



ONE LIFE THAT
CHANGES EVERYTHING
FOR EVERYONE

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Introduction: One Life

There are a lot of people in the world. Seven and a half billion of them, and that number is rising fast. It doesn't matter how much the adverts on TV try to convince us that we are unique, it's easy to feel very small, one solitary life lost in the middle of a vast crowd.

When we look back on history, we feel even smaller. Historians tell us that there are as many people alive today as have lived in all previous generations put together. That makes you one in 15 billion or more, a tiny dot on the landscape of humanity. It's no wonder that so many people feel insignificant. Emma Stone could be talking to any of us when she confronts Michael Keaton in the movie *Birdman* and points out that he's scared his life doesn't matter – *You're right, your life isn't important. Neither are you, so get used to it!*

But I have written this book because I have good news for you: Emma Stone is wrong. Your life is important. You are significant. Not because of who you are, but because of who somebody else is and because of what that person says about you and what he has done for you. I have written this book to explain

how one person's life has changed everything for your own. It isn't a long book, but if you read it slowly and thoughtfully it will transform the way you live and love and laugh and hope and play and work and die. I know that for a fact, because the things I'm going to tell you are already transforming my own life and the lives of some of the friends that I'm going to introduce to you in these pages. I'm going to invite you to join us on our journey of discovery.

I'm going to tell you about the life of one solitary soul in the midst of 15 billion. He did none of the things that normally lead to greatness yet he is by far the most thought about, talked about, written about, sung about, blogged about and tweeted about person in history. His immense significance is undeniable and it isn't just theoretical. He claimed that everything he said and did was intended to transform the lives of people like you and me. There's a famous saying about him:

He was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He grew up in another obscure village. He worked in a carpenter's shop until he was thirty, and then for three years he was an itinerant preacher. He never owned a home. He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never had a family. He never went to college. He never put his foot inside a big city. He never travelled two hundred miles from the place where he was born. He never did any of the things that

one usually associates with greatness. He had no credentials but himself.

While still a young man, the tide of popular opinion turned against him. His friends ran away. One of them denied him. He was turned over to his enemies. He went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed to a cross between two thieves. While he was dying his executioners gambled for the only piece of property he had on earth – his coat. When he was dead, he was laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of a friend. Twenty centuries have come and gone, and today he is the central figure of the human race and the leader of human progress. All the armies that have ever marched, all the navies that have ever sailed, all the parliaments that have ever sat and all the kings that have ever reigned, put together, have not affected the life of humans on this earth as powerfully as that one solitary life.

How did an obscure Galilean named Jesus of Nazareth manage to split the whole of history into *BC* and *AD*, dividing history into events before and after his birth? How did he punctuate our calendar with the great festivals of *Christmas* and *Easter*, both of which are celebrations of what he did for us? More to the point, why are those events so important for you and me today? Why do people describe the One Life of Jesus as the *Good News*? This short book answers all those questions and many more.

I have divided the book into six parts. Each one

explores a major aspect of the life of Jesus. I begin each part with the basic facts, explaining what Jesus said and did. Then I get very practical by introducing you to somebody who explains how these facts have transformed their own life today. I finish each part with some critical analysis, asking what evidence we have to believe that these facts are really true.

I hope to help you to grasp what eludes the many people who allow the face of Jesus of Nazareth to get lost in the crowd. I hope to help you to understand what Napoleon Bonaparte only realized in his dying days in exile on the island of St Helena. His own life spent, he turned to his old friend General Montholon and confessed that

Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne and I have founded empires. But upon what did we rest the creations of our genius? Upon force! Jesus Christ alone founded his empire upon love; and at this moment millions of men would die for him. I die before my time, and my body will be given back to earth, to become food for worms. Such is the fate of him who has been called the Great Napoleon. What an abyss between my deep misery and the eternal kingdom of Christ, which is proclaimed, loved, and adored, and which is extended over the whole earth! Call you this dying? Is it not living, rather?¹

So let's set out on a journey of discovery. Let's explore

¹ Quoted by John Abbott in his classic biography *The Life of Napoleon Bonaparte* (1860).

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the facts about the greatest man who has ever lived. You have only got one life to live, so it's only right you want to live it to the full. Let's discover the One Life that changes everything for everyone.

