

“*Superheroes Can’t Save You* is creative, engaging, funny, and both biblically and historically accurate. Who could ask for more? Todd Miles takes familiar characters (especially for those of us who grew up on comics or watch movies) and skillfully uses them to help us better understand who Jesus is—and isn’t. If we get it wrong about Jesus, in the end it won’t matter much what else we get right. I’m happy to recommend this important and enjoyable book.”

—**Randy Alcorn**, founder and director,  
Eternal Perspective Ministries

“*Superheroes Can’t Save You* is the most brilliantly creative Christology text I’ve ever read. By comparing each major Christological heresy to a familiar comic book superhero, and then contrasting them to the biblical Christ, Miles shows that each heresy presents a Jesus who is unable to do what the Bible claims Jesus did. As a result, the reader is given a lucid and memorable picture of the biblical Christ.”

—**Bruce Ashford**, provost and dean of faculty,  
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

“In a world that is in desperate need for clarity on issues of faith, Dr. Todd Miles illuminates the truth about who Jesus is in a creative and compelling way. By combining his love for superheroes and his passion for the gospel of Christ, this book will engage a broad spectrum of readers as they journey through historic heresies that have plagued the church and are presented with the truth of who Jesus is. This is a fun read!”

—**Aaron Coe**, executive director, Passion Global Institute,  
and assistant professor of world missions and intercultural  
studies, Dallas Theological Seminary

“There are not many books that combine deep theology with insightful creativity, but *Superheroes Can’t Save You* does, and does so brilliantly. In a world searching for something bigger and better with every movie ticket, Miles shows us how each superhero undersells what only the Son of God can truly provide. This is a book you will want to read for yourself, read with your kids, give to your youth minister, then to your pastor, and then to your friends. You will want to because it is a timely and accessible work and, more importantly, it offers us a Savior bigger and better than anything Marvel and DC has to offer—a Savior who can truly save us.”

—**J. Ryan Lister**, associate professor of theology,  
Western Seminary, and director of doctrine  
and discipleship, Humble Beast

“*Superheroes Can’t Save You* is a book that is culturally relevant, theologically astute, and capable of providing the reader with smiles as well as solid biblical knowledge. Youth and youth workers who disciple them will find this to be a very accessible book to promote the knowledge of our beautiful Savior.”

—**Ron Marrs**, associate professor of youth and  
pastoral ministries, Western Seminary, and director,  
Portland Youth Workers Network

“I like superheroes. I love Jesus a lot more. It’s not often that I’m able to bring the two together. In *Superheroes Can’t Save You*, Todd Miles deploys some of the most iconic figures from the Marvel and DC universe to help us think rightly about the true story of history’s greatest hero. This book teaches big truths in a fun way.”

—**Russell Moore**, president, The Ethics and Religious  
Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention

“Who is Jesus? And who have people made Him out to be? In this engaging and insightful volume, Todd Miles clearly and faithfully unpacks the historic and biblical Christian understanding of Jesus, and compares it to familiar superheroes. Creative, fresh, and thoroughly biblical.”

—**Christopher W. Morgan**, dean and professor of theology,  
School of Christian Ministries, California Baptist University

“Speaking both as a theology professor and a self-professed comic geek, I can’t say enough good things about *Superheroes Can’t Save You*. This is a brilliant example of contextual, pedagogical theology expressed in the vernacular of pop culture. Miles takes the content of historical theology that is so often prone to boring exposition and makes it accessible to students of all ages in an entertaining and engaging way. Highly recommended!”

—**Rhyne Putman**, associate professor of theology  
and culture, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary,  
and pastor of preaching and vision,  
First Baptist Church, Kenner, Louisiana

“It is rare to find someone who can take complex concepts and make them simple to comprehend. Yet it is here that Dr. Miles shines. One of the most central doctrines of Christianity is the nature of the second person of the Trinity, and this book makes it accessible to all. This book will also move your heart to love and worship Jesus Christ. As an added bonus, Dr. Miles’ childhood stories and wry sense of humor will keep you captivated all the way through. The comic book metaphor is not just for kids—it’s the key to understanding Christology for all ages and walks of life. I consider it a ‘must read’ and will highly recommend it to the women who attend our events.”

