

“QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS”

Session 2 – Who is Jesus?

THE BEGINNING

Jesus was born in the small town of Bethlehem in Roman-occupied Judea (modern-day Israel). According to our modern calendars, Jesus was born about 4 BC (*Why not “0” or “1”?* *The Medieval monks who tried to figure it out didn’t have all the information we have, and so their calculations were off by a few years*). Jesus grew up in Nazareth, another small town up north in the territory of Galilee. He was raised in a fairly typical Jewish home and as far as we know had the same experiences that most boys in first-century Israel had:

- He was circumcised as an infant as a mark of his inclusion in God’s covenant promises to Israel (Luke 2:21).
- His parents, in obedience to the words of an angel, named their son Jesus — a form of the Hebrew name Joshua. It means “The LORD saves.”
- Jesus learned a trade, the craft of carpentry, from his adopted father, Joseph. A carpenter in that culture built furniture and homes and even made some farm equipment.
- Jesus attended synagogue school and learned to read the Hebrew of the Bible. In the everyday discourse of Galilee, he probably spoke a related language, Aramaic. He would also have learned to speak Greek, which was the language of commerce in the Roman Empire.

Jesus did have one out-of-the-ordinary experience as a boy. When he was twelve years old, he went with his parents to the city of Jerusalem. He got so engrossed in a theological discussion with the religious scholars in the temple that he missed the family caravan home to Nazareth! Mary and Joseph had to backtrack an entire day’s journey to find him (Luke 2:41-50.)

IN THE SPOTLIGHT

When Jesus was around thirty years old, he began his public ministry. Thirty was the age of maturity in Israel. Priests in God’s temple did not begin to perform their sacred duties until that age. Jesus waited in humility until he reached the age when his teaching would be respected.

Early in his ministry Jesus chose twelve men from among his followers to be his disciples. These men stayed around Jesus all the time. They were students and learners, but they were also being groomed to be leaders and spokesmen for Jesus. They would eventually stand as eyewitnesses of all that Jesus said and did. They would be his representatives to spread the message about Jesus to the whole world. These men are also called apostles – “ones who are sent out” as official ambassadors and representatives of a person who holds great authority.

“The Twelve” recognized Jesus as more than just a rabbi (teacher) or miracle worker. Soon after they started spending time with Jesus, they came to the realization that he was the Messiah, the Christ, the anointed one God had promised to send as Israel’s Redeemer and King. Much of what Christians believe about Jesus comes from the written testimony and witness of these apostles preserved in the New Testament. They followed Jesus and watched everything he did. They listened to everything Jesus said. They were empowered by Jesus to speak and to act with his own authority after he left the world. God’s own Spirit guided them as they wrote down their remembrances, and Jesus promised that the Spirit would give them profound understanding of the significance of Jesus’ actions and words.

The common people listened intently to what Jesus taught and received Jesus' miracles with joyful appreciation. The religious leaders in Israel, however, were not impressed. They dismissed Jesus' teaching as the ramblings of an untrained upstart. They attributed the power of his healing miracles to an evil power, not to God. As Jesus' influence among the people grew, the religious leaders became more and more nervous. They feared that Jesus would spark a political revolution that would jeopardize their positions of influence. They also feared that the Roman army would move quickly to put down any disturbance and might destroy the nation in the process. The leaders of Israel decided that Jesus needed to be eliminated.

FULFILLING HIS DESTINY

The opportunity to take Jesus down came sooner than the religious leaders ever expected. One of Jesus' closest followers offered to hand Jesus over to his enemies in exchange for a sack of silver coins. Jesus was arrested, pushed through a bunch of trials, and finally condemned on trumped-up charges. The Jewish leaders accused Jesus of blasphemy, of speaking against the holy character of God. They had a bigger problem, however. The Jewish Council could condemn all they wanted, but only the Roman authorities could legally execute a criminal.

Pontius Pilate, a Roman bureaucrat in charge of Judea, a troublesome province on the farthest edge of the empire, was pressured into doing what the religious leaders wanted. He ordered Jesus to be crucified. Jesus lived for six hours on the cross. At the end he "gave up his spirit" and died. A few brave followers put his body in a stone tomb and said good-bye. Nervous religious leaders had the Romans position some soldiers near the tomb so the disciples of Jesus wouldn't be tempted to steal their master's body. There was little chance of that, however, as the disciples were in hiding. The typical Roman pattern was to crucify not only an insurrectionist, but their followers as well. The disciples were behind locked doors.

