

Who Is Jesus?

One Solitary Life

Jesus never wrote a book, never held a political office, never went to college, never got married, and never had kids. He lived most of his life in a small town, never traveling far from it, mostly working a common job, and he was abandoned by his friends and died young.

Yet... despite Jesus' rather minuscule life, his impact is unmatched.

Jesus is easily the most famous person in the history of the world. He has innumerable books written about him, songs written to him, and pictures painted of him. Billions of people have given their lives to him and thousands upon thousands have given their life for him.

As James Allen Francis, who pastored right here in Los Angeles in the nineteen-teens and -twenties, once put it: "All the armies that ever marched; all the navies that ever sailed; all the parliaments that ever sat; all the kings that ever ruled put together have not affected the life of man on this earth as much as that one solitary life."

So what is it about this man that makes him so fascinating?

Who is Jesus?

This is the most important question you'll ever answer. And it's not just some random question dropped from the sky, it was Jesus himself who asked: "Who do you say I am?"

There are a lot of opinions about Jesus in our society today. For some, Jesus is a moral teacher from whose teachings they can pick and choose what they like. For others, Jesus is a heavenly firefighter who can rescue them from trouble but otherwise they're on their own. For some, he's simply a spiritual coach, helping fill their religious quota in the pursuit of a well-rounded life. Or he's Republican Jesus or Democrat Jesus or American Jesus.

But Jesus himself said that if you want to know who he is, then you need to look to the Scriptures.

In 1 Corinthians 15, the apostle Paul wrote, “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.”

So who is Jesus? Notice, first of all, that Paul calls him Christ. “Christ” is not Jesus’ last name. His disciples didn’t call him Mr. Christ. It didn’t say “Christ” on the back of his football jersey. Christ is not a name—it’s a title. It means “Messiah”. The Messiah was the king God had promised would set right everything our sin made wrong. Jesus is the son of God, sent to rescue the people of God and bring the kingdom of God.

So who is Jesus? He’s the king who came to save us. But how does he do that?

Reflect

What are some of the common beliefs about Jesus that you heard growing up?

Reality Church of Los Angeles

Good News

Let's look back at 1 Corinthians 15. Paul said, "Christ died for our sins." But what is sin?

Everyone knows the world's not the way it's supposed to be. That's obvious if you watch the news, but you can also just look in your own heart. The Bible says that the root of all that's wrong in the world is our sin—that we have rejected God in our hearts and look for satisfaction in the things God made instead of God himself.

- I find my identity in my career, not in my creator.
- I find my security in safety, not in God's sovereignty.
- I find my joy in instant gratification, not eternal glory.

And the result of this sin—these wayward hearts that lead to ungodly lives—is that we are separated from God and deserve his justice for marring his creation.

I know that's hard news to receive, but you won't understand how good the good news is until you know just how bad the bad news is. The Bible is honest in diagnosing our spiritual sickness, but it does so for the purpose of pointing to the remedy. We are great sinners, but we have a greater savior.

So to deal with the problem of sin, Jesus came and lived a perfect life—he was compassionate to the marginalized, brought justice to oppressors, and did everything to the glory of God. Then he who was without sin chose to bear the penalty of our sin by taking our place on the cross so we could be forgiven and reconciled to God.

This has been called "the great exchange." He took our sin, guilt, and shame; and we receive his righteous record, status as children of God, and his spirit dwelling within us. The cross then becomes, not just the moment of salvation, but the turning point for our lives.

Because of Christ's death on the cross, we move from

- death to life
- bondage to freedom
- shame to honor
- mourning to dancing

- darkness to light
- fear to faith
- ashes to beauty
- defeat to victory

Why would he do this for us? It wasn't out of obligation. Many of us have heard that Christ died for our sins so many times that we start thinking that's what God was supposed to do. Like it's his job to forgive us. "I'm good at sinning, he's good at forgiving. It's a match made in heaven!" No, Christ's death wasn't out of obligation.

It was out of love. As the fourteenth-century Christian, Catherine of Sienna, pointed out: nails were not enough to hold God "fastened on the cross, had not love held him there."

Jesus died on the cross for our sins, but he didn't stay dead. 1 Corinthians 15 goes on to say "He was raised on the third day." This carpenter from a small town called Nazareth walked out of his tomb, triumphing over sin, evil, and death.

