

WHY JESUS?

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You can know God personally. The Creator of the universe made you and wants an intimate relationship with you. The way to know the Father is through his Son: **"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me"** (John 14:6). How can you meet Jesus for yourself?

Who is Jesus?

The most important question in human history is the one Jesus asked his followers 20 centuries ago: **"Who do you say I am?"** (Matthew 16:15). Muslims believe that Jesus was born of a virgin, lived a sinless life, ascended to heaven and will return to our planet at the end of history--but they do not believe that he was divine. Many Buddhists and Hindus view him as an enlightened teacher. Many Jews see him as a brilliant rabbi.

How did Jesus see himself?

In recent years many people have claimed that Jesus saw himself only as a religious teacher, and that the Church deified him over the centuries. Not according to the eyewitnesses. When Jesus stood on trial for his life, the high priest challenged him: **"I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God"** (Matthew 26:63). His answer sealed his fate: **"Yes, it is as you say"** (v. 64). Earlier he told his opponents, **"Before Abraham was born, I am!"** (John 8:58). He clearly claimed to be God.

Jesus told his enemies, **"My Father is always at work to this very day, and I, too, am working.' For this reason the Jews tried all the harder to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God"** (John 5:17-18). Later he taught his disciples, **"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me"** (John 14:6).

C. S. Lewis was one of the most brilliant men of the 20th century. A converted atheist, he later wrote these words about Jesus:

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that 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.' That is the one thing we must not say. 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. 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 His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to (Mere Christianity... 55-6).

Jesus' first followers accepted his claim to be God. Peter and the other apostles refused to stop preaching that Jesus is Lord, even when threatened with their lives (cf. Acts 5:29-32). Each disciple except John was martyred for his faith in Christ, and John was exiled to the prison island of Patmos for preaching that Jesus is God. Billions of people across twenty centuries have believed that Jesus is the only way to heaven, for he is our Saviour and Lord.

Did Jesus exist?

The Bible says that Jesus existed and that he is the Son of God. But the Qur'an says that he is no more than a man. Buddhist and Hindu writings support their non-Christian beliefs. Nearly all faiths have a book which claims that their religion is true.

If we did not have the New Testament, what could we learn about Jesus? First, let's look at the early non-Christian historical records:

1. Thallus the Samaritan (A.D. 52) wrote a work tracing the history of Greece from the Trojan War to his own day. In it he attempts to explain the darkness of the crucifixion of Jesus as an eclipse of the sun. This is the earliest non-Christian reference to Jesus' existence and death.
2. Mara bar Serapion (writing after A.D. 70, as he describes the Fall of Jerusalem) adds: "What advantage did the Jews gain from executing their wise King? It was just after that their kingdom was abolished." His letter is on display in the British Museum today. It shows that the first Christians saw Jesus not just as a religious teacher, but as their King.
3. The Roman historian Suetonius (AD 65-135) later records, "Punishments were also inflicted on the Christians, a sect professing a new and mischievous religious belief" (Nero 16.2). Note that the Empire would not punish people who followed a religious teacher, only one who made him Lord in place of Caesar.
4. Tacitus (AD 55-120) was the greatest ancient Roman historian. Around AD 115 he writes, "Christus . . . suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition broke out" (Annals XV.44). His description of Christian belief as "superstition" makes clear the fact that Tacitus considered the followers of Christus to believe something supernatural or miraculous, not simply that he was a great human teacher.
5. Pliny the Younger was a Roman administrator and author, governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor; two volumes of his letters are extant today. The tenth of his correspondence books (written ca. AD 112) contains the earliest non-biblical description of Christian worship: "They were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verses a hymn to Christ as to a god." Note that believers worshiped Christ as God in AD 112, not centuries later after their beliefs "evolved," as some critics' claim.
6. Flavius Josephus, the noted Jewish historian (AD 37/38-97), records: "Ananias called a Sanhedrin together, brought before it James, the brother of Jesus who was called the Christ, and certain others . . . and he caused them to be stoned" (Antiquities 20.9.1). Thus, the Christians called Jesus the Christ, the Messiah.

