

The Wonder of Jesus

Who Was Jesus?

Lesson #1 for April 5, 2008

Scriptures: Matthew 16:13-16; John 20:26-28; 1 Corinthians 1:18-27; 15:3-7.

1. Read Matthew 16:13-16. The major question for this lesson is about the “identity” of Jesus. Who was Jesus? Was He really God? Was He really human? These questions have challenged thinkers and theologians since the days of Jesus. These are absolutely foundational, fundamental questions for the Christian. If Jesus did not really become a human being—if He just appeared to be a human being as the Docetists suggested in the early centuries—then the whole plan of salvation is just a charade! If Jesus was not fully God or if He was some other kind of being, then we do not really know the truth about God!
2. During His earthly ministry, Jesus was faced with an incredible challenge. The Jewish people had built up their hopes on the coming of the Messiah. Back in the days of Moses as recorded in Deuteronomy 18:15-22, God had told Moses that He would send a prophet like Moses to guide His people.
3. At the end of the Old Testament, Malachi, the last of the Old Testament prophets, was told by God:

“But before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes, I will send you the prophet Elijah. He will bring fathers and children together again; otherwise I would have to come and destroy your country.” (Malachi 4:5,6, *GNB*)

4. Why did Matthew and the other disciples suggest that Jeremiah might come before the Messiah? There is nothing in the Old Testament to suggest that. However, during the time between the records of the Old Testament and the New Testament, various ideas arose. In the apocryphal book of 2 Maccabees, (2 Maccabees 2:1-11) it says that Jeremiah and some of his friends hid the tabernacle, or tent, and the ark of the covenant in a cave on Mount Nebo, the mountain where Moses had seen the vision of the land of Palestine. Ellen White confirms a part of that story. {PK 453.2}
5. In another very strange apocryphal book, the writer claims that the Lord said:

“I will send my servants Isaiah and Jeremiah to help you. At their request I have consecrated and prepared for you twelve trees, heavy with different kinds of food, twelve fountains flowing with milk and honey, and seven high mountains covered with roses and lilies. I will make your children very happy there.” (2 Esdras 2:18,19, *GNB Apocrypha*)

These words were probably not written until the end of the 1st or possibly into the 2nd century A.D., but they reflect traditions that arose among the Jewish people probably before Jesus came.

6. When Jesus asked the most important question of His disciples—“Who do people say the Son of Man is?” (Matthew 16:13, *GNB*)—they immediately reflected those popular ideas.
7. As we know, some people believed that Jesus was a reincarnation of John the Baptist whom Herod had beheaded. (Matthew 14:1,2; Mark 6:14,15) Jesus discussed that possibility with three of His disciples on the way down from the mountain of transfiguration as recorded in Matthew 17:10-13. He clearly suggested to them that John the Baptist was, in fact, the one who

was to come in the place of Elijah. Why do you think God gave that prophecy about Elijah?

8. As we know, Jesus was rejected by many in Galilee after spending a fantastic year ministering to them. Then He took His disciples for a period of about six months traveling through Gentile territories and focusing on preparing His disciples for what was coming. Far to the north on the side of Mount Herman near the city of Caesarea Philippi, He asked them this critical question, "Who do you say I am?" (Matthew 16:15, *GNB*) Some of the disciples had been following Jesus intermittently for 2 ½ years. Some had been following Him for a little over a year. It is possible that James and John were cousins of Jesus and may have known Him—or at least about Him—almost from the time of His birth.
9. So, what would it take to convince you that someone that you had known for several years was in fact God? What would it take to convince you that the carpenter from down the street, who had built your house or maybe your dining room table, was God?
10. It was obviously too much for the people of Nazareth. (Luke 4:16-30) Can we blame them?
11. In your opinion, what is the most convincing evidence that Jesus existed before His incarnation?
 - a. Paul says that He was the One who led Israel out of Egypt. (1 Corinthians 10:1-4) Jesus, Himself, said that the whole Old Testament was about Him. (John 5:39; Luke 24:44) John 1:1-3 says He existed before anything else. Hebrews 1:1-3 and Colossians 1:16,17 say that He created all things. But all of these statements are just claims!
 - b. Micah predicted the place of His birth. (Micah 5:2)
 - c. Daniel predicted the time of His ministry and death. (Daniel 9:24-27)
 - d. Isaiah said that the baby who was to be born would be "Wonderful Counselor," "Mighty God," "Everlasting Father," "Prince of Peace." (Isaiah 9:6; compare 7:14)
 - e. Jesus Himself stated before the Sanhedrin that He was God. (John 8:24,28,58; compare John 4:26; 13:19; 18:5)
 - f. Jesus stated repeatedly that He and the Father were One. (John 10:30; 17:20-23; compare 8:54)
 - g. Jesus stated that He was with the Father before this world was created. (John 17:5,24)
12. The Jews had developed some fairly elaborate ideas about what the Messiah would come and do. Clearly, they expected the Messiah to conquer the Romans or at least drive them out of Palestine. They understood from Micah 5:2 that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem. It was generally believed that He would then disappear, and after a number of years, He would reappear as the Messiah to lead their nation to victory. (John 7:27)
13. They believed that the fact that they knew that Jesus was from Nazareth disqualified Him from being Messiah. Apparently, most of the people did not realize that Jesus had been born in Bethlehem and was a descendant of David. They were certain that the Messiah would not come from Galilee. (John 7:40-44)
14. The preaching of John the Baptist had stirred up the Jews to a "fever pitch." Some people had concluded from reading the book of Daniel that the time had come for the Messiah to appear. The Pharisees and Sadducees even went to John asking him if he was the Messiah. (John

1:19-28) John clearly pointed beyond himself to Jesus.

