

Who Is Jesus?

Greg Gilbert
Foreword by Trip Lee

“Jesus asked his disciples, ‘Who do you say I am?’ It’s a question each of us must answer. In a wonderfully readable and succinct manner, Greg Gilbert mines the pages of Scripture to consider the truth of Christ’s claims about himself. This is essential reading for the Christian and the seeker.”

Jim Daly, President, Focus on the Family

“Greg’s greatest asset is his ability to make profound things simple. As his book *What Is the Gospel?* helps us distinguish the true gospel from the false, so *Who Is Jesus?* helps us distinguish Christ as he presents himself from how we have remade him.”

J. D. Greear, Lead Pastor, The Summit Church, Durham,
North Carolina; author, *Jesus, Continued . . . Why the Spirit
Inside You Is Better than Jesus beside You*

“There is no more important question in the cosmos than, who is Jesus? Greg Gilbert, with brilliant mind and pastoral heart, unpacks that question step by step with both insight and accessibility. Whether you’re a skeptic looking into these things for the first time or a long-time believer, this book will drive you right to where we all need to go: to the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”

Russell D. Moore, President, The Ethics & Religious Liberty
Commission; author, *Tempted and Tried*

“Clearly Christian, but more than polite and respectful to the skeptic, this book helps you consider Jesus carefully. Gilbert throws fresh light upon familiar scenes, joining facts with their significance. It is artful, yet plain and full of beautiful biblical theology. Here is an invitation to you the reader to come to know Jesus yourself.”

Mark Dever, Pastor, Capitol Hill Baptist Church, Washington,
DC; President, 9Marks

“This book does two things at once. It credibly places Jesus in the context of his own times, and shows why he cannot responsibly be left there. It is for those who have never thought about Jesus as well as those who think they know him all too well.”

Timothy George, Founding Dean, Beeson Divinity School;
general editor, *Reformation Commentary on Scripture*

“This little book will be a great tool for introducing people, including the athletes I coach, to the most amazing person who ever lived.”

Coach Ron Brown, University of Nebraska Cornhuskers

“I am always looking for a short and clear book on the life of Jesus that I can put into the hands of someone wanting to truly know who he is and what he did. I now have it in *Who Is Jesus?* Greg Gilbert is right: ‘The story of Jesus is not the story of a good man. It is the story of a Claimant to the Throne.’ Consider the evidence presented in this work and see where it takes you.”

Daniel L. Akin, President, Southeastern Baptist Theological
Seminary

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 **CROSSWAY**

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Who Is Jesus?

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To Justin, Jack, and Juliet

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Foreword

Have you ever mistaken a person for someone else? I remember being at a party with my best friend in high school. We had just arrived when we saw our friend Nicole standing in the corner having a good time. We had spent time with Nicole and her pregnant friend the day before, so we decided to walk over and greet them. My best friend said hey to Nicole, rubbed her friend's belly with a kind smile, and thoughtfully asked, "How's the baby?" The only problem was that this was a different friend. And she wasn't in the least bit pregnant. Man, was I glad I didn't speak up first.

It can be embarrassing and humorous to make mistakes about other people's identities. You risk looking dumb and offending others, so it's best to be sure before you speak up.

The book you hold in your hands is about recognizing someone else's identity, but the stakes are much higher. When we talk about Jesus, we're in a totally different category than recognizing old friends or acquaintances. When we're mistaken about Jesus's identity, it's more than embarrassing—it's tragic.

This is why Greg Gilbert states from the outset that the title

of this book, *Who Is Jesus?*, is the most important question we'll ever ask. That may sound ridiculous to seekers, skeptics, and maybe even some Christians, but if you keep reading, you will see why it's such a vital question. Sure, we're not going to run into the Prince of Peace on the street or at a party, so it's not about putting a name with a face. It's about responding to him with the honor and trust that he deserves.

For example, Greg writes, "Once you begin to understand that Jesus is in fact God, and that he is in a unique and exclusive relationship with God the Father, you also begin to understand that if you want to know the God who created you, then you need to know Jesus. There's just no other way."

