

Was Jesus a Real Person?

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[0:00] Well, take your Bibles tonight and open them to Matthew 16.

We're going to be in Matthew 16, and you can go ahead and find verse 13. One of those familiar passages, at least one particular part of it, and we'll get to that in just a moment, our subject, of course, is discovering the real Jesus.

And the question tonight is, was he a real person? Was he a real person? And interesting question. I don't really imagine that anyone in here tonight doubts that Jesus was real, real person, real historical person.

And we could really get off into a lot of things and get really way far afield where we need to be scripturally and look at a lot of things that would substantiate the reality or the truth that Jesus was a real person.

And we'll get into some of that tonight. I want you to think about Jesus for a moment. In fact, just to get us started, I wonder, if Jesus lived today in America, can you imagine the kind of trouble he would be in?

[1:31] He would be in trouble with the FDA for turning water into wine without a license. He would be in trouble with the EPA for killing fig trees.

He can't do that. He'd be in trouble with the AMA. That's the American Medical Association, in case you didn't know. He would be in trouble with the AMA for practicing medicine without a license.

The Department of Health, he would be in big trouble with them for feeding 5,000 people in unsanitary conditions. Jesus would be in big trouble with the NEA for teaching without a certificate, with OSHA for walking on water without a life preserver.

I tell you, he'd be in big trouble if he lived in this country today. How about PETA? He'd be in trouble with PETA. That's people for the ethical treatment of animals. You know that organization. He'd be in trouble with them for driving a herd of hogs into the sea.

You know, he'd be in big trouble there. And how about now, the NOW, National Organization of Women? He'd be in trouble with them for not choosing a female for an apostle.

[2:44] Hmm? Think about that. And finally, he'd be in trouble with the Anti-Defamation League for calling the Jews a brood of vipers. Can't do that.

Not in our world today. But, you know, a little humor to get us started. But our focus is Jesus tonight. And the real answer, the issue that I want to answer is whether or not Jesus was an historical person.

Was he a real person? I mean a real live person when he lived on this earth. If he was a real live person, a real person historically, must we simply accept that by faith?

Or can we prove it? And does that matter? Whether we can prove it or not. And if a real person then, and this is the crucial, really the most important thing, if a real person then what should be our response to what he said and what he did?

That's the most important thing, right? Now I propose to you that Jesus was not only a real historical person, but that he is the Christ, the Son of the living God.

[4:00] And that's going to be in our text here in just a moment. Someone very famous made that statement, that declaration. And I believe that to be true. And so it's not just enough to say that he, historically speaking, was a real person.

I say he was the Messiah, the Christ, the very Son of the living God. And I submit to you that Jesus Christ was who he claimed to be and actually said everything the Bible says he said.

And that he did exactly what the Bible said he did and accomplished what the Bible promised that he accomplished.

All right, now, Matthew chapter 16 and verse 13. It opens with kind of a, you know, kind of setting where they were and giving us that information.

When Jesus came into the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples a question. All right, I'm going to read the question in just a moment. But actually in the text, and we're going to just let the text kind of unfold as we go along.

[5:14] I'm not going to read it all in front. But in the text, he is going to ask two questions. The first one we'll get to in just a minute. Two questions.

And those two questions form the main divisions of my message tonight out of this text. Now, question number one. Verse 13.

Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am? That's question number one. It's an interesting question, isn't it? Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?

That's kind of awkward English, but the question's pretty clear and interesting. Now, how did Jesus' disciples answer the question? So they said, verse 14, some say John the Baptist.

Some, Elijah. Others, Jeremiah. Or one of the prophets. There was the answer to the first question.

[6:17] His first initial question. Here are the possibilities. As they're kind of, I guess, brainstorming. Maybe, you know, one said this, one said that, and one said another. And maybe Peter said, you know, I heard the other day a couple of people talking.

And they thought, they said. And so here are the possibilities. John the Baptist. Maybe John the Baptist brought back to life. Or maybe he never did die.

Or, you know, news in that day wasn't like it is in our day. They didn't have Fox and CNN and round-the-clock news. And so maybe most people did not know that John the Baptist had been put to death, been executed.

So they're just saying, this Jesus, that's just John the Baptist. And so they're really saying he was a great preacher. Others said Elijah.

That famous prophet. But really, they said Elijah in the sense of a great miracle worker. And so this man is Elijah.