PART 1

He Became Flesh



He Became Flesh

Whichever way you look at it, Christmas is a very odd time of year. We give presents that are not wanted (one in every three gifts, if you believe the surveys) to people that we don't get on with (the average family begins to argue by 9:58 on Christmas morning), while eating party food that tastes so unpleasant we avoid it for the rest of the year (don't even get me started on Brussels sprouts). But weirder than all of this is the fact that most of our celebrations ignore the meaning of the party. A study of the 1,739 Christmas cards on sale in Tesco, the largest retailer in Britain, found that only seven of them depicted the birth of Jesus. It's as if we have forgotten what made our ancestors so excited when they made Christmas the greatest festival of the year.

Our journey of discovery therefore starts with good news. Christmas was meant to be more than binge-eating and TV-watching. It was never meant to be an excuse for big businesses to raid your pockets once a year. Lost amid the wrapping paper on the floor and drowned out by Michael Bubl  crooning "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town" is a message that has inspired

millions of people for 2,000 years. I love the way that an early scholar of the life of Jesus we are studying sums up the true meaning of Christmas: *“He became what he was not so that we might become what he is.”*

He became what he was not. It’s crucial that we understand this if we want to grasp the true significance of Jesus of Nazareth.

One of the twelve original disciples of Jesus was a man named John, who wrote a famous record of his life and teaching. He emphasizes several times that Christmas was not the start of the story for Jesus, but merely the start of his story as a man. He tells us that Jesus talked about *“the glory I had with you before the world began”* and that he claimed to be the God who had created the whole universe. He recalls that Jesus looked back to the founding father of the Jewish nation, who lived 2,000 years before his birth, and declared that *“Before Abraham was born, I am!”* When John and his friends started worshipping Jesus as *“My Lord and my God!”*, instead of correcting them he commended them and asked them why it had taken them so long to understand.¹ This is the amazing truth that lies at the heart of our Christmas celebrations. The God who created the universe became part of the universe he had created. He became a baby in a manger in a dirty stable in Bethlehem, a small town in first-century Israel. God became what he was not so that we might become what he is.

¹ You can find John’s gospel in the Bible. See John 1:1–15; 8:56–58; 12:41; 17:5; 20:28–29.

In order to explain the birth of Jesus, John introduces us to the concept of the Trinity – the idea that God exists in three distinct persons: Father, Son and Spirit. Some of the greatest human minds have grappled with this concept for the past 2,000 years, trying to explain how God can be both one and three at the same time. The fact that they have not fully succeeded shouldn't surprise us. I have a pet catfish that watches all that happens in my family from its fish tank, but I don't expect it to understand my family. We're too complex for its fishy brain to fathom, just as God is too complex to be pinned down by the limited capacity of our human minds. John simply tells us that Jesus is the Word of God, the second Person of the Trinity:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made... The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

John and the other early historians of the life of Jesus don't just emphasize his divinity. They also emphasize his humanity. They tell us that Jesus grew tired and hungry and thirsty. He loved and laughed and told stories. He was troubled and moved to tears and devoted to his mother.² His birth as a human baby

2 See John 4:6; 11:33–36; 12:27; 13:21; 19:25–28. See also Matthew 4:2 and

in Bethlehem did not make Jesus anything less than God but nor did his divinity make him anything less than human. He became fully one of us, as the early theologian Augustine of Hippo explains:

The Maker of man was made man, that the Ruler of the stars might suck at the breast; that the Bread might hunger, that the Fountain might thirst, that the Light might sleep, that the Way might be wearied by the journey, that the Truth might be accused by false witnesses, that the Judge of the living and the dead might be judged by a mortal judge, that Justice might be condemned by the unjust, that the Chastener might be chastened with whips, that the Vine might be crowned with thorns, that the Foundation might be hung on a tree, that Strength might be made weak, that Health might be wounded, that Life might die. He suffered these and many other indignities for us, so that he might free us who are unworthy.³

Read Augustine's words again a bit more slowly. They are seriously good news. We live on a fairly small planet in a relatively small solar system. Our sun is one of 200 billion stars in the Milky Way, and astronomers tell us that the Milky Way is one of over 500 billion galaxies in the known universe. It's no wonder we feel small! Carl Sagan sums up our culture's view of what

Luke 10:21. The disciples of Jesus emphasize his humanity because only by becoming fully human was he able to fully save humans.