7. Finally, consider Josephus' most famous statement about Jesus (Antiquities 18.3.3): "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 Christ; and when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the 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 from him, are not extinct at this day." While most historians do not believe that this paragraph represents Josephus's own faith commitment, it does document the beliefs of the earliest Christians regarding Jesus. Note that it was written before the end of the first century.

Now, let's consider early Christian beliefs, all recorded in the first generations following Jesus' earthly ministry.

1. The Didache, written before AD 100, repeatedly calls Jesus "the Lord." It ends thus: "The Lord shall come and all his saints with him. Then shall the world 'see the Lord coming on the clouds of Heaven'" (16.7-8).
2. Clement of Rome, writing in AD 95, repeatedly refers to the "Lord Jesus Christ." And he promises a "future resurrection" on the basis of his "raising the Lord Jesus Christ from the dead" (24.1).
3. Ignatius, writing between AD 110 and 115, refers to "Jesus Christ our God" (introduction to his letter to the Ephesians). To the Smyrnaeans he adds, "I give glory to Jesus Christ, the God who has thus given you wisdom" (1.1).
4. Justin the Martyr (ca. AD 150), repeatedly refers to Jesus as the Son of God (cf. Apol. 22). He describes the fact that God raised him from the dead and brought him to heaven (Apol. 45).

These statements were all made about Jesus generations before the Church supposedly deified him. The first enemies of Christianity tried to dismiss his divinity, but no one ever denied that he existed. There can be no historical question that Jesus lived, and that his first followers worshiped him as their God and Lord.

Is Jesus really God?

After Good Friday, Jesus' disciples assumed their leader was dead and gone. After Easter Sunday, they were transformed and began winning the world to Jesus. The resurrection changed their lives, proving that Jesus really was and is God.

The Bible teaches that Jesus' resurrection is the foundation of the Christian faith:

If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead" (1 Corinthians 15:13-15).

Is there objective evidence that Jesus rose from the dead?

David Hume was an 18th-century Scottish philosopher, known today as the "Father of Skepticism." He made it his life's work to debunk assumptions which he considered to be unprovable, among them the veracity of miracles. He argued for six criteria by which we should judge those who claim to have witnessed a miracle. They should be:

1. Numerous
2. Intelligent
3. Educated
4. Of unquestioned integrity
5. Willing to undergo severe loss if proven wrong
6. Their claims should be capable of easy validation (*An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* [LaSalle, Illinois: Open Court, 1966] 128-9).

How do those who claimed to see the risen Christ stack up by these standards?

They were *numerous*: over 500 saw the resurrected Lord (1 Corinthians 15:6). They were *intelligent* and *well-educated*, as the literature they produced makes clear (the Acts 4:13 claim that they were "unschooled, ordinary men" meant only that they had not attended rabbinic schools). Paul was trained by Gamaliel, the finest scholar in Judaism (Acts 22:3). They were men and women of *unquestioned integrity*, clearly *willing to undergo severe loss*, as proven by their martyrdoms. And their claims were *easily validated*, as witnessed by the empty tomb (cf. Acts 26:26, "this thing was not done in a corner").

So the witnesses were credible. But is there objective evidence for their claims? It is a fact of history that Jesus of Nazareth was crucified and buried, and that on the third day his tomb was found empty. Skeptics have tried to explain the empty tomb ever since.

The earliest explanation was that while the soldiers guarding his tomb slept, the disciples stole the body of Jesus (Matthew 28:11-15). But how would sleeping guards know the identity of the thieves? How could the disciples convince 500 people that the corpse they stole was alive? And why would these disciples then die for what they knew to be a lie?

A second approach claims that the women stole the body. But how would they overpower the guards? How would they make a corpse look alive? Why would they suffer and die for such a fabrication?

