

## **Who is Jesus? Study One**

My earliest recollection of anything to do with Christianity was walking to school at the age of around nine. As I passed a Salvation Army church, a poster on the wall caught my attention. It said, “Are you really alive?” I thought it was the most ludicrous statement that I had ever read! I had to be alive to read the stupid thing! There was no explanation to it, and it seemed to me that Christians could be the most illogical people around. Of course, when I finally became a Christian myself, I understood that when a person comes to Christ, there is a different kind of life that he enters into, a new life in Christ where a person becomes “really alive.”

My bias against Christianity led me into searching through lots of New Age stuff and other religions. What finally turned my head to look at Christianity was a book by a writer by the name of Hal Lindsey, who wrote the book, “*The Late Great Planet Earth.*” He presented a number of evidences that Jesus was alive and well and that many biblical prophecies were and are being fulfilled that have been written about His return. I don’t know about you, but I needed a lot of evidence before I could entrust my soul to Christ. I began my search for meaning in my life with great earnest. I don’t believe that you can prove Christianity with a mathematical or scientific proof but there is a ton of evidence that, if it were presented in a court of law, any logical thinking person would weigh up the evidence and render a decision that Christianity is true. In this study I want to examine some of the historical evidence for the person of Christ and just who He was for your consideration:

### **First of all, how do we know He even existed?**

I am told that in a communist Russian dictionary Jesus is described as “a mythical figure that never existed.” No serious historian could maintain that position today. There is a great deal of evidence for Jesus’ existence. Evidence from the New Testament, but also in non-Christian writings, for example, the Roman historians Tacitus (directly) and Suetonius (indirectly) both have written about Him. Then there is the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, (obviously a non-Christian), born in 37 A.D., describes Jesus and His followers thus:

“Now there was about this time, Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man, for he was a doer of wonderful works, a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews, and many of the gentiles. He was (the) Christ; and when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at first did not forsake him, for he appeared to them alive again the third day, as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him; and the tribe of Christians so named after him, are not extinct at this day.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Josephus, Antiquities, XV 63f.

**How do we know that what they wrote down has not been changed? Are the New Testament Documents Reliable?**

Perhaps some would say that the New Testament was written a long time ago. How do we know that what they wrote has not changed over the many years? The answer lies in the science of Textual Criticism. What that means is that the more texts or manuscripts we have, and the closer to the time it was written, the less doubt there is about the original.

Let’s compare the New Testament with other ancient writings handed down to us. The late Professor F.F. Bruce (who was Rylands professor of biblical exegesis at the University of Manchester, England) points out that for Caesar’s *Gallic War* we have nine or ten copies, and the oldest was written some nine hundred years later than Caesar’s day. For Livy’s *Roman History* we have not more than twenty copies, the earliest of which comes from around 900 A.D. When it comes to the New Testament we have a great wealth of material. The New Testament was written between 40 and 100 A.D. We have excellent full manuscripts of the whole New Testament dating from as early as 350 A.D. (A time span of only three hundred years), papyri containing most of the New Testament writings dating from the third century, and even a fragment of John’s Gospel dating from about 130 A.D. There are over five thousand Greek manuscripts, over ten thousand Latin manuscripts, and 9300 other manuscripts, as well as over thirty-six thousand citing’s in the writings of the early church fathers.

Work	When Written	Earliest Copies	Time Span (yrs)	No. of copies
Herodotus	488-428 B.C.	900 A.D.	1,300	8
Thucydides	c.460-400 B.C.	c.900 A.D.	1,300	8
Tacitus	100 A.D.	1100 A.D.	1,000	20
Caesar’s Gallic War	58-50 B.C.	900 A.D.	950	9-10
Livy’s Roman History	59 b.c.-17 A.D.	900 A.D.	900	20
New Testament	40-100 A.D.	130 A.D. (full manuscripts 350 A.D.)	300	5,000+Greek 10,000 Latin 9,300 others

F.F. Bruce summarizes the evidence by quoting Sir Frederic Kenyon, a leading scholar in this area:

“The interval then between the dates of original composition and the earliest extant evidence becomes so small as to be in fact negligible, and the last foundation for any doubt that the Scriptures have come down to us substantially as they were written, has now been removed. Both the *authenticity* and the *general integrity* of the books of the New Testament may be regarded as finally established.”

