

Question: If you were to tell someone about Jesus what would you say?

To talk to someone about Jesus is sometimes challenging but having confidence in what you can say helps a lot. Today we are going to talk about the historicity of Jesus; who He was and what we can reliably know about Him. Who was He as a person? This is important because some people and organisations deny critical things about Jesus from His existence through to His life, to what He did and claimed, through to His death and resurrection. In fact, the effort at dispelling almost everything about Jesus is so pervasive and enduring one can only wonder at the source.

When one discusses this topic, it is important to recognise not only what we can argue positively for, but also the arguments against and material that is not so reliable some might want to use, so let's start There.

In considering historic sources the more reliable material is always that closest to the source and recorded by eyewitnesses. These are first-hand records. This doesn't always make them accurate because we see everything with all sorts of biases and perspectives. Ask any two fans from opposite sides of a game what they thought of a particular incident. You can get wildly different stories... and then ask the ref! However, the firsthand accounts will validate that something happened and some information about who was involved, with the accuracy to be determined. Of course, the more witnesses the more likely one can build an accurate summary of things that transpired.

In the case of Jesus, we get fascinating insights from a variety of non-biblical sources. In the case of Rabbinic sources and insights from the Quran we can gain very little about Jesus specifically. The Rabbinic written materials we have come from at least the fifth century and are generally polemics against Christians. They rail against His miracles as sorcery or magic and argue Jesus was even likely the devil incarnate. This continues the argument of some Pharisees and Sadducees in Jesus time and actually support that Jesus lived and did miraculous things. Written in 653AD the Quran is interesting in that it affirms the virgin birth of Jesus, sees Jesus as prophet, a miracle worker, and doer of wonderful signs, but denies He was the Son of God, the Messiah. Oddly, it argues that Jesus was not crucified just it was made to look like that and those that followed Him were left full of doubt. An assertion a history of the apostles might like to argue a few weeks later. Rabbinic and Quran based sources are then both later and unreliable except in the most generic sense.

When we turn to Roman sources around the time there are a number of texts of significant value, particularly those of Tacitus and Josephus. Tacitus, regarded as one of the greatest Roman historians writing in the later part of the first century records that the Nero blamed the Christians for the fire in Rome in 64AD. He writes *"To squelch the rumour (that Nero caused the fire) Nero created scapegoats and subjected them to the most refined tortures those whom the common people called "Christians" hated for their abominable crimes. Their name comes from Christ, who, during the reign of Tiberius had been executed by the procurator Pontius Pilate."* [Tacitus, Annals 15.44].

Flavius Josephus was another historian of the time and one with a colourful history. A Jewish leader who surrendered to the Romans in AD67 during the Jewish-Roman wars after a vision from God. He had been in Jerusalem at the same time as Jesus in earlier days and would have had first-hand experience of Jesus' ministry, or at least the accounts around Jesus' ministry. Josephus prophesied that Vespasian, who was commanding the Roman army at the time, would become Emperor. Vespasian was bemused and had Josephus placed under house arrest. Subsequently, Vespasian did become Emperor and he had Josephus become his historian and travel with him. Josephus wrote monumental works and histories of the time, most of which we still have today. In his *Antiquities of the Jews*, a polemic against anti-Jewish bigotry two passages are important. In writing about the death of Jesus' brother James at the hand of the high priest of Jerusalem Ananus Josephus writes, "... *Ananus... assembled the Sanhedrin of judges, and brought before them the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James, and some others ... he delivered them to be stoned.*" (Josephus CW 645). In *Antiquities* 18.63 there is an even more significant passage that even after years of challenges and debate remains intact in its likelihood of being a personal testimony by Josephus. He writes, "*At this time there appeared Jesus, a wise man, if indeed one should call him a man. For he was a doer of startling deeds, a teacher of people who receive the truth with pleasure. And he gained a following both among many Jews and among many of Greek origin. He was the Messiah. And when Pilate, because of an accusation made by the leading men among us, condemned him to the cross, those who loved him previously did not cease to do so. For he appeared to them on the third day, living again, just as the divine prophets had spoken of these and countless other wondrous things about him. And up until this very day the tribe of Christians, named after him, has not died out.*"

Even without directly Christian sources we can be very confident that Jesus was a very real person who lived and had a dramatic impact on the world around Him. But we have the New Testament, a series of accounts of Jesus' life, letters to early churches and an end time revelation written by one of Jesus' closest disciples. Can we rely upon these? As predominantly eye-witness accounts they are invaluable.

