

Who Is Jesus? Dying God

Journey Back.

I invite you to journey back in time about 2000 years to the Middle East. Imagine yourself as one of Jesus' closest followers. You have lived with him for almost three years, studying his words and actions. After listening to his teachings, witnessing countless miracles and incredible healings, and hearing Jesus himself affirm his deity, you are convinced that this Jesus must be the long-awaited Messiah, the very Son of God sent to deliver your people from oppression, bring justice, and usher in peace.

Late one night, a band of men approach Jesus to arrest him. Perhaps you prepare to draw a sword, wondering if this is the beginning of the Messiah's political campaign. Shockingly, Jesus surrenders himself without a fight. Questions flood your mind. *What is he doing?* The next day, you observe Jesus quiet and helpless during numerous trials. *Why isn't he defending himself?* Roman guards beat him. *How can they torture the Messiah?* Finally, you see him too weak to even carry his cross. He hangs with nails in his hands as an angry crowd jeers throughout the crucifixion. "He saved others, but he can't save himself. Let this Messiah, this king of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe," the crowd mocks.ⁱ Secretly, you wonder the same thing. *Why doesn't he save himself?* The final blow to your faith in Jesus comes when the Roman soldiers confirm his death. All of your hopes are dashed that this Jesus is the Messiah. *He can't be. He's dead.* Never before has such excitement and hope so quickly transformed into shock and fear. You flee the scene.

What good is a dead Messiah?

At first, I did not understand how the disciples could desert Jesus so quickly. I criticized them as cowards for fearing persecution so much as to shrink from the Messiah. However, after placing myself in their shoes, I could better understand their desertion was greatly a result of the fear that what they had believed about Jesus was false. The disciples had proclaimed him to be the Messiah, the Son of God. Jesus' suffering and death rattled this belief, and stripped them bare of their faith. In their minds, a dead Jesus couldn't be the Messiah, for as Josh McDowell asks, "What good is a dead Messiah?"ⁱⁱ In fact, it would be ludicrous for them to continue risking their lives for something they doubted.ⁱⁱⁱ Upon reflection, I realized that I would have fled, too.

The Great Mystery.

Jesus claimed to be the Son of God, and died less than 24 hours later.^{iv} Many view this as proof that he was not the Son of God. However, although the idea of a dying God is shocking, it does not necessitate the rejection of Jesus' claim. Just because something is unimaginable does not preclude its possibility. It simply means that it will take careful consideration and an open mind for us to wrap our heads around this "mystery," as some of Jesus' followers called it.^v

The message and story of Jesus is indeed a mystery because although Jesus fulfilled (and will fulfill) all of the Old Testament prophecies and promises regarding the Messiah, *he does it in an unexpected way.* God revealed knowledge of the Messiah through the prophets, but He concealed some parts of His magnificent plan from human understanding. Through Jesus, God finally revealed the mystery that He had "kept hidden for ages and generations."^{vi} In reading Old Testament Scriptures in light of Jesus' Messiahship, one can piece together the puzzle and reconcile a dying Messiah. This plan, however, was impossible for man to predict, which is why the mystery remained hidden until Jesus.^{vii}

Jesus' followers were right in expecting a Messiah who would deliver them from oppression, exert justice, and bring everlasting peace. They awaited this end through the means of a victorious political savior, but it came through a penniless carpenter who hung on a cross. However, to fully grasp this, it is necessary to understand what exactly happened on the cross and resulted from Jesus' death.

The Death of the Son of God.

Jesus died to take the punishment for our sins, so that we would not have to. The Bible teaches that all men have sinned; we have all done wrong.^{viii} More specifically, we have all rejected the Divine will of God, and have selfishly sought our own way. God created us to live in relationship with him, and to worship and obey him. The rejection of our Creator is such an offense that when God describes our turning away from him to other things, he declares, "Be appalled at this, you heavens, and shudder with great horror."^{ix} Our sin separates us from the Holy God, obstructing our peaceful relationship with him.^x The punishment for our sin is death, a spiritual separation from God for eternity.

