

# Jesus: The Centerpiece of the Bible

## Rivne Lecture #3

Introduction: As I explained in my first lecture, the Bible is divided into two main sections called the Old Testament and the New Testament. The first contains the record of God's dealings with the people of Israel, while the second records the coming of Jesus, the establishment of the church, and contains numerous documents relating to Jesus and how His followers should live.

- A. However, it is important to note that in one sense, both Testaments are about Jesus, that He is, in fact, the primary topic of both the Old Testament as well as the New.
- B. The Old Testament is a book which is always looking forward to what God is going to do next. Beginning with the account of the Creation and the beginning of human sin, the question is, "What is God going to do about it?"
- C. Part of the answer to that question is the creation of the people called Israel, the descendants of a man named Abraham, to whom God promised that "all nations of the earth would be blessed" through his descendants. The rest of the Old Testament records the outworking of that promise.
- D. Yet the Old Testament ends with the people of Israel still looking forward to the coming of one called the "Messiah," meaning "The Anointed One," the one chosen by God to bring to fruition all of the promises made to Abraham, and the one through whom the problem of sin and death would finally be solved. Anointing was the ancient way of indicating God's choice for the king of Israel. So the Coming One would be Israel's ultimate king, chosen by God.
- E. The New Testament begins with the claim that Jesus of Nazareth is that promised Messiah. The very first words of the New Testament are these: "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ (or, Jesus Messiah), the son of David, the son of Abraham" (Matthew 1:1). Then follows a genealogy of 42 generations, demonstrating that Jesus was, in fact, descended from David and that the entire history of the people of Israel reached its climax and fulfillment in Him.
- F. The rest of the New Testament tells the Jesus story, which includes the story of the church He established. So in a very real sense, Jesus is the main subject of the Bible, with all of its documents either pointing ahead to Him or looking backward to who He was and what He did and said.

**1. In discussing Jesus, one question that must be addressed is whether or not He actually lived. Was He a real figure of human history, or was He merely the invention of the founders of the early church, who needed a mythological figure to give credence to their new religion?**

- A. Let me begin my response to this question by pointing out that what we are asking here is not simply a theological question but a historical one. Does history support the reality of this Jesus described in the Bible or does it not?
- B. We should note that in asking historical questions about Jesus or anyone or anything else in history, what we are looking for is probability and not possibility. The question is not, "Is it possible that someone like Jesus lived in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century A.D.?", but "Is it probable that such a person lived? Is there any evidence to support such a belief, or is the belief itself merely the product of wishful thinking?"

- C. In the case of Jesus, it can be said with confidence that the evidence for his actual existence is so strong, that to deny He ever lived must be the result of either (a) ignorance of the facts, or (b) prejudice that is unwilling to see the facts for what they are.
- D. So, aside from the claims made in the Bible, what is the evidence for Jesus' actual existence? It consists primarily of references to Him by writers who lived shortly after His own time and who mention Him only incidentally in the course of discussing other historical matters.
- E. Some of these writers were neither Christians nor Jews, and were people who had a very low opinion of Christianity.
- (1) For example, the Roman historian Tacitus, writing around A.D. 115, describes the terrible tortures of Christians whom Nero blamed for the fire of Rome in A.D. 64. Tacitus refers to Jesus as "Christus" (Latin for "Christ") and says that He suffered "the extreme penalty at the hands of Pontius Pilate, the governor of Judea. Since Tacitus refers to Christianity as a "mischievous superstition," it is obvious that he doesn't mention Jesus in order to prove His existence, but mentions Him only in connection with an event of Roman history.
  - (2) Likewise, another Roman, Suetonius, who wrote in the late First and early Second Centuries A.D., mentions an edict issued by Emperor Claudius in A.D. 49, ordering all Jews to leave Rome. The cause, he says, was a sequence of disturbances instigated by someone he calls "Chrestus," from the Greek word for "kind." This was apparently his misunderstanding of the title "Christ" (Messiah). Suetonius doesn't say much about Jesus, but it is evident that he was aware of Him.
  - (3) One of the more interesting references to Jesus comes from Pliny, the Roman governor of Bithynia, in A.D. 112, who wrote to the Emperor Trajan, asking him how he should deal with those who were accused of being Christians. Should he pursue them simply for being Christians, or only if some sort of charge was brought against them? We are fortunate that not only Pliny's letter, but also Trajan's reply, has survived. In posing his question to Trajan, Pliny gives the earliest description we have of Christian worship, outside the New Testament itself. At one point he says that the Christians "sang a hymn to Christ, as to a god." So it becomes evident that as early as A.D. 112, Christians were worshiping Jesus as a divine being.
  - (4) There are other pagan authors, such as Lucian of Samosata and Celsus, both writing in the Second Century A.D., and both of whom had an intense dislike for Jesus and the Christian faith, but Tacitus, Suetonius, and Pliny are our major historical witnesses from this era.
- F. In addition to these non-Christian, non-Jewish writers, there is also the testimony of Jewish authors.
- (1) The most important of these is the historian Josephus, who lived in the latter part of the First Century, and who was a first-hand witness of the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Josephus mentions the trial and stoning to death of James, the brother of Jesus, the one called Christ." In another somewhat controversial reference to Jesus, Josephus mentions that He was known as a miracle-worker and teacher, that He had followers among both Jews and Gentiles, that Pilate had Him crucified at the insistence of the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem, and that His followers were known as "Christians." In another text, Josephus mentions John the Baptist, adding that he was feared by Herod

