

## WHO IS JESUS?

Some people see becoming a Christian as a blind leap of faith. The type of faith that offers nothing to base belief on.

But it is not a blind leap of faith but a step of faith based on firm historical evidence. There is indeed a step of faith required and commitment is necessary.

Charles Blondin was an expert tight-rope walker. He did heart stopping feats around the world for large crowds. One day he was performing a remarkable tight-rope walk across the Niagara Falls. Below him, tons of surging water cascaded in foaming white fury. The crowd applauded as he safely crossed. "How many of you believe I can now cross back to where I just came from?" he asked.

The crowd roared a unanimous "of course we believe you can!" to which he asked a horrifying question. "Who will come back across with me on my back!?"

It was of little surprise that the enthusiastic belief that Blondin could return safely, was not responded to with the same enthusiasm with people clamouring to go with him. At first no one stirred but finally a volunteer did step forward and safely completed the daring deed.

Now, the point is this. All the crowd 'believed' Charles Blondin could do what he said he would but only one person's belief was sufficient for them to make a commitment to what they believed.

In this section we will examine some of the vast historical evidence that provides 'reasons to believe' and makes commitment to Jesus a reasonable thing. Apparently in a communist Russian dictionary Jesus is described as 'a mythical figure who never existed'. No serious historian could maintain that position.

There is a great deal of evidence for Jesus' existence. This comes not only from the Gospels but also from non-Christian sources. The Roman historians Tacitus and Suetorius wrote about him. The Jewish historian Josephus (born in AD37) describes Jesus and his followers:

"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."

So there is evidence outside the New Testament for the existence of Jesus. Furthermore the evidence in the New Testament is very strong. Sometimes people say, "The New Testament was written a long time ago. How do we know that what they wrote down has not been changed over the years?"

## **THE PROPHECIES REGARDING THE COMING OF THE LORD JESUS**

All in all there were some 60 major prophecies including about 270 separate details. Jesus fulfilled all of them! Jesus said the Law and the Prophets, the Jewish Scriptures, which are our Old Testament told all about Him (Matthew 5:17). Remember also the Lord's discussion on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:27).

All these scriptures point in 'type' or foreshadow as well as in specific detail to the Lord Jesus' coming. The hundreds of details given were to be like an authenticating signature! Anyone claiming to be the Messiah would have to 'fit' the portrait given.

A few examples:

- Born of a virgin (Isaiah 7: 14)
- The place of birth (Micah 5:2)
- His betrayal for 30 pieces of silver (Zechariah 11 : 12-13)
- Nature of his crucifixion, death, burial (Psalm 22, Isaiah 53).

All too much to be a big coincidence. A highly respected professor of mathematics calculated that for 8 of the 60 major prophecies to be fulfilled the chances would be at least 100,000,000,000,000,000:1. (In other words next to impossible!). It is about the same chance as that of a blind-folded man being able to pick one marked 50 cent piece out of a pile of coins covering New Zealand to a depth of over 2 metres!

When he extended his calculations to cover the chances of 48 of the 60 major prophecies being fulfilled by chance in one man they were a staggering 1 in 10157 - that is 1 with 157 '0's after it - a chance too small for us to be able to even comprehend.

## **BUT WHO IS JESUS?**

Is he just a great moral teacher on a par with Buddha or Mohammed, a philosopher like Confucious? Few people doubt that Jesus was a real human being. His body was subject to all the things we encounter:-

- tiredness (John 4:6),
- hunger (Matthew 4:2).

He had human emotions:-

- he was angry (Mark 11:15),
- he loved (Mark 10:21),
- and was sad (John 11:35).

He also experienced human experiences such as:-

- temptation (Mark 1:13),
- he learned (Luke 5:22),
- he worked (Mark 6:3)
- and he obeyed his parents (Luke 2:5).

What many say today is that Jesus was **only** a human being - albeit a great religious teacher. The comedian Billy Connolly spoke for many when he said, "I can't believe in Christianity, but I think Jesus was a wonderful man."

What evidence is there to suggest that Jesus was MORE than just a wonderful man or a great moral teacher?

The answer, as we shall see, is that there is a great deal of evidence. This evidence supports the Christian position that Jesus was and is the unique Son of God. Indeed, he is God the Son, the second person of the Trinity.

### **WHAT DID JESUS SAY ABOUT HIMSELF?**

One of the fascinating things about Jesus is that so much of his teaching revealed his identity - where he had come from, what he had come to do and where he would be going. Jesus constantly affirmed that he was a man whose identity was God. One of his disciples (Philip), once asked Jesus to show them all what God (the Father) was really like. Jesus' response was that he was the expression in physical form of everything that God is (John 14: 8-11). To see Jesus and to experience him, is to experience who God is. In effect he was saying to people, "If you want to have a relationship with God you need to come to me." (see John 14:6).