Look, If Jesus is still dead, then our faith is useless, our belief is misguided, and our hope is empty. If Jesus is dead, then Christianity is dead.

But IF the tomb is empty, then the world is full of meaning and Jesus is at the center of it. If Jesus is risen, then our past is forgiven, our present is transformed, and our future is secure.

He IS risen. And because of the resurrection, we're not just talking about a historical figure but a living savior.

Because Jesus is alive, we don't have to live for the approval of others anymore. We don't have to be defined by our failures anymore. We don't have to be crushed under the weight of our guilt. We don't have to live in fear anymore.

Christ died for our sins and rose from the grave.

Now, the word the Bible uses to summarize all of this is "gospel." That word literally means "good news."

The gospel is not good advice about what we're supposed to do, it's good news about what God has done for us. It's an announcement of grace. We were dead in our sin, and we've been made alive in Christ.

And all of this good news is centered on one thing—Jesus. Christianity is not primarily about a system of beliefs or principles of morality, but a person—Jesus. This is what 1 Corinthians 15 says is “of first importance.”

But remember, this isn’t just about you and God. In 1 Corinthians 15, it says that Christ died for our sins “according to the scriptures” and rose from the grave “according to the scriptures.” That’s Paul’s way of saying that Christ’s death and resurrection was the climax—the fulfillment—of the whole story of Scripture.

We’ll talk more about that story in the rest of the discipleship pathway, but the point is that it isn’t just about God rescuing sinners from the world, he is reconciling sinners to himself and one another as part of his renewal of the world. What began with creation ends with new creation, and in the middle is Christ—the king making all things new.

Reflect

What questions do you have about/for Jesus?

Our Response

So how do we respond to this good news?

In Mark 1, Jesus says that the response to the gospel is faith and repentance. These are the first words out of the mouth of Jesus in the Bible. He says, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.” This is what we’ve been talking about. The good news of Jesus. But how do we respond to the gospel? Jesus says with belief and repentance.

Now, in our culture, I know “repentance” comes across as a cold and harsh word, but it’s actually a beautiful invitation when you understand what it means. To repent literally means “to turn around.” Apart from Christ, our lives are going in the wrong direction. I choose my own way. I live for myself. I’m destroying the relationships around me. I’m going the wrong way. “To repent” simply means I turn around.

But the key is who I’m turning toward. The term “repent” appears more in the New Testament than the Old. The Old Testament’s most common call to repentance is to “return to the Lord.”

That’s where faith comes in. Faith is the way we receive grace. If someone gives you a gift, you simply open your hands to receive it. Salvation is a gift of God’s grace and it is received only through the “open hands” of faith.

In the fourth century, a follower of Jesus in North Africa named Augustine once said that we don’t receive God’s blessings because our hands are gripped tight on control of our own lives.

Squeeze your fists right now. That’s how our hearts are when they’re resistant to God’s grace. But now open them. Faith is doing that with your heart to receive God’s grace.

And faith is not only an initial trust, it’s an ongoing dependence on the Lord where we have a posture of faith and surrender to God. Because of what he has done for us, we receive his grace by faith, entrusting everything to him. This isn’t just a matter of handing over the “religious compartment” of my life. Faith is about entrusting everything in my life to Jesus.

Romans 10 says, “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved,” and John 1 says, “To all...who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.”

That’s the biblical response to the gospel. Faith and repentance—turning from your sin and trusting in the Savior.

Reflect

Where in your life have you seen God’s care for you?

Religion and the Gospel

There's one more aspect of responding to the gospel that we have to understand—and this has personally been life-changing for me. We all know we can reject the gospel through reckless rebellion—the heart of which is living for ourselves but can play out externally as violence, sexual promiscuity, etc, etc. And if that's you, I want you to hear this—no one is too far from the grace of God. Jesus is a better savior than you are a sinner.

But it's important to understand that the gospel can be rejected, not only through reckless rebellion, but also through self-righteous religion.

I grew up around the church and I didn't get into too much trouble, but while I didn't do drugs, I was addicted to achievement. I learned how to perform—perform in sports, perform in school, and perform at church. When it came to religion, I knew how to play the game. But while I said and did the right things, my heart was far from God. I was using him to prop up my own self-righteous religion.

I'll never forget reading the Scriptures and being shocked at who Jesus constantly confronted. It wasn't the sinners and the prostitutes. It was the religious people! He called them white-washed tombs, which meant that they were nice and clean on the outside but dead on the inside.

