

Who Is the Real Jesus?

Read the Transcript:

Two thousand years ago a man set foot on our planet who claimed to be from a place beyond space and time.

Although he had no credentials or political backing, his life and words changed our world. His name is Jesus Christ.

While most great people simply fade into history books, Jesus of Nazareth is still the focus of thousands of publications, documentaries and media controversy.

Two billion people today claim to be his followers, yet many still wonder, “Who is the Real Jesus Christ?”

Was Jesus a Real Person?

Although some skeptics have called Jesus a myth, historians acknowledge he was a real person. In fact, nine non-Christian historians and writers mention Jesus within 150 years of his death, the same number who mention the contemporary Roman Emperor, Tiberius Caesar.

In addition to that, over five thousand eight hundred New Testament manuscripts tell us about Jesus’ life and words. That’s far more than for any other person in ancient history.[1]

New Testament scholar, John A. T. Robinson concludes that the New Testament was originally written while eyewitnesses of Jesus would still have been alive.[2]

Regarding the reliability of the accounts about Jesus he states, “The wealth of manuscripts, and above all the narrow interval of time between the writing and the earliest extant copies, make it by far the best attested text of any ancient writing in the world.”[3]

So, who was this man, Jesus Christ, and why was so much written about him?

Was Jesus a Great Moral Teacher?

Of all the world’s great men, Jesus has been considered the supreme example of moral perfection in both his character and his teaching.

Jesus obeyed all of God’s commandments. And he selflessly demonstrated love and compassion to the needy.

Historian Will Durant said of Jesus that “he lived and struggled unremittingly for ‘equal rights.’”[4]

Martin Luther King said of Jesus: “He did not seek to overcome evil with evil. He overcame evil with good. Although crucified by hate, he responded with aggressive love.” [5]

And renowned French philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, wrote: “When Plato describes his imaginary righteous man . . . he describes exactly the character of Christ. . . .”[6]

Jesus’ impeccable moral character was reflected in his teaching. Whereas most moral teachers spoke of rules to live by, Jesus taught that our priority should be to love God and others above ourselves. A trait he continually demonstrated.

Was Jesus a World-Changing Leader?

Historian Philip Schaff summarizes the impact of Jesus’ life and words: “Jesus of Nazareth...shed more light on things human and divine than all philosophers and scholars combined; he spoke such words of life as were never spoken before or since...” [7]

In just three years of active ministry, Jesus changed the world for the next 20 centuries. Other moral and religious leaders have left an impact---but nothing like that humble carpenter from Nazareth.

For example:

- Human rights have been founded upon Jesus’ teaching.[8]
- His words led to equal rights of women and minorities.[9]
- Slavery in Europe and America were abolished by Jesus’ followers.[10]
- Major universities such as Harvard, Yale and Oxford---were founded to proclaim his teaching.[11]
- Jesus’ compassionate words inspired countless charities and hospitals.[12]

Yale historian Jaroslav Pelikan writes, “Regardless of what anyone may personally think or believe about him, Jesus of Nazareth has been the dominant figure in the history of Western culture for almost twenty centuries. ... It is from his birth that most of the human race dates its calendars, it is by his name that millions curse and in his name that millions pray.”[13]

Non-Christian historian H. G. Wells agrees. When asked who has left the greatest legacy on history, he replied, “By this test Jesus stands first.”[14]

Was Jesus the Promised Messiah?

Hundreds of years before Jesus was born, Old Testament prophets from Moses to Zechariah foretold of a coming Messiah. This Messiah, or Christ, was to pay the penalty for mans’ sin and

be a light to the world. And, according to the prophet Isaiah, he would actually be God in human form. (Isaiah 9:6)

Jesus said his primary mission was first to suffer and die for our sins. Seven hundred years earlier the prophet Isaiah had foretold the Messiah's suffering for our sins.

“He was wounded because of our rebellious deeds, crushed because of our sins.... each of us had strayed off on his own path, but the Lord caused the sin of all of us to attack him.” —Isaiah 53:5 & 6, NET

While on earth, Jesus fulfilled nearly 300 of these Old Testament prophecies, including his lineage, city of birth and miracles.[15]

As his followers saw him heal the lame, deaf and blind, they became convinced he was the promised Messiah. And when Peter proclaimed him as “the Christ (Messiah), the Son of the living God,” Jesus acknowledged his statement as true.

But Jesus also revealed another mystery about his identity that was so shocking it eventually led to his trial and crucifixion.

So, what was that mystery?

Who did Jesus Say He Was?

As a man, Jesus became hungry. He felt pain. He required rest. He was tempted. Yet he was never accused of a sin.

However, Jesus made claims that no ordinary man could make. He spoke of himself as one with God the Father (John 10:30). This so infuriated the religious leaders that they attempted to kill him.

Later when his follower Philip asked to see God the Father, Jesus replied: “I have been with you a long time now. Do you still not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. So why do you say, ‘Show us the Father?’” (John 14:9, NCV).

