

# Dealing with Doubts – Part 7

## Jesus as a Living Person

by Dr. Gary Habermas  
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The longer I work with the issue of doubt, the more I am convinced that a major key in the process is understanding, on a daily, practical basis, that Jesus is still intensely personal. In dealing with volitional doubt, in particular, we have already seen the importance of applying the New Testament teachings of the personhood of Jesus to one's life in order to both increase one's faith and to provide greater impetus to love and be committed to Him. It is definitely true that He lived, died and rose from the dead in first century Palestine. But it is also true that He is just as alive and just as personal to each believer today, but we frequently do not quite appropriate that personal element in our Christian lives. Herbert Lockyer states the issue this way:

Have you met Jesus?... We try to feel His nearness. But He is not real to us. The tragedy is that Christ is not, to us, the living, bright Reality that He ought to be.<sup>1</sup>

But not only did Jesus act in a deeply personal way while He walked on this earth but He has also provided the means for a truly personal relation to believers today. Appropriating the truth of that closeness can solve several problems regularly faced by the doubter.

### **A. Jesus in the Gospels**

It appears that the subject of the various kindnesses which Jesus showed to different individuals and groups is a topic which is seldom mentioned in much detail. Yet this is an aspect<sup>2</sup> of His personality which can help provide a realization of His love for others. And I think that such a study serves to assist us in appreciating the personal element in His ministry. This, in turn, can also help us to formulate a foundation concerning how Jesus still has a personal relationship with believers today, as well.

Jesus' compassion is shown not only by His healings, but also by His attitude displayed in these acts. When a leprous man approached Jesus for healing, we are told that He was "filled with compassion" for him and responded that He was, indeed, willing to heal the individual (Mk. 1:41; cf. Matt. 8:2-3; Lk. 5:12-13). Just prior

to the feeding of the five thousand it is explained that Jesus “had compassion on them and healed their sick” (Matt. 14:14; Mk. 6:34). Then, before the feeding of the four thousand, we are again told that Jesus felt compassion for the people (Matt. 15:32; Mk. 8:2). In the case of the two blind men, “Jesus had compassion on them and touched their eyes” (Matt. 20:34). And when ten men with leprosy approached, requesting that Jesus have mercy on them, He did, healing all of them (Lk. 17:13).

In each of these examples, the narratives are very brief. But one unmistakably gets the idea that Jesus felt deep compassion for those who were sick, hungry or without leadership. His method was not simply to heal persons by walking among them in a detached manner. He shared their burdens and experienced their pain. Then He exercised His powers, thereby revealing His mercy.

Jesus showed Himself to be humble and gentle on several occasions. One of the best known of these occurred when little children were brought to Jesus so He would place His hands on them and pray for them. (Luke even includes babies in the group.) After rebuking the disciples for attempting to stop this procedure, we are told that Jesus “took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them” (Mk. 10:16; cf. Matt. 19:13-15; Lk. 18:15-17). In another instance Jesus also took a little child up in His arms in order to make a point (Mk. 9:36-37).

In more than one situation Jesus taught His disciples to be servants. In fact, the greatest one was to serve.<sup>3</sup> And then by example, Jesus washed His disciples’ feet; the Son of God humbled Himself to do this lowly job of service (John 13:1-17).

Additionally, in inviting individuals to come to Him, Jesus identified Himself with the words, “I am gentle and humble in heart” (Matt. 11:29). And Matthew also cites Zechariah 9:9 as a prophecy which mentions the gentleness of the Messiah (Matt. 21:5).

Further, in a number of rather striking statements, Jesus spoke of His followers as His friends and was very specific about His love for them. Most frequently, it is the disciples who are called the friends of Jesus (Lk. 12:4; Jn. 21:5). On one occasion He spoke of the growth in their relationship: “I no longer call you servants. . . . Instead, I have called you friends. . . .” (Jn. 15:14-15). Jesus also called Lazarus His friend (Jn. 11:11).

We are additionally told, again primarily in the Gospel of John, that Jesus loved His disciples (Jn. 13:1, 34-35) and one disciple, in particular (Jn. 13:23). The depth of this relationship is seen in Jesus’ statement, “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you” (Jn. 15:9). This is even more apparent when Jesus points out that dying for one’s friends constitutes the greatest love (Jn. 15:12-13).

