

Who is Jesus?

by Paul Zilmer

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Cover illustration: Impressions of what Jesus might have looked like by various artists from differing traditions; both Eastern and Western.
But the Bible never describes Jesus' appearance.

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Introduction - How we Know about Jesus

Jesus of Nazareth was a Jewish teacher who lived 2000 years ago in what is now the nation of Israel. At that time, the area was part of the Roman empire. He grew up in a working-class family, in a small town of no importance, with little formal education. Yet his teachings literally changed the world.

The Christian religion is based on the belief that this Jesus, while being a man like us, was also the Son of the one and only Living God. His teachings were therefore communications from God.

The foundation of his teaching was that mankind is flawed by sin, and that death is the consequence of sin. Jesus, however, never committed sin, and was provided by God to save men and women from sin and death. Jesus died, but was raised up by God to live forever. The Christian hope is that we will also be raised, to live forever with him.

This short booklet provides an introduction to who Jesus is: his background, his life and his death, his role now, and his role in the future.

How we know about Jesus

The holy book of the Christian religion is called the Bible. The Bible has two major sections. The Old Testament (also called the Hebrew scriptures) is the holy book of the Jews. It covers the history of God's dealings with mankind from the creation of the universe, up until the time of Jesus. The New Testament is the story of Jesus and of the beginning of the Christian church.

The Bible is God's message to mankind. It tells us that there is only one God in all the universe, and He made all things. He revealed Himself to certain individuals, who wrote down what they learned about Him. Both the Old Testament and the New Testament are composed of a number of "books", the writings of different authors. These authors were inspired by God; that is, God revealed to them what to write. So the Bible is often called the Word of God, since it is a revelation from Him, not just the thoughts of the human authors.

The Old Testament provides the background for the work of Jesus. It contains many prophecies (predictions) about the work of Christ, who is also called the Messiah. The words Christ and Messiah mean the same thing - 'he who is anointed to be king'. The New Testament reveals that Jesus was the Messiah who was foretold in the Old Testament. That is why he is often referred to as Jesus Christ, or sometimes just Christ.

The Promised Son

The first words of the Bible tell us that:

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” (Genesis 1:1)

God then created all forms of life. Finally, He created a man and a woman - Adam and Eve. He gave this first man and the first woman everything, but told them that if they disobeyed Him, then they would die.

Tragically, Adam and Eve did disobey. Disobedience to God is called ‘sin’. As a result of their sin, the man and woman were condemned to die. However, God made a promise to them. He told them that a descendent of the woman would come, who would deal with the problem of sin and death.

God did not put Adam and Eve to death immediately, but they became mortal, destined eventually to die. They had children, and all mankind is descended from them. Every one of those descendants has inherited from them an inclination to do wrong, a moral weakness that tempts us to sin. And every descendant of Adam and Eve is mortal, destined to perish.

After many generations, an exceptionally faithful man named Abraham came along. God was so pleased with Abraham's faithfulness, that He made a covenant with him. This covenant consisted of a number of solemn promises:

1. God promised to set apart this man and his descendants, and work especially with them. The descendants of Abraham are the Jews, and they were selected by God to be His people.
2. He promised that there would be one particular son, who would be a ruler.
3. He promised that Abraham personally, this one special son, and all of Abraham's other descendants would inherit the land where Abraham lived, forever.
4. He promised to bless the entire world through Abraham.
5. And He promised to be forever the God of Abraham and his descendants.

The special son promised to Abraham would be the same special son promised to Eve. The blessing on the entire world would come through this son. It is also important that for anyone to inherit the land forever, they would have to live forever. So there is a promise of immortality for Abraham, for the special son, and for others. Just as God told Adam and Eve, this special son would have to deal with the problem of sin and death, in order for the promises to be fulfilled.

Abraham's son Isaac, and Isaac's son Jacob, were also faithful men, and God repeated the promises to them. Jacob is also called Israel, and he had twelve sons. The nation of Israel is descended from Jacob and his sons. Another name for these people is the Jews.

