

IS JESUS REALLY GOD?

Text: Matthew 26:57-64

The Puzzle of Christ

Why not just let Jesus be a remarkable man? A great moral teacher, a social revolutionary, a deeply God-conscious man? Why must Christians say that Jesus was the one and only Son of God? No other world religion is so audacious about its founder. Muslims don't picture Mohammed actually claiming to BE Allah. Jews don't claim that Moses actually WAS Yahweh come to earth. The Buddhists don't even have a mental framework in which to conceive of a sovereign God becoming a human being. Hindus believe in many incarnations – the divine in all. So why are Christians hung up on the divinity of Jesus the way they are?

Yale historian, Dr. Jaroslav Pelikan, spent 60 years studying the original and earliest documents of the Christian church, and he will tell you that this hang up, if that's what it is, goes all the way back. Pelikan points out that the very earliest Christian sermon, the earliest account of a Christian martyr, the oldest non-Christian report about the church, the oldest liturgical prayer (1 Corinthians 16:22), ALL refer to Jesus of Nazareth as Lord and God. Pelikan contends that there is clear evidence dated to within a decade or so of Christ's crucifixion of widespread Christian belief that Jesus was not merely a gifted man but actually God in the flesh.¹

Now, do you know why this is so amazing? It is because the earliest disciples were Jews. Jews were accustomed to the idea that God might speak to people through teachers and prophets. But as members of the most tenaciously monotheistic nation on earth, the Jews understood God as a radically holy, transcendent being. The notion that this God might calve off some part of himself and come to earth in human form would be as preposterous to them as if I suggested that your arm might just pop off your body any second now, crawl down the hall, and get you a cup of coffee. Some may wish it would!

If you're using your brain, you have to ask yourself: So how did these Jews (and some equally skeptical other ones of us) come to believe that Jesus of Nazareth was not simply a very wise teacher, or a very impressive leader, or a particularly excellent prophet, but actually a radically different phenomenon – God himself in human flesh? The answer is that three pieces of a puzzle came together and formed a singular picture for them. Why believe Jesus is really God? Because prophecy confirms it, Jesus' own claims affirm it, and Christ's character is consistent with it. Let me take each of those briefly in turn.

The Connections Piece

The FIRST part of the puzzle is the prophecy piece. The prophets of the Old Testament said a lot about the work God was planning to do through the Messiah he would send. They also gave us a lot of detail about how we could recognize this savior when he came. Read Isaiah 53, for example, and you'll hear the prophet foretelling the coming of a suffering servant upon whom God would lay the sins of us all and by whose wounds we would be healed. Read your way through Psalm 22 and you'll hear the prophecy of someone who undergoes a death in which his body is being pierced, and his clothing is being gambled over, and during which he cries out, **"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me."** Do any of these details or the person described there sound at all familiar? What do you make of the fact that these words were written hundreds of years before Jesus was born or before crucifixion was even invented by the Romans?

Mathematician, Peter Stoner, once calculated the odds of one person fulfilling just EIGHT of the biblical prophecies concerning the coming Christ. Stoner says: Imagine covering the State of Texas with a layer of silver dollars, two feet deep. Now, mark one of those dollars and stir it into the whole mass of other coins. Then, go ahead and blind fold someone and tell him he can travel as far as he wants in any direction, but he's only allowed to pick up one silver dollar and say "This is the One." What's the probability that person will pick up the marked coin? The answer is ten to the seventeenth power – the same probability of one person fulfilling all eight of the major Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah. Now, here's the clinker: The details of Jesus' life fulfilled more than 300 such prophecies.²

The Claims Piece

The SECOND puzzle piece that has inclined many of us to believe that Jesus was no ordinary person is that Jesus himself claimed to be the one of whom the prophets had spoken. At the start of his public ministry, Jesus got up before his hometown crowd in Nazareth, read Isaiah's prophecy describing the coming Messiah, and then said: **Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.**³ Later when Simon Peter said, **You are the Christ (the Messiah), the Son of the living God**⁴, Jesus did not challenge him for saying something so blasphemous; Jesus commended Peter for that insightful observation.

Most of the time, of course, Jesus was far more low-key in the way he communicated who he was.⁵ After healing someone or sharing the truth of his identity with his disciples, Jesus often said: **Don't tell anyone about this.**⁶ This pattern is called "The Messianic Secret." Some skeptics point to this as an indicator that Jesus didn't want to be thought of as God. But there are far more reasonable explanations. One reason was that to go more public more widely would have been swiftly fatal. To shout out, "I am God" in a culture whose main religious conviction is that there is only one God and he is invisible was a blasphemy sure to bring on the execution of Jesus long before he'd sown his message as widely as he'd planned.

Secondly, if Jesus had revealed his super-nature even more blatantly, it would have resulted in a flood of followers motivated more by desire for the next bread basket, miraculous healing, or celebrity touch than by a devotion to God and his kingdom. There are times when Jesus even expresses this concern directly. (John 6:26-27).

Thirdly and most importantly, Jesus no more needed to say bluntly, "I am God," than Lady Gaga needed to show up at the Grammy's shouting, "Attention everybody, I am a celebrity singer!" Everything about the person and work of Jesus, declared who He was. To numerous people, Jesus said: **Your sins are forgiven.**⁷ To the repentant thief on the cross, Jesus said: **Today you will be with me in Paradise.**⁸ To his disciples, Jesus said: **I did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give my life as a ransom for many.**⁹ Think about what Jesus is saying. Who is it that has the power and authority to forgive sins and to guarantee people a place in Paradise? Who's being is so valuable that his one life could serve as a "ransom" weighty enough to win the freedom of all people? We know the answer.