Antipas, who eventually imprisoned and executed him, just as the Gospel of Mark says (Mark 6:19-20).

(2) Another important Jewish source that makes frequent mention of Jesus is the Talmud, a collection of writings dating from the Fifth and Sixth Centuries A.D. The Talmud mentions Jesus numerous times, always calling Him a sorcerer. Interestingly the authors acknowledge that Jesus was known as a miracle-worker, but never attempt to discredit His ability to work miracles. Rather, they claim that He did so by the power of Satan.

G. It should be noted that there are not a large number of ancient sources which mention Jesus, but this should not be taken as an indication that He was not an actual figure of history. Two facts need to be kept in mind:

(1) First, we must remember that Jesus, while His name is universally known today, was in His own time regarded merely as an itinerant Jewish teacher who never left Palestine. As a result, not many ancient writers take notice of Him. What is remarkable is that, given the limitations of communications in that era, He was noticed by even this many.

(2) Second, the writers who do mention Jesus are not writing specifically about Jesus. Rather, they are recording other events in which Jesus or His followers were in some way involved. This makes their testimony all the more compelling, since they are not consciously trying to convince anyone about Jesus.

H. So, what do we learn from these non-Christian sources about Jesus. Actually, quite a lot.

(1) That He lived in Palestine in the First Century A.D.

(2) That He had a brother named James.

(3) That the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem called for His death.

(4) That He died by crucifixion at the order of Pilate, the Roman governor.

(5) That He was known both as a teacher and a miracle-worker.

(6) That His followers believed that He was Israel's long-awaited Messiah.

(7) That He was worshiped as Deity at least as early as the early Second Century.

(8) That His followers were called "Christians."

I. The non-Christian sources do not give us any additional information than what is given in the New Testament Gospels, but what they say agrees completely with what the New Testament says about Him, and all of the facts listed above can be known simply by reading the ancient sources, and without reading the Gospels at all.

J. So, it is evident that anyone who denies the existence of Jesus as an actual figure of history is ignoring the evidence of history itself.

**2. Our primary sources of information about Jesus, however, are not these ancient writers, but the four Gospels of the New Testament (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John). The vast majority of all that we know about Jesus comes from these four documents.**

A. Matthew was written primarily to a Jewish audience, to convince them that Jesus was, in fact, the Messiah for whom they had been waiting. To demonstrate this, Matthew takes great pains to show Jesus as the fulfillment of Israelite history and the fulfillment of numerous Old Testament texts.

- B. Mark, on the other hand, was written mostly for Gentiles, which is evident from the fact that when he makes reference to Jewish customs and to Aramaic words and phrases, he always explains or translates them, assuming that his readers won't know what he's talking about otherwise. Mark's unique view of Jesus is as the powerful, miracle-working Son of God. He gives less of Jesus' teachings than do the other Gospels, but tells more about what Jesus did.
- C. The Gospel of Luke was written by the only non-Jewish author in the New Testament. He writes to show that Jesus is "good news" (which is the meaning of the term "gospel," which describes the message about Jesus) to all humanity, especially for those on the fringes of society.
- D. John's Gospel presents Jesus as the divine "Word" of God, the one through whom God reveals His true nature and will. John tells less than the other Gospels about what Jesus did, but gives much insight into Jesus' nature by way of extensive speeches given by Jesus Himself.
- E. Everything written in the rest of the New Testament is based on the information given in these four Gospels. Many have compared them to four "portraits" of Jesus, each of which tells His story in a unique way and with a particular emphasis. Taken all together, they give a remarkable portrait of a truly remarkable individual.
- F. All four of them make the same astonishing claim: that Jesus was God's own Son, and that He died on a Roman cross in order to bear in Himself the punishment for the world's sins, and that He then rose from the dead.

