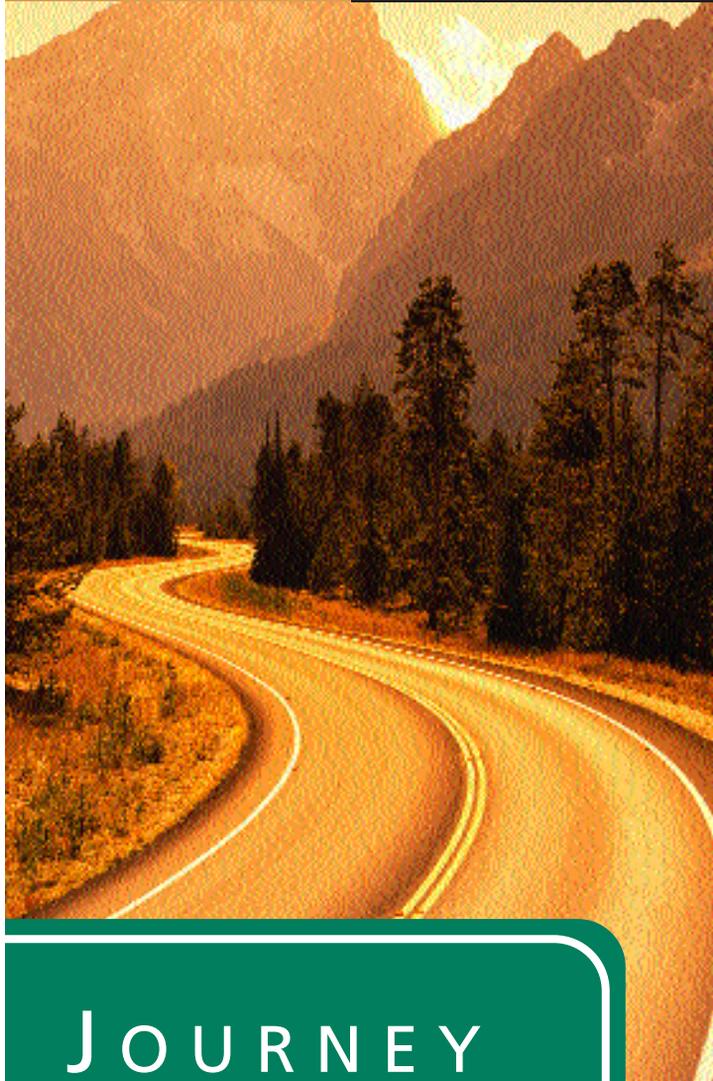


volume 2



JOURNEY
TO FAITH

Jesus... More
Than a Man

Jesus—More Than a Man

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” They replied, ‘Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’ But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say that I am?” (Matthew 16:13-15).

More than two thousand years ago, Jesus asked his closest disciples the same question that has been asked ever since. Who do you think that I am? Jesus knew how important that question was and still is.

The answer his disciples gave then, and that you and I give today, radically determines the direction of our lives.

Who is Jesus, anyway? *Time* magazine commissioned author and novelist, Reynolds Price, to write an article on Jesus for the new millennium, entitled, “Jesus of Nazareth: Then and Now.” He begins his article with these words:

“The memory of any stretch of years eventually resolves to a list of names, and one of the useful ways of recalling the past two millenniums is by listing the people who acquired great power. Muhammad, Catherine the Great, Marx, Gandhi, Hitler, Roosevelt, Stalin and Mao come quickly to mind.

“There’s no question that each of those figures changed the lives of millions and evoked responses from worship through hatred. It would require much exotic calculation, however, to deny that the single most powerful figure—not merely in these two millennium but in all human

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history—has been Jesus of Nazareth.” (“Jesus of Nazareth: Then and Now,” *Time*, December 6, 1999, page 86).

Even those who dislike Jesus and all he stands for have to accept the fact that no one has had a greater impact on the lives of people individually, as well as upon history and civilization as we know it. However, that is not to say that

they all agree upon who he was or what he was about. The different views of Jesus are many and varied.

It was the noted American author, Ralph Waldo Emerson, who said, “Jesus Christ belonged to the true race of the prophets.

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He saw with an open eye the mystery of the soul. Drawn by its severe harmony, ravished with its beauty, he lived in it, and had his being there. Alone in all history he estimated the greatness of man.” So to Emerson, Jesus was an example of a great man, a man who truly understood the depth of the human soul.