The last two statements strikingly reveal that, by the term “love,” Jesus does not refer to some weak or indecisive emotion. Rather, He compares His love for His disciples with nothing less than the Father’s perfect love for Him. Then, after encouraging His disciples to love one another, He points out that the greatest love is indicated by one’s dying for one’s friends. These teachings indicate Jesus’ true, sacrificial love. And this love is by no means limited to the disciples alone, since we are also told that Jesus loved Lazarus, Mary and Martha (Jn. 11:3, 5, 36), as well as

the wealthy young man who questioned Him concerning eternal life (Mk. 10:21).

At first reflection, one might be tempted to think that the force of these last statements might be mitigated due to Jesus' commands to love one's enemies, as well. And Jesus certainly does teach not only that one's enemies should be loved, but that we should also bless them, pray for them and lend willingly to them (Lk. 6:27-36; Matt. 5:43-48). But this should only cause us to increase our appreciation for Jesus, for the admonition concerning this treatment of one's enemies is no mere empty rule but a genuine love on His part. Such is indicated both by Jesus' cry to His Father that His executors be forgiven, which He made right during the time that He experienced the most intense pain of crucifixion (Lk. 23:34) and by His earlier remarks concerning His willingness to die because of His love for persons (Jn. 15:13).

Jesus' offer of comfort was often given to His followers. Sometimes such was manifest in brief admonitions not to fear, as when He stilled a storm (Mk. 6:50) or when He calmed a frightened Peter, James and John during His transfiguration (Matt. 17:17). On other occasions, however, detailed offers were made as to how people might experience true rest. Some of the images which were used by Jesus specifically correlated with Old Testament promises of God's blessings for His people.

For example, in Matthew 11:28-30 Jesus invites all who are weary and burdened to find rest by exchanging their problems for discipleship. Besides the beautifully-worded offer to lay down one's burdens, this proposal is reminiscent of the promise that if we cast our cares on God, He will sustain and keep us from faltering (Ps. 55:22). A similar teaching in Psalm 68:19 relates that God daily bears the burdens of His people. So Jesus not only made a wonderful offer Himself, but He tapped resources that a person who was familiar with God's Old Testament promises would recognize.

In another instance, Jesus announces His love for those in Jerusalem, saying that He longed to gather the Jews to Him like a mother hen gathers her chicks under her wings, so as to provide shelter and protection (Matt. 23:37-39; Lk. 13:34-35). In a similar vein, Jesus also wept over Jerusalem on another occasion, desiring its peace (Lk. 19:42). One of the most common images in the Old Testament was that of God providing a refuge for His people as their Shield and Protector. Perhaps the best-known of these is Psalm 91, but literally dozens of passages in the Psalms alone repeat this message,<sup>4</sup> as do other texts.<sup>5</sup> In addition to Psalm 91, other key portions include Psalm 36:7-9 and 46:1-7, where we are told that believers find refuge in God, where all their needs are met and supplied in overabundance. The key here besides the theme of protection is that of total rest and fellowship with the God of the universe. And again, Jesus tapped into this gorgeous imagery in His offer of peace to His people.

Another picturesque image is provided when Jesus compares Himself to a good shepherd who constantly cares for believers, who are His sheep. John 10:1-18 graphically portrays this, which is also a common theme for those familiar with the Old Testament. Jesus calls His sheep by name, leads them out of the fold and

directs them to peaceful pasture land (see especially Jn. 10:3-4,9). Like Psalm 91, there is a major counterpart here from the Book of Psalms as well. In Psalm 23 we find that God is our Shepherd and that His sheep lack nothing. He leads them out to beautiful green pastures and beside quiet waters where they rest comfortably. Even when facing death, the Lord's sheep have no need to fear because He is with them even then, comforting them. The sheep's desire (as in the earlier theme of refuge) is to spend eternity with the Shepherd. Other passages express very similar teachings.<sup>6</sup> Two other especially interesting texts refer to God gently carrying His sheep "close to His heart," paying particular attention to the young ones (Isa. 40:11) and carrying them that way forever (Ps. 28:9). These are quite reminiscent of Jesus as the good Shepherd of John 10, and of Jesus' parable of the shepherd who searches far and wide for his lost animal, placing it on his shoulders and calling his friends to rejoice when it is found. Jesus' own interpretation refers to the rejoicing in heaven when a sinner repents (Lk. 15:3-7).

