



What We Believe Jesus and the Gospel

This morning we are going to look at the most important question ever asked: who is Jesus?

Why is that so important? Because the answer leads to everything else about the Christian faith.

Few people deny that Jesus of Nazareth was a real person in history – an actual individual that lived in Israel about 2000 years ago. Apart from the Bible, we have documents from the Roman government as well as Jewish writings like Josephus and the Talmud that make reference to Jesus and establish the fact that He really lived, had disciples, performed healings, and was condemned to death by Pontius Pilate. You can prove these things the same way a historian would prove any other fact of history. Jesus is as real as Genghis Khan and George Washington.

Even people from other religions will often agree: Jesus was real. The disagreement is almost always over who He really was and what His life, teachings, and actions really mean because, there are people who refuse to accept what God has made plain.

Jesus explained the phenomenon this way: referring to Himself as the Light of the world, He told a religious leader,

John 3:19 ... this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.

No one rejects the identity and claims of Christ by saying there just isn't enough information to form an opinion. No, people most often reject or resist what is plain and clear about Christ because they don't like what they hear. He offers to shine the light of God on their life, and they prefer to remain in darkness. That's the truth of the human heart.

So let's take some time this morning to review some of the basic facts about Jesus, to come into the light and see what it reveals. And let's do that by turning not to Roman government documents or Jewish religious documents, but let's turn to the Bible and make one simple assumption – that the Bible is true and can be trusted.

We could spend hours upon hours discussing why we should trust the Bible and proving that it is true, but that's not our focus – we're focusing on Jesus, so we're going to just accept the Bible on this one premise: that God exists. And if God exists, He is capable of bringing us the information we need about Him in a form that can be trusted – that's the Bible. If God is who we believe He is – if He is capable of creating human beings and the planet we live on and the stars we see, let's just assume He is also capable of getting a

message to us and preserving that message in a trustworthy form we call the Bible. That's not too much of stretch, is it?

So, what do we learn from the Bible about Jesus?

We learn at least two things: He is the Son of God and the Savior of Man. That's a top-level starting point, we could go much deeper on what each of those mean, but if you want to know a quick answer to the question: who is Jesus? One short but comprehensive answer is: He is the Son of God and the Savior of Man.

Let's think about each of those for a while. First, Jesus is the Son of God. The Bible teaches, and Christians of all sorts have always believed in, a Triune God – the oldest and most widely accepted creeds express a belief in God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, not three Gods, but one. It's a mind-bending concept because we have nothing else to compare it to – but that's the struggle in thinking about God – He's not like anything or anyone else, so it is hard to explain things at times. Nevertheless, Christians believe and always have believed that Jesus is God.

Where did we get that idea? Well, from Him for one thing. He taught:

John 10:30 "I and My Father are one."

And from the very beginning, that didn't go over too well. People didn't want to accept that this person in front of them could be God.¹

John 5:18 Therefore the Jews sought all the more to kill Him, **because** He not only broke the Sabbath, but also said that God was His Father, making Himself equal with God.

In fact, years later this is the reason they used to have Him put to death. The Jewish religious and political leaders brought Jesus to Pilate, the Roman governor in Jerusalem, asking for the death penalty. Pilate interrogated Him and determined there was no need for Roman involvement:

John 19:6 ... Pilate said to them, "You take Him and crucify Him, for I find no fault in Him."

7 The Jews answered him, "We have a law, and according to our law He ought to die, **because** He made Himself the Son of God."

The Jewish leaders were very clear about why they were asking for His death. *It was because He claimed to be God*, a claim they rejected, and a claim people still reject today.

¹ Christ's claim to be God incarnate is unique among all other religions. Buddha, Gandhi, Krishna, Muhammad all assured their followers that they were not God.

As we mentioned, and as you've probably experienced, many people will accept that Jesus existed, but they won't accept that Him as God. They will accept Him as a good man, a good teacher, in Islam they will even revere Him as a good prophet, but they cannot accept that He was God. And yet this claim was very clear to the people alive in Israel at the time of His ministry: Jesus claimed to be God.

And there are only two ways you can respond to that – it's very binary – either He was, or He was not. You have to have an opinion on this; there is no getting around it. You must make this choice.

And, you need to know something else – not only was Jesus fully God, a member of the Trinity, He also became fully man. Without losing any of His identity as God, He came to identify with us as human beings. It's another mind-bending truth, another element of the Christian faith that is absolutely essential and has been held by Christians of all sorts throughout history even as they debated over how to properly express it.

The Bible tells us Jesus left His place in Heaven and deployed to earth on a search and rescue mission – **to seek and to save that which was lost** (Luke 19:10).² Or as Mark's gospel puts it:

Mark 10:45 “the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”

God had made promises and prophecies throughout history that someone would come to save humanity from the effects of sin: that he would be born of a woman (Gen 3:15), and of a virgin at that (Isaiah 7:14). That he would be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2), that He would be of the line of Abraham, through the nation of Israel (Nu 24:17), the tribe of Judah and a descendant of King David (2 Sam 7:16). That He would bring physical healing to people (Is 53:4); that He would make a triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Zech 9:9); and yet, He would not be accepted (Is 53:3; Ps 69:8).