John Lennon, the famous Beatle, made headlines early in his career when he compared the popularity of the Beatles with the popularity of Jesus:

“Christianity will go. It will vanish and shrink. I needn’t argue with that; I’m right and I will be proved right. We’re more popular than Jesus now; I don’t know which will go first—rock and roll or Christianity.” This remark provoked a storm of reaction, especially in the United States.

Lennon later tried to explain himself at a press conference in Chicago, on August 11, 1966. Lennon said, “I’m not saying that we’re better or greater, or comparing us with Jesus Christ as a person, or God as a thing, or whatever it is. I just said what I said, and it was wrong, or it was taken wrong.”

Lennon touched a raw nerve. While some might have agreed with him, millions were angered at his words. It is quite normal for people to criticize leaders of every type, but it is interesting that when someone criticizes Jesus they get a far stronger reaction. Jesus seems to be in an entirely different category than any other man.

Mahandas K. (Mahatma) Gandhi, Indian political and spiritual leader described his understanding of Jesus. “A man who was completely innocent, offered himself as a sacrifice for the good of others, including his enemies, and became the ransom for the world. It was a perfect act.” (*Non-Violence in Peace and War*, Volume 2, Chapter 166, 1949). Gandhi saw no divinity in Jesus, but saw great value in his acts of sacrifice. To Gandhi, Jesus was a great and willing martyr, but not God.

The notorious Marquis de Sade, French author and noted hedonist, had something to say about Jesus as well. “Lycurgus, Numa, Moses, Jesus Christ, Mohammed, all these great rogues, all these great thought-tyrants, knew how to associate with the divinities they fabricated with their own boundless ambition.” (Dolmance, in “Dialogue the Fifth: Yet Another Effort, Frenchmen, If You Would Become Republicans,” *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, 1795).

To de Sade, Jesus was just another in a long line of thought tyrants, someone who was trying to tell you what to think and how to think, so they could further their own boundless ambitions.

Jesus was a unique person whose message stirs powerful emotions. Even those who have been skeptical of the claims that people have made of Jesus have been overwhelmed when they stopped to carefully examine his life.

Low Wallace, a famous general and literary genius, was a known atheist. For several years Wallace pored over volumes in the leading libraries in Europe and America, seeking to find information that would forever debunk the Chris-

tian faith and destroy belief in Jesus. But while writing the second chapter of a book outlining his arguments, he suddenly found himself on his knees, crying out to Jesus, “My Lord and my God!” The evidence he discovered caused him to view Jesus in a totally different way.

Despite his prior prejudices, he discovered, to his astonishment, that Jesus was more than he had imagined. Later, Lew Wallace wrote the book, *Ben Hur*, one of the greatest English novels ever written concerning the time of Christ.

One of the most famous Christian philosophers of the last century was C.S. Lewis, a professor of English at Oxford University in England. Schooled in the scholastic disciplines, he was an agnostic who denied that Jesus was anything more than a man.

But as he studied the person and words of Jesus, he also gradually came to the conviction that Jesus was more than just a man. Over the years he became one of the greatest Christian thinkers, writing many books, including *Mere Christianity*.

When the famous British writer H.G. Wells was asked which person left the most permanent impression on history, he replied we should judge a person based upon historical standards. As a result he concluded, “By this test, Jesus stands first.”

Wells admitted, “I am a historian, I am not a believer. But I must confess as a historian that this penniless preacher from Nazareth is irrevocably the very center of history. Jesus Christ is easily the most dominant figure in all of history.” Wells concluded, “Christ is the most unique person of history. No man can write a history of the human race without giving first and foremost place to the penniless teacher of Nazareth.”

Will Durant, a popular modern historian and philosopher was once asked what he felt the apex of history was. He replied simply, “The three years that Jesus of Nazareth walked the earth.”

Perhaps no one has said it better than the French emperor, Napoleon Bonaparte. “I know men and I tell you, Jesus Christ is no mere man. Between him and every other person in the world there is no possible term of comparison. Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne, and I have founded empires.

“But on what did we rest the creations of our genius? Upon force. Jesus Christ founded his empire upon love; and at this hour, millions would die for him.”

Though people retain widely differing views about who Jesus is, one thing is for sure—Jesus is the single most important and influential person of the last 2,000 years.

But, if imperfect people with different opinions are our only source of information about Jesus, how can we hope to really understand him?

How can we understand the life of someone who was born over 2,000 years ago? If his life truly was different, and if he was more than a man, what evidence is there?