In particular, I think that these last two images are the greatest biblical pictures of Jesus' compassion, gentleness and love. The mother hen who gathers her chickens and protects them under her wings and the shepherd leading his sheep to peaceful pastures are simply graphic depictions of Jesus' treatment of believers.

With regard to the first image of the hen, Lockyer notes four keys in Jesus' attitude. First, He is a persistent lover, noted by the phrase "how often" He wanted to so protect the Jews. Second, He is a tender lover, illustrated by the treatment of the mother hen for her chickens. Third, Jesus was an unwanted lover, since the Jews "would not" receive Him. Lastly, He is a Judgmental Lover because He was forced to turn them back over to themselves, desolate.<sup>7</sup>

And again this is reminiscent of Psalm 91 with its stress on particularly God being the believer's Shelter, Refuge and Fortress as they rest under His wings in the shadows, away from all that is evil (vs. 1-13). The promise is made, further, that all who so rest will also find deliverance from trouble, answers to prayer, long life and salvation (vs. 14-16).

The imagery of the shepherd caring for his sheep is equally instructive. What could be more restful than being guided by the Son of God, the Creator of the Universe, as He takes His followers to safe pastures where they rest by quiet waters? In fact, Revelation 7:15-17 adopts this very idea to describe the eternal rest offered to those who triumph and keep their faith pure through great tribulation.

And once again, with both images the supreme ideas are those of protection, rest and fellowship. Such eternal communion with the God of the universe should be a cause of great joy for the believer. By these and other teachings, Jesus communicated His compassion, gentleness, friendship, love and desire for restful fellowship with believers. To spend eternity with Jesus is a truly wonderful reward made possible solely through God's love and grace. And we have seen a foretaste of such in the earthly ministry of Jesus.

## **B. Jesus is Personally Alive Today**

Perhaps many believers today would say that the chief issues involved in conceiving of Jesus as intensely personal today are that He walked on the earth 2000 years ago and that believers do not actually see Him as others once did. Interestingly, even believers shortly after Jesus' era apparently also dealt with this dilemma, although the time frame was more abbreviated (1 Pet. 1:18). But a biblical presentation of the data, I think, bridges the gap between the past and the present. Utilizing Jesus' earthly ministry as our point of departure, we will attempt to show that Jesus made provision for believers to compensate for exactly this concern on their part.

Before proceeding to Jesus' answer to this issue, a few contemporary illustrations will perhaps show that we regularly recognize that personal relationships can exist even when persons have never met. For instance, I know several individuals whom I have never personally met except through regular telephone conversations. Yet I consider each to be a personal friend. Such has even led to close friendships.

Or again, the popular practice of writing letters to pen-pals has doubtless led to countless close and personal friendships among persons who have never met. And a last type of in absentia friendship most frequently seems to occur when a parent knows they are dying, so they produce a number of writings or tape recordings for future use by children who are not old enough to understand and who will not remember their parent. In some cases, these communications are prepared for (as yet) unborn children.

Now it must be granted that these cases do not correspond in several respects to the large physical separation between Jesus and Twentieth Century believers. But the chief point to be illustrated here is that, in the last two types of cases, in particular, we perceive situations where personal relationships exist and develop without any actual face to face contact. Yet presumably few would claim that these cannot constitute truly personal friendships. For our purposes, it will be good to keep this in mind as we present thirteen steps by which Jesus Himself laid the groundwork for personal interaction with individuals, both in the first century and onwards until today.

First, the Incarnation is explicitly the supreme act which reveals Jesus' humanity. What could be a greater act of relating to human persons, especially when it was initiated by God Himself? Thus, Jesus chose to become a man; the Son of God, Himself a divine Person, chose to be further related to human persons by becoming one of them. It is doubtful that a more personal act could be conceived than an infinite God becoming a man.