—**Katherine Roberts**, co-founder and co-director,  
The Verity Fellowship

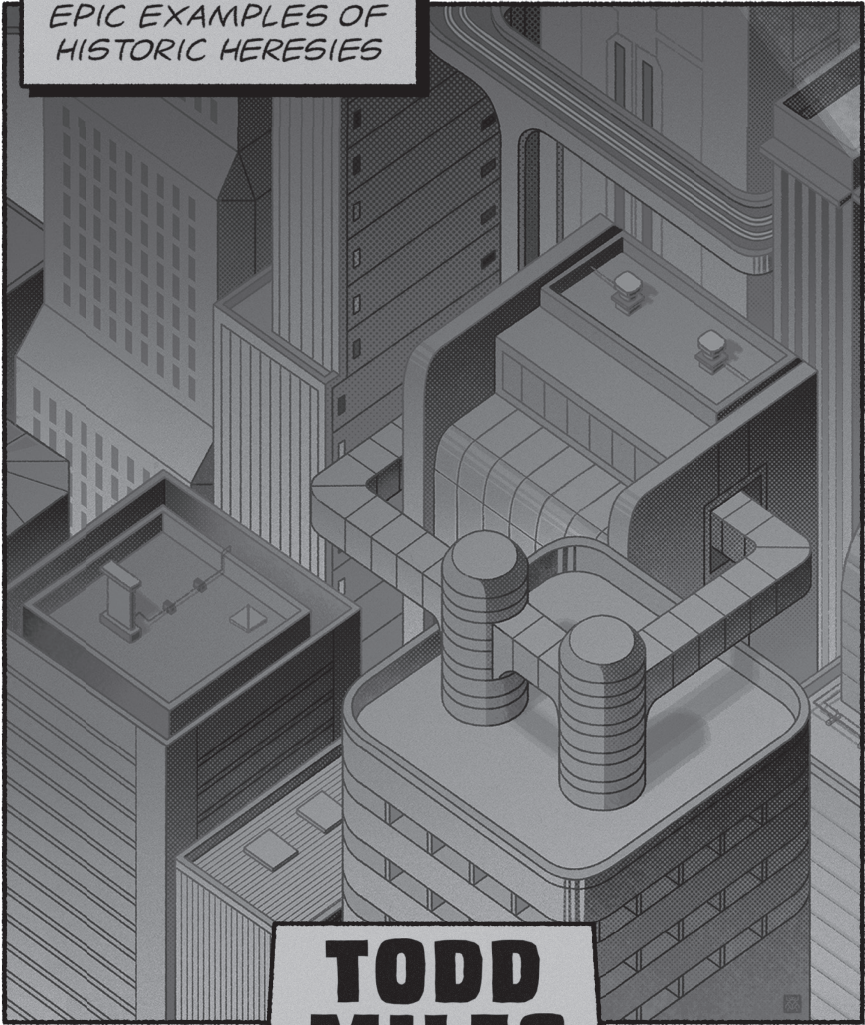


*SUPERHEROES CAN'T SAVE YOU*



*SUPERHEROES CAN'T SAVE YOU*

*EPIC EXAMPLES OF  
HISTORIC HERESIES*



**TODD  
MILES**

*Superheroes Can't Save You*  
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To Julius, Vicente, and Marcos

May you find in the Lord Jesus Christ, the one by whom,  
through whom, and for whom you were made, the fulfillment  
of all your deepest desires.

Colossians 1:15–20



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## *ACKNOWLEDGMENTS*

**T**his book was fun to write! I was able to combine my love for the Lord Jesus Christ with my childhood (and beyond) fascination with comic book superheroes.

The ideas and illustrations used throughout have been taught, tested, proven, modified, and often supplied by my students at Western Seminary over the past 14 years. I count it an undeserved privilege and immense joy to teach the glorious doctrine of the Lord Jesus Christ to current and future ministers of the gospel.

Dr. Gerry Breshears and Dr. Bruce Ware, my professors and mentors, have had more influence on my understanding of Jesus Christ than any other. How do you express gratitude for a gift like that? I believe that I first heard the Superman analogy from Gerry.

I had a great team of people, including my faculty colleagues, students, family, and friends, who voluntarily researched, read, and edited the chapters of this book. That team included Dr. Ryan Lister, Katie Roberts, Dr. Ron Marrs, Ethan Miles, Joshua Jen, Jerry Schoon, Levi Miles, Autumn Fabel, Tim Harmon, Drew Holmes, Ryan Dillon, Natalie Miles, Charlotte Roberts, and Grace Roberts.

I first taught this material at my home church, Hinson Baptist Church, to the Mariners Sunday school class. It was a ten-week

series attended by teenagers through octogenarians, and their reaction made me think there just might be a book in this after all.

I also took the content for a test-drive at the East by Northeast youth retreat. I am thankful for the good feedback and enthusiastic response of Tyler Walsh and the youth groups of New Hope Community Church in Hermiston, Stanfield Baptist Church, Bethel Baptist Church in Milton-Freewater, First Baptist Church in La Grande, Prairie Baptist Church in Prairie City, Union Baptist Church in Union, and Faith Baptist Church of Harney County in Burns.

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My older children played a unique role in this book. Not only did Ethan, Levi, and Natalie proofread the chapters; they also accompanied me in the “scholarly research” of attending superhero movies. Not every father has kids with whom he really likes to hang out (and who are willing to reciprocate in kind). The Lord has been exceedingly kind to me through them.

My youngest boys, Julius, Vicente, and Marcos, were also vital. All that time playing Batman and reading and watching the stories was not just fun; they were helping me write a book! It is with hope and love that I dedicate this book to them.

## *INTRODUCTION: AS WE BEGIN . . .*

**G**rowing up, I had an absolute treasure trove of comic books, all collected during the '70s and early '80s. I was captivated by the world of the superhero and could not get enough. My parents gave me a modest allowance for the less-than-modest amount of work that I did around the house (usually mowing the lawn), and the money went almost entirely to my growing collection of comics. One of my favorite memories is walking to our local drugstore with a single dollar in my pocket. The possibilities, situated on the comic book rack, seemed endless. I could buy regular comics for a quarter apiece, or I could invest in a double volume, something like *Superman Family*, for 60 cents or so. No matter how long the choice took, it was certain that I would peruse through everything on the rack, reading most of them while I stood there, finally settling on just the right selection. Looking back, I am amazed that the drugstore owner was so patient. I was never reminded, "This is not a library!" I was never chastised for loitering. Perhaps because they knew that I would be buying something. It was inevitable. I had to make a purchase because that comic would be read and reread and reread.

My favorite superhero was the Flash. (I lived under the delusion that I was superfast, so I naturally gravitated toward

that hero. I was disabused of that fantasy when I ran junior high track.) Following the exploits of the speedy Barry Allen opened the doors to more and more superheroes. Soon I was on my way to Smallville, Metropolis, and Gotham City, collecting a large number of *Superman* and *Batman* comics as well. Though partial to the DC world, I was no stranger to the Marvel universe. I had a good collection of *Spider-Man*, *Captain America*, and *Fantastic Four* comics. Some in my collection were first editions (*Superman Family* and *Man-Bat*, to name a couple).

Possessing these fantastic works of illustrated joy did not always work to my advantage. My collection was the envy of the neighborhood, and it was often a distraction. Friends would get lost at my house for hours, prompting their mothers to come and pull them out of the boxes of comics into which they had climbed. Whenever my cousins would come to town, I knew they would soon be found in my bedroom, poring through my treasure chests full of comic gold. Not realizing, and probably not caring, that they might be valuable someday, I read those comics to literal pieces. And when I went away to college, my mother threw them all away.

Every single one of them.<sup>1</sup>

But that is not the most important thing about me.

The most important thing about me is that I am a follower of Jesus. I first heard the gospel of Jesus Christ as a child, and I became a Christian at a young age, though I cannot tell you exactly when. I went to church every Sunday and lived a largely stagnate Christian life, staying out of trouble, but not really maturing much.

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<sup>1</sup> She did the same thing with my baseball cards. You will be happy to know that my mother and I are doing fine. I did not know any better than she did that they could have become collector's items.



And then I went to college. Most people would not choose a secular school like Oregon State University to get serious with the Lord, but that is what I did, and in God's kindness, it was all part of his plan for me. I got involved with a campus ministry (the Navigators) that changed my heart and my life. Bible study was a joy, working with others for Christ's kingdom became my passion, and Jesus grew in magnitude in my understanding and life. I became convinced, and still am, that Jesus Christ is the most compelling, interesting, and remarkable person who ever lived. He is exactly who he claimed to be, precisely who the Bible teaches that he is—God in the flesh, the King of kings and Lord of lords. He owns me because he created me, died for me, bought me, and reigns over me. In every way possible, I owe him my life.