If Jesus was just another guy, then knowing him makes no difference. But if Jesus is the Son of God and the only Savior of the world, then knowing him makes all the difference.

Too often we've mistaken Jesus for just another man. Or just another good teacher. Or just another prophet. But none of those descriptions is enough. So in this important little book, Greg helps us to think rightly about who Jesus actually is.

I love *Who Is Jesus?* because it's engaging. I actually enjoyed reading it. It's simple enough for anybody to read, and it addresses real questions. I also love this book because it's filled with Scripture. Greg isn't trying to conjure up new ways to look at Jesus. He's interested only in the actual historical truth. Who is this Jesus and why does he matter? Rather than listen to historians who never saw him, Greg focuses on the testimony of reliable eyewitnesses who met him. He focuses

on God's Word. This makes for an authoritative, potentially life-changing book.

Jesus made some radical claims, and he's the most talked about person in all of history. Who did he claim to be? And is that who he really is? I can think of no better small book to help you answer those questions. I think you'll be as blessed by it as I was.

Trip Lee

Rapper; Pastor; author,
*Rise: Get Up and Live in
God's Great Glory*

What Do You Think?

Who do you think Jesus is?

Maybe you've never really given it much thought. In a way, that's entirely understandable. After all, we're talking about a man who was born in the first century into an obscure Jewish carpenter's family. He never held any political office, never ruled any nation, never commanded any armies. He never even met a Roman emperor. Instead, for three-and-a-half years this man Jesus simply taught people about ethics and spirituality, he read and explained the Jewish Scriptures to Jewish people, and if the eyewitness accounts of his life are to be believed at all, he also did some pretty out-of-the-ordinary things. But then again, Jesus also ran bitterly afoul of the authorities of his day, and not long after he started his public ministry, he wound up being executed on a cross by one of Rome's many provincial governors—a kind of imperial middle manager for the people who had the real power.

On top of that, all this happened some two thousand years

ago. So why are we still talking about him? Why is this man Jesus so . . . inescapable?

Give Jesus a Chance

Regardless of what you personally think about him, surely we can agree that Jesus is a towering figure in the history of the world. One respected historian put Jesus's influence like this: "If it were possible, with some sort of super-magnet, to pull up out of that history every scrap of metal bearing at least a trace of his name, how much would be left?"¹ That's a good question, and the answer is probably, "Not much!"

But it's not just that Jesus is inescapable in some distant, historical kind of way. He's also inescapable in a much closer way than that. Think about it: You probably have at least one or two acquaintances who would say that they are Christians. Maybe they even go to church regularly and sing songs about—or even *to*—Jesus. If you press them on it, they might even say that they have a *relationship* with him, and that their lives in one way or another are organized around him. Not only that, but your city is likely dotted with church buildings of various kinds. Some of those buildings probably have thriving communities of Christians who gather in them on Sundays. Others probably aren't even churches at all anymore. But the point is that everywhere you look, if you're paying attention, you'll see reminders of this one particular man who lived about two millennia ago. And all of it presses the question on us: who is he?

¹Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* (Yale University Press, 1999), 1.

It's not an easy question to answer, mainly because we haven't managed to come to any society-wide consensus about who Jesus really was . . . or is. True, very few people doubt his existence anymore. The basic facts of his life—where and when he lived, how he died—are all pretty well agreed upon. But there's still massive disagreement, even among people who call themselves Christians, about the *significance* of his life and death. Was he a prophet? A teacher? Something entirely different? Was he the Son of God, or just an unusually gifted man? And for that matter, who did *he* think he was? His death at the hands of the Romans—was that part of the plan all along, or did he just get caught in the wrong place at the wrong time? And then there's the biggest question of all: After he was executed, did Jesus stay dead like the rest of us do, or did he . . . not?

For all the disagreement, though, everyone seems to agree on one thing: Jesus was an extraordinary person. He did things and said things that ordinary people simply don't do and say. Even more, the things Jesus said weren't just witty proverbs or ethical gems. They weren't pieces of advice on how to live better in the world. No, Jesus said things like, "I and the Father [by which he meant God] are one," and, "If you have seen me, you have seen the Father." And, maybe most shocking of all, "No one comes to the Father except through me."²

You see what I mean? Ordinary people don't say those sorts of things! God and I are one? No one comes to God except by me? Those aren't ethical teachings that you can decide to

²John 10:30; 14:6

incorporate into your life or not. They are *claims*. They are Jesus saying what he thinks is the *truth*.