A third explanation is that the authorities stole the body. Then, when the misguided disciples found an empty tomb, they announced a risen Lord. But why would the authorities steal the body they had stationed guards to watch? And when the Christians began preaching the resurrection, wouldn't they quickly produce the corpse?

A fourth approach is the wrong tomb theory--the grief-stricken women and apostles went to the wrong tomb, found it empty, and began announcing that Jesus had risen from the grave. But the

women saw where he was buried (Matthew 27:61); Joseph of Arimathea would have corrected the error (Matthew 27:57-61); and the authorities would have gone to the correct tomb and produced the corpse.

A fifth explanation is the "swoon theory." According to this view, Jesus did not actually die on the cross. He or his followers bribed the medical examiner to pronounce him dead, then he revived in the tomb and appeared to be resurrected. But how did he survive burial clothes which would have suffocated him? How did he shove aside the stone and overpower the guards? How did he appear through walls (John 20:19, 26) and ascend to heaven (Acts 1:9)?

There is only one reasonable explanation for the empty tomb, the changed lives of the disciples, and the overnight explosion of the Christian movement upon the world stage: Jesus Christ rose from the dead. He is therefore the person he claimed to be our Lord and God. He was justified in making the most stupendous claim in human history, one no one else has made in all of recorded history: **"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me"** (Matthew 28:18). The resurrection shows us that Jesus is God and Lord.

Is the Bible really true?

The Bible claims that "all Scripture is God-breathed" (2 Timothy 3:16), meaning that its words are the divine revelation of God. But nearly all religions possess books which make such claims. Is there objective evidence that the Bible is really true?

Historians ask three questions in studying any ancient book.

First: do we possess an accurate copy of the text? The original manuscripts do not exist for any book written before the fourth century of the Christian era. We do not have the original writings of Plato, Aristotle, Tacitus, or any other ancient writer. Books in their era were written on materials which did survive the passage of time.

But we have copies, some in fragments and others in complete book form. "Textual critics" are scholars who study these copies, seeking to produce a manuscript as close to the original as possible. Those who work on the texts of the Old and New Testaments believe that the Bible we possess today is virtually identical to the original manuscripts. The only questions which remain affect matters of spelling, punctuation, and isolated verses. None relates to faith practices or essential doctrines.

Second: do archaeological discoveries confirm the book in question? Archaeologists have made hundreds of discoveries verifying the biblical record. For instance, the Pool of Bethesda mentioned in John 5:2 was once dismissed by skeptics as non-historical, before archaeologists found it. I've seen the ruins myself. We now possess a stone inscription documenting the life and work of Pontius Pilate, the Roman official who sentenced Jesus to be crucified. We have the coffin of Caiaphas, the High Priest who condemned him to die. We have an inscription which describes the work of Gallio, a Roman official living in Corinth (Acts 18:12-17). Such discoveries all confirm the trustworthiness of the Bible.

Third: if the book makes predictions, have they been fulfilled? The Old Testament contains more than 50 promises regarding the Messiah to come; Jesus fulfilled every one of them. The Bible clearly keeps its promises.

Objective evidence says that you can trust the Bible. But the best way to know if it is true is to test its claims personally. You know a car repair manual can be trusted if it works in repairing your car. A cookbook is proven by the meals it produces. When you meet Jesus personally, you will discover that he is who the Bible says he is. And that the Bible really is the trustworthy word of God.

Aren't all religions the same?

We can believe that Jesus existed, that he is divine, and that the Bible is trustworthy. But what makes Jesus the only way to God, as he claimed (John 14:6)? Don't all religions lead up the same mountain to the same God? Why do we need to trust in Jesus to go to heaven?

Some people say that objective truth does not exist, so the claim "Jesus is Lord" is merely personal and subjective. But if I say, "There is no such thing as absolute truth," haven't I made an absolute statement? We believe that the Holocaust and 9-11 were objectively wrong. Objective truth is an intellectual and practical necessity in life.