I went on to attend seminary and then later to teach at Western Seminary in Portland, Oregon. I love every minute of my job (except grading papers and attending faculty meetings). I get to work with and teach people committed to Christ and willing to serve him wherever he would have them go. It is fantastic.

And I still love comic books.

Superheroes are still a lot of fun, whether their stories are told in print, cartoons, television dramas, or movies. I have enjoyed almost all of them: the Avengers, Iron Man, Thor, Ant-Man, Superman, Batman, Spider-Man, Arrow, the Flash, Daredevil—television and movie content lately has been a comic lover's dream.

But I have not just been amused and entertained. I have also been paying attention and have realized that there is something in the world of superheroes that transcends mere escapism. The superheroes represent humankind's best efforts to create saviors, demigods made in our own image, beings who are able to rescue us from the horrors that accost us all as humans. The

thing is, our best attempts to create such heroes fall desperately short of what we actually need. Superman, the greatest of the superheroes, is, well, super, and he is fantastically able to save imaginary people caught in the crosshairs of fictional crime. But even if he were real, he would not be able to save us from ourselves. He might be able to save individuals, but what of all humanity? Superman would not be able to rescue us from our greatest problems, and he certainly would not be able to deliver us from the wrath of God. He is not super enough, not human enough, not compassionate enough, and not divine in any way. He just does not measure up to the one who is more than enough of all those things, Jesus. Superman is no Jesus, and he never will be. The same is true of all the other comic book heroes. They just don't measure up.

Here is the thing: Jesus is the only one who can save us, but humans, darkened by sin and rebellion, don't like that fact. People know things are not quite right; in fact, they know things are nowhere close to right. We have all been there. We know, deep in our hearts, that we need someone to rescue us from the mess that we have made of our lives, our relationships, and the world around us. We know we need a Savior. But many people just don't want Jesus to be that Savior. Not the Jesus portrayed in the Bible. Not the actual living Jesus. The real Jesus asks too much, is too much, and says too much for their liking. So what are they to do?

Given that the list of potential saviors is pretty short, one solution throughout history has been to change and modify who Jesus is. Now, we can't actually affect the real, living Jesus by thinking wrongly about him. He is who he is, whether we like it or not. But we can deny things about Jesus—attributes, characteristics, abilities, and so on. I am sure you have seen this happen. People will often lie about themselves in their quest to be popular. Just a quick altering of facts to make themselves

more likable. That is not a good route to go, but it is a road often traveled. It becomes a very dangerous road, the fast lane to certain destruction, when we do that to Jesus.

The bad ideas about Jesus throughout history, the subtle changing of who Jesus is here and there, all make Jesus less remarkable, less magnificent, and less of a Savior. In fact, it makes him no Savior at all. According to the logic and story of the Bible, *it takes everything that Jesus is and does to save us*. Any alteration of Jesus, no matter how small, turns him into someone who cannot rescue humanity, who cannot re-create the cosmos, and who cannot reign over it as the great sovereign King.

The bad ideas about Jesus, at least the popular bad ideas, don't turn him into an evil monster. No, they are just subtle changes or misunderstandings about the Lord that make him more comprehensible, more domesticated, less intrusive, and less demanding. But the Jesus created by these bad ideas cannot save.

And here is what I have discovered: *Every bad idea about Jesus can be illustrated by a superhero*. The most popular bad ideas about Jesus that have really challenged the church, that have caused Christian leaders to gather together in what we call "councils" to study and hammer out what the truth actually is, are all now embodied by one popular superhero or another. Every one of them. And that is a remarkable fact.

Here is why: it tells me that Jesus is better than anything that we could ever make up!

The superhero creators and writers did not and do not set out to create false saviors who will lead the world astray. They are writers of fiction whose goal is both to entertain and to teach by making up characters with incredible powers, who will fight for a fictional world that is supposed to mirror our own. The comic hero is meant to capture our imaginations. The writers' hope is that you will put yourself in the comic world and find in each of their heroes a champion that you

wish actually existed in our own. Who hasn't read a comic and wished that Batman actually existed and watched over the streets, not of Gotham City, but of your hometown? Who hasn't daydreamed that Superman was actually patrolling the skies over your neighborhood, swooping in to fight injustice when it rears its ugly head?

And isn't it interesting that the best they can do is make up a character that looks suspiciously like a deficient view of Jesus?

We can't even make up anyone as wonderful as Jesus!

I have been teaching about Jesus for more than a decade now, and at times it has been difficult for my students to understand and remember the historical bad ideas about Jesus. It is worth studying them, because in looking at the faulty ideas of Jesus, the reality of Jesus becomes clearer. Students might not know or care about Docetism or Apollinarianism, but most people have heard of Superman and the Incredible Hulk. Illustrating these teachings with superheroes has made the topics more understandable and more fun. That is the primary reason why I have written this book: to help us understand and worship Jesus better.

## WHY HERESY IS IMPORTANT

The theological term for "bad idea about Jesus" is *heresy*. Though some people think that anybody who disagrees with them about anything related to theology is a heretic, I think we should be more careful with the term. A bad idea or false teaching is a heresy if it undercuts the gospel. So for our purposes, if the bad idea about Jesus is such that the proposed Jesus could not do what the real Jesus actually did in order to save us, then that bad idea is a heresy. Every bad idea covered in this book undercuts the gospel. Thus, the proposed Jesus embodied in the superheroes cannot save anyone. Therefore, I have no problem

referring to these bad ideas as “the Superman heresy” or “the Batman heresy.”

As fun as the superhero illustrations might be, we are dealing with serious and deadly ideas. So another reason I am writing this book is to warn you. We will look back in time at the historical origin of each of the superhero heresies. I want you to know how you, if you are a Christian, can unwittingly fall into the Superman heresy or the Spider-Man heresy. There are people who have decided to believe in and worship someone closer to a fictional superhero than the actual Jesus Christ of the Bible and of history. And many of those people earnestly believe they are following the real Jesus! But they are not.

Finally, we will consider why any of this is important. These sections are crucial because if Jesus is to be able to do everything that the Bible says he does, then he has to be everything that the Bible says he is, without any alteration.

Each chapter takes on a different bad idea (or heresy) about Jesus, and each one of these heresies is embodied in a different superhero. I suppose you could look at it as a series of battles: Jesus versus Batman, or Jesus versus Ant-Man.<sup>2</sup> So the chapters will provide an explanation of each superhero; they will examine how each superhero represents a deficient view of Jesus; and they will demonstrate how Jesus is much better than the idea embodied in each superhero.