[7:18] Or maybe they've heard the rumors that he is Elijah reincarnated. You know. And so he's a great preacher. He's a great miracle worker. Some said Jeremiah. That prophet.

So he was a great prophet. And others just kind of generalized and said he's just one of the prophets. A prophet among many other prophets. And, you know, people are still saying some of these same things today.

Speculations about who Jesus was or is. But they're saying some other things as well. And here's where it becomes a problem. Today, the answers to Jesus' question.

That first question. Would really cover a wide range of opinions and speculations and beliefs.

And let me just give you a few of them. First, he is simply a legend. Kind of categorized some of the various views about who Jesus was under that category.

[8:27] He's legend. And legend in a couple of senses. In the first sense, he's a legend in the sense of what he said or was reported that he said.

And really more importantly, what he became. You know, kind of like a Davy Crockett. About 20% fact, 80% fiction. I don't know if the percentages are right.

But a lot was said about Davy Crockett and some of the, you know, wild and interesting stories. And I don't know if this was true. But in the movie, he was able to grin a bear down.

You know, just grin him. Legends, you know. And so this is what this Jesus is. And there's some fact, you know, some fact there. You know, kind of like the National Enquirer.

There's some little kernel of fact there. And then the rest of it is bizarre lies. And, but in the case of Jesus, it's the stuff of legend.

[9:29] That's what some believe. In 1993, a group of scholars calling themselves the Jesus Seminar. I don't know if you've ever heard of this group. They published a book entitled The Five Gospels.

And then the subtitle to the title was What Did Jesus Really Say? Now that kind of clues you in on where these guys, this book's coming from.

What did Jesus really say? And so these scholars are kind of put together. 150 of them, as a matter of fact. Quote Bible scholars and linguists and different other kinds of scholars.

And they're grouped together. And they are the supposed experts. And they have read the Bible and studied the Bible and the history behind the Bible and all of these things.

And so they came up with this ingenious way of deciding just which of the many things recorded in the Bible that Jesus said.

[10 : 32] Which of those he really said? That's kind of interesting. And you would think that they would choose a very scholarly approach. But in reality, what they did was they all took all of the sayings of Jesus.

And they used different colored marbles. Have you heard about this? Different colored marbles. And they would decide, you know, based upon the colored marbles, they would put marbles in, a marble in for each thing that Jesus said.

And a particular color marble based upon their conclusions about whether or not what he said was really what he said. And so red, for example, you could probably guess this.

A red marble meant Jesus surely said that. Put it in the box. A pink marble, not quite red, pink, would mean that they had concluded, this scholar had concluded that Jesus might have said that. And then a gray marble was, Jesus probably did not say that. And then a black marble meant Jesus surely did not say that.

[11 : 50] What a scholarly way of deciding and interpreting the Bible. What a democratic, maybe really it's a very democratic way to decide or to discover the real Jesus.

See, he's just legend. Some of what is reported about Jesus and reported concerning what he said is true, but most of it has been kind of embellished and expanded and exaggerated.

And he's legend in that sense. There's a second sense of legend. And some would hold that he was a legend in the purest sense of the word.

That is, there never was such a person as Jesus. He's 100% legend. Kind of like Paul Bunyan. Not to be confused with John Bunyan. Author of Pilgrim's Progress.

But I mean Paul Bunyan. The guy who had the, what was the, blue ox. Yeah. Okay. Baby. He didn't know the name. All right. Well versed on Paul Bunyan.

[12 : 57] He's a legend. There was no such person. I'm sorry to tell you there was no such person as Paul Bunyan. A Semitic scholar by the name of John Allegro wrote a book entitled The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross.

And in his book he promoted the theory that Jesus was not a historical person but rather a code name for a certain hallucinogenic drug made from a red topped mushroom.

And there are many other, of course, less off the wall theories disputing the historicity of Jesus.

So he's just legend. Second, well before we get to the second one, let's answer this one for a minute. Today, did you know that today no serious historian disputes, even those who claim to be atheists, dispute the fact that Jesus existed as a real person.

He's a real person. But we can go way back and consider some of the evidence. I'll just name some of these. A guy by the name of Thallus, a Samaritan historian, wrote a document that we have, that we have discovered today.

[14 : 22] He lived or wrote this document 20 years after the death of Jesus. And his attempt in that document was to explain the phenomenon of darkness on the day of his crucifixion.