The evidence for determining the true identity of Jesus will be found in looking at the uniqueness of Jesus. Though he had a human body and lived in our world, he was unique in ways peculiar to him alone.

What made that one solitary life, lived so many years ago, so very different?

• *HIS ENTRANCE INTO OUR WORLD WAS UNIQUE:*

Undoubtedly the greatest of all religious observances is the observance of Christmas, the celebration of the entrance of Jesus into our world. Whether or not you believe in, or celebrate Christmas, the story of Jesus’ entrance into our world is definitely unique.

Billions of people all over the world from all different races and cultures celebrate this event. Theologically, the term is called the incarnation, the moment in which God became fully human while remaining fully God. It is a difficult concept to grasp.

In his book, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, author Philip Yancey shares an episode from his youth when the concept of “the Word becoming flesh” dawned on him with profound meaning.

“I learned about incarnation when I kept a salt water aquarium. Management of a marine aquarium, I discovered, is no easy task. I had to run a portable chemical laboratory to monitor the nitrate levels and the ammonia content.

“I pumped in vitamins and antibiotics and sulfa drugs and enough enzymes to make a rock grow. I filtered the water through glass fibers and charcoal, and exposed it to ultraviolet light.

“You would think, in view of all the energy expended on their behalf, that my fish would at least be grateful. Not so. Every time my shadow loomed above the tank they dove for cover into the nearest shell. They showed me one emotion only: fear.

“Although I opened the lid and dropped in food on a regular schedule, three times a day, they responded to each visit as a sure sign of my designs to torture them. I could not convince them of my true concern.

“To my fish I was deity. I was too large for them, my actions too incomprehensible. My acts of mercy they saw as cruelty; my attempts at healing they viewed as destruction.

“To change their perceptions I began to see would require a form of incarnation. I would have to become a fish and ‘speak’ to them in a language they could understand.”

The biblical account of Jesus’ birth affirms its uniqueness among all other births. In Luke chapter one we are told that Jesus was born of a virgin. To say this birth is unique among all other births is an understatement.

A virgin birth is absolutely impossible from a human perspective. But why would the gospel writers mention this unless it was important? Why would Jesus need to be born of a virgin?

If Jesus was just a man, then all the talk about a virgin birth can safely be laid to rest.

If, that is. But if Jesus were more than a man, a virgin birth might make some sense. In John chapter one, Jesus’ birth is foretold in a unique fashion.

We are told that “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.” (John 1:1).

In verse fourteen we read, “The Word became flesh and lived for awhile among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

John is speaking about Jesus as the Word, and when he says that Jesus was with God and was God and was with God in the beginning, he is making it clear that Jesus existed before his physical birth. The only way that Jesus could exist before his physical birth would be if he were more than just a man.

The Bible teaches that God loved everyone so much that he “disguised” his divinity and visited his people (Philippians 2:5-8). The reason he did this was because of his love for us (John 3:16). Jesus was God with skin on—someone who allowed us to see the real heart of God up close and personal.

Furthermore, the Old Testament had prophesied that someone would come who would be born of a virgin hundreds of years before it happened (Isaiah 7:14). This man would be called “mighty God” and “Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6). In fact, Jesus’ life fulfilled hundreds of specific prophecies. Is it mere coincidence that the prophecies so perfectly fit Jesus’ life and ministry?

It is possible, but mathematically it is quite a stretch. According to the science of probability, the odds that any man in history who

Jesus was God with skin on—someone who allowed us to see the real heart of God up close and personal.

might have lived to the present time and fulfilled just eight of the hundreds of prophecies in the Old Testament concerning the life and death of Jesus would be 1 in 10 to the 17th power (or 1 in 100,000,000,000,000,000). If this number was expressed in silver dollars, they would cover the state of Texas two feet deep.

The chances of just fulfilling 48 prophecies would be 1 in 10 to the 157th power. Mathematicians generally agree that statistically, any odds beyond 1 in 10 to the 50th power have a zero probability of ever happening. (Peter Stoner, *Science Speaks*, Moody Press, 1963).

Jesus' entrance into our world sets him apart from anyone else who has ever

Someone could spuriously claim to have been born of a virgin, but does their birth also fulfill hundreds of ancient prophecies?

lived. Someone could spuriously claim to have been born of a virgin, but does their birth also fulfill hundreds of ancient prophecies?