In all, I cover seven significant bad ideas about Jesus (and therefore seven different superheroes, if you are counting such things). The first two chapters establish the full humanity and full deity of Jesus Christ. The remaining chapters investigate how Jesus could be fully human and fully divine at the same time. I finish up with a final look at who Jesus actually is and how he could be everything that the Bible says he is.

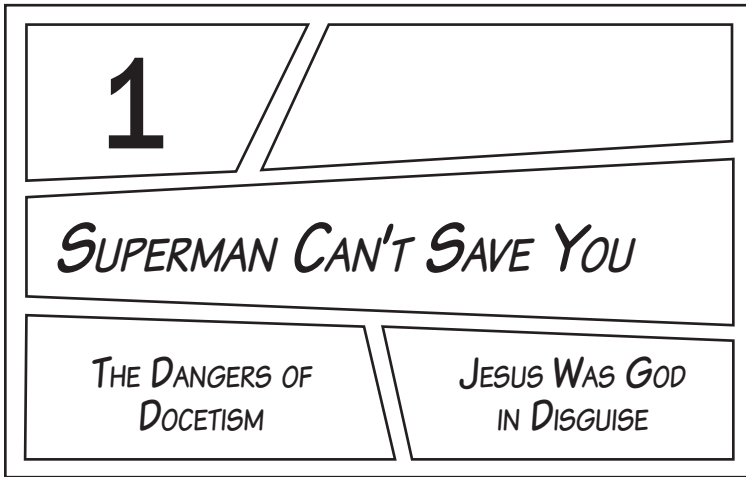
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<sup>2</sup>Remember, though: I like all of these comic superheroes!

I am certain that Jesus Christ is not only the most remarkable and important person ever, but he is the most remarkable and important person *for you*. The Bible makes the claim that “all things have been created through him and for him” (Col 1:16). That includes you and everybody you know, everybody who has ever and will ever exist. What this means is that every legitimate ultimate desire that you have can only be fulfilled in Jesus. Do you want significance? It can only be found in him. Do you want meaning? Follow Jesus—he will give it to you. Do you want life, true life, a life that is ultimately indestructible? It belongs to Jesus to give. Do you want a family? Jesus has made your adoption into the family of God possible. Do you want to be part of a team, a league? Jesus will give you a church. Do you want a purpose, a mission? Jesus promises to use you in his quest to save and re-create the world. Do you tire of trying to live up to what you think are God’s impossible standards? Jesus offers to give you rest. Do you want to be forgiven—finally, once and for all? Forgiveness such as that can only be found in Jesus Christ. You were made to worship and serve him. Jesus is a good Shepherd and a great King, the greatest that could ever be. There is no one else.

My prayer is that as you read this, your understanding and appreciation of the gospel will grow and that you will marvel at the Lord Jesus Christ, fully human, fully divine, the King of kings and Lord of lords, our model for living, our Creator and Redeemer, our great High Priest, our help in temptation, and our wonderful Savior. To him be the glory forever and ever.

Now, let’s get started.



Your name is Kal-El. You are the only survivor of the planet Krypton. Even though you've been raised as a human, you are not one of them. You have great powers . . .

—Jor-El in the motion picture *Superman* (1978)

Now listen: You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and his kingdom will have no end.

—the angel Gabriel to Mary (Luke 1:31–33)

**W**hen I was young, I had a fascination with telephone booths,<sup>1</sup> largely because of the number of Superman

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<sup>1</sup> For all you millennials out there who do not remember phone booths, they were three-by-three-by-eight-foot cubicles, each containing a phone, that

comics I had read. You remember Superman's MO. Whenever a crime was being committed in his vicinity, he would run to the nearest phone booth to shed his suit and tie, revealing his Superman cape and clothes underneath. He would then fly out to save the day. I remember peeking into such booths, hoping against hope that I would see a discarded suit and tie, proof positive of the existence of Superman. I often wondered how many suits Clark Kent went through, and what people thought when they came upon an abandoned but perfectly good suit of clothes in the phone booth. The homeless in Metropolis must have been well-dressed!

Let's pretend, for the sake of illustration, that you did find a suit and tie in a telephone booth, proving that the comic book world is real and that Superman does exist. Now, let me ask you a critical question: Was there a human being named Clark Kent?

The answer is . . . no. The human being named Clark Kent did not actually exist. Clark Kent is Superman's alter ego, but he is not a human being. Clark Kent is really just Superman in disguise. According to Superman lore, Superman was born Kal-El on the planet Krypton. His biological father, Jor-El, in an effort to save his son's life, jettisoned him from Krypton shortly before the planet exploded. The space vessel crash-landed on planet Earth near the small rural town of Smallville, Kansas, where the baby Kryptonian was found by Jonathan and Martha Kent. The Kents raised Kal-El as their own, giving the child the name Clark.

By all appearances, Clark seemed like any other human boy, but his adoptive parents knew better. They saw their child perform superhuman feats of strength on the family farm, away

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used to be all over every city in the United States. If that does not help, picture this: a phone booth was the mechanism that Harry Potter used to get to the Ministry of Magic.



from the gaze of others. If the fact that the Kents had found Clark in a crash-landed rocket ship was not enough to tip them off, their young son hoisting tractors around the farmstead probably convinced them that Clark was no ordinary boy.

Jonathan Kent, Clark's adoptive father, looms large in the Superman narrative. He models and teaches the young Clark such virtues as charity, compassion, righteousness, and nobility. He teaches him about justice while pointing him toward his ultimate destiny, which was to use his superhuman powers for the common good. Mr. Kent also teaches the young Clark to blend in with others, to appear as normal as possible. For if Clark is to maximize his impact on the world, he must appear to be an ordinary human, no different from anybody else. Clark learns those lessons well and incorporates traits into his persona that are almost the opposite of who he truly is—acting the part of a clumsy, bookish young man. No one would ever suspect that Clark Kent is the future Man of Steel.

After graduating from Smallville High and having kept his true identity secret, Clark moved to Metropolis. The big city is the ideal place to fight crime as Superman, while still maintaining his seemingly human alter ego. Strategically taking a job as a reporter with a newspaper, the *Daily Planet*, Clark is ideally positioned to be quickly alerted of criminal activity. To all appearances, Clark is nothing more than a mild-mannered reporter. Certainly, at least initially, his coworkers, Lois Lane and Jimmy Olsen, do not suspect that the still clumsy and rather nerdy Clark Kent is actually Superman in disguise.

