's Gospel** presents Christ as God. This great book is much used today, because it is the deity of our Lord which is questioned. John's Gospel, more than any other, is given out in evan-

gelistic work, because the key question people have is: "Is Jesus Christ really the Son of God?"

- Matthew answers the question "Is Jesus of Nazareth the King of Israel?" He says, "Yes," and he shows us why. He demonstrates Christ's legal and hereditary rights to the throne.
- Mark answers the question "Is Jesus Christ the servant of Jehovah?" He says, "Yes."
- Luke answers the question "Is Jesus Christ a true man?" He says, "Yes."
- John answers the question "Is Jesus Christ the Son of God?" His answer, of course, is a very positive "Yes!"

In John's Gospel we find only a brief genealogy. Three of the Gospels begin with a genealogy – Matthew, Luke and John. But it is a very brief one in John because it is the account of Christ's divine nature. This genealogy is encompassed in only one verse:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. {John 1:1 RSV}

That's all it takes! We have only two persons in this genealogy – the Father and the Son.

Have you ever noticed that in the Gospel of John there is not a single word about Jesus' sweat and agony in the garden of Gethsemane? What is the reason for that? Well, it is because the Son of God does not enter into the suffering as the Son of man does. Of course it is the same person, but John leaves that account out because it doesn't fit into the picture he is drawing of Christ.

In John's Gospel, however, we find the only place where we are told that when the temple soldiers came to arrest Jesus in the garden, he asked them, "Whom do you seek?" They answered, "Jesus of Nazareth." And he stepped forward and said to them, "I AM he." And they fell backward in amazement when he used that divine name of God – that name which the Hebrews did not dare pronounce. Seven times in John's Gospel Jesus

claims to be God by the use of that name, “I AM”

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- “I AM the bread of life” (6:35, 48);
- “I AM the light of the world” (8:12; 9:5);
- “I AM the door” (10:9);
- “I AM the good shepherd” (10:11);
- “I AM the resurrection and the life (11:25);
- “I AM the way, and the truth, and the life” (14:6);
- “I AM the true vine” (15:1).

John waits until the end of Chapter 20 to state his purpose in writing his Gospel – no doubt hoping that, by the time a person has read this far, the purpose already will have been accomplished:

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name. {John 20:30-31 RSV}

The book of **Acts** is a tremendously fascinating and interesting book. A number of years ago Canon Brian Greene spoke at Stanford University, and I went over to hear him. He told a story that I have remembered ever since:

An American, an Englishman and an Irishman were visiting Rome together, and they were taken on a tour of various points of interest throughout the city. Their guide took them to a section of Vatican City and showed them a chicken yard. In one pen was a hen which, the guide said, was a descendant of the rooster that crowed when Peter denied the Lord – a very interesting historical personage! The three visitors regarded this chicken in characteristic fashion. The American asked, “How much can I buy it for?” The Englishman exclaimed, “My word! Could you tell me how many generations have elapsed between these?” But the Irishman was very practical; he asked, “Does it lay any eggs?” You see, he was interested in apostolic success!

That is exactly what we have in the book of Acts – a tremendous record of apostolic success. Frankly, I don’t see how anyone can pick up the book of Acts – reading in any of our modern versions with an open, ready, eager mind – and be able to lay it down before finishing it. It moves so rapidly and is so exciting that I think it is one of the

most captivating books ever written. And Sir William M. Ramsay, the great British archaeologist, said that Luke, the writer of the book, is the most accurate historian who ever lived. So we have a book that is accurate history plus exciting adventure.

Acts constantly shouts triumph, from end to end. But this very apostolic success occasions considerable danger in the study of this book. It is always true that anyone or anything that is successful is bound to be imitated. The trouble with people who imitate, though, is that they almost invariably imitate faults instead of virtues. When I was a student at Dallas Theological Seminary each of us had to take a turn at preaching while the other students listened and evaluated. It was a very difficult time for all. I noticed that I could tell with whom certain individuals had been associated by the way they talked. Some of the young men had come from Bob Jones College, and they would stand on one leg, lean over the pulpit, and shout and wave their arms – just like Bob Jones! Others had been associated with the Young Life Campaign, and they would stand with their hands in their pockets or they would gesture with a closed fist and talk with a drawl – just like Jim Rayburn! They imitated them, but largely they imitated their faults rather than their virtues. And all too often people have imitated the weak points of the activities of the apostles and the Church recorded in Acts, because of a superficial analysis of the book.

We couldn’t understand the New Testament if we took this one book out. When we come to the close of the four Gospels we have learned that the apostles have been sent to only one nation – Israel. We also know that our Lord is risen, but that is all we know. And if we leave out the book of Acts and skip to the Epistles of Paul, we find that, instead of twelve apostles (or eleven) preaching only to Israel, we have an additional apostle, Paul, and Christians going out everywhere – to all the known world. And we find them talking, not about a kingdom, but about a new organization – the Church. All of this finds its root in the book of Acts. We wouldn’t know what had happened if it weren’t for this book.

Acts is a transitional book in the sense that it gives us the record of the way God moved in the minds and hearts of men to found and establish the Church and begin its great work in the world today. But it is not transitional in doctrinal sense. That is, when the Spirit of God came on the day of Pente-

cost – from that moment on in the mind of God – all the privileges and blessings and glory of belonging to the Church, the body of Christ, were true immediately. There wasn't any intermediate period. But it took a long time for men to comprehend this. Thus we find them still clinging to certain aspects of their old traditions and beliefs. Men were only slowly accepting and growing into the truth of the gospel. In that sense Acts is a transitional book.

