Knowing Jesus

Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the priceless gain of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. -Philippians 3:8

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By Steven L. Pogue

If you've committed your life to Christ, you have a relationship with Him. That's a great beginning! Developing that relationship involves getting to know Him better.

The best way to learn about Jesus is to read His claims concerning his identity in the Gospels. The Gospels are the first four books in the New Testament and tell the "good news" (which is what the gospel means) of Jesus Christ. They were written in the first century A.D. and were based upon eyewitness accounts of Jesus' life.

Jesus was born about 4 or 5 B.C. (Our calendars are a little off.) The nation of Israel had been under foreign occupation almost continuously since the seventh century B.C., and the Jews fought to maintain national identity. Every faithful Jew kindled the hope that one day Messiah would appear and provide salvation for the nation by overthrowing Roman rule. Messiah is a Hebrew word meaning "the anointed one," and Christ is a title, not Jesus' last name.

The bulk of the Gospel accounts is devoted to the three years that Jesus spent ministering around the Sea of Galilee in northern Israel. They tell us of the life and teachings of a unique person. Jesus, the Gospels explain, demonstrated his divine powers by healing the sick, blind and lame; by raising the dead; by walking on water and calming a storm at sea. His teaching lacked the exacting legalism and piousness that characterized so much of contemporary Judaism. He became tremendously popular among the masses in Galilee.

Throughout his ministry Jesus kept pointing the people to Himself. The masses wanted a political liberator. The religious establishment wanted their positions of power and piety recognized. Jesus pandered to neither group.

Let's examine four incidents in the Gospel of John to determine what Jesus claimed about Himself.

John 5: Jesus Calls God His Father

In the Gospel of John, chapter 5, Jesus was accosted by Jewish religious leaders for healing an invalid on the Sabbath (the Jewish "Day of Rest"). They considered any expenditure of effort on that day a violation of

God's command to maintain it as a day of rest. Over the centuries they had meticulously codified what was permissible, and Jesus' action flaunted their strict rules.

Jesus defended his action of healing on the Sabbath by explaining that God, as the sustainer of the universe, never rests but continually keeps working. And God is always doing good in human history. Since God cannot stop his work: "My Father constantly does good, and I'm following his example." Then the Jewish leaders were all the more eager to kill Him because in addition to disobeying their Sabbath laws, He had spoke of God as his Father, thereby making Himself equal with God (John 5:17,18).

The Jews saw Jesus' claim to deity as a virulent blasphemy. During the centuries of occupation by foreign nations, many Jews had endured terrible sufferings to remain faithful to worship Jehovah, the one true God. How could Jesus, a good Jew, ever think of saying that He was equal with God?

John 8: Jesus Has Always Existed

Three chapters later in John's Gospel, Jesus is conversing again with the Jewish leaders. He was in Jerusalem for the Feast of the Tabernacles, a celebration commemorating God's direction to Moses and the nation of Israel during their journey from Egypt to the Promised Land.

In this conversation Jesus made several claims. He said that He was the light of the world, that He could free men from sin and that anyone who believed in Him would not die. The Jewish leaders were again incensed by his seemingly preposterous claims but apparently decided to humor Him, hoping to reveal his inconsistencies. Not even Abraham, venerated founder of Judaism, had claimed to be immortal, so how could Jesus claim this? Jesus replied: "Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad."

"You are not yet fifty years old," the Jews said to Him, "and you have seen Abraham!"

"I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "before Abraham was born, I am!"
At this, they picked up stones to stone Him... (John 8:56-59, NIV).

His remarks were even more inflammatory because of his use of the words, I am. In the Old Testament, Moses saw a burning bush as he was tending sheep in the desert. Approaching the bush, God suddenly spoke to Moses and told him to return to Egypt and lead the Israelites out of bondage. God assured Moses that he would be with him.

Moses asked God who he should say sent him. God replied: "I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you'" (Exodus 3:14, NIV). I AM was not so much a label for God as it was an indication of God's complete ability to deliver the Israelites from bondage. Jesus ascribed this same name and power to Himself.

John 10: Jesus Is Equal To God

This third claim is recorded in the tenth chapter of John. It occurs at the Feast of Dedication, or Hanukkah. Jesus is again in Jerusalem, and there is considerable speculation among the crowds and religious leaders: Will Jesus announce that He is the Messiah? Tradition had always taught that the Messiah would be revealed at one such feast.

The Jewish leaders gathered around Jesus and asked Him if He was the Messiah. It may have been genuine curiosity, but more likely they intended to set a trap for Jesus, forcing Him to say something that would warrant his arrest and execution. Instead of giving them a direct answer, Jesus said that He had already told them who He was and that they had not believed Him:

"My sheep recognize my voice, and I know them, and they follow me...my Father has given them to me...I and the Father are one."
Then again, the Jewish leaders picked up stones to kill Him.
Jesus said, "At God's direction I have done many a miracle to help the people. For which one are you killing me?"
They replied, "Not for any good work, but for blasphemy; you, a mere man, have declared yourself to be God" (John 10:27-33).