But that is exactly what Clark Kent is. Clark Kent is just a persona, a costume, a charade, that conceals the reality beneath the facade. Clark Kent trips and falls. He is not strong enough to do the simplest of acts. He gets tired and sick, often feigning exhaustion from overexertion. And when danger threatens, Clark Kent cowers and runs away (usually to the nearest phone

booth to shed the suit and tie). But it is all an act. Superman is the most powerful being on the face of the earth. He is, as we well know, “faster than a speeding bullet! More powerful than a locomotive! Able to leap tall buildings in a single bound.”<sup>2</sup> He is not weak. He is not clumsy. He is not foolish. And he is not afraid. Not one bit. He is, in every sense of the name, Superman!

Did you know that many in the church, both now and in the past, have the same idea about Jesus? Some read the Gospels in the Bible and dismiss all the talk of the humanity of Jesus, because Jesus was really “God in disguise.” There was no human named Jesus, not really. That was just a persona, a costume, a charade, that concealed the reality beneath the disguise. Jesus just appeared to be human. He just *seemed* to be a man.

Is this your picture of Jesus?

Stronger than demons! Craftier than a Pharisee! Able to clear out temples with a single whip!

Look! Up on the mount. It's Moses! It's Elijah! It's Son of God-Man! Yes, it's Son of God-Man—strange visitor from up above, who came to Earth with powers and abilities far beyond those of mortal men. Jesus Christ—who can walk on water, multiply a few loaves and fishes into a meal for thousands, and who, disguised as Jesus of Nazareth, mild-mannered itinerant preacher from Galilee, fights a never-ending battle for truth, righteousness, and the kingdom of God!

I suspect that many Christians, even well-meaning ones, may have this exact notion of Jesus. But it's actually far from what the Bible reveals to us about Jesus. Now, many Christians are very good at arguing for (and rightly so) the deity of Jesus

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<sup>2</sup> “Adventures of Superman (1952–1958) Quotes,” IMDb, accessed June 22, 2017, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0044231/quotes>.

Christ. We believe that Jesus Christ was absolutely and fully God. Unfortunately, we are often so adamant about affirming the deity of Jesus that we ignore or even discount his humanity. I would go so far as to say that many Christians today do not know what to make of the humanity of Jesus. After all, how can humanity and deity coexist in one person anyway? We know that Jesus was the Son of God. Perhaps, like Superman, he just *seemed* to be human. Such thinking, though well-intentioned, is dead wrong. I call it the Superman heresy, but it has been around a long, long time.

## THE HERESY

The early church was quick to recognize the deity of Jesus. But it was not long before the question arose, how can Jesus be both human and divine at the same time? Obviously, one very easy way to answer that is to deny that such a combination is even possible. Eliminate either the true humanity or true deity of Jesus and there is no more difficulty. And if you are committed to the deity of Christ, then you really only have one option: deny that Jesus was ever actually human. Oh, sure, Jesus might have *looked* like a human, but he wasn't really. Jesus only *seemed* to be human. Much like the way Clark Kent wore glasses, a suit, and a tie, his human disguise, so Jesus wore the first-century garb and disguise of humanity. The church eventually called this way of thinking *Docetism*, from the Greek word *dokein*, meaning "to seem."

Why would such an idea enter into the theology of the early church, and why would it gain any traction at all? The answer lies in understanding the world of the church in the first and second centuries. That world had been strongly influenced by Greco-Roman philosophy. A prominent teaching, based loosely on Platonic dualism, was the radical ethical and essential

separation between the spiritual and the material. To the dualist, the material world was ignoble, shameful, and evil, while the spiritual world was noble, pure, and good. Not every Roman citizen of the first century shared this view, but enough did that such thinking quickly wormed its way into the young church. Dualism was such an issue that the apostle John had to go out of his way to affirm the humanity and physicality of Jesus to the early church:

What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have observed and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—that life was revealed, and we have seen it and we testify and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us—what we have seen and heard we also declare to you . . . (1 John 1:1–3)

In this passage, John tells his Christian readers that he was an eyewitness to the incarnation of the Son of God. You can almost hear John saying, “Jesus really was human. He really walked the earth. I saw him. I touched him with my very own hands. It is this very human, very real Jesus that we preached to you.” John was adamant: Jesus really did come in the flesh.<sup>3</sup>

Docetism later got a big boost from a false teaching that crept into the early church, called Gnosticism. (In fact, many believe that John’s and even Paul’s New Testament letters addressed early forms of Gnosticism.) Gnosticism was a syncretistic (or

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<sup>3</sup> Church history tells us that John, in his later years at Ephesus, opposed a false teacher named Cerinthus, who was spreading the false doctrine of Docetism. There is a great story of John fleeing a Roman bathhouse when he spotted Cerinthus through the steam. John feared that God would destroy the bathhouse in righteous judgment upon the heretic Cerinthus, and he did not want to get hurt in the collateral damage. So I guess that Roman bathhouses are OK, as long as heretics are not sharing the space.

Mulligan stew-like) religion,<sup>4</sup> borrowing and combining elements of Greco-Roman philosophy and religion, Christianity, and Judaism. Gnosticism's core tenet was that a secret knowledge (*Gnōsis*) was necessary for salvation, and that God, who was good and spiritual, could have no direct interaction with the material world. The goal of humanity was to escape the confines of the material world, both now (through rigid asceticism) and in the life to come. A full-blown Gnosticism did not arrive on the scene until the second century, but Docetism, an essential part of Gnosticism, had arrived in the church much earlier.

Now, this kind of dualism, the teaching that the material is inherently evil and the spiritual is inherently good, is *completely at odds* with biblical Christianity. The Bible teaches that God created the world directly, speaking it into existence (Genesis 1). He created Adam and Eve in his image, *imago Dei*, and an essential part of Adam and Eve was their bodies. This does not mean that God has a body. Jesus was clear that God is Spirit (non-corporeal); he has no body (John 4:24), but when God created man and woman in his image, he gave them bodies. I suspect this was to enable the first man and woman (and all others after them) to image (or represent) God in this world the way he wanted it done. Just as importantly, the Bible teaches that an essential aspect of our salvation is the resurrection of our bodies. The destiny of saved humanity is to dwell in the presence of God forever, and we will do so with real material bodies (1 Cor 15:35–49). These will be new bodies, again designed, I believe, to do those things that the Lord wants done in the new heavens and new earth. But such biblical truths did not stop the false teachers, and by the late first century, some churches

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<sup>4</sup>Mulligan stew is a dish made from whatever ingredients are available. I don't know who came up with the idea. I do know that it was served in elementary school cafeterias all through my childhood.

were infiltrated by those who claimed that the true Son of God could never have had an actual, physical body. Jesus could not have actually been human. He only seemed to be so. Just like Superman.