Three days after Jesus' death, some women followers came to Jesus' tomb in order to complete the proper burial process, for which there hadn't been time on the day of Jesus' death. They found the tomb empty. On their way back to the others, Jesus appeared to them, alive. He did so to the disciples as well. Later Jesus himself appeared on several occasions to widely diverse groups of his followers as confirming evidence that he had risen from the dead. Forty days after his resurrection, Jesus ascended back to heaven where he remains to this day.

THE HISTORICAL JESUS

The four New Testament gospels are the main source of information about Jesus but other ancient writers also provide verification that Jesus lived and sparked a new religious movement. Among them are the following:

Tacitus (circa AD 55 – 120) was a Roman historian who lived through the reigns of more than half a dozen emperors. In his massive history called the "Annals", Tacitus dropped in this passage as he wrote about the great fire in Rome during the reign of Nero: "*Consequently, to get rid of the report [that Nero himself had set the fire], Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilate.*" (Annals, 15.44)

Josephus, a Jewish historian who was born a few years after Jesus' death and who died in AD 97, wrote a much-debated passage about Jesus. The surviving version of the Antiquities reads as though Josephus was a true believer in Jesus. Later Christian scribes who copied and distributed the

work may have altered his statement to reflect Christian teaching. The tenth-century Arabic version of Josephus's book is probably closer to his original, but it still gives stunning testimony to Jesus' life and ministry: *"At this time there was a wise man who was called Jesus. And his conduct was good, and [he] was known to be virtuous. And many people from among the Jews and other nations became his disciples. Pilate condemned him to be crucified and to die. And those who had become his disciples did not abandon his discipleship. They reported that he had appeared to them three days after his crucifixion and that he was alive; accordingly he was perhaps the Messiah concerning whom the prophets have recounted wonders."* (Antiquities, 18.63 – 64)

JESUS' ARRIVAL

The Bible makes it clear that Jesus was unique. Jesus was born normally, but he was conceived miraculously. He was conceived in a virgin woman by a miraculous work of God's power, without the contribution of a man. Jesus was conceived by a work of God.

Some people (even some Christians) have a difficult time with "the virgin birth." They think it is too fantastic to believe or it was just a story some early Christians made up to spice up the early years of Jesus' life a little. But there are several solid reasons for accepting Jesus' miraculous conception as an essential part of Christian belief.

- First, the Bible specifically says that this is how it happened. In both the gospel of Luke (1:26 – 38) and in the gospel of Matthew (1:18 – 25), Mary is presented as a virgin who has never had sexual intimacy with any man. Joseph, her promised husband, is presented as a man who has not been intimate with Mary. If Jesus was conceived normally from a man and a woman, the Bible, at least at this point, is false.
- Second, the virgin conception is consistent with Jesus' eternal existence. Jesus did not begin to exist in Mary's womb. Jesus had existed from eternity. Jesus did not begin in Mary; he became human in Mary. You and I had a starting point. I did not exist before my conception. Jesus, however, had always existed.
- Third, Jesus' conception by God's miraculous plan is consistent with Jesus' sinlessness. The Bible describes human nature as "fallen" - that is, bent in one direction — toward evil. Jesus, who had no natural human father, was conceived and born without a sinful bent.
- Fourth, while the virgin conception is not taught directly anywhere else in Scripture except in Matthew 1 and Luke 2, the rest of Scripture seems to assume that Jesus was conceived in a supernatural way. The apostle Paul in the New Testament book of Galatians, for example, says that Jesus was "born of a woman" (Galatians 4:4) — not born of a man and a woman, but born of a woman. Jesus' conception is not just some minor point that we can choose to believe or disregard. It touches the whole issue of who Jesus really was.

WHO WAS THIS MAN?