So we know from the earliest manuscripts that He existed but who is He?

Martin Scorsese, the film producer, once made a blasphemous film called the Last Temptation of Christ. When asked why he made the film, he said that he wanted to show that Jesus was a real human being. Yet that is not really the issue in most people’s minds. Few people today would doubt that Jesus was fully human. He had a human body; He was sometimes tired and hungry. He had human emotions. He was angry, he loved, and He was sad. He had human experiences; He was tempted, he learned, He worked, and He obeyed His parents.

Most people say today that Jesus was *only* a human being-albeit a great religious teacher. Billy Connolly, the comedian, spoke for most when he said, “I can’t believe in Christianity, but I think that Jesus was a wonderful man.”

What evidence is there to suggest that Jesus was more than just a wonderful man or a great religious teacher? The answer is that there is a great deal of evidence to support the notion that He was and is the unique Son of God, the second person of the trinity.

### **What did He say about Himself?**

Some people say, “Jesus never claimed to be God.” Indeed, it is true that Jesus did not go around saying the words, “I am God.” Yet when one looks at all He taught and claimed there is little doubt that He was conscious of being a man whose identity was God.

#### **1) Teaching centered on Himself**

One of the fascinating things about Jesus is that so much of His teaching was centered on Himself. He said to people, in effect, “If you want to have a relationship with God, you need to come to me” (see John 14:6 Page 1621). It’s through a relationship with Him that we encounter God. In my younger years I was conscious of a missing piece to my life; it was though there was an inner void that was longing to be filled. Perhaps you yourself are aware of an inner dissatisfaction that you try to fill with things. This inner void is acknowledged by some of the leading psychologists of the twentieth century. They have all recognized that there is in the heart of every one of us, a deep void, a missing piece, a deep hunger.

Freud said, “People are hungry for love.”

Jung said, “People are hungry for security.”

Adler said, “People are hungry for significance.”

Jesus said, “I am the bread of life.” if you want your hunger satisfied, come to me. If you are walking in darkness, He said, “I am the light of the world.”

I was very scared of death as a teenager, partly because of the dangerous job I was doing; I was a commercial fisherman on the east coast of England. Many times I caught unexploded mines in our nets and had to deal with them and had them rolling around on the deck. There was always the question that would come—where would I go if I were to die? If you are fearful of death, Jesus said, “**I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives in me will never die**” (John 11:25-26). This is what I mean by Jesus’ teaching being centered on Himself. He pointed to Himself as the answer to the missing piece in life.

Some are addicted to different things, drugs, alcohol, sex—Jesus said, “if the Son sets you free, you shall be free indeed” (John 8:36). Many are burdened with worries, anxieties, fears and guilt. Jesus said, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). He said, “I am the way, the truth and the life.

He said to receive Him was to receive God (Matthew 10:40), to welcome Him was to welcome God (Mark 9:37), and to have seen Him was to have seen God (John 14:9).

A child once drew a picture, and his mother asked him what he was doing. The child said, “I am drawing a picture of God.” The mother said, “Don’t be silly. You can’t draw a picture of God. No one knows what God looks like.” The child replied, “Well, they will by the time I have finished! Jesus said in effect, “If you want to know what God looks like, look at me.”

**2) Indirect Claims.** Jesus said a number of things, which, although not direct claims to be God, show that he regarded Himself as being in the same position as God, as we will see in one or two examples. Turn in your Bible to Mark 2:3-12:

Authority to Forgive Sins

<sup>3</sup> Some men came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. <sup>4</sup> Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus by digging through it and then lowered the mat the man was lying on. <sup>5</sup> When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” <sup>6</sup> Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, <sup>7</sup> “Why does this fellow talk like that? He’s blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?” <sup>8</sup> Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts, and he said to them, “Why are you thinking these things? <sup>9</sup> Which is easier: to say to this paralyzed man, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up, take your mat and walk’? <sup>10</sup> But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.” So he said to the man, <sup>11</sup> “I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home.” <sup>12</sup> He got up, took his mat and

walked out in full view of them all. This amazed everyone and they praised God, saying, “We have never seen anything like this!” (Mark 2:3-12).

