



Jesus of Nazareth

It was an unknown author who offered this striking summary of Jesus' impact on the history of the past 20 centuries: "I am far within the mark when I say that all the armies that ever marched, and all the navies that ever sailed, all the parliaments that ever sat, and all the kings that ever reigned, put together have not affected the life of man upon this earth as powerfully as this one solitary life."

According to the four Gospels, which scholars have shown to be reliable historical works, Jesus Christ was born in a stable in Bethlehem, a town in Roman-occupied Palestine, around 4 BC. His birth was attended by shepherds and heralded by angels singing, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men of good will." After a flight into Egypt to escape the murderous wrath of King Herod, the infant Jesus returned to Palestine with his parents, Mary and Joseph, and grew up in the village of Nazareth, where he worked in Joseph's carpenter shop.



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At the age of 30 Jesus left Nazareth, gathered around him 12 men who became known as his apostles, and traveled throughout Palestine preaching love of God and love of neighbor and attracting followers by the thousands because he spoke with authority. He was a marvelous storyteller, illustrating his teachings with examples about persons, places, and things that were familiar to his listeners. Jesus spoke of fishermen casting their nets, farmers harvesting their fields, laborers working in the vineyards, shepherds chasing after their lost sheep, and a pompous religious leader lording it over a humble and repentant sinner.

The parables of Christ are often cited even by non-Christians as literary and moral masterpieces for the simple yet profound messages they convey. To answer the question, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan a bitter enemy of the Jews who nevertheless assisted a Jewish man left for dead by robbers after two of the victim's countrymen had ignored his plight.

To illustrate the forgiveness of God, Jesus related the tale of the Prodigal Son, the younger of two boys who took his share of the family's wealth, spent it all on loose living, and returned home shamefaced and repentant. His father, representing God, not only forgave his son but threw a party for him because the young man "was lost, and is found."

The core of Jesus' moral code was love, not only of God and neighbor but even of enemies. He adhered



Written by [Denise Behreandt](#) on December 24, 2008

to this difficult standard himself on the cross by asking forgiveness for those who had crucified him. "This is my commandment: Love one another as I have loved you," Jesus told the apostles at the Last Supper. "There is no greater love than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends." He exemplified this love himself by dying on the cross for the sins of the world.

Jesus urged his followers personally to help those in need — the hungry, the thirsty, the sick, the imprisoned, saying that whatever they did "for one of my least brothers, you did it for me." He asked them to forgive the faults of others and laid down the Golden Rule: "Treat others the way you would have them treat you." He forbade murder and adultery, anger and hatred, and encouraged prayer, fasting, and sacrifice, saying that "if a man wishes to come after me, he must deny his very self, take up his cross, and follow in my steps."

Thousands of people were drawn to Jesus by his tenderness and compassion for the sick and the suffering ("Come to me, all you who are weary and find life burdensome, and I will refresh you"); by his mercy and forgiveness toward sinners (When the Pharisees criticized him for associating with sinners, Jesus said, "People who are healthy do not need a doctor; sick people do"); and by his courage and fearlessness (He chased the moneychangers out of the temple and condemned the hypocrisy of the Scribes and Pharisees, comparing them to "whitewashed tombs — beautiful to look at on the outside but inside full of filth and dead men's bones").

Angry at Jesus' criticism of them and jealous of the crowds that followed him, the Pharisees sent clever men out to question Jesus while he was speaking in the hope of tripping him up. But he confounded them time and again, as when they asked him if it were lawful to pay taxes to the hated Romans, and he replied: "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, but give to God what is God's." Or when they asked if a woman caught in adultery should be stoned to death, and Christ said: "Let the man among you who has no sin be the first to cast a stone at her."

But Christians throughout the world believe that Jesus was more than just a good and holy man; they believe that he was the Son of God, the Messiah promised in the Old Testament. As evidence of their belief, Christians cite the fulfillment in Jesus of Old Testament prophecies regarding the place and circumstances of the Messiah's birth, the betrayal and suffering he would endure, and the manner in which he would die.

But the most convincing evidence of Jesus' claim to be God, they say, was the spectacular miracles he performed before hundreds and even thousands of eyewitnesses ("These very works which I perform testify on my behalf that the Father has sent me"). The Gospels report that he changed water into wine; cured the blind, deaf, and lame; exorcised demons from people; fed thousands with only a few loaves of bread and fishes; and raised three people from the dead.

The raising of Lazarus four days after he had died was the last straw as far as the chief priests and Pharisees were concerned and they plotted to kill Jesus, getting unexpected help from one of Christ's own apostles, Judas, who was willing to betray his master for 30 pieces of silver. Jesus was arrested late at night, put through the mockery of a trial, beaten and tortured, and finally put to death on the orders of Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor.

The followers of Jesus thought that they had seen the last of him when his body was taken down from the cross and placed in a borrowed grave outside Jerusalem nearly 2,000 years ago. But three days later, according to the Gospels, the tomb was found to be empty and more than a dozen people reported having seen Jesus alive that Sunday. Over the next 40 days, Jesus was reportedly seen in different



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places at different times by individuals, by small groups of people, and by large groups, including a crowd of 500.

On the 40th day, according to reliable eyewitness accounts, Jesus gave his apostles their final instructions — to carry his teachings "to the ends of the earth." He promised to remain with his church "until the end of the world" and then rose up into the heavens.

Whatever attitude people hold toward Jesus Christ, whether they believe him to be God or not, there is no question that if his teachings were faithfully followed by everyone, the world would be a better and more peaceful place in which to live. Merry Christmas!

This article originally appeared in the December 22, 1986 issue of The New American.



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