How reliable are our Biblical texts? Some of you will be familiar with the Alpha course and hopefully we will run another one by the end of the year. In the second instalment Nicky Gumble points out that Livy's Roman history was written between 59 BC and 117 AD, but the earliest copy we have was written in 900 AD, that's about a 900-year gap, and we have 20 copies. For Caesar's Gallic War, there is a 950-year gap, and we have 10 copies. But when we come to the New Testament, initially written between AD 40 and 100, the earliest copy we have was written in AD 130. There are 5,309 Greek manuscripts, 10,000 Latin and 9,300 others. It stands unique amongst ancient prose writings. One of the greatest ever textual critics JFA Hort said this, "*In the variety and fullness of the evidence on which it rests, the text of the New Testament stands absolutely and unapproachably alone amongst ancient prose writings.*"

In sharing our faith, we can be confident that Jesus was a very real man who lived in Israel and made an impact not only in His time but on human history itself. We can look further than this into the character of Jesus Himself in the record of the New Testament. Jesus was a human being with very human emotions and responses. Hebrews 4:15 tells us that "... ***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. Jesus was tested in all ways, yet without sin.” That doesn’t mean that He face every possible sin conceivable, that would be impossible but every type of sin in one form or another yes: ambition, moral and sexual, financial, power, despair, doubt and so on.

One of the more humorous and very human episodes is when Jesus begins His ministry in a very real and powerful way in Capernaum. How does it begin? His mother tells Him to sort out the problem of no wine at the wedding – probably because He brought along too many mates. Jesus wanted to brush her off, but she effectively told Him to get on with it – something many of us might relate to, right? Do what mum says or face the consequences.

Jesus’ temptations by the devil after His baptism are only part of what He faced throughout His life, just like all of us. Facing and enduring temptations and trials is not the same as giving in to them.

Jesus was compassionate. He regularly healed the sick and exorcised the possessed. He fed the crowds of thousands when they were hungry after coming out from the towns to hear Him preach. He wept when his friend Lazarus died and his friends and disciples had so little understanding and appreciation of what God was doing. He wept again as He looked upon Jerusalem knowing what would befall the city in under forty years’ time after it crucified its Messiah. He also got frustrated and annoyed. In Matthew 17:17 (also in Mark 9:19 & Luke 9:41) Jesus exclaimed, **“You unbelieving and perverse generation ... how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?”**, when His disciples who had been arguing amongst themselves who was the greatest were then unable to cast out a demon from a young man who had been suffering for years. Jesus also had a great sense of humour that comes through less clearly in English but in passages such as his discussion with Nicodemus around spiritual rebirth. Jesus was also passionate. When He was in the Temple He fashioned a whip and drove the money changers, the animals and birds from the Temple courtyard. He got real angry that day. And some of His words to some of the Pharisees, Sadducees and scribes were less than subtle. Take Matthew 23:25-26 for example: **“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean”**. You wouldn’t want to get on the wrong side of Jesus. And on the other hand, Jesus could be very gentle. The account of His encounter and healing of the crippled 38 year old at the pool in Bethesda (John 5), His treatment of the woman with persistent bleeding (Mark 5:25–34 also Matthew and Luke) and His healing of the woman in the synagogue who had been bent over for eighteen years with a bend back are all very gentle encounters, without even considering His dealing with Mary after His resurrection. But most of all Jesus loved people. He loved meeting with them, talking with them, sharing with them, telling them about God and the love God has for them. He loved the children, even when He was tired at the end of a long day. He loved regardless of culture, of age, of gender, of social expectation and rules, of class or profession. He loved those close to Him and those afar. He even loved those who would do Him harm. But Jesus was no fool. He looked to the heart of people and where they were coming from. He knew the religious leaders and

societal leaders and political leaders that truly wanted to do Him harm and He could identify those who didn't. This also led Him to experiencing a natural human fear, even terror after Moses and Elijah had told Him what He would have to go through at the end of His life. His suffering in Gethsemane, the sweating blood, speaks of the intensity of this fear, this terror but also of the depth of His dedication and determination to follow His Father's will. Your will not mine be done. In His mockery of a trial, His torture and crucifixion His character was revealed. He never gave up, He persevered to the end and even then, His compassion for the soldiers crucifying Him and for His mother were evident.

Jesus loved those who sought after truth, who sought after God and He was there for them. He loved to teach and bring people into a closer relationship with Father. This is Jesus the man. This is the one who would suffer and die for all of us knowing there was no greater love than to lay down one's life for His friends, for us.

And finally, Jesus was, from a young boy to the time of His death and thereafter, an obedient servant of His heavenly Father, attentive to His Word and faithful in response. He calls us to be the same.

When we talk of Jesus we talk of a very real person, and of a friend who is still with us here today. We follow Jesus knowing He has experienced our life, He understands us, and He knows us, because He has been and continues to be with us.

Amen

Next week: Jesus – His mission and His claims