Here's a man who wrote 20 years after the death of Christ. The implication being, a Jesus really did exist and live and was executed upon a cross.

And there was at least a darkness that took place during the crucifixion. Kind of lines up with scripture. And so Thallus, this atheist, is trying to explain what really happened there.

Not that he was a believer. But the implication being, here is historical fact for the real historical Jesus. A guy by the name of Marabar Serapion.

I'm not sure if that's how you pronounce it. He was a Syrian. And he wrote a letter to his sons in 73 A.D. In which he wrote of the deaths of Socrates, Pythagoras, and some guy by the name of Jesus.

[15 : 29] Tacitus, a Roman historian in 112 A.D., wrote about Jesus. Calling him, quote, Christos, who was put to death by Pontius Pilate.

And we're talking about factual evidence, historical evidence. Not written by Christians. Because, see, that's one of the main arguments. That, yeah, we've got, you know, some documents that were written years ago.

But they're all written by Christians. And you would expect them to lie. But these are atheists or pagans and non-Christians. And they have written about this Jesus. Plenty of the younger. A Roman governor wrote quite a lot about early Christianity.

From a non-Christian perspective. And his writings confirm that Christians living just 80 years after the death of Christ. Firmly believe that Jesus was a real person.

He wrote about this. They firmly believe he was a real person. That he was the Christ. And that he is God. Flavius Josephus. You probably have heard of Josephus. A Jew.

[16 : 40] A Roman historian. Born just a couple of years after Jesus' death. And he makes references in his histories of James, the brother of Jesus.

References to him. Other references to a so-called Christ. That's how he worded it. Whose name was Jesus. The Talmud.

That's the Jewish law books. Written during the second century after Jesus' death. Makes numerous negative, albeit negative, references to The crucifixion of Yeshua.

That's Hebrew for Jesus. Yeshua, the Nazarene, on the eve of Passover. References to that.

References to Yeshua and his disciples. The healing power of Yeshua.

The teachings of one Yeshua of Nazareth. Clearly, writing about Jesus. So, legend.

[17 : 37] But we need to go on from there. Where if then more than a legend. Then, according to some. He was a liar. He was just a liar.

Yeah, he really existed. He was a true person. He lived in history. And yeah, maybe he even went to the cross. And died on the cross. And so forth. But he was just a liar. It would say he was either some kind of a magician.

Able to work magic. Illusions. An illusionist. A guru, some would call him. A hypnotist. And so accomplished.

Such an accomplished hypnotist. That he could mesmerize and hypnotize large groups at one time.

They would also say that he was the husband of Mary Magdalene.

With whom he procreated a secret lineage and society. That was hopefully to take over the world.

That's what they say. He's just a liar.

[18 : 36] He was a deceiver. Who plotted his own resurrection. According to those who hold to this. German theologian by the name of Karl Barth. Now, not the famous Karl Barth.

B-A-R-T-H. But a different Karl Barth. B-A-H-R-D-T. Whatever. And he wrote about the life of Jesus. And this is what he said. He was reared.

Raised by the Essenes. The Essenes were just a religious sect. That kind of kept off. Isolated themselves from the rest of society.

So, he was raised by the Essenes. Studied Plato and Aristotle under Greek teachers. Performed no miracles. Luke and Nicodemus rescued Jesus from the tomb.

And with Luke's expert medicine. They nursed him back to health. This is how the theory goes. And after a few physical appearances. Mentioned in the Bible.

[19 : 34] Jesus retreated to the desert. To live the rest of his life with the Essenes. What does the Bible say? I mean, what? Can we trust the Bible?

Well, of course we can. But there are those who say we can. And what we know about Jesus. We have just, you know, received from the writers of the day.

And in the New Testament particularly. They were Christians. So, we would expect them to lie as well. Just like Jesus lied. Can we trust the Bible? Well, did you know?

That today there are. Just for an example. There are nine or ten copies of Julius Caesar's history of the Gallic Wars. And they date back 1,000 years after his death.

That's as old as we can find. 1,000 years after the death of Julius Caesar. Nine, maybe ten copies of it. And yet today few would dispute the accuracy and the historicity of those documents.

[20 : 40] But today we have more than 22,000 New Testament manuscripts. Some dating back to the second century.

Great if we had the originals. But we don't. But we have them all the way back to the second century. And yet the Bible is just repeatedly disputed as a non-historical book.