In fact it was this claim that sealed his death warrant. "*He made Himself equal with God*" (John 15:18) was the charge they made against him.

There is a hunger deep inside the human heart. Twentieth century psychologists recognise this hunger for love, for security and a sense of significance. Jesus said, "**I am the bread of life**" (John 6:35). In other words, "if you want your hunger satisfied, come to me."

Many people are walking in darkness, depression, disillusionment and despair. They are looking for direction. Jesus said, "**I am the light of the world**" (John 8: 12). Lots of people who have become Christians state that their experience was like that of suddenly having the light turned on for the first time, to see things as they really are.

Many 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 and believes in me will never die" (John 11 : 25-26). With lives burdened by depression, worries, anxiety, guilt and fears all around us, Jesus' promise of 'rest' for the heavy laden is the answer.

### ***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. His claim to be able to forgive sins is well known. On one occasion he said to a paralysed man, "Son your sins are forgiven" (Mark 2:5). The reaction of the religious leaders was, "Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sin but God alone?" Jesus went on to prove that he did have the authority to forgive sins by healing the paralysed man.

Another extraordinary claim that Jesus made was that one day he would judge the world (Matthew 25: 31-32). He said he would return and “sit on his throne in heavenly glory” (v31). All nations would be assembled before him. Some people would receive their inheritance prepared for them and eternal life while others would suffer the punishment of being separated from him forever.

Jesus said he would decide, as judge, what happens to everyone who has ever lived at the end of time. Jesus said what happens to us at Judgement Day depends on how we respond to Him in this life (Matthew 25 :40).

For a mere human to make such a claim would be outrageous.

### ***Direct claims***

When the question was put to him, “Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?” Jesus said, “I am...” (Mark 14: 61-64). At this the high priest tore his clothes and condemned Jesus to death for his assertion to be God.

On one occasion when the Jewish people began stoning Jesus, he asked, “why are you stoning me?” They replied that they were stoning him for blasphemy, “because you, a mere man claim to be God” (John 10;33). His enemies knew exactly what Jesus was declaring.

Jesus also accepted the worship of people. Thomas knelt before him saying, “My Lord and my God” (John 20:28). If somebody makes these claims they need to be tested. There are all sorts of people claiming to be certain things. This does not mean they are right. The world is full of flaky people with delusions as to who they are.

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 claim were untrue, either he knew they were - in which case he was an impostor or he did not know - in which case he was deluded; indeed was mad. That is the second possibility. The third possibility is that the claims were true.

C. S. Lewis put it like this, after he had looked for the truth and honestly accepted 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 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 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. . . but let us not come with any patronising nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”

Jesus said many had come before him claiming to be the one who had the answer for mankind's salvation and deepest needs. He said they were “thieves and robbers” (John 10:8). His words, that many would make these claims after him, have also proved to be profoundly true with lots of bizarre leaders drawing followings and deceiving many.

# **WHAT EVIDENCE IS THERE TO SUPPORT WHAT JESUS SAID ?**

## **His Teaching**

The teaching of Jesus is widely acknowledged as being the greatest teaching that has ever fallen from anyone's lips. Some who are not Christians say, "I love the Sermon on the Mount, and try to live by it." (Easier said than done!)

His words are more read, more quoted, more translated, believed more because they are the greatest words ever spoken. They come with answers to the human condition, and transcend every age, culture and generation.

In spite of all attacks his words powerfully influence countless millions today.

Many of our laws are based originally on the teachings of Jesus. Scoffers may ridicule, scientists explain his sayings and deeds away but in today our age of sophistication, 2,000 years after Jesus spoke his words on earth, no one has improved on the beauty and value of his teachings.

Could that teaching really have come from a con-man or a madman?

## **His Works**

Jesus said that the miracles he performed were in themselves evidence that "the Father is in me and I in the Father" (John 10:38).

Jesus must have been the most extraordinary man around. It was not boring being around him. He turned water into wine, took one boy's picnic lunch to feed thousands, ordered the weather to obey his command. He performed the most remarkable healings, opening blind eyes, restoring useless limbs and freeing people from every manner of evil that tormented their lives. On occasions he even raised back to life those who had died.

Yet it was not just his miracles that made his work so impressive. It was his love, especially for those who were perceived to be the loveless and undesirable of society. At times the gospels record how Jesus was moved with deep compassion and pity as he saw the scope of human need.

## **His Character**

The character of Jesus still impresses millions who would not even call themselves Christians. There was an irresistible attraction about him and a joy in his presence. Little children flocked around him, they too, drawn by his gentle strength and unselfish giving. His humility and acceptance of even his enemies who found no fault in him, do not suggest that here was a character who was evil or unbalanced.