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Again, many generations passed, and another very faithful man pleased God. His name was David. God made him king of the nation of Israel, and made some additional promises to him. God promised that the special son of the woman, the special son of Abraham, would also be a descendant of David. He promised that this son would be a great king, and would rule over the people of Israel forever. The way that God designated the kings of His people was to have them anointed; oil was poured on their head to designate them as the chosen king. The promised king is therefore called 'the Anointed', that is, the Messiah, or the Christ.

The Son is Born

The New Testament begins with these words:

"The record of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham."
(Matthew 1:1)

Jesus is the promised son. He is the one anointed by God as His designated king. He is the one who would conquer sin and death, and would bring blessing on the whole world.

Jesus was descended from Abraham and David through his mother. Her name was Mary. Before she was married, an angel (a divine messenger) was sent to Mary, to tell her that she was going to be the mother of the Messiah. She wondered how this could be, since she was a virgin. The angel told her that God's power would cause her to conceive a son. The son would therefore be the Son of God, as well as the son of Mary. The angel said that his name would be Jesus, which means "Savior". He would save his people from sin, and he would be the promised king.

Some religions have suggested that their gods have sexual relations with mortals. The account of the birth of Jesus is not like this at all. The one true God, who created all life, created His Son in the womb of Mary. Jesus was truly the son of Mary and truly the Son of God; a child miraculously formed in her womb by the Spirit power of the Creator Himself.

In due time the son was born as the angel said. A group of angels proclaimed the joyful news. This was the beginning of the greatest event in human history! Working through this man, Jesus, God was going to provide a way of salvation for mankind.

Mary was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph. Joseph married Mary, and they raised Jesus, along with the children who were later born to them in the ordinary way. Joseph was a builder, and Jesus learned this trade as he grew up. He also learned about who he was, both from his mother and from the Hebrew scriptures.

At the age of thirty, Jesus began his great work.

Jesus the Teacher

As we have said, Jesus was the Messiah, the Anointed. But he was not simply anointed with oil as the kings were in ancient times. God anointed Jesus with His own power, which is called the Holy Spirit.

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Jesus was given power over the forces of nature. He used this power to heal sick and crippled people, and he performed other miracles that proved he was in fact the Son of God.

Jesus spent about three and a half years teaching in the towns and the countryside of the Jews. Many people, both men and women, followed Jesus. Some were merely curious, but others became his students, and they were called 'disciples'. Of the many followers, Jesus selected twelve to work with particularly. They would later become the leaders of the Christian church.

The main method Jesus used to teach was telling parables. These were stories that had a lesson. Most were based on the ordinary activities of life such as farming or arranging a wedding. This method of teaching caused some people to stop following him. They didn't want to bother trying to understand what he meant. But many found his message compelling. When they didn't understand, they came and asked Jesus what he meant, and he explained. In this way, the true disciples stood out from the crowds.

The teaching of Jesus was very challenging. He called his followers to very high moral standards. He also challenged the religious authorities of his time, who had corrupted the Word of God by adding their own traditions to it. Jesus made it clear that truth is very important to God. The one true God insists that people understand Him, obey Him, and come to Him as He has directed. The way to find God does not lie within the mind of man. It is revealed by God, and He only accepts those who follow His way. Jesus brought people a message from God, not a philosophy. He told us that we must heed this message.

Jesus' teachings cannot be adequately covered in a short booklet like this. You will need to read the New Testament to learn what he taught. When you do, you will find that his teachings are just as compelling and challenging as they were 2000 years ago.

