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WHY JESUS?

Is Jesus relevant today?

Many think that Jesus Christ wants us to become religious. They think Jesus came to take all the fun out of life, and give us impossible rules to live by. They are willing to call him a great leader from the past, but say he is not relevant to their lives today.

Josh McDowell was a college student who thought Jesus was just another religious leader who set up impossible rules to live by. He thought Jesus was totally irrelevant to his life.

Then one day at a student union lunch table McDowell sat next to a vibrant young coed with a radiant smile. Intrigued, he asked her why she was so happy. Her immediate reply was, *“Jesus Christ!”*

Jesus Christ? McDowell bristled, firing back:

“Oh, for God’s sake, don’t give me that garbage. I’m fed up with religion; I’m fed up with the church; I’m fed up with the Bible. Don’t give me that garbage about religion.”

But the unfazed young coed calmly informed him,

“Mister, I didn’t say religion, I said Jesus Christ.”

McDowell was stunned. He had never considered Jesus more than a religious figure, and didn’t want any part of religious hypocrisy. Yet here was this joyful Christian woman talking about Jesus as someone who had brought meaning to her life.

Christ claimed to answer all the deep questions about our existence. At one time or another, we all question what life is all about. Have you ever gazed up at the stars on a pitch-black evening and wondered who put them there? Or have you ever seen a sunset and thought about life’s biggest questions:

- “Who am I?”
- “Why am I here?”
- “Where am I going after I die?”

Although other philosophers and religious leaders have offered their answers to the meaning of life, only Jesus Christ proved his credentials by rising from the dead. Skeptics like McDowell who originally scoffed at Jesus’ resurrection, have discovered that there is compelling evidence that it really occurred.

Jesus offers life with real meaning. He said that life is much more than making money, having fun, being successful, and then ending up in a graveyard. Yet, many people still try to find meaning in fame and success, even the greatest superstars...

Madonna attempted to answer the question of, "Why am I here?" by becoming a diva, confessing, "There were many years when I thought fame, fortune, and public approval would bring me happiness. But one day you wake up and realize they don't...I still felt

something was missing...I wanted to know the meaning of true and lasting happiness and how I could go about finding it."¹

Others have given up on finding meaning. Kurt Cobain, lead singer of the Seattle grunge band Nirvana, despaired of life at age 27 and committed suicide. Jazz-age cartoonist Ralph Barton also found life to be meaningless, leaving the following suicide note: "I have had few difficulties, many friends, great successes; I have gone from wife to wife, and from house to house, visited countries of the world, but I am fed up with inventing devices to fill up 24 hours of the day."²

Pascal, the great French philosopher believed this inner void we all experience can only be filled by God. He states, "There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every man which only Jesus Christ can fill."³ If Pascal is right, then we would expect Jesus to not only answer the question of our identity and meaning in this life, but also to give us hope for life after we die.

Can there be meaning, without God? Not according to atheist Bertrand Russell, who wrote, "Unless you assume a god, the question of life's purpose is meaningless."⁴ Russell resigned himself to ultimately "rot" in the grave. In his book, *Why I am not a Christian*, Russell dismissed everything Jesus said about life's meaning, including his promise of eternal life.

But if Jesus actually defeated death as eyewitnesses claim, (See "Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?") then he alone would be able to tell us what life is all about, and answer, "Where am I going?" In order to understand how Jesus' words, life, and death can establish our identities, give us meaning in life, and provide hope for the future, we need to understand what he said about God, about us, and about himself.

What Did Jesus Say About God?

God Is Relational

Many think of God more as a force than a person who we can know and enjoy. The God of whom Jesus spoke is not like the impersonal Force in *Star Wars*, whose goodness is measured in voltage. Neither is He some great unsympathetic bogeyman in the sky, delighting in making our lives miserable.

On the contrary, God is relational like us, but even more so. He thinks, He hears. He communicates in language we can understand. Jesus told us and showed us what God is like. According to Jesus, God knows each of us intimately and personally, and thinks about us continually.

God Is Loving

And Jesus told us that God is loving. Jesus demonstrated God's love wherever he went, as he healed the sick and reached out to the hurting and poor.