Now of course you may not accept what he says. You may reject it outright. But think about it: Wouldn't it make sense not to do that too quickly? Wouldn't it make sense to get to know this man a bit before you completely toss off what he says about you? Let me be bold and make a request, since you've been so kind as to pick up this book and start reading it: Give Jesus a chance. It may be that as you learn more about him, you'll realize that there are actually some very good reasons for believing what he said—about himself, about God, and about *you*.

Where Do You Go to Learn about Jesus?

So . . . how do you get to know a guy who lived two thousand years ago? Even if you start with a belief in the resurrection, it's not like we can knock on the door of heaven and sit down with Jesus over a cup of coffee. So where do you go to learn about Jesus? Many historical documents make reference to the existence, life, death, and even resurrection of Jesus, and you might be able to pick up a thing or two about him there. But most of those documents have at least a couple of problems. For one thing, many of them were written so late—sometimes hundreds of years after Jesus—that they really don't help us much in knowing who he *really* was. Not only that, but in most cases even the best of those documents just don't say much about him. They're concerned with other issues, and so they only mention Jesus or allude to him rather than tell us about him in any detail.

There is, however, one 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. That’s the Bible.

Now wait a second before you close this book! I know some people recoil when the Bible is mentioned because they think of it as “the Christians’ book,” and therefore they think it’s biased and useless for getting accurate information. If that’s what you think, then believe it or not, I’d say you’re half right. The Bible *is* in fact the Christians’ book. Without doubt, the New Testament documents that make up the second part of the Bible were written by people who believed what Jesus said, and they also believed that the Old Testament documents looked forward to his coming. They were believers. That much is undeniable. But that *doesn’t* mean that those people had some insidious agenda. Think about it: What could their agenda possibly have been? To make a name for themselves? To make money? To become powerful rulers of a very rich church? You can speculate about that, of course, but if that’s what they were aiming for, then the plan failed spectacularly. Most of the people who wrote the New Testament documents knew they could be killed for what they said about Jesus. *And yet they kept saying it.*

Do you see the point? If your goal in writing an account of something is just to get noticed, to become powerful, or to wind up rich, then you don’t stick to the story once the jig is up and your head is about to come off. The only way you stick by the story under those circumstances is if your goal is to *tell*

what really happened. That's what we have in the Bible—a collection of eyewitness accounts by people who believed what Jesus said, and who wrote their books in order to give an accurate description of who he was, what he said, and what he did. So how do you get to know Jesus? The best way is by reading those documents—that is, by reading the Bible.

Now, Christians believe that the Bible is way more than just a collection of the best information about Jesus we can get. They believe it is the Word of God, meaning that God himself led the men who wrote it to write what he himself wanted to say, so that everything they wrote was absolutely true. You've probably already guessed this, but I am a Christian myself, and I believe that about the Bible.

But maybe that's a bridge too far for you right now. That's OK. Even if you don't believe that the Bible is the Word of God, the documents it contains are still a matter of history. They're still the writings of people who intended to give an accurate account of Jesus. So if nothing else, approach them like that for now. Ask questions of them, read them critically and carefully just like you would any other historical document. Ask yourself, "Do I think this is true, or do I not?" All I'm asking is that you approach these documents fairly. Don't just drop them with a thud into some box labeled "Religious Junk" and decide from the outset that they must be silly, primitive, and false.

Look, the people who wrote the documents in the New Testament were smart people. They were residents and even citizens of the most powerful empire on the face of the planet.

They read philosophy and literature that we still read in our schools today. (In fact, if you're anything like me, they probably read those books more carefully and thoughtfully than you ever did!) What's more, they knew the difference between fact and fiction. They knew what delusion and deceit were, and they understood how those things differed from history and truth. In fact, the New Testament writers maintained the distinctions between such things far more sharply and carefully than we typically do. And what you realize as you read their writings is that they believed what they were saying about this man Jesus. They were *astonished* by it, but they believed it, and they wanted others to believe it, too. So they wrote in the hope that people would read what they said, get to know Jesus as they knew him, and perhaps come to realize that he is in fact worthy to be believed and trusted.

That's what I'm hoping this little book will help you to do—get to know Jesus through the writings of those earliest Christians. We're not going to work page by page through any one of the New Testament documents. Instead, we're going to use all those sources to try to get to know Jesus in the same way that one who was following him might have experienced him—first as an extraordinary man who did wholly unexpected things, but then with the quickly dawning realization that “extraordinary” doesn't even begin to describe him. Here was a man who claimed to be a prophet, a savior, a king, even God himself—a man whose listeners would have been perfectly justified in chalking him up as a lunatic or a charlatan if only he hadn't kept on *doing* things to back those claims up! Then

there was the way he treated people in such unexpected ways—compassion to outcasts, wrath to the powerful, and love toward the unlovable. On top of it all, despite his claims, Jesus didn't act like a king or a god. When he was offered a crown, he refused it, told his followers to keep quiet about who he really was, and talked instead about how the authorities would soon crucify him like a common criminal. But then again, he spoke as if all that were somehow part of his plan all along. Little by little, as they watched him and heard him, Jesus's followers came to believe that he was more than just an extraordinary man. He was more than a teacher, more than a prophet, more than a revolutionary, even more than a king. As one of them put it to him one night, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God."³

The Most Important Question You'll Ever Consider

So, who is Jesus? That's always been the question. From the moment the shepherds showed up claiming that angels had told them about his birth, to the day he astonished the disciples by calming the sea, to the moment the sun itself stopped shining on the day that he died, everyone was always left asking, "Who is this man?"

Maybe you've come to this book not knowing much about Jesus at all. Maybe you already know quite a bit about Jesus. Either way, I hope that as you read and as we explore his life together, you'll begin to get to know Jesus better—not so much as an academic subject or a religious figure, but as the man

³Matt. 16:16

the earliest Christians knew personally and as a friend. I hope you'll see what amazed them about him, and I hope you'll come away understanding better why millions say, "That is the man I'm trusting with my eternity."

Beyond that, I also hope that this book will challenge you to take Jesus's claims seriously. When someone claims to be your God, you really only have two choices, right? You can reject the claim or you can accept it. What you *can't* do, at least for very long, is suspend judgment and just see how it plays out. Jesus claimed some amazing things about himself, and also about you. Like it or not, that has radical implications for your life. So I hope this book will challenge you to think hard about Jesus, help you to see those claims and implications more clearly, and lead you to a firm answer to the question, who is Jesus?

Really, it's the most important question you'll ever consider.



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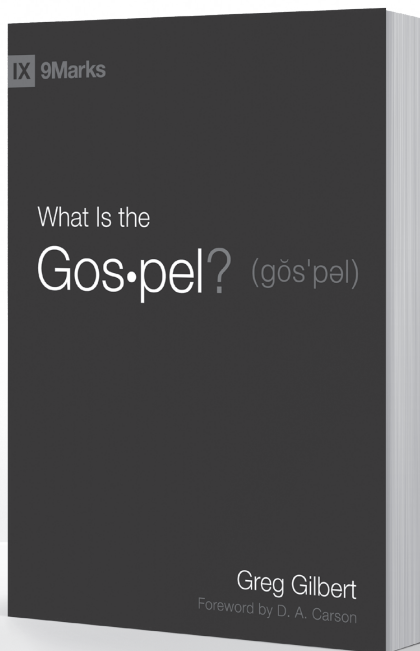
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“Greg Gilbert, with a sharp mind and a pastor’s heart, has written a book that will be helpful for seekers, new Christians, and anyone who wants to understand the gospel with greater clarity. I’ve been waiting for a book like this!”

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MARK DEVER, Senior Pastor, Capitol Hill Baptist Church, Washington DC

Find the Answer to the Most Important Question You Can Ask

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