A few of the key principles he taught are:

1. The Creator, the only God, loves us as His children. He calls us to love Him in return, and invites us to call Him "Father". He is not distant or unknowable. He wishes each one of us to know Him and have a close relationship with Him. (see Matthew 5:45, John 17:3, Acts 14:15-17, Acts 17:23-31)
2. As a reflection of God's love for people, He calls on us to love one another. You may have heard of the "Golden Rule". Jesus said, "Treat others the same way you want them to treat you." (Matthew 7:12). Jesus also said, "Love your neighbor as you love yourself." (Matthew 22:39). And he even told us we must love our enemies (Matthew 5:44). The life of any true Christian must be based on these teachings of Jesus. (see Galatians 5:17)
3. God has told us what is right and what is wrong. Doing wrong is sin, and will be punished with death. Wrong behavior includes: murder, theft, lying, sexual relations outside of marriage, harming or cheating anyone, warfare, and seeking power over others. Right behavior includes: honesty, caring for others, telling the truth and keeping your word, faithfulness in marriage, and sharing God's message with other people. (see Ephesians 5:3-7, 1 Corinthians 7:9-11, Galatians 5:19-20).
4. There will be a day of reckoning, and people will be judged according to how they have lived their lives. Those who reject the way that Jesus taught will be punished with eternal death. Those who

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belong to Jesus Christ and faithfully follow him will be given eternal life. (see John 5:28-29, 2 Corinthians 5:9-10).

A Sacrifice for Sin

The human race is fatally flawed. We are predisposed toward sin, and we are mortal. We are commanded by God to reject sin and do right, but we are weak. We cannot be perfect, and God has declared, "The wage of sin is death." (Romans 6:23). We are therefore destined to perish. We need to be saved from this condition to have any hope of life.

God is very just, but He is also very merciful. Through Jesus, God provided a way for us to be saved from sin and death.

Unlike us, Jesus never sinned. He was tempted to sin just like we are, but being God's Son he had the strength to resist the impulse to sin. Jesus was perfectly righteous (without sin). But since he was a man like us, he always had the impulse to sin within him. This impulse to sin is sometimes called "the devil". And, Jesus was mortal just like us.

In the Old Testament, God had revealed that there can be no forgiveness of sins without shedding blood. Animals were sacrificed to God in recognition of this principle. The offering of sacrifice is a recognition that it is we ourselves who deserve to die, and that God is just in requiring our death. The mercy of God is that the sacrifice can take away our sin, so that He treats us as being righteous.

The sacrifices of animals could not really deal with human sin. But the sacrifice of the perfect man, Jesus, could. It was part of God's plan all along that His Son would become the perfect sacrifice for sin, and the animal sacrifices were a way of pointing forward to Jesus.

Jesus was betrayed by one of his disciples, and condemned to death by the council of Jewish religious leaders. They were jealous of him, and did not realize that they were playing a part in God's plan. The leaders asked for the Roman governor to have Jesus crucified. This was the method of execution for common criminals. The one condemned was nailed or tied to a post and left to die. Sometimes the post had a cross-bar. We don't know if Jesus had a cross-bar or not, but we know he was nailed to the post through his hands and feet, and left hanging there for several hours until he died.

It is difficult for many people to understand how this terrible death could have anything to do with God saving people. The New Testament tells us that, when men and women become associated with the death of Jesus, his sacrifice cleanses away our sins. We obtain forgiveness from God. He will regard us as if we were righteous, allowing the righteousness of Jesus and our faith in him to be counted as our own righteousness.

If Jesus had simply died, this salvation wouldn't have been possible. But Jesus did not remain dead!

The Resurrection

If the wage of sin is death (Romans 6:23), it would not be right for the result of righteousness to also be death. It was right for Jesus to die, because he had the devil (the impulse to sin) in him, and he was mortal.

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But he never sinned, so it would not have been right for him to perish like a sinner. And so, God raised him up from death. This is called the resurrection.

At his death, the impulse for him to sin was forever killed. When Jesus was raised, he was no longer afflicted with the desire to sin, and he was no longer mortal. He is now immortal, that is, he can never die again.