God's love is radically different from ours in that it is not based upon attraction or performance. It is totally sacrificial and unselfish. Jesus compared God's love with the love of a perfect father. A good father wants the best for his children, sacrifices for them, and provides for them. But in their best interests, he also disciplines them.

Jesus illustrates God's heart of love with a story about a rebellious son who rejected his father's advice about life and what is important. Arrogant and self-willed, the son wanted to quit working and "live it up." Rather than waiting until his father was ready to give him his inheritance, he began insisting that his father give it to him early.

In Jesus' story, the father granted his son's request. But things went bad for the son. After squandering his money on self-indulgence, the rebellious son had to go to work on a pig farm. Soon he was so hungry even the pig food looked good. Despondent and not sure his father would accept him back, he packed his bag and headed home.

Jesus tells us that not only did his father welcome him home, but he actually ran out to meet him. And then the father went totally radical with his love and threw a huge party celebrating his son's return.

It is interesting that even though the father greatly loved his son, he didn't chase after him. He let the son he loved feel pain and suffer the consequences of his rebellious choice. In a similar way, the Scriptures teach that God's love will never compromise what is best for us. It will allow us to suffer the consequences of our own wrong choices. Jesus also taught that God will never compromise His character. Character is who we are down deep. It is our essence from which all our thoughts and actions stem. So what is God like—down deep?

God Is Holy

Throughout the Scriptures (nearly 600 times), God is spoken of as "holy." Holy means that God's character is morally pure and perfect in every way. Unblemished. This means that He never entertains a thought that is impure or inconsistent with His moral excellence.

Furthermore, God's holiness means that He cannot be in the presence of evil. Since evil is the opposite of His nature, He hates it. It's like pollution to Him.

But if God is holy and abhors evil, why didn't He make our character like His? Why are there child molesters, murderers, rapists, and perverts? And why do we struggle so with our own moral choices? That brings us to the next part of our quest for meaning. What did Jesus say about us?

What Did Jesus Say About Us?

Made For A Relationship With God

If you were to read through the New Testament you would discover that Jesus continually spoke of our immense value to God, telling us that God created us to be His children.

Irish U2 rock star Bono remarked in an interview, "It's a mind-blowing concept that the God who created the Universe might be looking for company, a real relationship with people...."⁵ In other words, before the universe was created, God planned to adopt us into His family. Not only that, but He has planned an incredible inheritance that is ours for the taking. Like the father's heart in Jesus' story, God wants to lavish on us an inheritance of unimaginable blessing and royal privilege. In His eyes, we are special.

Freedom To Choose

In the movie, *Stepford Wives*, weak, lying, greedy and murderous men have engineered submissive, obedient robots to replace their liberated wives who they considered threats. Although the men supposedly love their wives, they replaced them with toys in order to force their obedience.

God could have made us like that — robotic people (iPeople) hardwired to love and obey him, programming worship into us like a screensaver. But then our compulsory love would be meaningless. God wanted us to love Him freely. In real relationships, we want someone to love us for who we are, not out of compulsion — we'd prefer a soul mate over a mail-order bride. Søren Kierkegaard summarized the dilemma in this story.

Suppose there was a king who loved a humble maiden. The king was like no other king. Every statesman trembled before his power...and yet this mighty king was melted by love for a humble maiden. How could he declare his love for her? In an odd sort of way, his kingliness tied his hands. If he brought her to the palace and crowned her head with jewels ... she would surely not resist—no one dared resist him. But would she love him? She would say she loved him of course, but would she truly?⁶

You see the problem. Less poetically put: How do you break up with an all-knowing boyfriend? (“It’s just not working out between us, but I guess you already knew that.”) But to make freely exchanged love possible, God created human beings with a unique capacity: free will.

Rebellion Against God’s Moral Laws

C.S. Lewis reasoned that even though we are internally programmed with a desire to know God, we rebel against it from the moment we are born.⁷ Lewis also began to examine his own motives, which led him to the discovery that he instinctively knew right from wrong.