Other people say that all religions teach the same truth. But Buddha taught that there is no personal "god" (despite the fact that some of his followers now worship him). Hindus believe in thousands of individual deities but no "Lord" of the universe. Muslims believe that Allah (the Arabic word for God) is the one supreme ruler of the universe and that the Trinity is blasphemy. Jews believe that God revealed himself through the Laws and Prophets of their Scriptures, that Jesus was not the Messiah, and that the New Testament is not the word of God. And Christians say that Jesus is the only way to the Father.

If any one of these religions is right, the others must be wrong. None believes that other religions are equally correct or divinely inspired. The holy writings which the various world religions trust do not describe different paths up the same mountain, but very different mountains.

No other faith rests on historical evidence as compelling as that which exists for Christianity. No other religious leader was raised from the dead; no other ancient religious book possesses the kind of manuscript, archaeological, and prophetic evidence which the Bible can claim. If Jesus is alive, then he is Lord and God. And we can trust him to be our Lord and our God.

Why do you need Jesus in your life?

We know Jesus existed, the Bible is trustworthy, and Jesus' claim to be God is backed up by evidence and reason. Now, why do you need him personally? What will he do for you that no one else can?

The Bible diagnoses our problem: "**All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God**" (Romans 3:23). If you're the exception, the one person who has never lied or cheated or had an immoral thought,

I'd like to meet you and learn how you did it. The rest of us know that we've made mistakes and sinned. So what? "**The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord**" (Romans 6:23). God cannot let my sins into his perfect heaven, or it wouldn't be heaven any longer. My sins must be punished, my debt paid.

This is why Jesus came: to die in our place, taking our punishment on himself (see Isaiah 53:5, 12). No one else in all of human history has done this or could do it. Every other person has sinned, so that they owed their own debt to God. Only Jesus lived a perfect, sinless life (Hebrews 4:15), so he had no debt to pay. He could die for us, taking our place and purchasing our salvation. He then rose from the dead to prove his divinity, and to show us that we would live after death with him in paradise (John 14:1-6).

You need Jesus in your life so that your sins can be forgiven, and you can spend eternity in heaven. He is the only one who can give you this gift. But every gift, even one which comes from God, must be opened.

How can you meet Jesus personally?

If you believe that Jesus is the risen Lord and his word is true, you are ready to meet him personally. You can now open the gift of salvation he died to give you.

These are the biblical facts which make it possible for you to have a personal relationship with God:

1. ***God loves you.***

He created you and wants to have a personal relationship with you now on earth and eternally in heaven (John 3:16; Ephesians 2:4-5).

2. ***Sin has separated you from God.***

The Bible defines "sin" as choosing our will over God's. We have each made this mistake (Romans 3:23). Our sins have now separated us from our holy God, and he cannot allow us into his perfect heaven. Instead, we are each destined for an eternity separated from God in hell (Revelation 19:19-21).

3. ***You cannot repair your broken relationship with God.***

Many people think we can be good or religious enough to earn God's forgiveness and go to heaven when we die. But the Bible teaches that the only payment for sin is death (Romans 6:23; Ezekiel 18:20). Someone must die for the sins we have committed.

4. ***Jesus died to pay the debt owed by your sins.***

Since Jesus was sinless and owed no debt to God, his death could pay for our sins. He took our place on the cross and suffered the penalty we deserved. His death now makes it possible for a righteous God to forgive our sins and offer us salvation (Romans 5:8; 2 Corinthians 5:21; 1 Peter 2:24).

5. ***You must receive the gift he died to give.***

Now you must choose to trust in what Jesus has done for you rather than trusting in your own efforts to restore your relationship with God. In faith, rely completely on Jesus to make you right with God. Confess your sins and mistakes to God and choose to live by his word and will. Decide that you will make Jesus the Lord and Master of your life.