Second, we have already seen in the first section of this chapter how Jesus did not stay aloof but got involved with people's needs. Besides teaching His disciples, He also revealed His deep love and compassion for the sick, poor, hungry and outcasts. He dealt with both crowds and individuals. He blessed babies and children. He offered Jews protection and Christians leadership, calm, rest and fellowship. He even prayed for His enemies during His most intense pain. And much of this was done when Jesus was tired and weary, at much expense to His own physi-

cal needs. Then He taught that the same expression of self-sacrificial love was the chief fruit of a believer (Jn. 15:9-17). Such personal interaction with the needs of others is unparalleled among major religious teachers.

Third, Jesus repeatedly taught that sinners can have a personal relationship with Him by a faith-commitment. Thus, the same Jesus Christ who became man and who carried on the ministry such as we have outlined in this chapter actually invited individuals to experience a personal relationship with Him.

Fourth, Jesus prayed not only for the future welfare of His own disciples, but He even prayed specifically for those who would later become believers after them (Jn. 17:20). Thus, His prayer in this chapter was to eventually provide for believers today, up until His return (as do many of the exhortations in the New Testament epistles).

Fifth, Jesus died to show His love for us. In fact, it just may be that the death of Jesus is the single most convincing sign of His compassion for believers. And lest we think otherwise, His death was just as efficacious for us today as for anyone in the first century. What depth of love is shown when the infinite God of the universe cares for us enough to send His unique Son to die, especially with the explicit knowledge of the horribly tortuous death of crucifixion! And to think that the Son did it all without being forced; it was a totally voluntary act.

How many of us would willingly be tortured and die so that, say, a criminal could live? And yet this is precisely what Jesus did for us in His love while we were still offensive to Him in our sin (Rom. 5:8).

Then the pain that Jesus suffered is another angle from which to view the Cross. It assists us in understanding that God's own Son ultimately knows what it is like to suffer far more than virtually any humans ever do. We might not understand why we suffer sometimes, but He does.

Lastly, the Cross is also an intensely personal event. It was not only a death for the whole world but, at the exact same time, a death for each individual. Jesus, then, not only came to die for the world; He really came to die for me. New Testament offers of salvation to individuals specifically portray this aspect.

As a whole, then, the Cross reveals an intimate relationship between Jesus and believers. It shows His love, the pain He suffered, and the personal quality involved in His death. And, as we have said, it is as applicable to Twentieth Century believers as it was in the First Century.

Sixth, Jesus rose from the dead to prove His love for Christians. Thus, He did not simply claim that His death was special, including the factors just mentioned, but His resurrection sealed those statements, revealing that they were true. Additionally, the fact that the believer's eternal life is guaranteed by this same resurrection makes this event more important in personal terms, for it provides an example of the believer's own resurrected body.<sup>8</sup>

But at this point Jesus left His earthly ministry and took His place in heaven. This is an important juncture because it indicates a new order in God's personal relationship to believers, who also struggled even in the First Century with the issue of Jesus' being physically absent from them (Jn. 16:5-7, 12; cf. 1 Pet. 1:8). So as we

proceed through the remainder of the thirteen points, we will not only be concerned with how Jesus continues to relate to believers today, but also how the original question was answered for the disciples.

The seventh step in Jesus' provision for Christians, and the specific one which He used to comfort the twelve disciples after telling them that He would be leaving them, is that the Holy Spirit would be sent to them (Jn. 14:12-19, 25-27). He would minister to them as Jesus had done previously, also presenting additional benefits (see Jn. 14:26; 16:12-15).

At this point what must not be concluded is that the ministry of the Holy Spirit would be quite inconsequential in the sense of bringing the disciples direction and comfort or that this new ministry would be unreal to them because He could not be seen. All one should have to do, for example, is to study the Book of Acts to perceive how real the Holy Spirit's ministry was to the apostles. He guided, empowered, and enlightened them on many an occasion and there is no hint that there was any dissatisfaction on the part of these believers.

As for Christians today, it sometimes does appear that the Holy Spirit is too often viewed in just the negative way mentioned above: His ministry is thought of as being too inconsequential and too unreal. I think many believers too frequently think (privately, of course) that the work of the Spirit is an unfair "trade" for the earthly, visible ministry of Jesus.