This claim to be able to forgive sins is indeed an astonishing claim.

C.S. Lewis, in his book *Mere Christianity* puts it well when he writes,

“One part of the claim tends to slip past us unnoticed because we have heard it so often that we no longer see what it amounts to. I mean the claim to forgive sins: any sins. Now unless the speaker is God, this is really so preposterous as to be comic. We can all understand how a man forgives offenses against himself. You tread on my toe and I forgive you, you steal my money and I forgive you. But what should we make of a man, himself unrobed and untrodden on, who announced that he forgave you for treading on other men’s toes and stealing other men’s money? Asinine fatuity is the kindest description we should give his conduct. Yet, this is what Jesus did. He told people that their sins were forgiven, and never waited to consult all the other people whom their sins had undoubtedly injured. He unhesitatingly behaved as if He was the person chiefly offended in all offenses. This makes sense only if He really was the God whose laws were broken and whose love is wounded in every sin. In the mouth of any speaker who is not God, these words would imply what I can only regard as a silliness and conceit unrivaled by any other character in history.”

His claim to be the Judge of the World.

Another extraordinary indirect claim is that He would one day judge the world (Matthew 25:31-32). He said He would return and “sit on His throne in heavenly glory” (vs.31). All the nations would be gathered before Him. He would pass judgment on them. Some would receive an inheritance prepared for them since the creation of the world and eternal life, but others would suffer the punishment of being separated from Him forever.

### **3) Direct Claims**

*His direct claim to be the Messiah or Christ* (John 20:26-29).

<sup>26</sup> A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!”  
<sup>27</sup> Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.”<sup>28</sup> Thomas said to him, “My Lord and my God!”<sup>29</sup> Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (John 20:26-29).

Jesus didn’t say, “Hey, hang on a second; you’ve gone a bit too far there. He basically said, you were a bit slow to get the point, “stop doubting and believe,” He said (Verse 27).

His direct claim to be God the Son.

Again the high priest asked him, “Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?” <sup>62</sup>“I am,” said Jesus. “And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.” <sup>63</sup>The high priest tore his clothes. “Why do we need any more witnesses?” he asked. <sup>64</sup>“You have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?” They all condemned him as worthy of death (Mark 14:61-64)

If you only had one opportunity to take people to one passage of scripture in order to show them a direct claim to be God by Jesus, it is John 10:30-33:

<sup>30</sup> I and the Father are one.” <sup>31</sup> Again the Jews picked up stones to stone him, <sup>32</sup> but Jesus said to them, “I have shown you many great miracles from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?” <sup>33</sup> “We are not stoning you for any of these,” replied the Jews, “but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God” (John 10:30-33).

Claims like this need to be tested. All sorts of people make all kinds of claims. The mere fact that somebody claims to be someone does not mean the claim is right. Some people are deluded, thinking they are Napoleon, the Pope, or the Antichrist.

So how can we test people’s claims? Jesus claimed to be the unique Son of God; God made flesh. There are three logical possibilities. If the claims were untrue, either He knew they were untrue, in which case He is an imposter, and an evil one at that. That is the first possibility. Or He did know, in which case He was deluded; indeed, He was mad. That is the the second possibility. The third possibility is that the claims were true.