John 11: Jesus Offers Life Eternal

Lazarus, a close friend of Jesus, became ill. He lived in Bethany, less than two miles to the east of Jerusalem. Jesus at the time was many miles further to the east, ministering along the Jordan River. After He heard of Lazarus' illness, Jesus waited two days before departing. By the time He arrived in Bethany, Lazarus was already dead and buried.

Martha, Lazarus' sister, went out to meet Jesus and exclaimed that her brother would still be alive if Jesus had arrived sooner. Then follows this exchange:

Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."

Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believe in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

"Yes, Lord," she told Him, "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world" (John 11:23-27, NIV).

Jesus moved near the cave-like tomb where Lazarus was buried. Praying aloud, He thanked his Father for hearing Him: "I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me: (John 11:42, NIV). His prayer finished, Jesus commanded Lazarus to leave the tomb, and the dead man came out, still wrapped in grave clothes.

What These Claims to Deity Mean

Jesus made what seemed to be extravagant claims about Himself: equality and oneness with God, eternal pre-existence, and the source of everlasting life. These are not the statements of a mere mortal (at least a sane one). Jesus also declared that He had final authority over all the earth, that He would one day return and judge the earth, that He could forgive sin and that He was the only way to God. He said He could give life and fill man's greatest hunger. He called Himself the Son of Man, an Old Testament prophetic term for the Messiah. He allowed others to worship Him even though Jews were to worship God alone.

During the trial preceding the crucifixion, the Jewish leaders said this to the Roman governor Pilate: "We have a law, and according to that law He must die, because He claimed to be the Son of God" (John 19:7, NIV). Jesus of Nazareth was killed not for what He did, but for who He claimed to be. C.S. Lewis, the Cambridge University literature professor who journeyed from skepticism to Christianity, once remarked: "I am trying to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: 'I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God.' That is the 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 a 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."[1]

Christ is the unique personality of history

Of all the founders of major world religions, Christ alone claimed to be God! Abraham, Mohammed, Confucius, Buddha—none claimed to be God. Buddha, for example, told his disciples near the end of his life not to worry about remembering Him, but to remember his teaching about the Way of enlightenment.

Each of these founders of world religions can be divorced from his teaching without a total and irreparable loss to that religion. But Christianity is built upon Christ: who He claimed to be and what He did. His teaching is almost embarrassingly self-centered. What else can be said of someone who declares: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6, NIV)? But if Jesus' claims are true, then his statements are full of hope. We can know God because Jesus is God.

Fully God and Fully Man

Jesus Christ is not only fully God, but He is also fully man. He experienced hunger and thirst, loneliness, and the pain of betrayal and rejection. He suffered the humiliation of hanging naked upon the cross. He experienced temptations. He at real food, cried real

tears at the death of a friend and lost real blood during his crucifixion. Even his resurrection was physical. Jesus Christ was fully man.

What does it mean to us that Jesus Christ is fully God and fully man?

1. Because Jesus is God, He is worthy of our worship. We should treat Him as God, with reverence and respect. Jesus is not our buddy; He is our Lord.

The Lordship of Jesus means allowing Him direction over every area of our life: not only our religious worship and our private devotions, but our career, our family, our finances, our attitudes. Knowing Christ should affect our relationship with others and what we watch on television. Giving Christ control of these areas isn't what gets us into heaven; [giving Christ control] is a response to our eternal relationship with Him. He is your powerful Lord, Love Him, Worship Him.

2. Because Jesus is God, He is able to handle all of our problems. There is nothing we face that God cannot overcome. Jesus is the "I AM" who can do all things. Jesus claims that He is able to make all things work for good in our life (Romans 8:28). In fact, He is "able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine" (Ephesians 3:20, NIV). As you get to know Jesus better, I hope you will see that He has the power to do in your life what He promises.

3. Because Jesus is God, He was able to reconcile us to God. Jesus is more than a friend. He is our Savior.

4. Because Jesus is fully man, He is able to identify with all of our needs and problems. There is nothing we go through that He cannot understand: "Because He Himself suffered when He was tempted, He is able to help those who are being tempted" (Hebrews 2:18, NIV). By living among us, Jesus perfectly understood all that we feel.

5. Jesus' identity as fully man affirms our humanity. We do not become more Christian by becoming less human. God created us in his image and wants us to enjoy life with all of its possibilities. He gave each of us talents and abilities that He wants us to develop.

This does not mean that following Christ will make you healthy and wealthy (though it will make you wise!).

There will be personal sacrifices. You may have to give up what is comfortable: an old lifestyle, private habits, a career path, financial success, even your life. But you will discover that in living as God intends, life will be purposeful even in great difficulties.

1. C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity (New York: Macmillan, 1952), pp55-56. Used by permission.

This article is an excerpt from Steven L. Pogue's book, ***The First Year of Your Christian Life****. If you would like to purchase a copy of this book, you may do so here:* www.campuscrusade.com/books.