## WHO COMMITS THE SUPERMAN HERESY TODAY?

Do we think of Jesus the same way? I suspect that there are not many card-carrying Docetists out there (if you meet any, please let me know). Very few people today would go so far as to deny that Jesus was really human. In our Western world, where naturalism holds sway at the philosophical and scientific levels,<sup>5</sup> you are more apt to find those who would deny that Jesus was supernatural and divine. But I am concerned that some Christians, without thinking, will lapse into the Superman heresy when they consider how Jesus did the things that the Bible tells us he did.

We can fall into the trap easily. It happens every time we assume that when Jesus was confronted with a difficult issue, be it temptation, sickness, demon possession, or the like, he overcame the obstacle by virtue of his deity. It is almost as if we think that when Jesus was tempted by Satan in the wilderness, he found the nearest telephone booth and pulled off his first-century Jewish robe, revealing the “Son of God-Man” insignia emblazoned on his chest. He then went off to do battle with Satan, laughing, “Who do you think you’re kidding, deceiver? I am Son of God-Man! I cannot be tempted. Be gone!” and then,

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<sup>5</sup> Naturalism is the worldview that teaches that the cosmos contains only matter, just atoms and molecules bouncing off other atoms and molecules. According to naturalism, there really are no spiritual or immaterial aspects to the cosmos.

using some sort of cool, divine superpowers, he vanquished Satan until the next episode. That is how all the *Superman* comics and television shows went. The seemingly feeble Clark Kent transforms into Superman and then easily defeats the bad guys. I wonder if some of us have the same idea of Jesus.

Of course, when we look in detail at the actual narrative of Jesus's temptations in a later chapter, we will find that Jesus did not do any of the things I just mentioned to stand against Satan. The means that Jesus used to battle the tempter were, well, quite ordinary. That is, they were common—the sort of tools that any human who loves the Lord could use.

A number of years ago, the “What Would Jesus Do?” (WWJD) movement was in full force. The idea behind it was that Christians (or anybody else, I suppose) who were faced with a difficult situation were to ask themselves, “What would Jesus do?” The question was supposed to bring clarity, insight, and guidance. For a while, you could not swing a tattered comic book without hitting someone wearing a WWJD bracelet, sporting a WWJD cap, eating from a WWJD lunchbox, doing schoolwork in a WWJD notebook—I could go on and on.

At any rate, Christians were supposed to stop in the moment of difficulty and ask, WWJD? I suppose there is some merit in asking the question. After all, the Bible teaches that Jesus left us “an example, that you should follow in his steps” (1 Pet 2:21).<sup>6</sup> But the entire WWJD enterprise was flawed from the beginning at various levels, and rather than being illuminated by the exercise, I often found it to be discouraging. Here is how it worked out with me.

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<sup>6</sup>The WWJD movement is based on a book published in 1896 by Charles M. Sheldon, called *In His Steps: What Would Jesus Do?* The book took its title from Peter's words in 1 Pet 2:21.

Let's say I was in a sticky situation. Maybe I was battling a temptation and couldn't figure out how to beat it. Maybe I was trying to share the gospel with a friend and attempting to think up the right words to convince him of his need for Jesus. Or maybe I saw someone in desperate need, and I wanted to help that person. What to do? Ask, WWJD! But after pondering on what the risen and conquering Lord of the universe would do for a few moments, I usually came up with something like, "Jesus would laugh at Satan and say no to the temptation because he was the Son of God." Or, "Jesus would know the exact thing to say that would confound even the smartest Pharisee, because he was the Son of God." Or, "Jesus would multiply loaves and fishes into a feast. And he could do that because he was the Son of God." And then, growing discouraged, I would think to myself, *I can't do any of those things, because I am not the Son of God.* The question was absolutely no help. In fact, it actually made things worse.

And here's the thing: I was lapsing into the Superman heresy and I didn't even realize it. Jesus can be a help in temptation. He can guide us, teach us, and empower us, and we will discover why as the book proceeds. But the reason is not that Jesus is "Son of God-Man."

## WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS

The Bible could not be clearer that Jesus was fully human. His humanity was prophesied long before his birth in Bethlehem. He was born like any other human (really!). He lived, grew, and did all the things that humans do.

*Jesus Was Predicted by the Prophets.* The prophets anticipated long before Jesus was born that God would work his salvific plans through a man who was to come.



Approximately 1,000 years before Jesus was born, David, the second king of Israel, had it in his mind to build a really nice temple for the Lord. David recognized that the Lord had blessed him in myriad ways, not the least of which was a fantastic palace that made the simple tent that housed the ark of the covenant of God look like, well, a simple tent (2 Sam 7:1–2). The Lord responded to David's offer by sending the prophet Nathan to tell him that rather than David building a house for him, the Lord would build a house for David. The Lord went on to say, "When your time comes and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up after you your descendant, who will come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever" (2 Sam 7:12–13). Theologians call this the Davidic covenant, and it is one of the most important events recorded in the Bible, because in the covenant God committed to work his plan of redemption in and through the house of David. The substance of the promise is that David would have a son who would eventually assume the throne and reign forever. That son would also build a temple for the Lord. Questions arise immediately: How can a son of David reign forever? What about David's son Solomon? Isn't he the fulfillment? Didn't he build the temple? Solomon did reign over a more prosperous kingdom than his father, and he did build a temple. But his reign did not last forever (he died), and the temple he built was destroyed (by the Babylonians in the 500s BC). The fulfillment awaited someone else, from the line of David, a future son. And that is what we need to emphasize: God's promise would be fulfilled by a boy being born, from the family of David. A human boy.