And yet, we must come to grips with the fact that for Jesus, the work of the Holy Spirit was very substantial, both as a fit reminder of Jesus' own ministry, as well as providing for genuinely new dimensions (Jn. 14:12; 16:13 for examples). Additionally, the New Testament reports that the Holy Spirit provides a specific testimony to the believer in order to certify His own, individual participation in salvation.<sup>9</sup> This topic is substantial enough to be the subject of the next chapter, so we will not pursue it here, except to say that this witness is real and deeper than human emotions, reason or sense experience, although it often affects these three. But the point here is that the Holy Spirit's overall work is not only quite substantial, but that it is the first link in the chain which provides the believer today with a personal witness to the living Jesus, as indicated by the Lord Himself (Jn. 16:14).

Eighth, and in an apparently separate sense, Jesus also promised to be with His followers through the end of this age — or until He returns (Matt. 28:20; cf. Heb. 13:5-6). While this is possibly a reference to the ministry of the Holy Spirit, it appears in Matthew to also refer separately to Jesus' presence with believers (cf. also Matt. 18:20). At any rate, it is clear that Jesus is, in some sense, promising His presence to Christians from the First Century to the present.

Ninth, Jesus also provided a love letter even for Twentieth Century believers — the New Testament. He promised the apostles that they would be His spokesmen and His witnesses (Matt. 10:40; Lk. 24:48; Acts 1:8). Additionally, the Holy Spirit would inspire them (see John 14:26; 16:12-15). The result of Jesus' promises was the writing of the New Testament, which remains, even for believers today, Jesus' love letter to us. It is an especially affective bridge between the First Century and

ourselves, although we may sometimes forget that it is a document provided for us by Jesus Himself.

Further, the tenth connection between the living Jesus and believers today is that He taught us to pray in His name so that God will answer (Jn. 14:13-14; 15:16; 16:23-24). In this sense, He is presently involved in meeting our needs and responding to our requests. When believers pray in Jesus' name and the prayer is answered,<sup>10</sup> Jesus has had a part in it, a further indication of His current involvement with our lives.

The eleventh indication which believers have today that Jesus is still personally involved with them is that He still serves as Mediator and High Priest. The Book of Hebrews repeatedly teaches that this is a continuing, unending priesthood (Heb. 7:23-8:6; 9:24-28), and as such also applies just as much to believers today as it did in the First Century. So Jesus did not "pass off the scene" so to speak, but has a continuing ministry with believers even at present. And the fact that He is our Mediator (1 Tim. 2:5-6) likewise remains the case with no difference between the First and Twentieth Centuries.

The twelfth truth is that Jesus is not only the Creator of the universe and everything in it (Jn. 1:3; Col. 1:16), but He is also the Sustainer of the universe, as well (Col. 1:17; Heb. 1:3). In fact, Scripture teaches a "radical" dependency of creation on God, such that two biblical writers can poetically say that if God would withdraw His breath, everything would die (Job 34:14-15; Ps. 104:29).

Now at first thought some might contend that this does not sound too personal, but such would be to miss the point that, in order to sustain all life at every moment, God is intricately involved with each one of us. And if one thinks that God must also sustain the far reaches of the universe it should be said that such is, in fact, actually needed in order for life to exist on earth. Thus, the God Who controls the universe is also intimately involved with human life.<sup>11</sup>

Thirteenth, the very same Jesus who was so personally involved in the lives of so many individuals while He was on the earth, who prayed for believers, died on the cross for the sins of the world and rose again for us, who sent the Holy Spirit, provided the New Testament and serves as our High Priest and Mediator, as well as being the Sustainer of the universe, has also invited believers to spend eternity with Him! Such an offer is almost incomprehensible. Unlike individuals who are willing to share some (but not the best) things with others, Jesus wants to include Christians in His eternal plans. And to spend eternity with Jesus Christ represents the highest of Christian hopes; to praise Him and live with Him forever is beyond any specifically human dreams. Yet, Jesus freely offered this future to those who entrust their lives to Him.

A personal existence in heaven with the personal God of the universe is a fit conclusion to our study of how Jesus could have lived 2000 years ago and still be personally involved with believers today. After all, the point here was to show that Jesus is personally concerned with contemporary Christians and the opportunity to finally meet Him and spend eternity with Him clearly reveals the biblical thesis at its best.