The name for God in Israel---"I AM" (Yahweh)---was so holy that no Jew would utter it. However, Jesus shocked the Jewish religious leaders by calling himself, "I AM." After telling them he had preexisted the Jewish patriarch, Abraham who had lived two thousand years earlier, Jesus exclaimed, ‘The truth is, before Abraham was, I AM!’” (John 8:52-58). By using God's name for himself, Jesus was claiming deity.

In *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis reasons that if Jesus' claims of deity are untrue, then he couldn't have been a good man or great moral teacher. If Jesus isn't who he claimed to be, he would have been either a liar or a lunatic.

Lewis explains, “I am trying here to prevent anyone from saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: ‘I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept his claim to be God.’ That is the one thing we must not say.” [16]

Jesus clearly claimed to be God. So was he lying, was he a self-deceived lunatic---or is he God’s Son, deity in human form?

Did Jesus Prove His Claims?

Toward the end of Jesus’ three-year ministry, he told his disciples that he would be condemned and killed in Jerusalem.

This was devastating news! The disciples had spent three years with him. They had seen his many miracles and listened to his teachings of God’s unconditional love and grace. They were stunned!

However, Jesus told them something else they didn’t fully understand. He said that after his death he would rise again.

His promise to rise from the dead put Jesus’ entire ministry on the line. If he defeated death, it would validate his claim to deity. And it would mean that everything he told us about God, himself and our purpose and destiny is true.

Even his promise, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he dies, yet shall he live” (John 11:25, ESV).

Bible scholar Wilbur Smith explains, “When he said He would rise again from the dead, the third day after He was crucified, He said something that only a fool would dare say if He expected the devotion of any disciples – unless He was sure He was going to rise.” [17]

As Jesus predicted, he was taken prisoner, condemned to death by Pontius Pilate, and crucified on a Roman cross.

After hanging on the cross for six hours, Jesus died. A Roman guard pierced his side to make sure he was dead. Then, Jesus was buried in the tomb of a wealthy member of the Jewish council, Joseph of Arimathea. Roman guards were ordered to maintain a 24-hour watch at the tomb.

Jesus’ disciples had gone into hiding, fearing they, too, would be arrested and possibly executed like Jesus.

But on the third day, Mary Magdalene and other women hurried to the disciples claiming they had seen Jesus alive! Shortly afterwards the eyewitnesses tell us that Jesus appeared alive to Peter, John, and over 500 others. The disciples were suddenly transformed.

Peter Steinfels of *The New York Times* writes: “Shortly after Jesus was executed, his followers were suddenly galvanized from a baffled and cowering group into people whose message about a living Jesus and a coming kingdom, preached at the risk of their lives, eventually changed an empire. Something happened...But exactly what?” [18]

Who Moved the Stone?

One person who wanted to know what happened was English journalist and skeptic, Frank Morison who began research for a book to prove that Jesus’ resurrection was a myth. However, as he examined the evidence, Morison’s views changed as well as the theme of his book. What was it that changed Morison’s mind as well as his book?

Morison discovered Jesus’ death was verified by both Jewish and Roman historians. Morison then wondered if the disciples had conspired a plot to make it appear Jesus had risen. However, there are three main problems with that theory:

1. The tomb was secured by a large stone and a 24-hour trained Roman guard. It would have been impossible for the disciples to roll the stone away and remove Jesus’ body without notice.
2. A resurrection plot would have died out as soon as someone discovered Jesus’ body, yet that never happened. Tom Anderson, former president of the California Trial Lawyers Association, explains, “With an event so well publicized, don’t you think that it’s reasonable that one historian, one eye-witness, one antagonist would record for all time that he had seen Christ’s body? ... The silence of history is deafening when it comes to the testimony against the resurrection.” [19]
3. The disciples changed from being cowards into men who were willing to be tortured and martyred for proclaiming the risen Jesus. Professor J. N. D. Anderson, author of *Evidence for the Resurrection*, reasons, “Think of the psychological absurdity of picturing a little band of defeated cowards cowering in an upper room one day and a few days later transformed into a company that no persecution could silence – and then attempting to attribute this dramatic change to nothing more convincing than a miserable fabrication ... That simply wouldn’t make sense.”[20]

It was the dramatic transformation in the disciples’ behavior that convinced Morison the resurrection really happened. He writes, “Whoever comes to this problem has sooner or later to confront a fact that cannot be explained away ... This fact is that ... a profound conviction came to the little group of people – a change that attests to the fact that Jesus had risen from the grave.”[21]

In a reversal of his skepticism, Morison changed the title of his book to, *Who Moved the Stone*, which documents the evidence that persuaded him the resurrection of Jesus Christ was a true historical event.

What Would a Jury Conclude?

Another scholar who wrote about evidence for Jesus' resurrection was Dr. Simon Greenleaf, founder of the Harvard Law School. Greenleaf wrote the rules of evidence still used in our legal system today.

Applying those rules to the events surrounding Jesus' death, Greenleaf concluded that any honest jury would render a verdict that Jesus' resurrection really happened. As with Morison, it was the sudden change in the disciples' behavior that persuaded him.

He writes, "It would have been impossible for the disciples to persist with their conviction that Jesus had risen if they hadn't actually seen the risen Christ." [22]

Jesus' resurrection convinced his disciples that he was the Messiah who died for our sins, the great "I AM" who had spoken to Moses, "the only way to God," and "the resurrection and the life." They now knew Jesus alone had the power over life and death, and they gave their lives proclaiming him as the risen Lord.

Although he was originally a skeptic, Lewis explains how Jesus' resurrection was unique among all events in human history.

"Something perfectly new in the history of the Universe had happened. Christ had defeated death. The door which had always been locked had for the first time been forced open." [23]

So, what does Jesus' resurrection mean to you and me today?

Why Is the Resurrection Important?

The apostle Paul, who was originally a skeptic of Jesus' resurrection, explains its impact on our lives.

"For Christ has completely abolished death, and has now, through the Gospel, opened to us men the shining possibilities of the life that is eternal." (2 Timothy 1:9, J. B. Phillips).

In other words, Jesus' death and resurrection opened the door for us to have eternal life with Christ. But, there is an obstacle preventing us from going to heaven. The apostle Paul explains.

"You were his enemies, separated from him by your evil thoughts and actions..." (Colossians 1:21b, NLT).

The obstacle to us having eternal life with Christ is that we have sinned and rebelled against a holy God. Although God loves us beyond our understanding, his perfect justice requires payment for our sins. The penalty is death.

Many wonder why an all-powerful, loving God can't just forgive us without judging our sins. Why does he demand justice?

Imagine entering a courtroom and you are guilty of murder. As you approach the bench, you realize that the judge is your father. Knowing that he loves you, you immediately begin to plead, "Dad, just let me go!"

With tears in his eyes he responds, "I love you, son, but I'm a judge. I can't simply let you go."

Presenting the evidence against you, he bangs the gavel down and declares you guilty. Justice cannot be compromised, at least not by a judge. But because he loves you, he steps down from the bench, takes off the robe, and offers to pay the penalty for you. And in fact, he takes your place in the electric chair.

This is the picture painted by the New Testament. God stepped down into human history, in the person of Jesus Christ, and was crucified on the cross for us. Jesus is not a third-party whipping boy being punished for our sins, but rather he is God himself. Stated more bluntly, God had two choices: to punish us for our sin, us or to receive the punishment himself. In Christ, he chose the latter.

In other words, God's perfect justice is completely satisfied by the death of his Son, Jesus Christ. All of our sins—no matter how bad they are or have been—are completely paid for by the blood of Christ. Paul writes,

"...yet now he has brought you back as his friends. He has done this through his death on the cross in his own human body. As a result, he has brought you into the very presence of God, and you are holy and blameless as you stand before him without a single fault." (Colossians 1:22a NLT).

But wait a minute, you say, "Don't I have to do good deeds to go to heaven?"

Aren't Good Deeds Enough?

Since eternal life is a gift from God, you and I can't do anything to earn our way into heaven. Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, explains God's amazing grace.

"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast." —Ephesians 2:8-9, NIV

For a gift to be ours, we need to actually receive it. Like any gift, you can choose to accept or reject Jesus Christ's pardon for the penalty for your sins. This was made clear by the apostle John.

"This is what God told us: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life, but whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life." —1 John 5:11, 12, NCV

To become a Christian you must place your faith (trust) in Jesus' death for your sins on the cross, and in His resurrection for your eternal life. It is a choice that you alone must make. No one else can do it for you.

You must honestly admit you have sinned and want the forgiveness Jesus Christ offers you. The apostle John tells us that "If we freely admit that we have sinned, we find God utterly reliable—he forgives our sins and makes us thoroughly clean from all that is evil" (I John 1:9, J.B. Phillips).

John tells us that whoever receives Jesus Christ becomes his child.

"Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God".

You can receive Jesus right now by asking him to come into your life and forgive your sins. If you haven't ever invited Jesus into your life, simply pray the following words.

But remember, it's not the words you say but the attitude of your heart that is important.

"Dear Lord Jesus, thank you for dying for all my sins—past, present, and future. Thank you for giving me eternal life. I receive you as my Savior by faith, and desire you to be Lord of my life. Make me the kind of person you want me to be."

If you have made this commitment to Jesus Christ, he actually entered your life. He will help you to become the brand-new person he created you to be. He is freeing you to experience a life of meaning, purpose and power. There is even more...

Share your thoughts about the article you just read and we will send you a link to **download the free book** — "The Adventure of Living with Jesus."

Endnotes for "Who Is the Real Jesus?"

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4. Will Durant, *The Story of Philosophy* (New York: Pocket, 1961), 428.
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20. J. N. D. Anderson, "The Resurrection of Jesus Christ," *Christianity Today*, 12. April, 1968.
21. Frank Morison, *Who Moved the Stone?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Lamplighter, 1958), 104.
22. Simon Greenleaf, *The Testimony of the Evangelists Examined by the Rules of Evidence Administered in Courts of Justice* (1874; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1995), back cover.
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