More than 700 years before Jesus was born, the prophet Isaiah predicted, "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a

sign: See, the virgin will conceive, have a son, and name him Immanuel” (Isa 7:14). I grant you that this was going to be no ordinary baby. Clearly the conception of Jesus was absolutely remarkable, a one-of-a-kind sort of affair, but that does not mean that the virgin’s baby would be anything less than human. The child would be called “Immanuel,” meaning “God with us” (Matt 1:23), indicating that there was going to be something divine about the child as well. We will discuss the implications of the divinity of Jesus in the next chapter, and really for the rest of the book. But for now, recognize that it was predicted that a woman was going to give birth to a son. A boy. A human boy. Nothing in the prophecy suggests that he would be anything less than human. There is plenty to suggest that he would be more than your typical human, but he would not be less.

At about the same time that Isaiah was alive, the prophet Micah predicted that a great ruler would be born in Bethlehem (Mic 5:2–3). That ruler would “stand and shepherd them in the strength of the LORD, in the majestic name of the LORD his God” (v. 4). The baby born in Bethlehem would be great, but a great *human*.

There are other passages that could be considered (e.g., Isa 9:6; Dan 7:13), but they make the same point. The Lord had a plan to redeem his people. He announced it through his prophets centuries in advance. And that plan focused on a man. This prophetic anticipation is important because it demonstrates that Jesus’s humanity was not an afterthought, an accident, or an ad hoc addition to God’s master plan. As we will see, the humanity of Jesus is essential to God’s saving purposes. To be sure, Jesus is a remarkable man. But he is truly a man.

*Jesus Was Born and Grew Up Like a Normal Human.* Luke recorded the birth of Christ in the second chapter of his Gospel. Anyone who has ever watched the *Peanuts* Christmas special

(*A Charlie Brown Christmas*) is well acquainted with Linus's famous reading of the passage. Because of a census decreed by Caesar Augustus, all people in the Roman Empire were to travel to their ancestral homes and register. Luke wrote:

Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family line of David, to be registered along with Mary, who was engaged to him and was pregnant. While they were there, the time came for her to give birth. Then she gave birth to her firstborn Son, and she wrapped him tightly in cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them. (Luke 2:4–7)

I want to point out that despite all the events that transpired before and after the birth (angel announcements, a virgin conception, traveling to register, giving birth in a stable, a multitude of angels singing, Magi visiting and worshiping, Mary and Joseph fleeing for their lives, the slaughter of infants—that is quite a list!), look at how simple Luke's account of the birth is. When it came time for Mary to deliver her baby, she gave birth just as every woman did at the time. There is nothing remarkable about the actual labor or delivery. It was a normal human birth, complete with blood, pain, tears, and joy in the end. Forget what we sing at Christmas in "Away in a Manger" about how "the little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes." I am sure that when the cattle woke up Jesus (or when he got hungry), he cried. Why? Because Jesus was a human baby, and human babies cry. If they don't, there is something wrong. Jesus's conception was remarkable and miraculous; the angelic activity was extraordinary; emissaries showing up from distant lands and shepherds arriving from nearby to worship must have been jaw-dropping

(see Luke 2:8–19). But none of those things change the facts of Jesus's birth. It was the normal birth of a baby boy.

After that, Jesus grew up like a normal boy. In fact, his upbringing, save a flight to Egypt and later getting lost in Jerusalem, was so unremarkable that none of the Gospel writers have much to say about it. Luke summarized his boyhood this way: "And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and with people" (Luke 2:52). It is significant that Jesus grew in these ways. We see growth in godliness and early signs that Jesus was respected by people. But Jesus is portrayed by the Gospel writer as a godly human boy. People have not always been satisfied with such mundane reports about Jesus's early life. There has long been a hunger for extraordinary tales that prove Jesus was beyond human. About 100 years after the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke were written, the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* was written. It contains all sorts of wild stories of the boy Jesus breathing life into clay birds, cursing troublesome neighbors with blindness, and even putting a bully to death (the bird story even made it into the Muslim Qur'an<sup>7</sup>). The stories are the stuff of fantasy and lack credential and the ring of truth. The church has never accepted them as authentic or truthful. But they do demonstrate how dissatisfied people are with an ordinary human boyhood for Jesus. When we are not thinking rightly, we want Jesus to tip his divine hand and do some magical act, like the young Clark Kent, as he hoisted tractors all over the Kent family farm. But we dare not fall prey to the Superman heresy. The Gospel writers present a very human Jesus to us, because he was just that, very human.

*Jesus Demonstrated Normal Human Limitations.* Part of the human experience is needing nourishment and rest, and Jesus was no exception. It might not seem remarkable to note,

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<sup>7</sup>See Surah 5.110 if you want to check it for yourself.

but it is important: Jesus got hungry and thirsty, and he needed sleep. In Matthew 4, Jesus spent a remarkable amount of time praying and fasting. The result: he was hungry (v. 2). If we see Jesus as being fully human, we would expect that to be the case. But if Jesus is God-in-disguise, then there is no reason to think that he would get hungry. Why would he?

On another occasion, after a long day of preaching and healing, Jesus was so tired that he fell fast asleep on a boat that was taking him to his next destination (Matt 8:21–27). A storm arose on the Sea of Galilee that threatened to swamp the boat. The storm was so fierce that his disciples, many of whom were seasoned fishermen, feared for their lives. But Jesus was so exhausted that he slept through wind, waves, and water crashing over the sides of the boat. Now, I suppose this might have been an act. Perhaps if Jesus were God-in-disguise, it might be a trick to get the disciples to come to him for help. But the problem with this is that Matthew never said this. He simply relayed what happened—there was a crazy storm, and Jesus had to be awakened from a deep sleep. We can only conclude that the reason Jesus was asleep is that he was tired—just as any human would be after a hard day's work.

John's Gospel tells the story of Jesus and his disciples traveling through Samaria (4:1–44), where Jesus reached out to a Samaritan woman at a well. This passage is best known for Jesus's statement that God is seeking people who will worship him in Spirit and in truth (vv. 23–24). But don't miss the reason that Jesus initially spoke to the Samaritan woman. He stayed behind while the disciples went to get food because he was "worn out from his journey" (v. 6). He asked the Samaritan woman for something to drink because he was thirsty (v. 7). I suppose that Jesus could have pretended to be hot and thirsty, hoping to create an opportunity to speak to the woman. But that is not how John told his story. We would only think that if

we had some precommitment to Jesus not really being human, a stubborn refusal to give up the Superman heresy.