At one time or another, Jesus claimed all the well-known attributes of God. He claimed to be *omnipresent*: **Wherever two or three of you are gathered, I am with you.**¹⁰ He claimed to be *preexistent and eternal*: **O Father, glorify me together with yourself with the glory which I had with you before the world began.**¹¹ Jesus claimed to be the *judge of the world*: **When the Son of Man comes in his glory... all the nations will be gathered before him and he will separate them one from the other... into everlasting punishment... [and] into eternal life.**¹² Jesus claimed to be *sinless*: **Which of you convicts Me of sin?**¹³ he asks. Jesus claimed to be the *Lord of Time*: **For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath,**¹⁴ he said. Jesus claimed to be the *Master of Life and Death*: **No one takes my life from me,** Jesus said to Pilate at the threat of his crucifixion. **But I lay it down myself, and I have power to take it up again.**¹⁵ Jesus also claimed to be the source of *absolute truth*. People who were very holy men or prophets might dare to say "Thus, saith the Lord." Only Jesus had the audacity to say, time and again, **You have heard it said [in the Scriptures,] but truly I SAY TO YOU...** And Jesus claimed the *perpetual authority* of God. **Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away**¹⁶ – as the fact that we are still reading and talking about them today helps illustrate. Who still thinks that Jesus never really claimed to be divine?

The Character Piece

Some years back, a college friend of mine became convinced he was God, Jesus Christ in fact. Urged on "by the angels" (he later told me), Mike jumped off a highway overpass and broke most of the bones in his body. Fortunately, he received thereafter the medical care he clearly needed for his mind and his body. You'd almost have to conclude that anybody who said the sort of things that Jesus said about himself was either mentally ill or a raving megalomaniac, like Hitler or Stalin. Oxford and Cambridge scholar, C.S. Lewis, points out how often this is overlooked when it comes to evaluating

Jesus. "People often say about Him: 'I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God.' [But] that," says Lewis, "is the one thing we must not say [based on the evidence]. 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 the 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. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about Him being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to."¹⁷

And yet this reality suggests a THIRD piece of the puzzle about him. Christ's character lined up with his claims and with what the prophecies said about the Son of God. In Jesus of Nazareth we see an absolutely stunning self-confidence coupled with a simply stupefying servanthood. We see a being who not only does not run from suffering when he could, but who actively chooses the cross for the sake of redeeming those he loves. We see a life that does not render evil for evil, but overcomes evil with good. We see One who speaks the Truth, believes the impossible, and honors all person. If this is not the character of God, then this I definitely know: It's not the character of Man.

Putting It All Together

In his book, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, Philip Yancey recounts the story of George Buttrick, for many years the chaplain at Harvard University. On hundreds of occasions, students came to his study, telling him: "I don't believe in God." Buttrick's response was to say: "Well, then, why don't you sit down and tell me what kind of God you don't believe in. I probably don't believe in that God either." He'd then go on to talk to the students about Jesus -- the true corrective to all our false notions of God.

Yancey confesses: I must admit that Jesus has revised in flesh many of my harsh and unpalatable notions about God. *Why am I a Christian?* I sometimes ask myself, and to be perfectly honest the reasons reduce to two: (1) the lack of good alternatives, and (2) Jesus. Brilliant, untamed, tender, creative, slippery, irreducible, paradoxically humble – Jesus stands up to scrutiny. He is who I want my God to be."¹⁸

The Bible say that **those who had laid hold of Jesus led Him away to Caiaphas the high priest, where the scribes and the elders were assembled... And the high priest... said to Him, "I put You under oath by the living God: Tell us if You are the Christ, the Son of God!" Jesus said to him, "It is as you said."** ¹⁹ **Then the high priest tore his clothes, saying, "He has spoken blasphemy! What do you think?" They answered and said, "He is deserving of death" (Matt 26:57-66, NKJV)**

What about you? What will you do with Jesus? There are three things you CAN do to someone who claims to be God as Jesus did. You can look down from your seat and say: "You're a certifiable lunatic. You need to have your arms wrapped up in a strait-jacket." Or you can look down from your seat and say: "You're a blasphemous liar. You need to have your arms nailed to a cross." Or you can take the third option. It is the one taken by those who look closely at the prophecies of the Messiah and see how they came together in Jesus of Nazareth. It is the option chosen by those who study the claims of Jesus and find them remarkably consistent with the character of this man. Some of us have gotten down from our thrones, and onto our knees, and said: "You are my Lord." It is these people whom Jesus, the Son of the Living God, still takes in his arms.

Please pray with me...

Lord God of all life, take us to yourself we pray. Fill us with your life today. Use us in every way. For the sake of your dear Son and our Savior. Amen.

¹ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 1, p.173

² From Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands A Verdict*. For a variation on these mathematics, see Lee Strobel, *Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry and Mary*, p.37

³ Luke 4:21

⁴ Matthew 16:16-20

⁵ Jesus preferred most often to call himself "The Son of Man," because the title was a brilliantly ambiguous and dual one. The prophet Ezekiel had described himself as a "Son of Man," referring to his place as a representative of the needy human race. On the other hand, the prophet Daniel had used the same title to describe the powerful Messiah who reigned with God. Jesus was both of these things. He was the representative man who would stand in for humanity and absorb the penalty of sin AND he was also the powerful King who alone could conquer death.

⁶ Matthew 17:9; Luke 5:14

⁷ Matthew 9:2; Luke 7:48

⁸ Luke 23:43

⁹ Mark 10:45

¹⁰ Matthew 18:20

¹¹ John 17:5

¹² Matthew 25:31-46

¹³ John 8:46

¹⁴ Luke 6:5

¹⁵ John 10:18

¹⁶ Mark 13:31

¹⁷ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, pp. 55-56.

¹⁸ Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, p. 264

¹⁹ Matthew 26:62-64, NKJV