## **His Fulfilment Of Prophecy**

We have already looked a little at this aspect and seen how impossible it would be to fraudulently 'arrange' things to fit the prophecies.

## His Resurrection

The physical resurrection from the dead of the Lord Jesus Christ is the cornerstone of Christianity.

Let's explore the evidence of this really happening...

### *His absence from the tomb*

Many theories have been put forward to explain the fact that Jesus' body was absent from the tomb on the first Easter Day but none of them are convincing.

Ahmed Deedat, a Muslim leader expresses their belief that Jesus merely swooned on the cross and the cool tomb revived him later on. Jesus had undergone a Roman flogging, enough to kill many people. The whip, constructed of leather thongs with interwoven pieces of bone and metal would gouge him causing heavy bleeding and weakening. After the other brutal treatment he received and then hanging on the cross for six hours, could a man in this condition roll away a stone weighing probably a ton and a half? The embalming process with a huge weight of spices on his body would be enough to finish off anyone if they had 'merely swooned'.

The soldiers were clearly convinced that Jesus had died or they would not have taken his body down. If they had allowed a prisoner to escape they faced a death penalty.

Furthermore, when the soldiers discovered that Jesus was already dead, 'one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear bringing a sudden flow of blood and water (John 14:34). This appears to be the separation of clot and serum which we know today is strong medical evidence that Jesus was dead. John did not record this information for that reason as he would not have possessed that knowledge, which makes it even more powerful evidence that Jesus was indeed dead.

Secondly it has been argued that the disciples stole Jesus' body, and began a rumour that Jesus had risen from the dead. This makes no sense. The disciples were a disillusioned and terrified group at the time of the crucifixion. Remember big bold Peter had denied he even knew who Jesus was.

To raid a tomb protected by a Roman 'watch' (a group of soldiers trained to defend six square feet to the death) is a feat too remarkable for a timid group of followers who wondered if their number might be up next.

Consider too, what the disciples later endured for the message they proclaimed about Jesus. They endured floggings, torture, for many even death. It seems inconceivable that they would be prepared to endure all that for something they knew to be untrue. Who would be prepared to die for what they knew was a lie?

Thirdly, some have said the authorities stole the body. This is also totally unrealistic. If they had, why did they not produce it, to quash the rumours.

Josh McDowell in "*The Resurrection Factor*" describes Peter and John's first glimpse into the tomb. Looking at the grave clothes they were in Josh's descriptive words "like an empty chrysalis of a caterpillars cocoon" - when the butterfly has emerged. It was as if Jesus had simply passed through the grave clothes. Not surprisingly, John 'saw and believed' (John 20:8).

## ***His Appearance to his Disciples***

Were these hallucinations? The disciples were unlikely candidates for hallucination. People who hallucinate are unlikely to stop doing so. Jesus appeared to his disciples on eleven different occasions over a six week period. The number, of occasions with different individuals in different settings, (over 500 people saw Jesus) all verifying that they had encountered the risen Lord Jesus - and then the sudden cessation make a theory of hallucination highly improbable.

There was also an objective reality about Jesus' presence amongst his followers as he appeared after the resurrection. He ate a piece of fish (Luke 24:42) and on one occasion cooked them breakfast (John 21 : 1-14). Peter said they ate and drank with him after He arose from the dead (Acts 10:41). He held long conversations with them, teaching them many things about the Kingdom of God (Acts 1:3).

## ***The Immediate Effect***

The effect of Jesus rising from the dead had a dramatic impact on the world. The Church was born and grew from a handful of uneducated fishermen and tax gatherers to an amazing, peaceful revolution that swept the whole known world in the next three hundred years.

## ***Christian Experience***

Countless millions of people down the ages have experienced the risen Jesus Christ. From every race, tribe, nationality - from every social background they all unite in a common experience of the risen Jesus Christ.

Some have come into their relationship with him having been very sceptical to begin with. One such person was an outright unbeliever, Frank Morison. He began seriously studying the life of Christ with "a very definite feeling that, if I may so put it, his history rested upon very insecure foundations." Morison dug into his research with a view to writing a book that would disprove much of what Christians believe from the New Testament about Jesus. However, he found himself overwhelmed by the facts themselves. It was this that compelled him to write quite another book from that which he had set out to write. His book "*Who moved the Stone?*" is the very readable work of a man who was arrested by the powerful evidence 'for' Jesus and ended up himself, a committed Christian.

A former Chief Justice of England, Lord Darling wrote, "in its favour as living truth, there exists such overwhelming evidence, positive and negative, factual and circumstantial, that no intelligent jury in the world could fail to bring in a verdict that the resurrection story is true."