

The Historical Jesus

By Paul Gould

Pre-Session Assignments

One week before the session, participants will take the following assignments.

Assignment One

Read Matthew 16:13–16 and then turn to the comments related to “Who Is Jesus?” in the section **It’s in the Book**. Prepare to share your answers to the following questions: What are some of the popular views about Jesus in culture today? Who do your friends think Jesus is? Who do you think Jesus is? Why does this question matter?

Assignment Two

Read the comments related to “Did Jesus Claim to Be God?” in the section **It’s in the Book**. Look up the following passages and prepare to share what you learn about Jesus: John 8:58–59; Mark 14:61–62; Matthew 14:33; 28:17; and Mark 2:2–12.

Assignment Three

Read the comments related to “Is Jesus God?” in the section **It’s in the Book**. Look up the following passages and prepare to share what you learn about Jesus’s character (for example, His emotions, His intellect, and His relationships): Matthew 9:35–38; Matthew 5:1–16; and John 11:32–36.

Scripture to Memorize

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.” John 1:14

Session Goal

Consistent with God’s Word and in the power of the Holy Spirit—by the end of this session, disciples will understand how to show others, through a simple argument, that Jesus is Lord.

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It's in the Book

30 minutes

Real-Life Scenario

Imagine being in history class. The topic of the day is Jesus. Questions that arise include: What do Christians believe about Jesus? Who, really, was Jesus? Was Jesus a real person? Did He really think He was God, or did the early church make Him into a God? The class discussion is all over the map. Some Christians begin to quote Bible verses. Some passionately argue that Jesus was a great moral teacher and nothing more. Others sneer. Most seem confused. What would you say to the class? Who do you think Jesus is?

Who Is Jesus?

Our culture is confused about Jesus. But, as C. S. Lewis famously pointed out, an honest look at the life of Jesus reveals that Jesus was either God or a bad man.

On the one side clear, definite moral teaching. On the other, claims which, if not true, are those of a megalomaniac, compared with whom Hitler was the most sane and humble of men. There is no half-way house and there is no parallel in other religions. . . . The idea of a great moral teacher saying what Christ said is out of the question. In my opinion, the only person who can say that sort of thing is either God or a complete lunatic suffering from that form of delusion which undermines the whole mind of man. . . . It is either lunacy or lies . . . [or] one turns to the Christian theory.¹

In this study we'll explore a simple way to help others see that Jesus is Lord. By asking three questions, in the following order, it is possible to show that the "Christian theory" is the best theory. In other words, it is possible to show that the best explanation for the facts surrounding the person of Jesus is that He is Lord. The three questions we shall explore are: (1) Did Jesus exist? (2) Did Jesus claim to be God? (3) Was Jesus God?

Assignment One Feedback

The person who completed **Assignment One** during the week can now report the answers to the first three questions.

Discussion Question

Read out loud Matthew 16:13–16. Why does our view of Jesus matter?

On Your Own

In the space below make two columns, one with "What I Believe about Jesus" and the other with "What Scripture Says about Jesus." When finished, compare the two lists. What did you notice? Discuss as a group.

What I Believe about Jesus

What Scripture Says about Jesus

Did Jesus Exist?

There is overwhelming evidence that Jesus existed. The primary source of evidence is the New Testament biographies of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John). Moreover, there is supporting evidence from Jewish sources (such as the historian Josephus and the Talmud), Roman sources (such as Suetonius and Tacitus), and even the apostolic fathers (such as Ignatius and Clement) that all affirm the existence of Jesus. Jesus existed. He is not legend.

Discussion Question

Review the reasons the Gospels are historically trustworthy and therefore a good source for evidence concerning the reality of Jesus. (You may want to review the lesson “The Historical Accuracy of the Bible” in this series).

Did Jesus Claim to Be God?

Once His existence is established, our second question is, Did Jesus claim to be God? He either did or did not. If Jesus did not claim to be God, then He is best understood as a “lama”—a holy man, or a great moral teacher, on the same level as Siddhartha Gautama, Lao-Tze, Confucius, Socrates, the Hindu avatars, or the prophet Moses. Alternatively, if Jesus did claim to be God, then the options narrow, as we shall soon see. Let’s consider a passage from the Gospel of John.

Read John 10:22–33 out loud.

Studying the Passage

Verse 24. So the Jews gathered around Him, . . . “If You are the Christ, tell us plainly.”

The Jews were asking if Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah. They were waiting for the Messiah of Israel to come and establish a throne on earth in order to correct the injustices of the world and usher in a new golden age for Israel.

Verse 30. I and the Father are one. Jesus was claiming equality with God the Father. The word **one** signifies being of the same essence as the Father. The Jews understood the implications of Jesus’ words and immediately picked up stones to stone Him for claiming to be God.