I like to think of the book of Acts as a revolving door. A revolving door is constructed so that people can go in and go out at the same time. With most doors someone is either going in or coming out. People can't do both at the same time. But in a revolving door people can go in one side and come out the other. The book of Acts is like that – Judaism is going out and the Church is coming in. Both are in there at the same time, for a while, just as two people can be in a revolving door going in opposite directions. But don't ever try to set up housekeeping in a revolving door – it will knock you off your feet! Don't try to live in a revolving door, because it is not designed for such. Similarly, don't rely exclusively on the book of Acts for your doctrine and teaching. It is not designed for that. It is not designed to be the only book from which we get our instruction as to what to believe. It is designed to be a record of the introduction of the Church, and it is designed to stir us up and encourage us and bless us, and to show us what God can do and intends to do through the Church. But it is not primarily a book for doctrine.

The key to really understanding this book is the realization that Acts is not a record of the apostles, as the title would lead us to believe, but it is actually acts of the Lord Jesus Christ. Notice how it begins:

In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach... {Acts 1:1 RSV}

Luke is referring to the Gospel he wrote, and he says that in it he dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach. In the Gospel of Luke you have the record of what the Lord Jesus began to do. But now, in Acts, Luke gives us the record of what our Lord is continuing to do. So it is the Lord who is at work throughout both books. Luke is Volume 1; Acts is Volume 2 – continued from our first in-

stallment. That is what Luke is saying here in this first verse. From the incarnation of the Lord Jesus to his ascension, you have only what he began to do on earth.

During World War II, Prime Minister Winston Churchill of Great Britain, in a stirring message broadcast around the world, announced the victories of the Allied Forces when they had swept across North Africa and were about to launch the invasion of Sicily. Churchill said of these events: "This is not the end. This is not even the beginning of the end. But it may be the end of the beginning." Now, that is what we have in the four Gospels. It is not the end of our Lord's ministry when he ascends into the heavens, as recorded in Chapter 1 of Acts. That is just the end of the beginning. But in the rest of Acts we have the beginning of the end.

The record all through the rest of this book is of Christ's activity through the instrumentalities of men and women. In John 16:7 the Lord tells the disciples. "it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you." And in Luke 12:50, before the cross, Jesus tells them, "I have a baptism to be baptized with; and how I am constrained until it is accomplished!" That is, "How limited and shackled and fettered and bound I am until this thing be accomplished!" Well, it has been accomplished now. Our Lord is no longer fettered. He is no longer limited. He is no longer shackled. When the Spirit of God came, the omnipotence of God was let loose among men and women; and that is why we have the tremendous explosion which we call the book of Acts in our Bible.

The Holy Spirit gives us the outline of this book in a very well-known verse, Chapter 1, Verse 8 – our Lord's words to the disciples:

"But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you;" {Acts 1:8a RSV}

That encompasses the first two chapters of the book – the coming of the Holy Spirit. And then what?

"and you shall be my witnesses ..." {Acts 1:8b RSV}

That is the rest of the book. The two great divisions are the coming of the Spirit and the witness-

ing of the Spirit. The latter division separates into several parts:

“in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.” {Acts 1:8c RSV}

Thus the book is very plainly outlined for us. We have in Chapters 1 and 2 the coming of the witness – the Holy Spirit. Then from Chapter 3 through Chapter 7 we have the witnessing in Jerusalem, beginning with the story of Peter’s addresses there – preaching for the first time the gospel of the risen Christ to men and women in the very city in which he was crucified. Then, beginning in Chapter 8, we have the witness spreading into “all Judea and Samaria” – just as the Lord had said. Chapter 13 opens with the first sending out of Paul, beginning a process which carries right through to the end of Chapter 28 – and the witness has gone “to the end of the earth.” We can see how literally this outline has been fulfilled. It begins in Jerusalem, the center of the Jewish nation, and it ends in Rome, the center of the Gentile world. It carries us from the limited gospel of the kingdom, at the close of the four Gospels, through the spreading of the gospel of grace to the whole world, at the close of Acts.

Finally, notice that this is the one book of the Bible which is not finished. It ends very abruptly. The last two verses say that Paul has reached Rome:

And he lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ quite openly and unhindered. {Acts 28:30-31 RSV}

Acts leaves you right there. I never close this book without wondering to myself, “Well, what happened next?” It gives the distinct impression of being unfinished. There is a reason for this. It is because this is the biography of a living person.

I have in my library an autobiography of Dr. H. A. Ironside. It was written, naturally, while he was still alive. It ends on the same sort of note. It leaves you up in the air. You wonder what happens next. It isn’t complete. His life hadn’t ended.

You see, if Acts is the record of the life of Jesus Christ worked out through individual men and women, it is unfinished. This means that men and women are still writing the book of Acts today. It is not finished yet! Men and women of God have been writing this book ever since the days of the apostles. I don’t know where the record is kept, but I am sure that it is kept in heaven somewhere. It is an account of what the Holy Spirit is doing through people in sending the gospel out to the uttermost parts of the earth.

You and I still have a share in writing this book. We haven’t seen the last page yet. It is fascinating to think about it that way, isn’t it? And yet it is true. Our names do not appear in the chapters we have here, but somewhere other chapters have been written down – and somewhere we have a chapter to write!

Prayer:

Our Father, how we thank you for your truth! We pray that we will be diligent students of it, seeking out its depths. And may we especially be concerned about our own relationship with your Holy Spirit, so that we may move into the fullness of Christ, and not dabble in the shallows. We want to be trusty, faithful servants in this day and age, for Jesus’ sake, Amen.

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