Lewis wondered where this sense of right and wrong came from. We all experience this sense of right and wrong when we read of Hitler killing six million Jews, or a hero sacrificing his or her life for someone. We instinctively know it is wrong to lie and cheat. This recognition that we are programmed with an inner moral law led the former atheist to the conclusion there must be a moral “Lawgiver.”

Indeed, according to both Jesus and the Scriptures, God has given us a moral law to obey. And not only have we turned our backs on a relationship with Him, we also have broken these moral laws that God established. Most of us know some of The Ten Commandments:

“Don’t lie, steal, murder, commit adultery,” etc. Jesus summarized them by saying we should love God with all our heart and our neighbor as ourselves. Sin, therefore, is not only the wrong that we do in breaking the law, but also our failure to do what is right.

God made the universe with laws that govern everything in it. They are inviolable and unchangeable. When Einstein derived the formula $E=MC^2$ he unlocked the mystery of nuclear energy. Put the right ingredients together under exacting conditions and enormous power is unleashed. The Scriptures tell us that God’s moral law is no less valid since it stems from His very character.

From the very first man and woman, we have disobeyed God's laws, even though they are for our best. And we have failed to do what is right. We have inherited this condition from the first man, Adam. The Bible calls this disobedience, sin, which means "missing the mark," like an archer missing his intended target. Thus our sins have broken God's intended relationship with us. Using the archer's example, we have missed the mark when it comes to the purpose we were created for.

Sin causes the severing of all relationships: the human race severed from its environment (alienation), individuals severed from themselves (guilt and shame), people severed from other people (war, murder), and people severed from God (spiritual death). Like links on a chain, once the first link between God and humanity was broken, all contingent links became uncoupled.

And we are broken. As Kayne West raps, "And I don't think there's nothing I can do to right my wrongs...I wanna talk to God but I'm afraid cause we ain't spoke in so long..." West's lyrics speak of the separation that sin brings to our lives. And according to the Bible, this separation is more than just lyrics in a rap song. It has deadly consequences.

Our Sins Have Separated Us From God's Love

Our rebellion (sin) has created a wall of separation between God and us (see Isaiah 59:2). In the Scriptures, "separation" means spiritual death. And spiritual death means being completely separated from the light and life of God.

"But wait a minute," you might say. "Didn't God know all of that before He made us?"

Why didn't He see that His plan was doomed for failure?" Of course, an all-knowing God would realize that we would rebel and sin. In fact, it is our failure that makes His plan so mind-blowing. This brings us to the reason that God came to Earth in human form. And even more incredible—the remarkable reason for his death.

What Did Jesus Say About Himself?

God's Perfect Solution

During his three years of public ministry, Jesus taught us how to live and performed many miracles, even raising the dead. But he stated that his primary mission was to save us from our sins.

Jesus proclaimed that he was the promised Messiah who would take our iniquity upon himself. The prophet Isaiah had written about the Messiah 700 years earlier, giving us several clues regarding his identity. But the clue most difficult to grasp is that the Messiah would be *both man and God!*

"For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given. And his name shall be called...Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." (Is. 9:6)

Author Ray Stedman writes of God's promised Messiah: "From the very beginning of the Old Testament, there is a sense of hope and expectation, like the sound of approaching footsteps: Someone is coming! ...That hope increases throughout the prophetic record as prophet after prophet declares yet another tantalizing hint: Someone is coming!"⁹

The ancient prophets had foretold that the Messiah would become God's perfect sin offering, satisfying his justice. This perfect man would qualify to die for us. (Is. 53:6)

According to the New Testament authors, the only reason Jesus was qualified to die for the rest of us is because, as God, he lived a morally perfect life and wasn't subject to sin's judgment.

It's difficult to understand how Jesus' death paid for our sins. Perhaps a judicial analogy might clarify how Jesus solves the dilemma of God's perfect love and justice.

Imagine entering a courtroom, guilty of murder (you have some serious issues). As you approach the bench, you realize that the judge is your father. Knowing that he loves you, you immediately begin to plead, "Dad, just let me go!"

To which he responds, "I love you, son, but I'm a judge. I can't simply let you go."

He is torn. Eventually he bangs the gavel down and declares you guilty. Justice cannot be compromised, at least not by a judge. But because he loves you, he steps down from the bench, takes off the robe, and offers to pay the penalty for you. And in fact, he takes your place in the electric chair.