It is clear that whatever we think about Jesus, his entrance into our world was definitely unique and sets him apart from others. But it wasn't only his entrance into our world that makes him unique.

• ***THE LIFE HE LIVED AMONG US WAS UNIQUE:***

The parables of Jesus, his great teachings, the Sermon on the Mount are still being taught and followed today, thousands of years after he left this world. Billions have charted their life's course by adhering to his truths.

Even those who deny he was anything more than simply human agree that his teaching was unique and powerful.

Jesus public ministry only lasted three years, he had no formal schooling, yet his teaching was and is unique and powerful. What other man ever accomplished as much?

He ate and drank with the dregs of society—

criminals, immoral people and social outcasts—and encouraged them to enter his kingdom. Without validating their sinful lifestyles, he convinced them to follow his teachings, and they loved him for it. He touched lepers that no one else would go near, he showed mercy to those caught in immorality. And yet despite this amazing power he had, he never became rich.

Most humans who could harness this kind of power or influence would exploit it to their own material advantage. But by Jesus' own admission he had no place to lay his head (Matthew 8:20).

When Jesus walked on the earth, he could call out to men to come and follow him and they would drop their jobs and everything else and follow him, becoming one of his disciples. What was it about him that could command that kind of respect?

The life of Jesus is the story of the miraculous. He was known in his day primarily as a healer—a miracle worker—not simply a teacher. Even his enemies had to agree that he could accomplish the miraculous.

They accused him of using Satanic power to perform those miracles, but they could not deny them (Matthew 12:22-28).

Today, thousands of years removed from the miracles of Jesus, it is easy to dismiss them as folly. But we need to remember that when Jesus healed someone, he or she was someone that was well known in their town or city. Everyone knew his or her condition of being paralyzed, blind or leprous.

Many people talk about life after death, but only Jesus could resurrect the dead by his own power. Furthermore, Jesus prophesied his own resurrection.

He claimed that he would be turned over to the authorities and suffer many things and then be killed, but on the third day would rise from the dead (Luke 9:22). He even prophesied the way in which he would die (Matthew 20:17-19).

Those who respond to Jesus' resurrection by claiming that he was just pulling off an elaborate hoax will have to explain why his disciples were willing to be martyred before they would deny the truth of what they had seen and heard. How many people are willing to be killed for something they know to be a lie?

Is it just possible that this Jesus was more than a man? The life Jesus lived was definitely unique from every other person who ever lived.

• *THE CLAIMS HE MADE WHILE LIVING WERE UNIQUE:*

Perhaps nothing incites either love or hatred of Jesus as do his claims. It is the claims of Jesus that separate people into one of two camps; those who believe them and those who reject them. Nearly everyone is willing to admit that Jesus was a fine man, a good man, even an extraordinary man. But many balk at calling him more than a man.

Jesus made exclusive statements. The same man who many are willing to admit is definitely a "good man" said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6). Jesus didn't say "I am one way, or have some truth." He claimed to be the *only* way—the *only* truth. This claim is either true or it is false.

He went beyond claiming to be absolute truth, and claimed to be God himself. In John 10:30 Jesus proclaimed, "I and the Father are one." Some people try to maintain that Jesus wasn't really saying he was God, and that he was just "spiritually united" with God, but the Jews who were present understood what he was saying, and tried to stone him for blasphemy (John 10:33).

Rather than denying the claim, he bolstered it by asking them why they didn't believe who he claimed to be, when he had performed so many miracles in their presence (John 10:36-38). After Jesus' resurrection, he appeared to Thomas, one of his disciples. Though initially a doubter, when Thomas touched Jesus and confirmed that he

was indeed alive and resurrected, he proclaimed to Jesus, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28).

Jesus did not tell Thomas he was getting carried away. Jesus did not say that he wasn't really God. He accepted Thomas' worship. If Jesus was just a man, this would be disturbing, because it would call into question not only his sanity, but his morality.

On the other hand, if he really was God, it would make sense for him to accept Thomas' worship. If you claim that Jesus was just a good man, a moralist, then you have to explain how he could say the things he did. He would not claim to be God, because that would be intentionally misleading. Good men don't claim to be God.

On the other hand, if Jesus was merely a good man who thought he was God and said so, then he was mentally imbalanced. When people in our world tell us they think they are God, we usually put them under observation and on medication. Everything they say after that is suspect.

Jesus was either a liar, who knew he wasn't God and lied about it, eliminating him from the possibility of being a good person, or he was a lunatic, who thought he was God, but wasn't. Neither possibility can explain the incredible impact his life had on our world.