No, Jesus was no liar. And he was not a legend. So, what else do men say about Jesus? Well, some say he was a lunatic.

He's just crazy. Albert Schweitzer. Some of you are familiar with that name. He wrote his famous quest for or quest of the historical Jesus.

And Albert Schweitzer said this about Jesus Christ. He said he was a deluded fanatic who futilely threw away his life in blind devotion to a mad dream.

[21:42] Hmm. George Bernard Shaw said that Jesus was a sane man until Peter hailed him as the Christ. And after that he became a monomaniac.

A maniac fixed on one obsession. His delusion, he said, is very common among the insane. Hmm. Fourth, he was a learned teacher.

It's getting a little better, isn't it? From legend to liar to lunatic. Now, he's at least a learned teacher. I mean, let's give him that, some would say.

The Mormons, for example, say that Jesus was a man who achieved great things, but he was not God. The Jehovah's Witnesses say that Jesus was the second greatest person who ever lived, but he is dead.

Forever dead. The Muslims say that Jesus was a prophet, a good man, a great teacher, but so was the prophet Mohammed. Gandhi said that Jesus was the greatest moral teacher who ever lived.

[22:52] Now, we want to kind of embrace that, but we've got to go a lot further than that, don't we? So, is he a legend? A liar?

A lunatic? A learned teacher? Or is he the Lord? The Lord. I like what C.S. Lewis wrote in his, I think his best work, Mere Christianity.

He wrote, quote, I'm trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Jesus. They say, I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God.

That is one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg, or else he would be the devil of hell.

You must make your choice. Either this man was and is the son of God, or else a madman or something worse. Then he said, or C.S. Lewis wrote, you can shut him up for a fool.

[24:10] You can spit at him and kill him as a demon. Or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God. But let us not come up with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher.

He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to. And so we come to the second question that Jesus asked, the more important question.

The second question is in verse 15. And he said to them, but who do you say that I am?

Now that's the most important question, isn't it? Who do you say that I am? Now you see, question number one speaks to the intellect, speaks to the mind.

And it deals primarily with the historical significance of Jesus. Who do men say that I am? And that's important. It is important, I think. Jesus was a real person.

[25:12] And if we can look at history and prove and substantiate that historically, that's fine. That's wonderful. And I think we ought to do that if we can. Question two, though, goes much deeper.

Question two is the more important question, I believe. And it speaks not just to the mind, but it speaks to the heart. To the heart.

And it deals with, not with the historical significance. It deals with the eternal significance of Christ. Now how did Peter answer the question? Verse 16. Simon Peter answered and said, said to him, you are the Christ, the son of the living God.

Was Peter right about that or was he wrong? Well, according to Jesus, he was right. Verse 17.

Jesus answered and said to him, blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, Simon son of Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.

[26:32] Aren't you so? Peter was right, wasn't he? Jesus asked, who do you say that I am? And Peter said, you are the Christ, the son of the living God.

And Jesus said, you're right. Well, he said, blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah. How did Peter come to that conclusion about Jesus?

I mean, he just came right out with it. How did he come to that conclusion? Well, I read it to you already. Verse 17, the next phrase. Jesus said, flesh and blood has not revealed it to you.

That is, Peter, you didn't come up with that on your own. You didn't study my words, my sermons, you know, take good sermon notes.

And you didn't, you didn't do all, study my words and make up your conclusions, come to some kind of rational conclusion. You didn't hear the facts and then weigh them in your mind and say, okay, I'm convinced.

[27:42] I believe you're the Christ. Because, see, Peter's answer, because, and Jesus knew his heart, came from the heart, not the intellect.

Jesus said, your mom and dad didn't teach you that. Your Sunday school teacher didn't do it. Your preacher didn't convince you. I don't know if Peter had a Sunday school teacher.

His preacher was Jesus, wasn't he? He wasn't just convinced because of words or study or, you know, reasoning in his mind and coming up with a conclusion that seemed to make sense to him. So how did Peter know the real truth about Jesus? Tells us right here. For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but your father, which is in heaven.

Your father, which is in heaven. You know, there are a lot of people who have literally created for themselves their own Jesus.

[28:53] Through reasoning and intellect and rationalism. And through really creating something that was pleasing, that is more pleasing to them, more accommodating to them.

They've created their own Jesus. Like the lady who said that for 40 years she struggled to make her life fit her religion until she found a religion that fit her life.