He would be the cornerstone, the foundation piece, which the builders rejected (Ps 118:22-23). A friend would betray him for 30 pieces of silver (Ps 41:9; 55:12-14) and that money would later be used to buy a piece of land (Zech 11:12-13). He would be a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief (Is 53:3). And eventually He would die a tragic death, pierced in His hands and feet (Ps 22:16). He would be ridiculed and mocked as He hung naked dying while people gambled to see who got to keep His clothes (Ps 22). And yet none of His bones would be broken (Ps 34) and He would be buried in a rich man's tomb (Is 53:9).

All of these parts and pieces of information, and many others, were given hundreds of years before His birth and from various sources, all contributing to a sense of expectation and waiting in Israel to see: when would this promised one, this Messiah, arrive and finally help the people?

² “for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.”

God had sent prophets, He had appointed priests, He had installed kings and judges to lead in government, but none of them were the Chosen One, because, no human being could ever do what Jesus would do, and therefore, God took on human flesh, set aside all His rights and privileges and worship, and came to earth in the form of a fragile human child born to a poor family from the countryside. It's what we celebrate each Christmas.

And that means Jesus grew up in the context of a family. He had a mother, Mary, and father Joseph, though he was more of an adopted Father due to the Virgin Birth. He had brothers and sisters. He went to church, or synagogue in this case, with His family and went on long trips with them as well. He grew up and learned his father's trade. Jesus worked a job, He was skilled as a builder, He most likely had callouses on His hands.

And here is why all of that is important to you and me: if our Savior is not just fully God, but He's also fully man, then that means He can identify with our struggles in life.

When you read the gospels you learn that the sovereign God of the universe didn't come and live in some gated palace with guards throwing lavish parties and hosting heads of state. No, He was actually poor, He had little to speak of in terms of material possessions, and Judas, one of disciples actually stole from their ministry funds.

His own brothers and sisters didn't always get along with Him, and didn't understand Him.

He was tempted to sin *by the Devil himself*.

The Bible tells us Jesus felt sorrow, loneliness, and exhaustion at times. He cried at the funeral of a friend.

People spread rumors about Jesus while He was still alive, called Him names, talked about Him behind His back; one of the people He was closest to betrayed Him to people who wanted to kill Him, and when He was arrested, some of His closest friends ran away and denied ever knowing Him.

He suffered physical injuries and He died a slow, painful death. But He never grew bitter or calloused.

So, if you're working a job, feeling tired, or tempted, if you're struggling with money, or if people are talking bad about you, if your friends aren't sticking by you, if you feel like your family doesn't understand you, if you feel lonely or if you're injured or if you're dying, Jesus knows what you're going through. He felt our pain; He knows our lives because He was fully God and fully man.

Hebrews 4:15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.

This means you can take your issues to Him and find comfort, help, and hope. He came to earth in order to bring you those things.

But there is only reason why you can receive those from Him instead of judgment and wrath, and that is because in addition to being the Son of God who was fully God and fully man, He is also the Savior of Men, the Messiah in Hebrew, the Christ in Greek. He is the one sent to reconcile the relationship between human beings and a Holy God by offering Himself as a sacrifice for our sins.

Not long after He was baptized by John and introduced publicly as the Messiah, Luke's gospel tells us:

Luke 4:16 So He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up. And as His custom was, He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up to read.
17 And He was handed the book of the prophet Isaiah. And when He had opened the book, He found the place where it was written:

18 *"The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me,
Because He has anointed Me
To preach the gospel to the poor;
He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted,
To proclaim liberty to the captives
And recovery of sight to the blind,
To set at liberty those who are oppressed;
19 To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD."*

20 Then He closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all who were in the synagogue were fixed on Him. 21 And He began to say to them, "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

Jesus' miracles were intended to get people's attention and prove His authority and identity. If you think about it, everyone He healed physically, even the people He raised from the dead, eventually died again. The people He fed grew hungry again. Jesus did not come simply to do miracles, He came to make forgiveness possible – a forgiveness that would never fade, and which would grant, to those who received it, a new life and relationship with God that could never be taken away, lost, or changed.

This was the good news, the *gospel* in the Greek language of the New Testament.

When we talk about the gospel, when we talk about being born-again, we often use words like finding spiritual and emotional healing, redemption, freedom; we speak of being rescued, revived, recreated, and redeemed. Why is that? What is it that we need? What is that Jesus came to bring? Why did God have to come down?

Well, as a pastor and a chaplain I've had opportunities to speak with a lot of different religious leaders from all sorts of backgrounds – elders, pastors, priests, rabbis, imams, and

one of the questions I love to ask is, “Tell me, is there a problem between God and man? And if so, what must be done about it?” Asking that question is a quick way to get to the heart of what people believe about God.

And here’s the Christian answer: yes, there is a problem between God and man.

