

Christian Apologetics

Who Is this Jesus?

Introduction

In our last lesson we examined Christianity's claim on reality. The claims made by Christianity are based on historical events that took place in space and time, during human history. We can relate to these events in different ways: (1) We might be unaware of them; we may not know what transpired. (2) We can be indifferent to them; we might write them off as irrelevant. (3) We can evaluate them and conclude they are inaccurate and/or insignificant. (4) We can evaluate them and conclude they are accurate and significant. There are various other possibilities and permutations of possibilities.

When you hear the name "Adolph Hitler," what thoughts come to your mind? Write a brief summary of your opinion of the man:

Do the same for the name "Joseph Stalin."

Assuming you know some things about each of these two men, why is ambivalence about each of these men not an option for a thinking human?

Who is Jesus?

Is Jesus God in the flesh? Or is he an evil deceiver? Josh McDowell, Christian and apologist, asserted that the evidence about Jesus demands a verdict. C. S. Lewis observed that there are only three possible conclusions: Jesus was a liar, Jesus was a lunatic, or Jesus was and is Lord of all. We can add one additional "L" to the list: Jesus was a legend.¹ Let's examine each of these possibilities:

Jesus was a legend. No respected historian believes that Jesus of Nazareth did not exist. There is too much biblical and extra-biblical evidence. Jesus is not a myth. The burden of proof is on the skeptic when it comes to the most famous person in the history of the world.

Jesus was a liar. The Jewish leaders labeled Jesus a "deceiver." What was his motive? Did he gain power, revenge, sex, or wealth (typical reasons human beings tell lies)? He came to a horrifying death by crucifixion. Our selfish selves will take a lie a long way, but the gig is up when the cross and nails come out! Yet Jesus actually told people this is what awaited him. Again, the burden of proof is on the skeptic to demonstrate that Jesus is a liar. There is no plausible motive for such a deception.

Jesus was a lunatic. Jesus' enemies asserted that he was "demon-possessed" (John 7, 8) because of things he said. Is there any evidence that Jesus suffered from mental illness? Was he delusional? Megalomaniacal? Schizophrenic? Bipolar? Jesus claimed to be divine. Other than an *a priori* insistence that there is no God, is there anything crazy about someone who can bend the laws of nature claiming to be God in the flesh? Before someone is committed to a mental health institution today, the person must be thoroughly evaluated and shown to be mentally incompetent. The burden of proof is definitely on the skeptic to assert that Jesus was a lunatic.

Jesus is Lord. If the first three possibilities cannot be shown with merit to be true, then we must examine the fourth possibility: Jesus' claims about himself are true! This is a logical, intellectual conclusion. Any skeptic who is honest must consider this possibility. If he rejects it, is it because he just doesn't want to believe it? Or are there solid intellectual reasons for disbelieving Jesus' claims to be God in the flesh—other than the presupposition that there is no God—which introduces its own circular logic ("Jesus cannot be God because there is no such thing as God")?

¹ Portions of today's discussion outline are based on "Apologetics in Preaching: You Have to Do Something with this Jesus Character," by Michael Berg, in *Preach the Word*, www.wels.net.

The four Ls are just the beginning of the conversation

Evidence about Jesus deserves to be examined with an open mind. Indifference is not an option. Can we have a thoughtful conversation about the real Jesus?

Why Jesus of Nazareth is significant and cannot be ignored:

- Jesus is one of the most influential human beings in the history of the world. Billions of people have followed him throughout history and still do. Human beings have gone to war over Jesus Christ. Human beings have found great peace, comfort and hope in Jesus Christ.
- Jesus performed extraordinary feats that were documented by many sources. These feats cannot be discounted as parlor tricks or sleight of hand. Jesus' own enemies recognized that he had supernatural power—but they characterized it as demonic, not divine. What his disciples witnessed and experienced propelled them to speak about Jesus even to the point of martyrdom.
- Jesus has made powerful claims about this life and the hereafter. He says that those who trust in him have peace and forgiveness in this life and eternal life in the hereafter. He says that those who reject him remain in darkness now and will suffer eternal torment in the hereafter. According to Jesus, there is much at stake.

We can talk about plastic in the ocean, human trafficking, and climate change as if they are existential issues. Why are we concerned about the big questions of life? Could it be because we are not just molecules arranged differently than the soil? We are alive like dandelions, but we interact with the world in a more sophisticated way. So do animals, but we are more than animals. We are self-aware. We use language to interact at a higher level. We aspire to something more than just saving up nuts for the coming winter. We seek beauty, morality, progress, purpose. We desire value. We want our existence and our actions justified. We want to be right, and we care about being wrong.

Can we talk about who we are as human beings? Where we came from? What our purpose is? Whom we are accountable to? What our destiny is? Jesus of Nazareth taught about all these things. Is he worth an honest ear? He says we are created in the image of God, yet damaged by disobedience to our Maker. Yet our worth is found in Christ. God loves us, became one of us, and gave himself for us to atone for us and redeem us. This worth is what separates us from the dirt, the dandelions and the squirrels.

Can a purely material view of humanity begin to explain . . .

- Your sense of beauty when you gaze upon a glorious sunset?
- The love you feel for your children?
- Your sense of awe and wonderment and personal smallness as you gaze up into the night sky and behold billions of stars?
- The rush you experience when you learn a new skill or accomplish a difficult task?

Can a person who believes that human beings are without conscience, that morality is relative, and that people simply hold to things they were raised to believe . . .

- Offer any objective reason why genocide, hatred, and racial supremacy are wrong?
- Explain the visceral, righteous anger toward someone who is a racist or a pedophile?
- Intellectually explain how human rights can survive in a worldview that sees no moral difference between a human being and a chicken?

How can you respond?

"I don't have to think about Jesus. My life is fine just as it is. Jesus doesn't matter to me."

"I'm an agnostic. I don't know whether there is a God or not. I don't know whether there is an afterlife or not."

Briefly summarize in your own words why Jesus matters: