

IX 9Marks

Who Is
Jesus?

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Foreword by Trip Lee

Study Guide for

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What Do You Think?

Who is Jesus? Really, that's the most important question you'll ever consider.

There can be no doubt that Jesus is an enormously important figure in history. Everything you look, if you're paying attention, we find reminders of this one particular man who lived about two millennia ago. It all presses the question on us: "Who is he?" But even once you decide to start answering that question, how do you get to know this man who lived that long ago? The answer is that you look to the New Testament, a massive treasure trove of information about Jesus—detailed, personal, eyewitness, blow-by-blow accounts of what he said, what he did, and who he was. And what you find there is a picture of a man who was far more than merely *extraordinary*. You find someone to whom one of his followers would say, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God" (Matt. 16:16). So . . . what do you think? Who is Jesus?

1. Have you ever thought at all about the question, who is Jesus? Why or why not? Do you think it's an important question?

2. Chapter 1 mentions some of the claims Jesus made about himself. "I and the Father are one" and "No one comes to the Father except through me," for example (John 10:30; 14:6). On a first reading, how do those claims strike you? What do you think Jesus is saying?

3. Do you have any preconceived notions about the Bible? What are they? Do any of the arguments in this first chapter challenge those preconceptions? How?

4. What will it mean for you to approach the New Testament documents fairly, as historical documents? Why should we not toss those documents into a box labeled “religious junk” and simply dismiss them as silly, primitive, and false?

5. Where are you right now on the question, do I think this is true, or not? Skeptical? Neutral? Positively inclined? Why? What leads you to your position right now?

Going Deeper

Think about your experiences so far with Christians and with Christianity. What impression of Jesus—as opposed to Christians—do you have in your mind? Right now, if you had to answer, who would you say Jesus is? What are your most important questions about him? Is there anything in particular that keeps you from being a Christian, or do you simply need to know more?

An Extraordinary Man, and Then Some

Really, what kind of man says things like *that*? No ordinary man, that's for sure.

Most of us, if we're familiar with Jesus at all, really only know him on the surface. Maybe we know a few of the most famous stories about him, or we can quote some of his more famous sayings. Without a doubt, was something about Jesus caught the world's attention. He was an extraordinary person. But if you're really going to know Jesus, you have to look a little harder. You have to get beyond the usual debates, the common sound bites, and the familiar stories and see what lies just beyond the surface. Because though everyone agrees that Jesus was an extraordinary man, he made claims and did things that no *merely* extraordinary man would do.

1. If you had walked through that Washington, DC, subway station when Joshua Bell was playing the violin, do you think you would have noticed the beauty of what was happening? Have you ever taken the time to think carefully about why so many people find Jesus fascinating? If not, why not?

2. Have you ever read or considered any of Jesus's teachings? If so, which ones strike you as most insightful? What do you learn from those teachings?

3. When Jesus told the crowd to “render . . . to God the things that are God’s,” what did he mean (Matt. 22:21)? What do you think of that assertion?

4. The New Testament says that when Jesus performed various miracles, people were amazed. Why do you think they were amazed? Is there any good reason to think Jesus’s miracles *actually* happened, or can we easily conclude that they are simply legends?

5. We saw in chapter 2 that Jesus’s teachings and miracles were all for a purpose. What was that purpose? What are some of the things Jesus was claiming about himself?

Going Deeper

Think about what you know already about Jesus. Perhaps you’ve heard stories of miracles or accounts of his teaching. What do you think it would have been like to go into the countryside to hear him teach? Do you think you would have found Jesus “astonishing”? Why or why not? If you’re being as charitable as possible, why do you think so many people in our own day stake their lives on Jesus and desire to be his followers?

King of Israel, King of Kings

The story of Jesus is not the story of a good man. It is the story of a Claimant to the Throne.

One of the things that makes Jesus's life so captivating is the fact that he clashed—hard—with the ruling authorities of his day. He was a poor carpenter who eventually found himself at odds with the dominating Roman authorities in the region. That alone tells us that we're not dealing with a mere religious teacher or moral philosopher or ethical sage. No, as Jesus hung humiliated and dying on a Roman cross, the charge the Romans hung above his head read, "This is the King of the Jews" (Luke 23:38). They, of course, were mocking him. But in fact Jesus *was* claiming to be Israel's—and humanity's—King.

1. What was the significance of the voice from heaven saying about Jesus, "This is my beloved Son" (Matt. 3:17)? What would the people standing there have recognized immediately about the title *Son*?

2. Looking at the New Testament, do you think Jesus really made claims to kingship? Which accounts make it clearest that he did? If you had been a Jew living in the first century, what would those claims have meant for your life if you determined that they were true?

3. The nation of Israel was a real nation with a real throne and a real history. What was most striking to you as you read through this short history of Israel's throne?

4. The Old Testament prophets foretold a time when the throne of David would be more than just the national throne of Israel; God would *universalize* its authority. What are some of the specific prophecies that make that promise? If the promise is true, and if it's true that Jesus claimed to be the universal King, does that have implications for you? How?

5. Read again Isaiah's prophecy at the end of chapter 3. Does that sound like an ordinary king to you? Why or why not?

Going Deeper

Think a little more deeply about Isaiah's promise of a coming king. Why do you think ancient Israelites would have found that promise so wonderful? Are there any parts of that promise that would sound wonderful to you, if you really believed it?

The Great “I AM” . . .

Who then is this,
that even the winds
and the sea obey him?

When Peter whispered to Jesus, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God,” it was all coming together for him (Matt. 16:16). Yes, the kings of old had been styled “son of God,” but Peter meant something far more profound: this man sitting in front of him was the King, the Christ, the Anointed One of Israel, and therefore he was by title the son of God. But he was also the *Son* of God. Not just the King of Israel, but the King of kings. This man, Peter had come to realize, was God.

1. What do you think convinced Peter that he should get out of the boat and walk on the water? From what you know about Jesus so far, would you have done it? Why or why not? What would have been in your mind?

2. What are some of the clearest places in the New Testament where Jesus makes a claim to *being* God? Are you convinced that he really did claim that? Why or why not? If you came to believe that Jesus really claimed to be God, what implications might that have in your own life?

3. What do you think of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity? Why do Christians believe it?

4. The author says that even though the doctrine of the Trinity doesn't fully reconcile in his mind, he's okay with that, and he believes it anyway. Do you think that's intellectually irresponsible? Why or why not? Do you believe anything that cannot be finally and conclusively explained and reconciled?

5. If we do accept Jesus's claim to be God—and his claim to be in a unique and exclusive relationship with God the Father—does that have any implications for his claim that “no one comes to the Father except by me” (John 14:6)? Why would Christians claim that salvation may be had *exclusively* through Jesus, and not in any other way?

Going Deeper

Look at each of the three statements that make up the doctrine of the Trinity. See if you can find places in the New Testament where each of those statements is taught. In other words, find an affirmation that there is one and only one God. Then, find instances where God the Father, Jesus himself, and the Holy Spirit are said to be divine. (You'll have to look in the book of Acts for the Holy Spirit). Finally, find places where it's clear that those three are distinct persons. (Hint: look for places where the Father relates somehow to the Son, the Son to the Spirit, and the Spirit to the Father; that kind of interaction will show that they are distinct from one another, not just one person playing three different roles.)

. . . Is One of Us

Christians are convinced that Jesus is the Son of God, the Creator of the world, the great “I AM.” They are equally convinced that the great “I AM” has, incredibly, become one of us.

In the last chapter, we saw that Jesus claimed not only to be King, but also to be God. At the same time, the Bible makes it clear that Jesus was also fully, completely, wholeheartedly, and forever *human*. He didn't just *seem* human, nor did he just have human skin. He *is* human. Though he had existed for all eternity as the second person of the Trinity, in perfect and harmonious and beautiful relationship with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit, he decided to become human, and he knew when he did it that he would never be not-human again. There's only one thing that would lead the Son of God to do that: love.

1. What about Jesus's life shows us that he was in fact human and didn't just *seem* to be human?

2. Think about the fact that when the Son of God became human, he became human *forever*. Have you ever thought about that? What does that fact mean to you?

3. The Bible tells of many times when Jesus showed love to people. Which one or two of those stories affect you the most? What do those stories tell us about the kind of man Jesus is?

4. Why was Jesus baptized if he had no sin of which to repent? Why is it important that Jesus became human, just like us?

5. What do we learn from Jesus's defeat of Satan in the wilderness? What was the real significance of that encounter? What was King Jesus doing for his people?

Going Deeper

Think back to what you thought of Jesus when you began to read this book. Has anything changed in your thinking? What have you seen that you did not know or understand before Jesus? Did you have any misconceptions of Jesus (or Christians' beliefs about him) that have been clarified? If you could see Jesus do and say the things the people who wrote the New Testament documents saw him do and heard him say, do you think you would be drawn to Jesus? Does he seem like a person you would trust? Why or why not?

The Triumph of the Last Adam

You have to wonder if Satan remembered the voice of God promising him, so many millennia ago, “When the King comes, yes, you will bruise his heel, but he will crush your head.”