³ Augustine of Hippo in c. 400 AD in a sermon "On the Birth of Our Lord" (Sermons 191.1).

this means for us in his book *Cosmos*, concluding that

*We float like a mote of dust in the morning sky...
We live on an insignificant planet of a hum-drum
star lost in a galaxy tucked away in some forgotten
corner of a universe in which there are far more
galaxies than people... The universe seems neither
benign nor hostile, merely indifferent to the
concerns of such puny creatures as we are.*⁴

The Incarnation of Jesus – the fact that God has become a human being – is therefore brilliant news. It announces that Carl Sagan’s depressing verdict on the universe is wrong. We may live on a minor planet that revolves around a minor star in a minor galaxy, but the whole purpose of the universe revolves around us. God has not become a Martian. He has not become a Klingon or a Wookie. He became a man because he made the human race in his own image and because he loves us more than any other creature in the universe he has made. That’s the tragedy when we allow the tinsel and the turkey to become the main event at Christmas. We end up short-changing ourselves.

The real meaning of Christmas is great news, but it’s also very sobering. When the cavalry arrive in an old Western movie, it’s always because the cowboys are in trouble. When Superman flies onto the screen, it’s always because somebody is in danger and in desperate need of rescue. With Christmas, it’s just the same. The first time in the Bible that God promises to

4 Carl Sagan in *Cosmos* (1980).

come to earth as a human being is in Genesis 3:15, just a few verses after the first humans have sinned and messed up the universe that they were given. The rest of the Bible continues on a similar theme. It is because of our failure to live as we ought that God has become a human being, to succeed wherever we have failed.

The Bible uses a technical word to describe humanity's moral failure. The word is taken from the language of an ancient Bowman on the shooting range. *Sin* referred originally to an arrow missing the target, so the Bible uses it to describe the many ways in which our own lives miss the target of living rightly towards God and towards those around us. *"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,"* the Bible explains, but *"God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."* One man messed up and we have all messed up by following in his footsteps, so God became a new and perfect man for us to follow instead. *"Since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive."*⁵

It may not sound like good news to be told that you're a sinner, but it really is. It gives us somewhere to go with the uneasy sense we all have within our consciences, whenever we are honest with ourselves, that we haven't lived as perfectly as we ought to have done. It tells us that God knows all about our sin yet has not given up on us. He still loves us and he has

5 The apostle Paul in the Bible. See Romans 3:23; 1 Corinthians 15:21-22; 2 Corinthians 5:21.

proved it to us by coming to earth to live as one of us. He has stooped down to sit in the dust of our planet with us in order to take us up into the glories of heaven with him. We should all want this to be true. If what we celebrate each Christmas is that God loves us so much that he has become one of us in order to forgive us our sins and to lead us back onto the pathway that leads to life and immortality with him, then it's a Happy Christmas indeed.

It gets even better. When Jesus ascended back to heaven at the end of his earthly life, he did not take off his humanity like an unwanted Christmas sweater. He clung on to it. He is still fully human. There is a flesh-and-blood man seated right now in heaven, just as the Bible declares:

*"This is good, and pleases God our Saviour, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, **the man Christ Jesus**, who gave himself as a ransom for all people."⁶*

God became a human being forever so that we can be united with him forever. It's no wonder that previous generations inaugurated the world's biggest party to celebrate such good news.

One of the most successful Christmas movies of all time is *Love Actually*. It begins and ends with countless people hugging and kissing one another in the arrivals

6 The apostle Paul says this in 1 Timothy 2:3-6.

lounge at London's Heathrow Airport as the Christmas holidays begin. Enjoy the movie, but don't miss the fact that Christmas is about something even greater. It celebrates the moment when God embraced the human race by becoming one of us. It celebrates the fact that this means we are not meaningless life forms stuck on a meaningless rock that orbits a meaningless ball of fire in a meaningless universe. We are the only life form in the universe that God loved enough to come and kiss in person that very first Christmastime.

John 3:16–17 explains the reason for our Christmas parties: *“God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”*