Assignment Two Feedback

The person who completed **Assignment Two** during the week can now report on the results of exploring selected passages from the Gospels. What are some of the additional claims made by Jesus that support the contention that Jesus claimed to be God?

Discussion Questions

What is the significance of Jesus’ accepting worship (Matthew 14:33; 28:17)? What is the significance of Jesus’ forgiving sins (Mark 2–12)? What is the significance of Jesus’ claiming to be the Messiah (especially in Mark 14:61–62 in which Jesus quotes from Daniel 7:13–14)?

Was Jesus God?

We are now in position to ask our final question: Was Jesus God? We’ve established His existence and claim to be divine. With respect to our last question, there are three options. Either He claimed to be God and knew the claim was false, in which case He was a liar; or He

claimed to be God and did not know the claim was false, in which case He was a lunatic; or He claimed to be God and the claim is true, in which case He is Lord. Let's consider each of these options in turn.

If Jesus were a liar, He deliberately misled others regarding His identity and mission. This would make Him a colossal *moral failure*. But this option is implausible. Jesus had nothing to gain by dying for a lie. Moreover, His whole life and teaching are at odds with the claim that Jesus lied. Alternatively, if Jesus were a lunatic, He was a *psychological failure*. The problem with this option is that it does not fit well with the things we know about Jesus' character and actions. Those who suffer from the kind of "God complex" Jesus would have suffered from tend to exhibit unhealthy character traits. However, a look at Jesus reveals someone incredibly well balanced intellectually, emotionally and relationally.

The unparalleled life and impact of Jesus point us toward our final option: Jesus is Lord. We've ruled out all options but one. Jesus was not legend, lama, liar or lunatic. Jesus existed, claimed to be God and is God. Jesus is Lord! The logic of our argument naturally leads to this conclusion.

Assignment Three Feedback

The person who completed **Assignment Three** during the week can now report about Jesus' character. What did you find most fascinating about Jesus in these passages?

Discussion Question

Why is it so hard for people today to accept Jesus as Lord?

Heart and Hands

8 minutes

Read again the **Real-Life Scenario** near the beginning of the lesson. Consider whether your answers have changed during the session.

Be silent for two or three minutes. Thank Jesus for His sacrifice and for the gospel. Adore Him for His glorious reign on the throne of heaven. Then ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to you:

1. A way the Scriptures you studied today will change your heart for the glory of Christ.
2. Or a way those Scriptures will lead you to stop doing something for the glory of Christ.
3. Or a way those Scriptures will lead you to do something for the glory of Christ.

Write what the Spirit says to you below and then be ready to share what you have written with the group.

Since Last Week

5 minutes

Grace-Filled Accountability

5 minutes

Planning for Evangelism, Missions and Service

5 minutes

Prayer

7 minutes

At Home: Nail it Down

The most important question one can ask today is, “What am I to make of Jesus Christ?” Many are confused about the identity and mission of Jesus.

In this study, a three-step process was discussed which will help others understand and see Jesus as Lord. First, did Jesus exist? The overwhelming evidence from the Gospels and outside (Jewish, Roman and early Christian) sources supports this claim. Jesus is not *legend*.

Second, did Jesus claim to be God? A careful look at the Gospels reveals that Jesus claimed equality with God (John 8:58–59; 10:30), claimed to be the Messiah of Israel with unprecedented authority as a divine agent (Mark 14:61–62), claimed to forgive sins (Mark 2:2–12), and accepted worship as God (Matthew 14:33; 28:17). Jesus is not merely a great moral teacher, a *lama*.

Third, was Jesus God? If He existed, claimed to be God and knew this claim was false, He was a *liar*. This is implausible given His life and moral teachings and the fact that He had nothing to gain from dying for a lie.

If He existed, claimed to be God and did not know this claim to be false, then He was a *lunatic*. This is implausible, as well. Jesus was incredibly well balanced and healthy emotionally, intellectually and relationally.

The final option is that Jesus existed, claimed to be God, and is God. Jesus is *Lord!* This option best explains the facts of Jesus’ life and ministry, vindicated by (among other things) His resurrection, which shows that He was right about Himself. Today Jesus is reigning from the throne of heaven, King of kings and Lord of lords.

Follow Up Question

How would you demonstrate to someone that Jesus is Lord?

The Making Disciples curriculum is a gift from Southwestern Seminary to those who, for the glory of the Father and in the power of the Spirit, will spend a lifetime embracing the full supremacy of the Son, responding to His kingly reign in all of life, inviting Christ to live His life through them, and joining Him in making disciples among all peoples.

¹ C. S. Lewis, “What Are We to Make of Jesus Christ?” in Walter Hooper ed., *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 157, 158, 160.