### C. Conclusion

Near the beginning of this chapter we raised the issue of how Jesus could be separated from Twentieth Century believers by almost 2000 years and still remain personal, especially when no one today has ever seen Him. It was suggested by analogy that there might be at least some similarities in such human experiences as close friendships which evolve through telephone conversations, letter writing or tapes, each in the absence of face to face meetings. In the case of Jesus, knowing He would leave the world, He not only left a lifetime example of personal involvement but He also sent the Holy Spirit and prepared His disciples for the writing of the New Testament.<sup>12</sup> Thus, believers not only were given the Holy Spirit, but one result was the recording of the New Testament “love letters” for Christians down through the ages. In this sense, Jesus made sure that He left His followers with both the Holy Spirit and a written product, which may be at least reminiscent of those who leave messages of various sorts for their children because of their impending deaths.

At any rate, it is simply true that believers today do not operate by having seen Jesus in physical terms (1 Pet. 1:8; cf. 2 Cor. 5:7). And yet it appears that Jesus has left an unbroken chain from the time of His earthly life to the present. After a tremendous personal example during His ministry, His sacrificial death and resurrection, He sent the Holy Spirit (Jesus’ own chosen “Successor”) as well as promising His presence to believers and His being High Priest, Mediator and Sustainer, all of which reveal this ongoing relationship. And the chance to actually meet Him and to spend eternity with Him is an unprecedented personal offer.

Therefore, Christians should realize that there is not a 2000 year gap, except in the sense that Jesus has not continued His earthly ministry during that time. But such is not synonymous with Jesus’ absence from the lives of believers. And presently we do experience the ministry of the Holy Spirit in our lives (see next chapter), at least part of Whose ministry is to testify concerning Jesus (Jn. 16:14).

This conclusion is crucially important for those who suffer doubts. As asserted in Part 5 on Volitional Doubt, knowledge about one’s ongoing relationship with Jesus Christ and developing it are very important in building up one’s faith. Thus, to realize that one is really involved with a living Person is a key in responding to assaults on one’s faith: doubts assail a personal relationship, not simply a body of beliefs. To illustrate, I will presumably respond differently to attacks on my wife’s character because of a close personal relationship with her, as opposed to simply trying to defend someone’s honor.

But even far beyond this, to know that Jesus is still personally related to me is hopefully to begin to build up our relationship in a positive manner. Earlier it was suggested that one of the best ways to cause faith to grow is, paradoxically, to practice during the doubt itself. And it might be remembered that it is healthier to move ahead and grow than it is to always be engaged in fighting battles. (This is where meditation is also helpful to work on this positive growth.) At any rate, much Christian doubt as a whole can be corrected by the knowledge that Jesus presently is with us, knows our needs and loves us.<sup>13</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Herbert Lockyer, *Portraits of the Savior* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Publishers, 1983), p. VII
- 2 Since this is only an aspect of His personality, the picture presented here needs to be balanced by Jesus' total ministry, including, for example, His warnings of judgment for those who did not heed His words.
- 3 See Lk. 22:24-27 (cf. Matt. 20:26-28; Mk. 10:43-45); Matt. 23:11-12.
- 4 For a small sampling, see Ps. 3:3; 5:11; 9:9; 11:1; 16:1; 17:8; 18:2, 30; 25:20; 27:1; 28:7; 31:1-4, 19, 20; 32:7, for examples.
- 5 For a few of these, see Isa. 17:10; 25:4-5; 31:5; 57:13; Jer. 16:19; 17:17.
- 6 In particular, see Ps. 37:3; 74:1; 79:13; 80:1; 95:7; 100:3; Isa. 53:6.
- 7 Lockyer, pp. 113-117. Interestingly, Ps. 7:10-11 also notes that God is both a Shield and a righteous Judge.
- 8 See Jn. 14:3, 19; 2 Cor. 4:14; Phil. 3:21; 1 Jn. 3:2.
- 9 See Jn. 14:17, 20; Rom. 8:15-17; Gal. 4:6-7; 1 Jn. 3:23; 4:13.
- 10 For a brief listing of some other biblical conditions of answered prayer, see Part 6, endnote 7.
- 11 For an excellent discussion of points such as these, see Robert Gange, *Origins and Destiny: A Scientist Examines God's Handiwork* (Waco: Word Books, 1986).
- 12 See John Wenham, *Christ and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), especially Chapter 5 for some relevant data here.
- 13 Part 5 explains such strategies in detail.