*Jesus Died.* All four Gospels are adamant about this event in Jesus's life. When he was tacked to a Roman cross, he died. Jesus did not fake his death. He did not swoon. He was not even mostly dead. He was completely, 100 percent dead. The Roman soldiers, masters at administering death, oversaw the entire affair. The normal Roman crucifixion practice to hasten death was to break the legs of the victim, making it impossible for him to raise himself up on the cross to breathe. But Jesus, due to the beating and trauma he had endured leading up to the cross, was already spent. He died before the leg-breaking became necessary. Suspecting that Jesus was already dead, the Romans drove a spear into his side to confirm the fact. Sure enough—Jesus was dead. Here is the rub. God cannot die. But humans can and do. Jesus's death demonstrates that he was absolutely human.

## WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

OK, so Jesus was human. So what? What is the harm in pretending that Jesus was actually God in disguise? Would it really impact anything? Yes. The stakes are incredibly high. The biblical story depends on the humanity of Jesus. He didn't just happen to be human. Jesus had to be human. If he wasn't human, then we lose nothing less than the gospel. And you and I, in turn, lose any hope of being saved. Here is how the gospel works only if Jesus is human.

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth (Gen 1:1). He also created everything in it, including the first humans. Those two, Adam and Eve, were the high point of creation, for they alone were created in the image of God. These image bearers were created to rule in God's place, exercising dominion over all that God had just made. Of course, it is a

delegated authority. But God, as the Creator of everything, has creator's rights over everything that he has made. He, and he alone, has the right to delegate such authority, and he granted it to the first human pair, effectively saying, "Take care of my stuff." Such a responsibility is beyond generous, yet it is graciously granted.

You know what happened next. The joy of Genesis 1 and 2 was ripped apart by the rebellion of Genesis 3. God had granted to the first humans all that he had made, holding only one thing back for their own good. God told them that they could eat from any tree in the garden—they were all at Adam and Eve's disposal, save one—the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This was no stingy God, selfishly and arbitrarily holding the best back. Adam and Eve could have all they wanted, except one thing. And that one thing came with a warning: Eating from that tree would bring death.

The punishment seems harsh until we consider the actual crime. Adam and Eve were God's vice-regents, the ones who ruled in his stead over all that God had made. The Lord had granted to Adam and Eve dominion over *everything* he had made. This human pair was God's crowning achievement. They represented God's rule on earth. Thus, their sin was not merely the picking of some forbidden fruit. It was rebellion, treachery, and betrayal. God's ambassadors had rebelled against him and brought upon themselves death, and upon the creation they had so mismanaged, a curse.

Human sin had brought this calamity, and human death, the penalty, was right at the center of it. Sin is a human problem. And a human problem requires a human solution. In fact, the Lord said that the offspring of the woman, a baby to be born—a human baby—would grow to crush the head of the serpent (Gen 3:15). In the midst of the cursing, the Lord articulated that humanity's only hope would be a human. But we find

that humans were not able to take care of the problem. From Genesis 4 to the end of the Old Testament, we find failure after failure after failure on the part of humans to make things right, to reconcile themselves to God. Meanwhile, death, the just penalty of human sin, continued to reign. Look at Genesis 5 for proof. Those early humans lived a long time, but their end is the same—“then he died . . . then he died . . . then he died” (vv. 5, 8, and 11, among others). The drumbeat of death is relentless and terrifying, just like the drums of Moria beating out *doom, doom, doom* for the fellowship in *The Lord of the Rings*. There is no escape. Humans, the ones who got us into this mess and the ones rightfully tasked with getting us out, are singularly incapable of doing so.

In the midst of that Old Testament record of failure and death, we are introduced to a biblical paradigm that brings hope: “Salvation belongs to the LORD” (Jonah 2:9; Ps 3:8). This was not just an arbitrary statement, the description of the best man for the job. It was a prescription for how things must be—the prayer of a desperate humanity in a hopeless situation. If humanity was to be saved, God must step in. But how?

God initiated a plan first through a man (Abraham), and then through his extended family. He rescued that family from slavery in Egypt and made them into a nation (Israel), his treasured possession, a kingdom of priests who were to display the Lord’s justice and mercy to the nations. Of course, the sin problem persisted, even for the Lord’s people. So God introduced a sacrificial system. An animal could substitute for the people, a life for a life. Year after year sacrifices were offered, an endless progression. Although the Lord prescribed them, their continued use pointed to their lack of efficacy.

Imagine a Jewish family dutifully making their annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the Day of Atonement. In tow is a sheep or goat from the herd. I suspect there were many



opportunities to talk on the road, and I bet that often the subject matter between father and children turned to why the family lamb had to be slaughtered. The answer was, “The lamb is being offered as a substitute for us, its life for ours.” The obvious question that had to be asked was, “How can a sheep or goat take the place of a human?” and further, “How can the death of a sheep or goat atone for human sin?” And the answer, of course, is that it can't. Not only is a lamb not a human, but it is completely inferior to a human. It was a human, an image bearer, who had rebelled and incurred the penalty of death, and it would have to be an image bearer who would pay that price.

So, if sin is a human problem that requires a human solution and salvation belongs to the Lord, how can anybody be saved? The answer lies in the incarnation of the Son of God. Jesus is Immanuel, God *with* us. But Jesus is the son of David, a human *like* us. He could offer himself as a substitute for human sin because he is one of us. If Jesus was not truly and fully human, unlike Clark Kent, then he could not die for our sin. If he only seemed to be human, then there is no gospel, no good news. If Jesus is just “God in disguise,” like Superman, we all stand hopelessly condemned.

Superman cannot save you. But Jesus can. Jesus can redeem us because he took on our flesh, our nature—he is one of us. But he is not merely one of us. He is God in the flesh. And that is equally important, as we will find out next.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### *QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION*

- What are the personal benefits of the humanity of Christ?
- What goes through your mind when you read of Jesus getting hungry and tired?
- Do you see Jesus as “like you”? If not, why not?
- How has the humanity of Jesus inspired your love and devotion to Jesus?

### *QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION*

- Why will the gospel not work if Jesus is not fully human?
- Reread 1 John 1:1–3. Why was it so important to John that he had actually seen and touched Jesus?
- Describe a situation where someone talked of Jesus as though he were not really human.
- Have you ever thought that asking “What Would Jesus Do?” is silly because, after all, Jesus is God? If so, how might believing that Jesus is fully human change the way you approach temptation?
- What gets in the way of seeing Jesus as your legitimate and true example?

## FOR FURTHER STUDY

Read John 4:6–7 (from the story of Jesus’s encounter with the woman at the well). Consider the implications of the fact that Jesus was actually hot, tired, and thirsty. How did such things help him in his interaction with the Samaritan woman?