

Who is Jesus?

Most people in our society have some idea of who Jesus is, if only as a swear word used in conversation or as a Wikipedia bio, or maybe as an image they remember from Sunday School.

Familiarity often breeds contempt, and the name of Jesus is no exception. Those who admire Jesus inevitably try to attach His name to their own agendas. Others wear a cross around their neck to signify their allegiance to His cause, without realizing what the cross means. Jesus is praised as a wise teacher, but attempts to follow His teachings usually end in either frustration or hypocrisy.

And what about that cross? Why did He have to be killed, and how in the world could He come back to life? And what does that have to do with me?

The answer to these questions can be found in a close study of Jesus' life reflected in the New Testament books of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John supplemented by the words of his disciples in the rest of the New Testament scriptures.

To get to the bottom of who Jesus really is, we have to also examine a whole constellation of related ideas and facts: The collection of writings known as the Bible, the Jewish people and their culture, the historical context of Jesus' life and the growth of his followers from a few frightened disciples to a worldwide movement.

A lot of religious jargon and buzz words will need to be interpreted - repentance, eternity, the soul, sin, atonement, sacrifice, being saved, the kingdom of God, etc.

First - Jesus was born as a Jew in first-century Judea, which at that time was under Roman control.

The name "Jesus" is a form of the Hebrew word for "deliverer" or "savior." Virtually the same as the biblical successor to Moses - Joshua.

"Christ" isn't Jesus' last name. It's the Greek word that means "anointed." The Jews anointed their high priests and their kings with oil, and looked for a coming Messiah (the "anointed one" in Hebrew) who would be "anointed" with the Holy Spirit and usher in God's eternal kingdom.

Besides the Bible, the most effective insights into who Jesus is come from personal witness and authentic experience.

Each real believer in Jesus has a story, a narrative of what his life was like before encountering Jesus, and how it changed afterward. In the first century, telling those stories led to more and more people seeking and finding Jesus spiritually - facing their own sinful nature, discovering forgiveness in Jesus' sacrificial death and living in the resurrection life provided through Jesus' own bodily resurrection after His death on the cross. And we're still sharing that story.

[In fact, members of a Bible study group sharing the story of how they came to know Jesus is the best way to begin to get to know one another and come together as a body]

At its root, the message Jesus brings is that all of humanity has fallen into sin and away from God. The problem was unsolvable - so great, in fact, that justice demanded a sentence of death on everyone. Instead, God Himself, in the form of His Son Jesus, became one of us, and took on Himself humanity's sins as well as the punishment. Jesus' death - a horrible crucifixion by the Roman authorities - was actually a sacrifice that equalized the heavenly "moral balance sheet." He paid the bill. He rose from the grave and then ascended to Heaven, pouring out His Spirit on those who would receive this gift by faith in Jesus as their Savior.

Believers, by an inward act of faith, exchange their life for His, reckoning themselves to have died with Jesus on the cross, and now live as new creations through the eternal life He shares. They are now spiritually "in Christ" and He is "in" them.

The effect of this has been compared to having a huge weight lifted off or being released from a prison cell.

To reject this gift means you continue to labor under an increasingly heavy burden of sin and guilt... forever - a fate the Bible describes as "torment."

This story is called the "Gospel," or *euangélion* in Greek, which means "good news." But to receive it means leaving yourself behind. You literally get a new identity. This, of course, is good news to the new me (the Christ-in-me), but it's bad news for the old me I've left behind.

Jesus told his followers, "Deny (abandon) yourself, pick up your cross, and follow me."

"Deny" self = *aparneomai* and means to "strongly reject, disown, disavow, repudiate, and forget yourself."

Jesus still calls his followers to die to self, and He always has. That's the "full gospel."

We'll find that the most fervent opposition to Jesus was from the religious establishment of his day; those who claimed to have the answers and condemned and accused others in order to puff themselves up and appear pious.

Jesus welcomes the losers, the failures, the hurting, the broken, the marginalized, the questioning, people without options, and those who are "poor in spirit."