When God made the world, He made everything in it and the Bible says He made it good. And as part of that Creation, He made the first human beings – Adam and Eve. He gave them the run of the place and told them to enjoy it, to discover it, and define it. Everything was good and possible and enjoyable, with one exception: for all the things they could do, there was one thing, just ONE thing, which was off limits – they were told not to eat fruit from a particular tree.

And one day, Satan started asking Eve why not?

Genesis 3:1 Now the serpent was more cunning than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said to the woman, “Has God indeed said, ‘You shall not eat of every tree of the garden?’”

2 And the woman said to the serpent, “We may eat the fruit of the trees of the garden; 3 but of the fruit of the tree which *is* in the midst of the garden, God has said, ‘You shall not eat it, nor shall you touch it, lest you die.’”

4 Then the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die. 5 For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

6 So when the woman saw that the tree *was* good for food, that it *was* pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make *one* wise, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate. 7 Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they *were* naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves coverings.

8 And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden.

9 Then the LORD God called to Adam and said to him, “Where *are* you?”

10 So he said, “I heard Your voice in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; and I hid myself.”

11 And He said, “Who told you that you *were* naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you that you should not eat?”

12 Then the man said, “The woman whom You gave *to be* with me, she gave me of the tree, and I ate.”

13 And the LORD God said to the woman, “What *is* this you have done?”

The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.”

This was the very first sin. It was rebellion against God, a choice not to do what they had been told, and to do what they wanted instead.

And, it’s the pattern for what we still do today. Notice three things that happened.

First, Eve shifted her source of truth – instead of standing on what she knew God had said, she began to question it, and went with what she thought was best, with what looked right to her.

Second, she had a wrong view of herself – she thought could make a better judgment call than God, that He didn't trust her, He probably didn't understand how mature and capable she was – she knew herself better than anyone else, right? And she knew what was best for her, she knew how to make her own choices.

And third, she had a wrong view of God – she thought He was keeping something good from her. But the worst part happened AFTER the sin – AFTER she and Adam had eaten the fruit, AFTER they had done wrong – then what happened? Their wrong belief about God led them to run away from Him, and try to fix things on their own, instead of running to Him for help.

And friends, that is the exact same problem we have today. People know about God, people know about Jesus, they often know that He died for the sins of the world, but instead of running to Him for help, they run away from Him and try to deal with their problems on their own. It's not going to work. When we sin, we break something we cannot fix on our own. We need Him to forgive us, and fix us.

Forgiveness is needed because God is holy and righteous. He is pure and undefiled. There is nothing wrong or tainted about God. He is good, yet we rebel against Him and we deserve to be punished. Parents punish their children for defiance. Governments punish their citizens for defiance. Is it any surprise that God should punish us for our defiance? The Bible says that punishment is an eternal separation from God in a place of suffering prepared for the devil and his demons, called hell. And if you have committed one single sin it is enough to send you there forever. The stakes are high and very real.

But, God is not only holy and just; He is also merciful. And so, He took on flesh and came to suffer the punishment we deserve. Jesus lived a perfect life, He never sinned, never did anything wrong, never did anything worthy of judgment, and was put to death though the only charge against Him was being the Son of God.

It was all part of God's plan for what has been called the Great Exchange - Jesus took the punishment we deserve for sin and gives us His righteousness instead. He takes our place, and offers us His.

This is the gospel: God's victory over sin and death through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Paul summed it up like this:

1 Cor 15:1 ... I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you...

1 Cor 15:3 ... that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures, ...

Or, as we read in

Col 1:19 For it pleased *the Father that* in Him all the fullness should dwell, 20 and by Him to reconcile all things to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross.

In other words – Jesus is the Son of God (in Him all the fullness of God dwells) and the Savior of Men (having reconciled us to God, making peace through shedding His blood on the cross).

And now, those who have accepted this Gospel, this good news, of God our Savior, are called Christians – imitators of Christ, who seek to obey God’s great command to love Him and love others and His great commission, to tell other people, all over the world, about God and what He has done.

This is what we celebrate when we receive communion. Which we’re going to do in a moment. When Christians receive communion, and only Christians should receive communion, we are remembering the death of Jesus and what it was all about. The bread reminds us of His body that was broken, beaten, bruised, pierced on the cross for us – it reminds us of the cost of our rebellion and sin. And the cup reminds us of His blood – poured out like a sacrifice – His innocence made available to us.

He told His disciples:

Matthew 26:27 ... “Drink from it, all of you. For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many **for the remission of sins.**

A reminder, as often as we receive it, that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is also the Savior of Men.

You understand who He is now, you understand the gospel, you understand communion. You may have questions, but you know the really important basics. So let me ask the same question we asked last week. You know all about this God who came to earth to make Himself available to you: are you available to Him?

Are you available to God? To this God, to the God who has done these things for you? Are you available to Him – is your life a blank check for Him to spend as He wants? Are your hands off the wheel so He can steer where He wants? Is there anything you’re holding back despite all He is offering to you?

It’s a question for you to pray over as the men distribute the elements for communion and we prepare our hearts to remember Jesus today.

Let’s pray.