**3. But can the Gospels be trusted to tell the truth about Jesus? Since they are our most important sources about Him, this is a vital question that must be answered. If they are not trustworthy historical sources, then we know very little about Jesus at all. If they are trustworthy, then we have ample basis for knowing who Jesus is and what He did.**

- A. This is far too large a question to answer adequately in the time we have, but let me offer a few observations about why I think the Gospels should be regarded as trustworthy.
- B. Some assume that because the Gospels were written by Christians, they cannot be trusted to give an unbiased picture of Jesus. While this may sound reasonable on the surface, it is actually a rather odd assumption.
  - (1) If the Gospels were, as many claim, simply made-up stories about Jesus, it is surprising that they included some of the things they record. For example, the baptism of Jesus is often cited as an indication that Jesus was not, as the New Testament writers claim, sinless, since John's baptism involved repentance and the forgiveness of sins. Knowing that, why would the writers (three of the four of them) have said that Jesus was baptized unless in fact, that is what they knew (or at least believed) actually happened? Likewise, why do they record that Jesus became angry on some occasions, or acknowledge that even Jesus' closest followers at times did not believe in Him?
  - (2) Also, the assumption that Christian writers would be incapable of telling the truth and that we could only get the facts from those who had no vested interest in them is strange indeed. That would be like saying we can only know what happened at the World Trade Center in New York on September 11, 2001, by talking with people who were not there, rather than with survivors who were inside the buildings and with the emergency personnel who rescued them.

- (3) Some are fond of pointing to the lapse of time between the events of Jesus' life and the actual writing of the Gospels. It is generally acknowledged that the Gospels were all written in the latter half of the First Century A.D. Since Jesus died around A.D. 30, there is a lapse of some decades between the events and their recording. The assumption is that during that time lapse, the stories about Jesus must have become distorted.
- a. We should note that a standard is being applied to the Gospels here that is not applied to other writings from antiquity. For example, no one usually questions at least the basic accuracy of the writings of Julius Caesar and other notables, yet the lapse of time between the events recorded and their recording is at least as large as that between Jesus and the writing of the Gospels.
  - b. Besides, we have a source even closer in time to the historical Jesus than the Gospels: the letters of the apostle Paul, who confirms much of what is said in the Gospels. Paul wrote his letters beginning in the late 40s A.D., at least 20 years earlier than the earliest of the Gospels. He confirms belief in Jesus' deity and in His death and resurrection. So if the story became embellished, it did so in far less than 40 years. That would mean there were still people alive who had seen and heard Jesus. So if what Paul wrote was not true, it could have been easily refuted.
- C. With these thoughts in mind, we might wonder why anyone would be so skeptical about the Gospels as to deny even their basic accuracy. There are numerous reasons, of course, but one must not go unnoticed. Many people are simply biased against anything that is supernatural. That means they assume (regardless of evidence) that miracles cannot happen, that Jesus could not possibly be the divine Son of God (since there probably isn't a God), that people cannot and do not rise from the dead, and that anything suggesting such things is automatically false. I will only note here that this argument cuts both ways: Many of those who assume that the Gospels cannot be true because the authors were Christians are predisposed to not believe them simply because they are not Christians. This is hardly valid historical reasoning.

It is the consistent claim of the writers of the New Testament that Jesus Christ came into the world to fulfill God's promises to Abraham and his descendants. They state that He was no ordinary man, not even an ordinary "messiah," but the divine Son of God who is eternal in nature. Their testimony is that He overcame sin and death by allowing Himself to be temporarily overcome by death, as He bore the sins of the world, and that He afterward rose from the dead to open to all the possibility of likewise rising from the dead to live forever in the presence of God. It is a powerful message, and a compelling one, as is the kind of life of self-sacrifice lived by Jesus Himself & which He taught His followers to live, what He called "the abundant life," a life lived to its fullest potential. All of this is part of the story of Jesus, and I urge you to read it for yourself and see that Jesus is indeed what the Bible is all about.