Almost all that information above - the historical story of Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection - comes from the first four books of the New Testament in the Bible, referred to as "gospels." Two of the Gospel writers — Matthew and John — were Jesus' disciples during his ministry. They were eyewitnesses of the things they wrote about. The man named Mark was a close associate of the disciple Peter, and collected Peter's stories of Jesus. Luke conducted a careful personal investigation into the life and death of Jesus just a few years after all the events took place.

These books were written within thirty to sixty years of Jesus' death when many of those who knew Jesus personally would have still been alive to challenge anything that was not true. The four gospels are accurate, trustworthy accounts of the things Jesus said and did.

But Christians believe much more about Jesus than simply that he lived and died. We also have a theological understanding of Jesus based on the gospel records and on the interpretation of what Jesus did provided in the rest of the New Testament. As Christian thinkers and believers contemplated all that the biblical writers said about Jesus, they came to some firm convictions about who Jesus really was. This deeper understanding of the significance and importance of Jesus is also part of Christian belief and teaching.

JESUS IS FULLY HUMAN

Christians believe that Jesus was a genuine human being. The questions and affirmations about Jesus' humanity arose because some people wanted to make Jesus so divine, so heavenly, that he became like an illusion, or a vision, or an angel, or like God just "appearing" on earth as a man. But the Bible makes the point in a number of ways that Jesus was actually and fully human:

- Jesus had a human body. He was born; he grew up; he learned how to walk and talk and feed himself. Jesus even referred to himself as "a man who has told you the truth" (John 8:40).
- Jesus shows all the characteristics of being human. If you had met Jesus, you would have realized immediately that he was a human being. He got hungry and thirsty and tired. He experienced love and sorrow and compassion. Jesus knew from personal experience what being human was all about.
- Jesus also possessed human names and human ancestors. He called himself "the Son of Man" regularly (Luke 19:10). He was referred to as the "Son of David" (Mark 10:47) and the New Testament writer Paul says that Jesus is "the man Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 2:5 NIV). In Matthew's gospel we have the family tree of Joseph, Jesus' adoptive father (Matthew 1:1 – 17), but the genealogy in Luke's gospel is probably the family tree of Mary, Jesus' biological mother (Luke 3:23 – 38). Jesus had fully human DNA in his body. He was one of us!

JESUS IS FULLY GOD

The amazing claim of Christianity is that Jesus was a man — but more than a man. Christians believe that Jesus was also God. He was the infinite, eternal God who broke into our world of time and space and joined his God-ness with our humanness. We call that act the incarnation of Jesus — God became flesh. All other religious leaders were, by their own admission, only human. Only Jesus Christ claimed to be God as well.

The Bible provides several lines of evidence that Jesus is God. Theologians refer to this biblical teaching as the deity of Jesus — from the Latin word *deus*, meaning God.

The Bible Declares It

First, and most convincingly, Jesus is called God in the Bible. The opening verse of the gospel of John reads, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). John is obviously referring to Jesus with the title "the Word" because later in John 1:14 he writes, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us." In verse 18 of John 1, the writer makes his point again: "No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known." John wants us to understand and believe that Jesus of Nazareth is also the eternal God!

Jesus himself intimated the same thing on a couple of occasions. Once he told his accusers, “My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working.” His enemies understood perfectly what Jesus was saying when he called God “my Father.” The next verse reads, “For this reason they tried all the more to kill him; . . . he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God” (John 5:17 – 18). On another occasion, Jesus said, “Before Abraham was born, I am!” (John 8:58). It was a clear claim to the eternal existence of God. Abraham had lived 1,800 years before Jesus uttered those words, but now Jesus says that before Abraham was born, Jesus already existed. His opponents picked up stones to kill Jesus for making such an outlandish claim, but Jesus was able to escape (John 8:59).

The New Testament writers and Jesus himself were convinced that Jesus was far more than a humble carpenter from Nazareth. He was nothing less than God in human flesh and in human form. Even the Old Testament prophets knew that God’s Messiah would be more than a man. Isaiah referred to him as Immanuel — a name that means “God with us” (Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:23). The prophet also called the promised Messiah “Mighty God” (Isaiah 9:6).