This is the picture painted by the New Testament. God stepped down into human history, in the person of Jesus Christ, and went to the electric chair (read: cross) instead of us, for us. Jesus is not a third-party whipping boy, taking our sins, but rather he is God himself. Put more bluntly, God had two choices: to judge sin in us or to assume the punishment himself. In Christ, He chose the latter.

Although U2's Bono doesn't pretend to be a theologian, he accurately states the reason for Jesus' death:

"The point of the death of Christ is that Christ took on the sins of the world, so that what we put out did not come back to us, and that our sinful nature does not reap the obvious death. That's the point. It should keep us humbled. It's not our own good works that get us through the gates of Heaven."⁹

And Jesus made it clear that he is the only one who can bring us to God, stating, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except by me." (John 14:6)

But many argue that Jesus' claim that he is the only way to God is too narrow, saying that there are many ways to God. Those who believe all religions are the same deny we have a sin problem. They refuse to take Christ's words seriously. They say God's love will accept all of us, regardless what we have done.

Perhaps Hitler is deserving of judgment, they reason, but not them or others who live "decent lives". It's like saying that God grades on the curve, and everybody who gets a D- or better will get in. But this presents a dilemma.

As we have seen, sin is the absolute opposite of God's holy character. Thus we have offended the one who created us, and loved us enough to sacrifice His very Son for us. In a sense our rebellion is like spitting in His face. Neither good deeds, religion, meditation, or Karma can pay the debt our sins have incurred.

According to theologian R. C. Sproul, Jesus alone is the one who can pay that debt. He writes:

“Moses could mediate on the law; Muhammad could brandish a sword; Buddha could give personal counsel; Confucius could offer wise sayings; but none of these men was qualified to offer an atonement for the sins of the world. Christ alone is worthy of unlimited devotion and service.”¹⁰

A Gift Undeserved

The biblical term to describe God's free forgiveness through Christ's sacrificial death is *grace*. Whereas mercy saves us from what we deserve, the grace of God gives us what we don't deserve. Let's review for a minute how Christ has done for us what we could not do for ourselves:

- God loves us and created us for a relationship with Himself ¹¹
- We have been given the freedom to accept or reject that relationship ¹²
- Our sin and rebellion against God and His laws have created a wall of separation between us and Him ¹³
- Though we are deserving of eternal judgment, God has paid our debt in full by Jesus' death in our place, making eternal life with Him possible.¹⁴

Bono gives us his perspective on grace.

“Grace defies reason and logic. Love interrupts, if you like, the consequences of your actions, which in my case is very good news indeed, because I've done a lot of stupid stuff...I'd be in big trouble if Karma was going to finally be my judge...It doesn't excuse my mistakes, but I'm holding out for Grace. I'm holding out that Jesus took my sins onto the Cross, because I know who I am, and I hope I don't have to depend on my own religiosity.”¹⁵

We now have the picture of God's plan of the ages coming together. But there still is one missing ingredient. According to Jesus and the authors of the New Testament, each of us individually must respond to the free gift Jesus offers us. He won't force us to take it.

You Choose The Ending

We continually make choices—what to wear, what to eat, our career, marriage partner, etc. It is the same when it comes to a relationship with God. Author Ravi Zacharias writes:

“Jesus' message reveals that every individual...comes to know God not by virtue of birth, but by a conscious choice to let Him have His rule in his or her individual life.”¹⁶

Our choices are often influenced by others. But in some instances we are given the wrong advice. On September 11, 2001, 600 innocent people put their trust in the wrong advice, and innocently suffered the consequences. The true story goes like this:

One man who was on the 92nd floor of the south tower of the World Trade Center had just heard a jet crashing into the north tower. Stunned by the explosion, he called the police for instructions on what to do. “We need to know if we need to get out of here, because we know there’s an explosion,” he said urgently on the phone.

The voice on the other end advised him not to evacuate. “I would wait ’til further notice.”

“All right,” the caller said. “Don’t evacuate.” He then hung up.