C.S. Lewis put it like this:

“A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic, on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg, or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse...but let us not come up with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”

### **What evidence is there to support what He said?**

**1) His Teaching.** The teaching of Jesus is widely acknowledged to be the greatest teaching that has ever fallen from anyone’s lips. “Love your neighbor as yourself.” “Do to others as you would have them do to you.” “Love your enemies,” “turn the other cheek” (Matthew 5-7)

Bernard Ramm, an American Professor of theology, said this about the teachings of Jesus:

“They are read more, quoted more, loved more, believed more, and translated more because they are the greatest words ever spoken...Their greatness lies in the pure lucid

spirituality in dealing clearly, definitively, and authoritatively with the greatest problems that throb in the human breast...No other man's words have the appeal of Jesus' words because no other man can answer these fundamental human questions as Jesus answered them. They are the kind of words and the kind of answers we would expect God to give."

Could this teaching really come from a con man or a madman?

**2) His Works.** Some say that Christianity is boring. It would not be boring being around Jesus. When He went to a party, He changed a huge amount of water into Châteaux Lafite- 45 BC (Three bottles of Châteaux Lafite-Rothschild 1869 were just sold at a Hong Kong auction by Sotheby's. The hammer price was \$232,692 a bottle).

What about when He went to a funeral? Take the stone away! Loose the bandages off of Lazarus!

What about going to a picnic with Jesus there when all they had was 5 loaves and 2 fish?

What about going to the hospital with Jesus, when there was a man laying there that had been invalid for 36 years? He told him to get up. He healed him completely.

What about His death—laying down His life for His friends.

**3) His character.**

Bernard Levin wrote of Jesus:

"Is not the nature of Christ, in the words of the New Testament, enough to pierce to the soul anyone with a soul to be pierced?...he still looms over the world, his message still clear, his pity still infinite, his consolation still effective, his words still full of glory, wisdom and love."

The Lord Chancellor, Lord Hailsham, describes the character of Jesus in his autobiography, *The Door Wherein I Went*, how the person of Jesus came alive to him when he was in college:

"The first thing we must learn about him is that we should have been absolutely entranced by his company. Jesus was irresistibly attractive as a man...what they crucified was a young man, vital, full of life and the joy of it, the Lord of life itself, and even more the Lord of laughter, someone so utterly attractive that people followed him for the sheer fun of it...the Twentieth Century needs to recapture the vision of this glorious and happy man whose mere presence filled his companions with delight. No pale Galilean He, but a veritable Pied Piper of Hamelin who would have the children laughing all round Him and squealing with pleasure and joy as He picked them up."

**4) The fourth piece of evidence is His fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy.**

*Wilbur Smith, the American writer on theological topics, said:*

“The ancient world had many different devices for determining the future, known as divination, but not in the entire gamut of Greek and Latin literature, even though they used the words prophet and prophecy, can we find any real specific prophecy of a great historic event to come in the distant future, nor any prophecy of a Savior to arrive in the human race...Islam cannot point to any prophecies of the coming of Mohammed uttered hundreds of years before his birth. Neither can the founders of any cult in this country rightly identify any ancient text specifically foretelling their appearance.”

Yet in the case of Jesus, He fulfilled more than three hundred prophecies, written about Him, including 29 of them in a single day—the day He died. Many of them could not be controlled by Him. Some perhaps would say that He set out to fulfill them on His own. But how do you control the place of your birth in Bethlehem? It was written hundreds of years previous as to the place of His birth. What about where He would be buried? What about the prophecy that the Roman soldiers would cast lots for His clothes while He was hanging on the cross?

#### ***5) The fifth piece of evidence is His Resurrection***

**a) His absence from the tomb. Some people say that He didn't really die.** He just swooned on the cross and later woke up in the tomb. Let's think about that for a minute. First we are told that out of His body came blood and water, which we now know to be a separation of clot and serum, medical evidence in any courtroom for death:

Because the Jews did not want the bodies left on the crosses during the Sabbath, they asked Pilate to have the legs broken and the bodies taken down.<sup>32</sup> The soldiers therefore came and broke the legs of the first man who had been crucified with Jesus, and then those of the other.<sup>33</sup> But when they came to Jesus and found that he was already dead, they did not break his legs.<sup>34</sup> Instead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water (John 19:31-34).