The death and resurrection of Jesus provided a great victory. For the first time in human history, death had been defeated! All his life Jesus had defeated sin. Now the temptation to sin was dead, and he was alive forever.

The resurrection is the greatest sign of all that Jesus was the Son of God, and that what he taught was true. And it is a beacon of hope for all of us. Jesus defeated sin and death, and by God's grace, his victory can become our victory.

A person becomes a Christian by being baptized (dipped) in water. This is not merely a ritual. It is our connection to the things we have been talking about:

1. Baptism is a symbolic burial and resurrection. We figuratively go through the same process of dying, being buried, and being raised up to a new life. Although we still have the impulse to sin, we symbolically put it to death. Although we are still mortal, we commence a new life of service to Jesus Christ:

“even so we should walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:4)

2. By being baptized, we acknowledge that we deserve to die. We confess that we are in need of salvation, and we recognize that the only way of being saved from sin and death is through the sacrifice of Jesus.

“He who believes and is baptised will be saved” (Mark 16:16)

3. Our baptism expresses faith in God, and in His offer of salvation. God graciously allows our faith to be counted as righteousness. Our sins are washed away, and being dipped in the water is an indication that we have been made clean in God's eyes:

“buried with him in baptism ... having forgiven you all trespasses” (Colossians 2:12-13)

4. The figure of baptism is an expression of our confidence that God will save us out of literal death. Like Jesus, we will also be raised up to immortality:

“If we have been united with him in the likeness of his death, certainly we shall also be united together in the likeness of his resurrection” (Romans 6:5)

Mediator Between God and Man

After Jesus was raised from the dead, he spent about six weeks with his disciples. He did not show himself to everyone, but only to those that he had chosen as his witnesses. There was one large crowd of about 500 people who saw him alive.

Jesus taught his disciples that they would need to carry on the work of spreading the gospel (good news) of salvation. He told them that they would receive the Holy Spirit - the power of God - as proof that they were truly carrying God's message to the world.

Then, Jesus ascended to heaven while his disciples watched. Jesus is now with his Father, with God Himself, in heaven. He passed the role of teacher on to his followers. His role now is as our priest.

A priest is someone who acts as an intermediary between God and mankind. In particular, it is the duty of the priest to present sacrificial offerings to God on behalf of those who come to worship. In Old Testament times, there were priests who offered the animal sacrifices. We have seen that those sacrifices were pointing forward to the one great sacrifice. In the same way, those priests were pointing forward to the one great Priest, who is Jesus Christ.

Jesus today is our advocate, appearing before God on our behalf. Our sin, and our mortality, separate us from God. The work of Jesus now is to reconcile us with God. Because God loves us, and because Jesus is the perfect advocate, we are accepted by God. Jesus, in his righteousness, is allowed to represent us, and therefore to save us.

“There is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.” (1 Timothy 2:5)

The Spread of Christianity

After Jesus ascended to the Father, the disciples obeyed the command to spread the good news. The leading disciples were called "apostles", which means people who are sent to do a particular job. It was Jesus himself who specifically sent them to carry on his work.

Before his death, Jesus never left the area that is now the nation of Israel. But it was not God's intention that salvation would come only to the Jews. God worked through the Jews because Abraham had been so faithful. But salvation is for everyone who comes to God through Jesus.

The apostles went throughout the Roman empire, preaching the gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ. Because they had the power of the Holy Spirit, they were able to do miracles like Jesus had done. This proved that they were not just making the story up. They were also eyewitnesses of the resurrection, and they told people that this was proof that God really was saving people.

Huge numbers of people responded to this teaching. They believed the message, and were baptized for forgiveness of their sins. And so Christianity got its start. Soon there were Christian churches everywhere. The Roman government did not like this new religion. They saw it as a political threat, and soon began to persecute Christians. Many were put to death, but the gospel continued to spread.