How can you make this decision? Through prayer you can meet Jesus today. There is no single prayer you must pray to become a Christian, no magic formula, but the following words are one way to trust Christ as Lord. They are the prayer I offered to God on September 9, 1973, when I first trusted in Jesus as my Saviour. If you will pray them with the sincere commitment of your heart and life, you will join me in knowing Jesus personally and living for him as your Lord.

Dear God,

Thank you for loving me. Thank you that Jesus died on the cross to pay the penalty for my sins and failures. I admit to you that I am a sinner, that I need you to save me. I ask you to forgive me for my sins. I turn from them now. I invite Jesus into my life as my Saviour and Lord. I turn my life over to him. I will live for him as long as I live. Thank you for giving me eternal life and making me the child of God. In Jesus' name, Amen.

If you just prayed this prayer for the first time, please tell someone about your decision. Christianity cannot be lived alone. A coal by itself goes out--it needs the heat of other coals. Share your new faith with someone you trust, and with a church where you can grow in your commitment to Christ. For helpful resources, such as a free, downloadable Bible, a local church finder, and answers to frequently asked questions, click here to visit Need Him Ministries.

How can you know that you're a Christian?

How can you be sure that you are God's child, that you have a personal relationship with him? What can you do when doubts about your faith arise?

First, trust his word.

Your salvation does not depend on anything you can do, but only on what God has done for you. If you have invited Jesus Christ to be your Saviour and Lord, his word promises that he has done what you asked him to do. He has forgiven your failures and sins and made you the child of God. You have his word on it:

1. **"Whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life"** (John 3:16). From the moment you "believed in him," you received eternal life.
2. **"Whoever lives and believes in me will never die"** (John 11:26). You have eternal life, right now. You will never perish. When you breathe your last breath here on earth, you breathe your first breath in heaven.
3. **"My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand"** (John 10:27-28). You are not holding onto him--he's holding onto you.

4. **"If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!"** (2 Corinthians 5:17). You are a new creation, the child of God. It is not possible for you to return to where you were before you met Christ.

Once you have chosen to trust in Jesus, you have become a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). Now it is impossible for you to choose to lose your salvation. A child cannot choose later not to be born. You are his child, and will always be his child, just as my children will always be my children. No matter how they feel, or what they say or do, they cannot go back and not be my sons, because they were born as my sons. You were "born again" as the child of God and will be his child forever.

Second, trust God, not feelings.

There will probably be times when you don't feel close to God, when you don't feel like going to worship, or reading the Bible, or praying. But the Bible nowhere tells us how it feels to be a Christian. Our feelings depend on many factors besides our relationship with God. They are the caboose at the end of the train of faith, not its engine.

If you're married, there may be times when you feel closer to your spouse than others--but you're still married. An employee's feelings about her employer don't change the fact that she has a job. A student's feelings about his teachers don't change the fact that he's in school. Feelings don't change facts.

Unfortunately, we still sin and fall short of the people our Father wants us to be. Fortunately, our assurance is not based on our abilities but God's grace. He says that we are his children. His Son died to pay our spiritual debt so we could join his eternal family. This is the word of the Lord.

Third, live your faith and it will become real.

It takes as much faith to believe in God now as it did when you first trusted in Jesus. Faith is a relationship, and no relationship can be proven. No married couple can prove to someone outside their family that they love each other. No friends can prove their friendship to those who have not experienced it. It's impossible to explain love to someone who has never felt it. Relationships are self-validating--the more they are experienced, the stronger they become.

So, don't wait until you feel close to God--act as though you are. Read his word, pray, worship him personally and publicly, and get involved in the life and work of a local church. Act on your faith, and you'll find your faith growing deeper and stronger.

You were made by God to know Jesus and make him known. A personal relationship with Jesus Christ is the only piece that will fit the hole in your spiritual jigsaw puzzle. He is the hub into which all the spokes of your life fit, the "true north" on your compass. If you haven't entered a personal relationship with Jesus yet, I sincerely hope you'll pray to meet him today. If you know him, I hope that you'll help someone else know him. Helping people follow Jesus is the greatest joy in life.