When Jesus met and defeated Satan in the wilderness, it was a culminating moment in a millennia-long conflict—a conflict involving the fate of all humanity. For centuries Satan had been opposing God and his plans in the world, but now he had come face to face with one who had defeated him—and decisively. But Jesus’s battle with Satan was not just personal. He was picking up a fight for righteousness and obedience that his people had long ago lost completely. He was taking up the fallen sword and standing as his people’s King, Substitute, and Representative.

1. How does the Bible present Satan? What induced him to rebel against the God who made him? How does his temptation to Adam and Eve—“You will be like God!”—reflect his own rebellion against God (Gen. 3:5)?

2. What was God’s purpose for human beings when he created them in the garden of Eden? What does it mean that they are the only creature made “in God’s image” (Gen. 1:26–27)? Why would God’s purpose for the humans have galled Satan so badly?

3. We read in chapter 6: “Satan’s attack on the humans was exquisitely calculated to overthrow everything God had done in the garden” (p. 86). What does that mean? What had God done, and how was Satan’s temptation of the humans aimed at destroying that?

4. Satan’s entire strategy was to overthrow the structures of authority that God had set up in the world. How do you relate to authority in your own life? How do you react to the idea of God’s authority over you?

5. What were the effects of Adam’s sin against God? How are we still seeing those effects in our lives, and in our own place in history?

Going Deeper

Christians believe that Jesus came to be “the last Adam,” that is, to stand as fallen humanity’s King and Champion. How do you feel about the idea that humans need someone to stand in their place and do for them what they cannot do for themselves? How do you feel about the idea that *you* yourself need such a Champion?

Lamb of God, Sacrifice for Man

As the lamb was killed, every eye would have instinctively risen from the dying lamb to one little boy, and the whole family would know: This lamb is dying so that little Joshua here won't. The lamb is dying in Joshua's place.

Seeing Jesus walk down toward the river to be baptized, John pointed at him and cried out something that would have both thrilled and confused the crowd: "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). The people would have known what John was really saying. For centuries, God had been teaching his people that the rightful, fitting penalty for sin was death. But he had also taught them that someone else—a Representative—could die in the sinner's place. Even more amazingly, God had taught them that the one who would die in their place for their sin was . . . him.

1. The Bible says over and over that the penalty for sin is death. It also insists that penalty is right and fitting. Why is death a fitting penalty for sin?

2. What do you think about the Bible's insistence that *you* are a sinner? What about its insistence that you deserve death for your sin? Does that seem out of proportion to you? Why or why not?

3. What is the significance of the story about Moses striking the rock and water coming out of it? What was God teaching his people in that event?

4. Read Isaiah's description of the divine, royal Suffering Servant (Isa. 9:6–7). What does Isaiah say that the promised King will do that is so amazing and unexpected?

5. When Jesus died on the cross, what was he really doing?

Going Deeper

Spend some time thinking about the Bible's insistence that you are a sinner, someone who has rebelled against God and deserves death. Don't just dismiss that thought; at the very least, try to understand why that would strike Christians as so important. Now, understanding that, how would it make you feel to hear that someone else could pay that penalty for you? What emotions does that bring? Do you understand why Christians call all this "good news?"

Resurrected and Reigning Lord

If Jesus didn't rise from the dead, then Christians are pathetic people. But if he *did*, then every human being is confronted with a demand to believe what he said, to acknowledge him as King, and to submit to him as Savior and Lord. And of course, my friend, that includes *you*.

The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is the hinge on which all Christianity turns. It's the foundation on which everything else rests, the capstone that holds everything else about Christianity together. That means that when Christians assert that Jesus rose from the dead, they are making a *historical* claim, not just a *religious* one. They're saying that this thing happened just as surely and really as it happened that Julius Caesar became emperor of Rome. It's the kind of claim that can be thought about and investigated; it can be judged, and you can come to a conclusion about it. *Do you think it happened or not?*

1. Imagine what it would have been like to be a follower of Jesus on the day that he died. What emotions do you think those people felt? What would that Saturday have been like for them?

2. From the accounts in the New Testament documents, do Jesus's followers strike you as credulous, gullible people? Why or why not?

3. Why do Christians say that the resurrection of Jesus is the foundation and capstone of the Christian faith? What happens to Jesus's claims (and Christianity) if he didn't get up from the dead? What happens to those claims if he *did* get up from the dead?

4. Have you given much thought to the question, did Jesus really rise from the dead? If not, why not? What would you have to do to carefully consider that question? Do you think it's an important question to reach a conclusion about?

5. If you have come to the conclusion that you think Jesus really did rise from the dead, what do you think is next for you? What would the Bible say you need to do in response to that? When the Bible says that you need to "believe in" or "trust in" or "rely on" Jesus, what does that mean? What are you trusting in him to *do*?

Going Deeper

So . . . do you think Jesus rose from the dead or not? Why?