There is a third possibility; that Jesus was exactly who he said he was. If Jesus was truly God, who took on human nature to live among us, then the claims are true.

• *THE UNIQUE WAY HE LEFT OUR WORLD:*

If someone claims to be God, they need to offer proof. This brings us to the unique way that Jesus left our world. Jesus was betrayed by one of his disciples, taken to a mock trial and

When people in our world tell us they think they are God, we usually put them under observation and on medication. Everything they say after that is suspect.

sentenced to be crucified—exactly as he had foretold he would be. He was crucified on a hill with two other criminals.

One of the questions we often struggle with is how can we hope God would understand what we experience in life, when he is so far removed from our world? If God came to earth in the person of Jesus, then he experienced the worst our world can offer, not only during his life, but specifically in his final suffering.

In fact, this very suffering that he endured was also prophesied. In Isaiah 53, for example, we are told about his rejection (verses 3-4), his physical affliction (verse 5) and even his attitude (verse 7).

In verse 9 we read that he would be assigned a grave with the wicked. A person who was crucified normally had his body thrown into an open pit. Yet, verse 9 mentions that he would be with a rich man in his death. We learn in John 19:38-42 that Nicodemus, a wealthy man, allowed Jesus to be put in his burial tomb.

In Psalm 22:1 we read the very words that Jesus uttered on the cross (Matthew 27:46). Verses 7-8 describe the treatment Jesus received from the onlookers (Matthew 27:41-44).

Verse 16 describes his hands and feet being pierced, something that crucifixion involves. Verse 18 claims that they will divide his garments among them and cast lots for his clothing, something that John 19:24-25 shares in vivid detail. These are only a few of the hundreds of prophecies written hundreds of years before his birth and fulfilled in his death.

If this were the end of the story, it would be a tragic ending to an amazing life. In fact, Thomas Jefferson, our third president, wrote *The Jefferson Bible*, in which he removed all traces of the miraculous in the New Testament. He simply could not accept the miraculous elements in it. His Bible ended with Jesus being put in the tomb and everyone walking sadly away. But that's not what happened.

Three days later, when the women came to

finish his preparation for burial, his body was missing. He had said that he would die and after three days rise again, which is precisely what the Bible says happened.

Soon Jesus appeared to his disciples and they finally believed that he was who he had said he was, the son of God.

Jesus didn't just appear to his twelve disciples alone, but to more than five hundred of his disciples over a period of several weeks (John 20:26, 1 Corinthians 15:6). If his death were merely a hoax, simply producing the body would have put an end to it. But no one ever could.

If Jesus had merely been killed at his crucifixion, his death would have been little more than a martyrdom—tragic, and all too familiar in our world.

On the other hand, if he did rise from the dead, it is quite possible that his life and death had a definite purpose. If his death wasn't an accident, or a matter of unforeseen tragedy, then could there have been a grand purpose behind it all? And if Jesus came to die on purpose, to complete a divine rescue, then we can be safely assured that God really does love us.

• ***THE UNIQUE IMPACT HIS LIFE HAS HAD ON OTHERS DOWN THROUGH HISTORY:***

The hope of eternal life that Jesus promised and then modeled has changed the face of our civilization forever. The church that Jesus left behind was not limited to the early Jewish believers, but soon spread throughout the Roman Empire, and from there throughout the world. That church continues strong over two thousand years later.

Millions would die for this Jesus today. Many are willing to suffer martyrdom rather than renounce their faith in Jesus. Why? Because they know that this world is not all there is.

Millions of Christians around the world today follow Jesus of Nazareth. The attitude of these believers goes beyond respect and admiration and involves worship and love. What

other life has had such an impact? What could possibly account for this uniqueness? You can call it coincidence, but you would be swimming against the tide of overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

How can we ever hope to find our way to God? Who could possibly show us the way? Could it be that this Jesus was truly the God-man, who came to earth to show us how to find our way home to the Father?

Could it really be true that “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him” (John 3:16-17)?

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

- 1) How religious do you have to be before you're religious enough?
- 2) Why did Jesus frequently criticize good, religious people?
- 3) What is God's grace, and what do you have to do in order to get it?
- 4) How good do you have to be in order to get to heaven?
- 5) If the gospel is the good news, then what is the bad news?

These and other questions will be discussed and answered in our next volume, *Journey to Faith, Volume 3: Good News!*