Shortly after 9:00 A.M., another jet crashed into the 80th floor of the south tower. Nearly all 600 people in the top floors of the south tower perished. The failure to evacuate the building was one of the day’s great tragedies.¹⁷

Those 600 people perished because they relied on the wrong information, even though it was given by a person who was trying to help. The tragedy would not have occurred had the 600 victims been given the right information.

Our conscious choice about Jesus is infinitely more important than the one facing the ill-informed 9/11 victims. Eternity is at stake. We can choose one of three different responses. We can ignore him. We can reject him. Or, we can accept him.

The reason many people go through life ignoring God is that they are too busy pushing their own agenda. Chuck Colson was like that. At age 39, Colson occupied the office next to the president of the United States. He was the “tough guy” of the Nixon White House, the “hatchet man” who could make the hard decisions. Yet, in 1972, the Watergate scandal ruined his reputation and his world became unglued. Later he writes:

“I had been concerned with myself. I had done this and that, I had achieved, I had succeeded and I had given God none of the credit, never once thanking Him for any of His gifts to me. I had never thought of anything being ‘immeasurably superior’ to myself, or if I had in fleeting moments thought about the infinite power of God, I had not related Him to my life.”¹⁸

Many can identify with Colson. It’s easy to get caught in the fast pace of life and have little or no time for God. Yet ignoring God’s gracious offer of forgiveness has the same dire consequences as outright rejection. Our sin debt would still remain unpaid.

In criminal cases, few ever turn down a full pardon. In 1915, George Burdick, city editor for the *New York Tribune*, had refused to reveal sources and broken the law. President Woodrow Wilson declared a full pardon to Burdick for all offenses he had “committed or may have committed.” What made Burdick’s case historic is that he refused the pardon. That brought the case to the Supreme Court, which sided with Burdick, stating that a presidential pardon could not be forced on anyone.

When it comes to rejecting Christ’s full pardon, people give a variety of reasons. Many say there isn’t sufficient evidence, but, like Bertrand Russell and a host of other skeptics, they aren’t interested enough to really investigate. Others refuse to look beyond some hypocritical Christians they know, pointing to unloving or inconsistent behavior as an excuse. And still others reject Christ because they blame God for some sad or tragic experience they have suffered.

However, Zacharias, who has debated with intellectuals on hundreds of college campuses believes that the real reason most people reject God is moral. He writes:

“A man rejects God neither because of intellectual demands nor because of the scarcity of evidence. A man rejects God because of moral resistance that refuses to admit his need for God.”¹⁹

The desire for moral freedom kept C. S. Lewis from God for most of his college years. After his quest for truth led him to God, Lewis explains how acceptance of Christ involves more than just intellectual agreement with the facts. He writes:

“Fallen man is not simply an imperfect creature who needs improvement: he is a rebel who must lay down his arms. Laying down your arms, surrendering, saying you are sorry, realizing that you have been on the wrong track and getting ready to start life over again...is what Christians call repentance.”²¹

Repentance is a word that means a dramatic turn-around in thinking. That’s what happened to Nixon’s former “hatchet man”. After Watergate was exposed, Colson began thinking about life differently. Sensing his own lack of purpose, he began reading Lewis’s *Mere Christianity*, given to him by a friend. Trained as a lawyer, Colson took out a yellow legal pad and began writing down Lewis's arguments. Colson recalled:

“I knew the time had come for me... Was I to accept without reservations Jesus Christ as Lord of my life? It was like a gate before me. There was no way to walk around it. I would step through, or I would remain outside. A ‘maybe’ or ‘I need more time’ was kidding myself.”

After an inner struggle, this former aide to the president of the United States finally realized that Jesus Christ was deserving of his full allegiance. He writes:

“And so early Friday morning, while I sat alone staring at the sea I love, words I had not been certain I could understand or say fell naturally from my lips: ‘Lord Jesus, I believe You. I accept You. Please come into my life. I commit it to You.’”²¹

Colson discovered that his questions, “Who am I?” “Why am I here?” and “Where am I going?” are all answered in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul writes, “It is in Christ that we find out who we are and what we are living for.” (Ephesians 1:11, The Message)

When we enter into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, he fills our inner void, gives us peace, and satisfies our desire for meaning and hope. And we no longer need to resort to temporary stimuli for our fulfillment. When He enters into us, he also satisfies our deepest longings and needs for true, lasting love and security.