Jesus’ Works Demonstrate It

The Bible points out that Jesus does things that only God can do:

- Jesus is the Creator. Through him everything was made. The Bible declares, “For in him [Jesus] all things were created . . . all things have been created through him and for him” (Colossians 1:16).
- Jesus forgives sins. When a paralyzed man was brought to Jesus one day, he said, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” Then, to prove that he had full authority to forgive sins, Jesus instantly healed the man! (The whole story is in Mark 2:1 – 12).
- Jesus will raise the dead at the final resurrection. As Jesus said: “Just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it” (John 5:21).
- Jesus gives eternal life to those who believe in him. Another startling claim from Jesus: “I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish” (John 10:28).

Worshiped as God

A third line of evidence for the deity of Jesus is that he receives the worship that belongs only to God. Angels worship Jesus (Hebrews 1:6); demons tremble before him (Mark 5:6-8). His own followers saw his miracles and fell before him in adoration (Matthew 14:32-33). Thomas, one of Jesus’ closest followers, doubted the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. When he saw the risen Lord he said, “My Lord and my God!” (John 20:28). Jesus accepted the worship that rightly belongs only to God.

Contrast that with the shock in the Apostle Paul’s voice when some people tried to worship him as some kind of god. He tore his clothes and said, “We too are only human, like you” (Acts 14:15). When the apostle John was overcome by the majesty of heaven and fell down in worship before a magnificent angel, the angel’s words were direct. “Don’t do that!” he said. “I am a fellow servant [of God] with you . . . Worship God!” (Revelation 22:9). But Jesus never rebuked those who worshiped him. He never told them to stop or to get up. He received their worship and blessed them for it.

“I Am”

We also know that Jesus himself claimed to be God. He made that assertion in several ways:

- Jesus claimed authority over institutions that God had established. In Matthew 12:8, he said he was “Lord of the Sabbath.” Jesus claimed authority over the seventh day of worship and rest marked out in the fifth of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:8 – 11). When Jesus drove the money

changers and marketers out of the temple of God in Jerusalem, he said, “My house will be called a house of prayer (Matthew 21:13). Jesus saw himself as the one in charge of God’s things.

- Jesus made a clear claim that he was eternal — that he had been in existence in Abraham’s day (who lived centuries before Jesus was born). “Before Abraham was born, I am!” (John 8:58).
- Jesus placed himself on the same level as God the Father as the object of saving faith. In a discussion with his disciples, Jesus said, “You believe in God, believe also in Me” (John 14:1).
- Finally when asked directly if he was the Messiah, the Son of God, Jesus responded, “I am” (Mark 14:61 – 62; see also Matthew 26:63 – 64). The Bible’s testimony is unanimous and clear. Jesus is more than a man. He is also fully God, the unique Son of God.

Further Biblical Passages Declaring the Divinity of Jesus:

- Colossians 2:9 - For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form;
- Hebrews 1:3 - The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word;
- John 1:3 - Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.
- Philippians 2:9–11 - God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

HUMAN BEING AND DIVINE BEING

Jesus was one of a kind! He was the God-man — fully God and fully human. That union of humanity and deity in one person is one of the holy mysteries of the Christian faith. Jesus possessed two natures (human and divine), and those two natures resided in one person (Jesus). Jesus always acted as a unified person. He was both God and man, but he acted and reacted and felt emotion and spoke as one fully integrated person. The closest the Bible comes to explaining the incarnation (the coming in the flesh of God the Son) is in Philippians 2:5 – 9:

In your relationships with one another, have the same attitude of mind Christ Jesus had: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a human being, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name.

THE CHRISTIAN FAITH CENTERS ON JESUS.

To his followers Jesus is much more than a religious teacher or miracle worker or spiritual guide. Jesus is God himself who saw our desperate condition and who laid aside heaven’s glory to do something about that condition. He stepped down into human history as a tiny baby, unnoticed and poor. As a man he spent three years teaching his followers and healing the sick. Jesus then willingly laid down his own life as a sacrifice for our failures and wrongs. Death took Jesus, but it couldn’t hold him for very long. He burst out of the grave alive! He’s alive today and stands in heaven as our Saviour and Lord. That’s who Jesus is!

Adapted from Douglas Connelly and Martin Manser – “Christianity for Blockheads - A User-Friendly Look at What Christians Believe” (Zondervan, 2009)