Rejecting the gospel through self-righteous religion is a danger for anyone who grew up in the church, and it will become a danger once you spend enough time in the church. Our hearts are prone to finding acceptance through performance, even in the church.

This is why we have to understand the difference between self-righteous religion and gospel-centered Christianity.

Religion	Gospel
Good advice	Good News
I obey to be loved	I am loved, therefore I obey
About what I do	About what God has done
Jesus is a means to an end	Jesus <i>is</i> the end
I use Jesus to get something else	In Jesus, I get God himself

I used the phrase “gospel-centered Christianity” a moment ago because the gospel is not just for conversion. The gospel is for all of life. Jesus changes everything. But sadly, this is not the way that many people think about the gospel.

We assume that the gospel is only for non-Christians or beginners. It’s the entry-level basics of Christianity, the training for JV that you eventually graduate from and move past when you become a varsity Christian.

But this approach couldn’t be further from the truth. We never graduate from the gospel. The good news of Jesus is what saves and sustains us. The gospel is an endless well of power that we draw from for the rest of our lives. Tim Keller has faithfully taught this principle throughout his ministry as a pastor in New York City. He says,

We never “get beyond the gospel” in our Christian life to something more “advanced.” The gospel is not the first “step” in a “stairway” of truths, rather, it is more like the “hub” in a “wheel” of truth....The gospel is not just the minimum required doctrine necessary to enter the kingdom, but the way we make all progress in the kingdom.

This is so important. We grow as Christians not by moving beyond the gospel but by going deeper into its riches.

The gospel not only saves us from our sin; it makes us more and more like our Savior. The good news is our foundation for standing firm in a difficult and ever-changing world.

New Life

Many Christians are motivated by guilt and shame. “Stop sinning!” they say. “Good Christians don’t sin.” “God will be disappointed in you if you sin.” Shame and guilt can be powerful motivators, but they don’t lead to health and freedom—they lead to further bondage and shame.

Jesus changes all of this. Because of the gospel, we’re motivated not by guilt but by gratitude. When I fix my eyes on Jesus and remember what he has done for me, I rejoice over his perfect life that is credited to me, his sacrificial death that removes my guilt and shame, and his victorious resurrection that gives me the power to overcome sin.

As my gratitude for the gospel grows, I can walk in a manner worthy of the new life he’s called me to. I don’t need to be enslaved to sin because I’ve been set free. I can say no to weaker desires because I’m saying yes to a greater desire.

This doesn’t rule out the need to strive for holiness; it just means that we are to strive with grace-driven effort. We do not work for grace but from grace.

For me personally, this has been a long process of learning how to apply the gospel to my life. For example, one night several years ago, I was talking with my wife and I said, “I think I have a comparison problem.” I had been comparing myself to other people and then wallowing in shame, and just felt really discouraged.

Like the good wife that she is, she gently started asking me questions to get beneath the surface of my statement. “What do they have that you are craving? What exactly do you envy about their position?” What emerged was my underlying belief that when I saw these people, they were getting the approval I longed for in my own life. People affirmed and applauded them, and I craved that approval.

My wife helped me realize that I didn’t have a comparison problem. I had a gospel problem. There I was, longing for the approval of others, when the king of the universe already approves of me in Christ. God looks at me and sees the righteousness of Christ and says, “This is my son whom I love; with him I’m well pleased.” Because God approves of me in Christ, I’m set free from living for the approval of others.

That day I could have passed a test about the gospel on paper, but I wasn’t believing it in my heart. God gently and graciously reminded me of the best news ever, news I

will need every day of my life until the Lord returns to complete the good work he began.

In the school of life, we will never graduate from the gospel or outgrow the love of God. The good news of Jesus is not only the entry point into the kingdom of God; it is the foundation for a lifetime of following the king.

So who is Jesus? Who is Jesus to you? We've seen that Jesus is the king who came to save. Through his life, death, and resurrection, we can have new life. This good news of the gospel changes every aspect of our lives.

Maybe it feels overwhelming thinking about applying the gospel to every aspect of life. Well, just remember this:

Jesus makes you a new person with a new family on a new mission.

It's simple enough for a child to understand, yet deep enough that we will be learning more about it for the rest of our lives.

Reflect

Read John 1:1-20. What do these verses say about who Jesus is? How does what you have observed in the passage shape how you relate to Jesus?