

Christ Alone: Who Is Jesus of Nazareth?

Who is Jesus of Nazareth? This is a question that has hung over the human race for the past two thousand years. During His lifetime the religious establishment in Jerusalem was obsessed with finding the answer. Was He the long-awaited Messiah promised by the prophets in the ancient writings? And if He was, what did that mean for them? If one reads the Gospel accounts in the Bible—the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John—one gets the impression that whether or not Jesus was the Messiah really didn't matter much to these self-important men, even as they pursued Him and constantly questioned Him. They often came under fire from Jesus for their self-righteousness and disregard for the poor and disenfranchised. Jesus called them a “brood of vipers” and “whitewashed tombs.” The whole twenty-third chapter of Matthew is a tirade against the hypocrisy of these religious leaders who ignored their responsibility to lead the people of God in the ways of the Lord or to set the example for those entrusted to their care. And their hatred of Jesus is apparent throughout the Gospels as they schemed to trick Him, and in the end, had to hire false witnesses to lie about Him in order to finally condemn Him to death. Whether or not Jesus was the Messiah sent from God, He was not the messiah they wanted.

Others who wondered about Jesus were the crowds of people who followed Him. Once He had healed His first paralyzed man (Mark 2), the news was out that this Rabbi had the amazing gift of healing. Those who were blind, victims of leprosy, the deaf, those unable to speak, people crippled by arthritis and other diseases, folks overcome by mental illness or held in bondage by evil spirits, all sought help and healing from this miracle worker. Even to touch the hem of His robe brought relief from pain and disease. Was this man the long-awaited Messiah spoken of in the writings of the prophet Isaiah? (Chapter 35) Rumors spread; people speculated. Who was this man? Jesus knew about the curiosity and speculation. He had come to do the will of His heavenly Father. But was the message coming through? Were those who crowded around Him day after day getting the message? *“Now it happened that as [Jesus] was praying alone the disciples were with him; and he asked them, ‘Who do the people say that I am?’ And they answered, ‘John the Baptist; but others say, Elijah; and others, that one of the old prophets has risen.’”* (Luke 9:18-19)

It is likely that Jesus already knew the answer to the question He had asked His disciples, but He needed to have this conversation about His identity with them. These were the ones Jesus Himself had chosen. They didn't follow Him around trying to trick Him into saying something treasonous or blasphemous. They hadn't started following Him around because He could work miracles. These were the ones Jesus had invited to come and follow Him. They were His closest disciples, the ones who would carry on the message of God's love into the future after He was no longer present in the flesh to preach and teach, guide and heal. So He asked the question—“Who do people say that I am?” But what He really wanted to know was the answer to His second question: *“And he said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ And Peter answered, The Christ of God.”* (Luke 9:20) The word “Christ” in Greek meant the same as the word “Messiah” in Hebrew. The disciples believed that Jesus was indeed the One promised by the prophets. But even though they knew He was the One, they didn't yet understand the full extent of His lordship or how He was going to be their eternal King and heal all infirmities—not just physical ailments and impairments, but also those of the soul: Hatred, jealousy, hardness of heart, faithlessness—*sin*. And so *“he charged and commanded them to tell this to no one, saying, ‘The Son of man*

must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.’” (Luke 9:21-22) It was only by entering into the stronghold of the enemy—into death itself—and destroying the hold the evil one had over us, that Jesus could bring true healing and freedom. It wasn’t the way we humans would have done it, and the disciples didn’t yet understand, but it was the only way. And before the disciples started sharing the truth of Jesus identity, they needed to come to a fuller understanding of just Who He was.

The events that Jesus described came to pass. One of His own disciples, Judas Iscariot, betrayed Him and turned Him over to the authorities. He was condemned on false testimony, tortured, and crucified. He died and was buried. But on the third day, the first day of the week, He walked out of the tomb. Eyewitness accounts by those who saw Him and spoke with Him during the forty days following His resurrection confirmed that He was indeed alive, with the marks of the nails in His hands and feet, and the gash in His side from the sword thrust into Him by a Roman soldier to be sure He was dead. Forty days after He returned to life, He left His disciples, returning to His heavenly Father. Those who were with Him said He was lifted up into the clouds after blessing them and promising to be with them always. Ten days later they got their “marching orders”: *“When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.”* (Acts 2:1-4) From that time these disciples-turned-apostles, spread out into the streets of Jerusalem and to the farthest corners of the world, preaching the Good News that the Lord had fulfilled the ancient promises to send a Savior who would save us from our sins. When brought up on charges before the same council that had condemned Jesus, the Apostle Peter, who had first confessed that Jesus was the Messiah, offered this defense: *“Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, ‘Rulers of the people and elders, if we are being examined today concerning a good deed done to a [crippled man], by what means this man has been healed, be it known to you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by him this man is standing before you well. ... And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.’”* (Acts 4:8-10, 12)

Who is Jesus of Nazareth? This is the question He asks each of us. The eyewitness accounts of those who lived in His presence and followed Him in this earthly life, and the accounts of believers through the ages since who have experienced His love and power in their lives, all attest to this truth: He is the Christ, the Son of God, the Savior of the world. *“And there is salvation in no one else....”*