A lot of people have done that. A lot of people have a flesh and blood kind of Jesus. A religion that really fits them.

That's accommodating to them. The apostle Paul said, described them as having a form of godliness. Or we might translate that, a man created Jesus.

But then he said, they deny the power thereof. That is, they haven't a clue who Jesus really is. You know, just ask people a simple question.

[29:56] Who was Jesus? Just try this. Ask them, who was Jesus? And the majority of people will answer. You know, kind of prefacing their response with the words, well, to me, Jesus was.

Now, that may be very genuine and there may be more to it behind it. Maybe it's just a kind of reflex. Well, to me, understanding that others have different views. But there is the crux to the matter.

To me, he is. And if your answer is based upon the heart conviction. And understanding that God placed there.

And you're like Peter. How does God reveal the truth? The true identity and the glory of Jesus. So that I can recognize him and receive him.

Believe in him. How does God do that? Well, frankly, honestly, I don't know how he does it. How he works in the secret places of the heart and the spirit.

[31:09] And quickens the spirit. And opens our eyes to the truth. So that we embrace it. I don't know how that works. But I can speak to somewhat to when it happens.

Matthew 11, 2. Story about John the Baptist. Well, about John the Baptist in prison. And you might remember the story.

He had heard about what Jesus had been doing. He had been carrying on his ministry. And he did a very strange thing. He sent some of his disciples to find out if Jesus was the true Messiah.

And I want you to listen to how Jesus responded to him in Matthew 11, 4. I'll just read it to you.

Jesus answered and said to them, to John the Baptist's disciples, Go and tell John the things which you hear and see.

Go witness to John. The things you've heard and seen here with me. The blind see and the lame walk. The lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear.

[32:17] The dead are raised up. And the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he who is not offended because of me. In essence, Jesus was really identifying, validating his true Messiahship.

John would have understood the connection. So he's really telling them, go point them to me. Have John consider me, what I'm doing right now.

Does that make sense? Well, Matthew 14. The disciples are in a boat in a raging storm. And Jesus comes to them walking on the sea. Remember that story?

Peter also walks on the water. And when Jesus steps into the boat, the storm ceases. And the Bible says that they worshipped him. Saying, truly, you are the Son of God.

Matthew 27, 54. Jesus has been brutalized and crucified. And now he's there hanging on the cross. And listen to what the Bible says in verse 54 of that chapter.

[33:40] So when the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus. Actually, the word is watching him.

They saw the earthquake. They saw the earthquake. It's something to have an earthquake you can see. And you can see them, can't you? They saw the earthquake.

And the things that had happened. And there were other phenomenal events that took place. They feared greatly. Saying, truly. This was the Son of God.

That was the point here. All this. Just this. I don't know how God does it. How God reveals the true Jesus to the heart of hearts of a man or woman.

I know that he does. I don't know how he does it. I know it's his work. And there's not anything that I can do to create that and make that. I don't know how God does that.

[34:42] But I know when it happens. It happens when people are brought to focus their attention on Jesus. Jesus brought to singularly consider him and his work, his claims, and what he accomplished upon the cross.

Just like John the Baptist was led to consider Jesus so that he would understand exactly who he was. And how the disciples, Jesus, came to them and they considered him and focused upon him. All their attention was on him and they worshipped him and said, truly, he is the Son of God. And how those scribes watching him.

What was occurring there at the cross. And the things that took place at that event. They said, truly, he is the Son of God.

They were brought to consider him, to focus upon him. To be enamored by him and his work and his person.

[36:06] And it's then that often that God breaks in and reveals the true identity of his Christ.

To the heart of him. And so, the point here for us is that we need to lead people to focus on Jesus. The real Jesus. Not some socially acceptable Christ.

Not some benevolent kind of God. But the real Jesus.

And all that he did. And said to point people to the real Jesus. The real Jesus. In life.

Someone has written. In life he was hungry. Yet he was the bread of life. In death he was thirsty. Yet he was the living word.

[37:10] Living water. In life he paid taxes. And yet he was the king. King of kings. In death he was sold for 30 pieces of silver.

Yet he redeemed. All of his children. In life he was weary. Yet he is our rest. In death.

He was brought as a lamb to the slaughter. And yet he was the good shepherd. Jesus died. Yet by his death.

He destroyed the power of death. So that you and I could live. Who? Do you say? Jesus is. Thank you.