

FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE #3

WHO IS JESUS ?

If I wanted to learn something about a person who lived in the distant past I would have to go back to reference sources. I might go to a library and look for anything that person wrote. Or I could check the writings of someone who knew the individual personally and fortunately wrote something about him or her. Also I could look for a biography written by an author who researched his subject first. The biographer more than likely did not know the individual personally but faithfully researched all known data before writing. Perhaps the person themselves wrote something. We have nothing today that Jesus wrote personally.

How do we get to know about Jesus who lived about 2000 years ago. The main source we would turn to is the Bible in which there are four separate rather short biographies written about Jesus. Two of the authors as far as we can determine were close followers of Jesus during his approximate three year public life. They are the apostles Matthew and John who wrote the Gospels named after themselves. The other two biographies were written by Luke and Mark who learned about Jesus from his earliest followers. Outside the Bible there are two historians of the first century A.D. who wrote just a few sentences about Christ. These give us just enough data to verify that Jesus definitely was an historical figure.

The Bible is a treasured set of 72 “books” that include the 45 “holy” books” of the Jewish faith and the 27 “books” of the New Testament which span from the birth of Jesus till about 100 A.D. Now, everything mentioned so far is just background data and history.

But who is Jesus, and how can I get to know about him and to know him ourselves?

The Gospel’s written by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are absolutely the best introductions to the person of Jesus. They give us his origins, both human origin and divine origin. They tell us in rather rapid fashion what he did the last three years of his life and what he taught the people during that time. The gospels tell the story of many miracles of healing that he performed and how people responded to him. They recount many things that Jesus taught about God and how

he gradually revealed his true relationship with God. All four gospels recount in some detail how some persons began to oppose him and ultimately brought about his execution.

And most dramatically the gospels tell the story of his resurrection from the dead and his subsequent few days on earth. We will have to come back later to the idea of resurrection.

Reading these Gospels is an excellent way to begin to know who Jesus is. Christians believe that the authors of the “books” of the Bible were inspired by God as they wrote the stories. And in that sense, God played a major role in the presenting the contents of the Bible.

When you read the Gospels, and also the other books of the Bible , you are in that sense hearing the Word of God. The Gospels can by their divine inspiration touch your heart in ways that you realize that this is not fiction. As long as I have an open attitude in my mind and heart when reading the Bible, God can move in my soul and nourish it. Reading one of the gospels straight through or in perhaps two sections is a rewarding experience and an opportunity for spiritual growth. Jesus has touched the lives of actually billions of people over the two thousand years since he walked on earth. His teachings live in the hearts of many people who call themselves Christian. He has changed the lives of many people who struggle to follow his values.

In the title on this page, “Who Is Jesus”, I used the present tense of the verb “IS” rather than “WAS” which we would normally not do when talking about a person who lived long ago. That was not a grammatical mistake. It is true that Jesus lived about 2000 years ago and I could ask, “Who was Jesus?” But there is something singularly unique in the story of Jesus. That is, that after being executed by crucifixion and buried for about a day and a half he came back to full life again. This phenomena is called resurrection. The power for Jesus to accomplish this came not from any trick but by the sheer fact that Jesus was the Son of God and possessed all of the powers of God for use to help others and even to return to life. Being the “Son of God” is not just a phrase to imply that he was a favorite of God , or a very holy man. It is a title used by Christians with the ultimate of respect. It means that Jesus is a divine Person, the second Person of the Holy Trinity. As the Son of God he existed as a pure spirit, God, since all eternity along with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. When he was conceived and