And the staggering thing is that God Himself came as a man to pay our entire debt. Therefore, no longer are we under the penalty of sin. Paul states this clearly to the Colossians when he writes,

“You were his enemies, separated from him by your evil thoughts and actions, yet now he has brought you back as his friends. He has done this through his death on the cross in his own human body. As a result, he has brought you into the very presence of God, and you are holy and blameless as you stand before him without a single fault.” (Colossians 1:21b-22a NLT).

Thus God did what we were unable to do for ourselves. We are set free from our sins by Jesus' sacrificial death. It is like a mass murderer going before a judge and being granted a full and complete pardon. He doesn't deserve a pardon, and neither do we. God's gift of eternal life is absolutely free—and it is for the taking. But even though the pardon is offered to us, it is up to us to accept it. The choice is yours.

Are you at the point in your life where you would like to accept God's free offer?

Perhaps like Madonna, Bono, Lewis and Colson, your life has also been empty. Nothing you have tried satisfies the inner void you feel. God can fill that void and change you in a moment. He created you to have life that is flooded with meaning and purpose. Jesus said, "My purpose is to give life in all its fullness." (John 10:10b)

Or perhaps things are going well for you in life but you are restless and lack peace. You realize that you have broken God's laws and are separated from his love and forgiveness. You fear God's judgment. Jesus said, "I am leaving you with a gift---peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give isn't like the peace the world gives."

So whether you are simply tired of a life of empty pursuits or are troubled by a lack of peace with your Creator, the answer is in Jesus Christ.

When you put your trust in Jesus Christ, God will forgive you of all your sins—past, present, and future and make you His child. And as His loving child, He gives you purpose and meaning in life on Earth and the promise of eternal life with Him.

God's Word says, "to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God." (John 1:12)

Forgiveness of sin, purpose in life, and eternal life are all yours for the asking. You can invite Christ into your life right now by faith through prayer. Prayer is talking with God. God knows your heart and is not as concerned with your words as He is with the attitude of your heart. The following is a suggested prayer:

"Dear God, I want to know You personally and live eternally with You. Thank You, Lord Jesus, for dying on the cross for my sins. I open the door of my life and receive You as my Savior and Lord. Take control of my life and change me, making me the kind of person You want me to be."

Does this prayer express the desire of your heart? If so, simply pray the above suggested prayer in your own native language.

When you make a commitment to Jesus Christ, he enters your life, becoming your guide, your counselor, your comforter, and your best friend. Furthermore, he gives you strength to overcome trials and temptation, freeing you to experience a new life full of meaning, purpose, and power.

Chuck Colson discovered that new purpose and power. Colson readily admits that before becoming a Christian, he was ambitious, prideful, and self-centered. He had no desire or power to love others in need. But his thoughts and motives radically changed once he committed himself to Christ.

Endnotes

1. O: The Oprah Magazine, "Oprah talks to Madonna," (January, 2004), 120.
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3. Quoted in William R. Bright, *Jesus and the Intellectual* (San Bernardino, CA: Here's Life Publ., 1968), 33.
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7. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper, 2001), 160.
8. Ray C. Stedman, *God's Loving Word* (Grand Rapids, MI: Discovery House, 1993), 50.
9. Quoted in Assayas, 204.
10. R. C. Sproul, *Reason to Believe* (Grand Rapids, MI: Lamplighter, 1982), 44.
11. New Testament, John 3:16
12. Ibid., John 1:12
13. Old Testament, Isaiah 59:2
14. New Testament, Romans 5:8
15. Assayas, Ibid.
16. Ravi Zacharias, *Jesus among Other Gods* (Nashville: Word, 2000), 158.
17. Martha T. Moore and Dennis Cauchon, "Delay Meant Death on 9/11," USA Today, Sept. 3, 2002, 1A.
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19. Ravi Zacharias, *A Shattered Visage: The Real Face of Atheism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), 155.
20. Lewis, 56.
21. Colson, 129

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