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New believers were given some of the Holy Spirit power, if an apostle was there to give it to them. But no one other than the apostles themselves could pass on this power. One by one, the apostles were killed by those who opposed the message. Eventually all those who had the Holy Spirit powers died. But a new, more permanent way was provided to convey that the message was indeed from God.

The apostles, and some others who had the Spirit power, were inspired by God to write the message down. They wrote down the teachings of Jesus and the events of his life. They wrote down what the apostles did. And they wrote letters that contained Christian teaching. These writings are the New Testament. Like the Hebrew scriptures of the Old Testament, these are inspired writings and are in fact the Word of God.

“All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16).

The apostles are dead, but for nearly 2000 years their writings in the New Testament have continued to teach us.

Jesus Will Return

When Jesus ascended to heaven, there were angels who spoke to the disciples who were watching. The angels told them:

“This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.” (Acts 1:9)

Jesus has done much of what was promised by God. He has conquered sin and death, and he has become the source of blessing for everyone. But he has not yet fulfilled the promise to be the King.

Many prophecies in both the Old Testament and the New Testament tell us that Messiah will reign as King over all the earth. The disciples expected Jesus to do this right away, but he told them that it would be later (see Acts 1:6-7).

The apostles preached that Jesus would return, to fulfill the remaining promises. The Bible tells us that when he returns, Jesus will do several things:

1. He will send out the angels to raise the dead, and gather them together with his followers who are still living. (see Matthew 24:31, 1 Thessalonians 4:16)
2. All those who are gathered will be judged. Jesus will determine who has been faithful and obedient, and who has not. The faithful will be rewarded with eternal life. The unfaithful will be condemned to die forever. (see John 5:28-29, 2 Thessalonians 1:9)
3. Jesus will rule over the entire world, on behalf of the Father, the one true God. Not everyone will welcome him but those who resist him will be conquered, and all the earth will be filled with the knowledge of God and His glory. (see Daniel 7:14, Revelation 5:10)

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4. As King, Jesus will rule with absolute justice. There will be no corruption in his government. Suffering, warfare, disease, and death will diminish, and eventually will be eliminated. The kingdom will continue until all sources of sin are eliminated. Finally, even death will be abolished. By this time, none of the unfaithful will remain. Jesus will then turn over the kingdom to his Father (see 1 Corinthians 15:24-28, Revelation 21:1-8).

We do not know exactly when Jesus will return (see Mark 13:32), but Jesus taught us to be ready for his coming at any time.

Jesus did give us some signs that would precede his coming, and we can see many of these signs happening right now. One of those is the return of the Jewish people to the land of Israel. Those Christians who watch for these signs are very excited, for the time of Jesus' return could be very soon. The promise of eternal life, of a beautiful world without suffering, of a kingdom of peace and justice, appears to be very near.

Jesus calls you to be his disciple, now, before it is too late. He asks you to confess that you are a sinner in need of salvation. He asks you to listen to him, to understand the one true God and the one way that leads to life. He calls on you to leave behind the life you have lived, and obey him. He holds out to you the hope of eternal life, and warns that the alternative is eternal death.

You can learn more about Jesus, and about the hope of life, by reading the Bible. The Christadelphians, (a name meaning 'Brothers and sisters in Christ') who published this booklet, are available to help you. God understands that you will have questions, and He has provided answers, both through His Word, and through those who have already come to Jesus Christ.

Jesus told his disciples, *"I am the way, the truth, and the life."* (John 14:6)

As you learn more, you will discover that there is good reason to believe him.

PAUL ZILMER

Questions

1. What is the source of our information about Jesus?
2. Who received promises of a special son?
3. What does the title "Christ" mean, and why is it applied to Jesus?
4. Who were Jesus' father and mother?
5. What are some of the key elements of Jesus' teaching?
6. How was Jesus victorious over sin?
7. How was he victorious over death?
8. How can we have a share in his victory?
9. Where is Jesus now?
10. What is Jesus doing now?
11. What promises about Christ have not been fulfilled?
12. How will they finally be fulfilled?

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