15. With all of those ideas floating around, what do you think Peter had in mind when he said, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God”? (Matthew 16:16. *GNB*) Did Peter really understand what he was saying?
16. Why was Jesus asking that critical question at that point? Look at what follows in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Jesus recognized that the time had come when He must begin telling His disciples about what was going to happen to Him. (Matthew 16:21-28; Mark 8:31-9:1; Luke 9:22-27) The fondest hopes of the Jewish people and the fondest hopes of His disciples were going to be smashed. Those ideas were so strange and so foreign even to His disciples that they could not comprehend them! (Luke 18:31-34) Their paradigm did not allow for the possibility of the death of Jesus at the hands of “God’s people.”
17. So, in light of all of these suggestions, who was this Jesus? Read Exodus 3:1-6 and Deuteronomy 18:15-18. Moses had been told that God would send a prophet like him. But, this Jesus—who looked very much like an ordinary human being to His friends—was not just a prophet like Moses. He was Yahweh—“the Burning Fiery Bush!” That very ordinary appearing Human Being was the One who had descended on Mount Sinai with thunder and lightening; He was the One who handed Moses the Ten Commandments. He was the One who opened the Red Sea and made room for the children of Israel to march through. He was the One who sent the flood and “destroyed” Egypt with 10 plagues. He was the One who killed 185,000 Assyrians in one night. But, He was also the One who spoke with the prophets of the Old Testament. He was the gentle Shepherd of Psalm 23. He was the Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, and Prince of Peace of Isaiah 9. He was the One who sent them into exile and brought them back. He was the One who had predicted His own coming in the book of Daniel.
18. But those ideas are so hard for humans to “wrap their minds around.” In the 17th and 18th centuries in the age of so called “Enlightenment” as people were beginning to discover the facts of antiquity, they believed it was necessary to rewrite the history books in light of the archaeological evidence, as they understood it. Critical scholars began to rewrite the history of ancient Israel. They determined to reject anything that appeared to be supernatural because it could not be evaluated historically. Many of them chose to reject anything which could not be corroborated by extra-biblical archaeological evidence.
19. Before long, they were doing the same thing with the story of the Christian Church. And then perhaps most importantly of all, they were doing the same thing with the story of Jesus. Because events such as the incarnation, the miracles of Jesus, and His resurrection from the dead could not be tested or corroborated in any way historically or scientifically, the reality of those events was rejected. A great quest was started which is continuing until our day for the “historical Jesus.” But, the fact that people were looking for a “historical Jesus” automatically assumes that the “Jesus” recorded in Scriptures was a fake.
20. What did the Bible writers themselves think about the story of Jesus? Read Luke 1:1-4; 2 Peter 1:16-21; John 20:30, 31; 1 John 1:1-4. As “unbelievable” as those stories might seem on first encounter, the Bible writers and disciples were absolutely certain that they were true.
21. Fortunately, more careful scholars in more recent years have pretty much discredited the arguments put forth by earlier critical scholars regarding the “historical Jesus.” It was apparent to them that the arguments put forth were mostly wishful thinking on the part of those who were

determined to destroy the very idea of God!

22. In our day there is a group of radical, liberal scholars trying to reinvent the “historical Jesus.” They call themselves the “Jesus Seminar.” “Their goal is to ‘rescue Jesus from the spin doctors who wrote the Gospels.’” —Roy Hoover, in Kenneth L. Woodward, “The Death of Jesus,” *Newsweek*, April 4, 1994, page 39. Their basic premise is: if there is any possible way to discredit the Bible story, they will do it! They have even suggested that Jesus did not rise from the dead but instead His body was eaten by dogs!
23. Paul and other New Testament writers have clearly pointed out that, taken superficially, the story of Jesus was going to seem like foolishness to Jews and Greeks. (1 Corinthians 1:18-27)
24. Two thousand years later, what kind of evidence can we produce to verify the truth of the incarnation? What impact has the life and death of Jesus and His resurrection had on the world since His day? Has any other human being or even group of human beings impacted the world as much as He did?
25. Many scholars have pointed out repeatedly that if Jesus was not who He claimed to be, then He was the greatest fraud of all time! Was He, in fact, the Messiah? Was He God?
26. Have you settled that question for yourself? Try to imagine how you would struggle with the ideas the disciples had to struggle with. Just about the time they had actually come to believe that this “ordinary-looking human being” was in fact the Messiah—maybe even the Son of God—then they had to try to deal with the crisis brought on by His cruel torture and death. Then, when He rose from the dead, their world sustained a “fruit basket upset,” a paradigm shift! What was it that happened to them in those next few weeks that made them so convinced of the truthfulness of Jesus’ story that they were ready to die for it?
27. How many of the details of the life of Jesus are you so certain about that you would die for them? Are you ready to accept Jesus not only as your Savior but also as your Lord? What is the distinction between Savior and Lord?

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