When Jesus died on the cross, he served as a substitute for us. Jesus never sinned during his life, so he could be the perfect sacrifice to bear the penalty and suffer the consequences for our sin. Christian author John R.W. Stott describes what happened on the cross as this:

Our sins came between the Father and the Son. The Lord Jesus Christ, who was eternally with the Father, who enjoyed unbroken communion with him throughout his life on earth, was thus momentarily abandoned. . . . He tasted the torment of a soul estranged from God. Bearing our sins, he died our death. He endured instead of us the penalty of separation from God which our sins deserved.^{xi}

After Jesus' death, reconciliation with God became available. The Bible teaches, "God made him [Jesus] who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."^{xii} God forgives us by exchanging our sin for Jesus' righteousness. The Apostle Paul writes, "For God was pleased to have all his [God's] fullness dwell in him [Jesus], and through him [Jesus] to reconcile to himself [God] all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his [Jesus'] blood, shed on the cross."^{xiii} Through faith, repentance, and daily following Christ, our relationship with God is restored, and we will no longer have to pay the penalty for our sins. In this way, the death of the Messiah brings the deliverance, justice, and peace Jesus' followers expected. It does not come through a political savior, but through the savior of our souls.

My favorite part of the great mystery is the reason why God designed this plan to redeem humanity though it cost him the death of His Son. The reason is love. Our sin demanded a punishment that required blood; someone had to die.^{xiv} Although we do not deserve His forgiveness, God decided to take our punishment Himself because He loves us and wants us to be reconciled to him. Jesus explained, "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."^{xv}

Journey Back.

Journey back once again to the moments before Jesus' death. With light shed on the mystery of Jesus, what do you now see in viewing the cross? Do you look at Jesus' powerlessness as an example of God's impotence, or as proof of God's love?^{xvi} Do you jeer at a Messiah who seemingly cannot save himself, or do you admire a compassionate and loving Savior who willingly gives his very life for the sake of those insulting him? Do you reject the notion of a dying God, or will you embrace him as Lord and Savior?

Shannon Walker '11

slwalker@princeton.edu

www.tennetmedia.com

ⁱ Mark 15:32

ⁱⁱ McDowell, Josh. *More than a Carpenter*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc, 1977.

ⁱⁱⁱ One of the greatest evidences I see for the claims of Christ as the Messiah is the transformation of his followers. They all fled the night of his arrest, and one even denied knowing him three times. So, what caused the miraculous transformation of these cowardly, unbelieving men into courageous endorsers of Jesus as Lord and Christ (Acts 2:36)? To me, the only explanation, as described by Josh McDowell, is in the resurrection of Jesus and his subsequent appearance to them. This confirmed to his followers that Jesus was in fact the Messiah. Their faith was restored, and they garnered newfound zeal and bravery to face persecution and martyrdom. McDowell provides the following analysis: "Yes, a lot of people have died for a good cause, but the good cause of the apostles died on the cross. Only the resurrection and resultant contact with Christ convinced his followers he was the Messiah. To this, they testified not only with their lips and lives, but with their deaths."ⁱⁱⁱⁱ More can be found in Josh McDowell's book [More than a Carpenter](#), which addresses questions on Christianity.

^{iv} Luke 22:66-71

^v 1 Timothy 3:16, Colossians 2:2

^{vi} Colossians 1:26

^{vii} Isaiah 53

^{viii} Romans 3:23

^{ix} Jeremiah 2:12

^x Isaiah 59:2

^{xi} Stott, John R.W. [Basic Christianity](#). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1971.

^{xii} 2 Corinthians 5:21

^{xiii} Colossians 1:19-20

^{xiv} Leviticus 17:11, Hebrews 9:22

^{xv} John 3:16

^{xvi} Yancey, Philip. [The Jesus I Never Knew](#). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995.