born on earth to Mary he in actuality took on a whole human nature while still retaining all that he was as a member of the Holy Trinity. This is very complicated sounding and very mysterious to say the least. But it is the reality of God and of Jesus' true nature. This is considered, however, to be the absolute truth, yet something our human minds can never fully understand. This is pure "believing". And the only way a rational person can accept it as the truth is if God places in their soul a gift from God called FAITH. We need this gift from God in order to accept Jesus and all that he taught. The belief in God as three Persons, yet one God, and the belief that Jesus Christ was at the same time both God and man is the very foundation belief of Christianity. All other beliefs of Christians are built on this foundation. From this recognition that Jesus as both God and man we can understand how he was able to resurrect from the dead. His resurrection was a shock to his followers. He even had to ask them to give him something to eat in front of them so that they would realize they were not "seeing a ghost". Jesus also spent some time with them after his resurrection before He ascended to God the Father in heaven. The first chapter of the book of the Bible called "Acts of the Apostles" gives another very short account of his days between resurrection and ascension to the Father. This book was written by Luke, the same person who authored one of the four gospels on Jesus' life. Jesus said something very paradoxical just before he ascended out of sight into the heavens. He said, "I will be with you always until the end of times." Gone but still with us !

Jesus had a profound effect on the lives of his personal followers and these effects are recounted in some of the other books of the Bible in the New Testament. But Jesus also had, and still has, a profound effect on people who never knew him during his life, who came to learn about him from others or in a very special personal encounter with Jesus after he left earth. St. Paul is one of these latter types of person. He never knew Jesus personally. But Jesus appeared to him in a spectacular story recounted in the acts of the Apostles. St. Paul was converted from a radical opposition to Jesus followers and his teachings to Jesus' very ardent adherent. He spent the remainder of his life proclaiming Jesus and everything Jesus taught.

But the very interesting thing is that Paul was not taught about Jesus by Jesus' closest followers. Jesus appeared to Paul some years after Jesus' Resurrection and taught Paul directly most of what Paul later preached. Several years later Paul met two of the original followers of Jesus, the Apostle Peter and the Apostle James. Paul "checked out" with Peter everything that he had been

teaching and Peter concurred that Paul had been teaching others correctly what Jesus had taught people during his lifetime. This whole mysterious sounding way of learning is possible because Jesus is still alive and over the centuries can and has appeared to individuals whom he has selected for specific purposes. It is very similar to God speaking to the prophets of Israel hundreds of years before Jesus was born on earth. St. Paul wrote several letters to the earliest Christians, explaining all about Jesus and encouraging them in their struggles. He often said something like this, “I learned from the Lord (Jesus) and then he would continue on recounting one of Jesus’ teachings. St. Paul’s letters have been incorporated into New Testament of the Bible as the inspired word of God as part of the “Public Revelation”. The very last books of the Bible were written by about 100 AD and with their writing the Public Revelation of the Christian faith has been closed. Yet God continues just as powerfully today to touch the hearts of people in every generation giving them the gift of faith so that they also accept the truths in the Bible and his teachings passed on by the earliest Christians.

Over the centuries of Christianity, periodically Jesus has appeared to individuals or more subtly communicated with them. We see this as “private revelations from the Lord”, and these exceptional graces serve some purpose in God’s plan. Often these appearances serve to strengthen and deepen the spiritual life of the individual. And these same individuals by relating these personal spiritual experiences often deepen the spiritual lives of others who hear their stories and experiences. On some occasions their private spiritual experiences have a prophetic nature.

Because Jesus still lives, he so often works in the hearts and souls of his followers especially by giving them his Holy Spirit. He works in the minds and hearts of person whom he is trying to bring to faith and belief in Him. It is most difficult to explain the subtleties of how God works in the mind and heart of people, if one has never experienced this. It is even difficult to understand how all this is taking place even for the person who is actually experiencing God’s grace and joy in his heart. But none the less, it reveals the soul and power of God called the Holy Spirit working in our world today. But we must be open to God’s subtle helps called “grace”. We have all received from God the quality of having a free will, we can make our own choices for good or not for good. Therefore, the gift of Faith which enables us to comfortably believe in God and in Jesus comes best when we have an open attitude, a willingness to consider and experience.

Next editions: What did Jesus say and do?