Can we really believe that Jesus deceived the Roman soldiers whose life was in their hands if they let someone escape?—it was their life instead. He was stabbed in the side with a spear just in case. Jesus had been whipped and had his back flayed, He did not have the strength left to carry His cross. Then He hung bleeding from the wounds of the thorns in His head, and then the spear in His side. Of course we know that Peter warmed his hands by the fire just a few hours earlier, so we know that it was really cold that day. Can we really believe that He shrugged off the cold in the tomb, moved the one and a half ton boulder across the entrance of the tomb, fought off or bribed the soldiers outside and then ran off?

What about when Peter and John ran to the tomb—what did they see that caused them to believe?

<sup>3</sup> So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. <sup>4</sup> Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. <sup>5</sup> He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. <sup>6</sup> Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, <sup>7</sup> as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. <sup>8</sup> Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. <sup>9</sup> (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) (John 20:3-9).

**Some people believe that the disciples stole the body.** Let's think about that. The disciples were greatly disillusioned at the death of their master. Can we really believe that after three days they would try to steal the body under the noses of the guards at the tomb? Why would they do that? Could Peter have got up on the Day of Pentecost and preached to more than 3000 people for the sake of a lie? Many of them gave their lives for what they believed.

**Maybe the authorities took the body?** That is highly unlikely because when the disciples started preaching that Jesus had risen from the dead, they would have just produced the body.

**b) Second piece of evidence for the resurrection is His appearances to the disciples.** Were they all hallucinating? Thomas was absolutely convinced when Jesus presented Himself to them alive. After the resurrection, Jesus appeared on more than 10 separate occasions to different disciples, on one occasion to more than 500 people at the same time (Luke 24:36-43). Twice we read that He ate with them—if Jesus was just a spirit, how could He eat in the presence of His disciples? (John 21:12-15, Luke 24:41-44).

**c) The immediate effect.** The changed lives of millions of people over the last 2000 years.

Michael Green, writer of many popular and scholarly works, said:

“(The) Church...beginning from a handful of uneducated fishermen and tax gatherers, swept across the whole known world in the next three hundred years. It is a perfectly amazing story of peaceful revolution that has no parallel in the history of the world. It came about because Christians were able to say to inquirers: “Jesus did not only die for you. He is alive! You can meet him and discover for yourself the reality we are talking about!” They did, and joined the church and the church, born from that Easter grave, spread everywhere.”

### **Christian experience.**

C.S. Lewis sums it up like this:

“We are faced then with a frightening alternative. The man we are talking about was (and is) just what He said or else a lunatic or something worse. Now it seems to me obvious that he was neither a lunatic nor a fiend; and consequently, however strange or

terrifying or unlikely it may seem, I have to accept the view that He was and is God. God has landed on this enemy occupied world in human form.”

Are you yet convinced? Maybe it is time for you to do something about it? The God we are talking about knows everything about you and loves you with an everlasting love (Jeremiah 31:3). He has gone to extraordinary means—coming in the person of His Son, the Lord Jesus, to pay the debt of sin that you and I have deserved due to our sinful lives on Earth. The Bible says that whoever calls upon the Name of the Lord, shall be saved (Romans 10:13). If you sincerely turn to the God who made you, turn away from sin, and invite the person of the Lord Jesus Christ to forgive you your sins, the Bible says that you will be saved. There is no better time than the present time.

Here is a prayer you may like to pray:

Father, I come humbly to you today being aware of the great love that brought the Lord Jesus Christ to earth to pay the penalty in my place for sin. Although He did not deserve the kind of death He died, I see that He did it for me, taking my place and dying for me at the cross. I turn around from my life of sin and come to you. Forgive me my sin and come into my life—I want to live for you from this moment on. Thank you for the free gift of life that you offer me in Christ. I receive that gift of life today. Amen!

I would encourage you to also read the study following this one, entitled, “Why Did Jesus Die?”

Many of the thoughts of this study are from the Alpha Course by Nicky Gumbel. I would recommend his book, Questions of Life, printed by Kingsway Publishers.

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