

FACE TO
FACE
WITH
JESUS

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Introduction

Jesus Changes Everything

From childhood I've loved astronomy. I grew up in an unbelieving home. Night after night I'd gaze at the stars, clueless about a Creator, but yearning for something greater than myself.

One night, as I stared through my telescope at the great galaxy of Andromeda with its trillion stars 2.5 million light years away, I was filled with awe. I longed to explore its wonders and lose myself in its vastness.

I read fantasy and science fiction stories of other worlds, of great battles and causes. I knew that the universe was huge beyond comprehension. But my wonder was trumped by a sometimes unbearable sense of loneliness and separation. In retrospect, I think I wanted to worship, but I didn't know what or who to worship. I wept not only because I felt so insignificant, but also because I felt so disconnected from the Significant One I did not know or know of.

Several years later, at age fifteen, after attending a church youth group, I opened a Bible and saw these words for the first time: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." And then I read verse 14, the greatest understatement ever: "He made the stars also." A

universe one hundred billion light years across containing countless stars, and the Bible makes them sound like a casual add-on!

I quickly realized that this book was about the Person who made the universe, including Andromeda and Earth—and me.

I had no reference points when I read the Bible. All of it was new, intriguing, sometimes confusing, and utterly disorienting. But when I reached the Gospels, something changed. I was immediately fascinated by Jesus. I'd been an avid reader of fiction, but I knew this wasn't fiction. I knew Jesus wasn't just a character in a story. I soon came to believe that he not only lived two thousand years ago, but that he still lived. Everything about Jesus of Nazareth struck me as completely believable. And, somehow, I knew he was the One my heart had always longed for.

By a miracle of grace, Jesus touched me deeply, gave me a new heart, and utterly transformed my life. Forty-five years later, he's still unveiling himself and changing me into his image and likeness. I couldn't be happier that he's every bit as real to me now as the moment I met him—but now I know him better, and therefore worship him more deeply.

For me, Jesus didn't just change everything back then. He still changes everything today.

Humble Savior

Having been raised with no knowledge of God, part of what drew me to Christ is how the Gospel accounts seemed so contrary to typical human reasoning. Yet I found them completely credible. No human would make up such a story! It had the ring of truth to me...and still has.

In the Old Testament, we read how God kept reaching down to his people: “The LORD...sent word to them through his messengers again and again, because he had pity on his people...But they mocked God’s messengers, despised his words and scoffed at his prophets” (2 Chronicles 36:15-16).

The prophets foretold the coming of Messiah. Yet centuries of oppression and suffering passed, and many lost hope. In every generation there were people like Simeon and Anna who longed for and prayed for Messiah’s coming. And finally, when the Redeemer’s absence became unbearable, he came: “But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman” (Galatians 4:4).

Jesus came to us in humility. He didn’t have the honor of being born to the house of a king. He wasn’t born in Rome, the world’s political capital, or Athens, the philosophical capital, or Alexandria, the intellectual capital, or even Jerusalem, the religious capital. He was born in tiny Bethlehem, which means simply “House of Bread.”

Jesus came in humiliation. Everyone who could count thought he was conceived out of wedlock, a shameful thing in that time and place. He grew up in a town of ill repute, where a Roman military outpost accounted for moral corruption: “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” (John 1:46).

Jesus worked as a humble carpenter, lived in relative poverty, and endured many indignities as he spent three years teaching and healing and speaking the good news of God’s Kingdom. And then, the eternal and infinitely holy Son of God chose to endure the most shameful death—crucifixion with its excruciating suffering—to take our sins on himself. Not some, but all of them.

Who Is He?

Jesus made bold claims about his identity, which religious leaders of his day considered blasphemy. He claimed to be God’s only Son, one with the Father, descended from Heaven and destined to rule the universe as King. And what response was he met with? “For this reason they tried all the more to kill him” (John 5:18).

Many today try to reduce Jesus to the role of a good teacher, one good moral example, maybe the best among many. But his own claims about himself in Scripture make that impossible. In his book *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis famously pointed out,

I am trying here 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...or else he would be the Devil of Hell... but let us not come with any patronising nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.

The battle for human souls pivots on the issue of Christ's identity. He's the watershed, the dividing line between Hell and Heaven. Jesus made that clear when he asked his disciples about his divinity: "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" (Matthew 16:15).

That question is the most important one we will ever answer. Our own eternity hangs in the balance. Who do *you* say Jesus is? Who do you believe, in your mind and deep in your heart, that he really is? Every person must give an answer—and whether our answer is right could not be more consequential.

Come and See

When Peter identified Jesus as the Messiah, Jesus said to him, "Simon son of Jonah, you are a *happy* man!

Because it was not flesh and blood that revealed this to you but my Father in heaven” (Matthew 16:17 TJB).

Happy is the person who recognizes the real Jesus! It was true of his disciples then, and it’s true of us now.

Biblical Christianity is fundamentally not simply a religion *about* Christ, but a relationship *with* Christ. If we get it right about Jesus, we can afford to get some minor things wrong. But if we get it wrong about Jesus, it won’t matter in the end what else we get right.

The Bible reveals that Jesus Christ, God’s Son, in a supreme act of love became a man to deliver us from sin and suffering (John 3:16). Jesus lived a sinless life (Hebrews 2:17-18; 4:15-16). He died to pay the penalty for our sins (2 Corinthians 5:21). On the cross, he took upon himself the Hell we do deserve in order to purchase for us the Heaven we don’t deserve. At his death he said, “It is finished” (John 19:30), using the Greek word for canceling certificates of debt—meaning “paid in full.” Jesus then rose from the grave, defeating sin and conquering death (1 Corinthians 15:3-4, 54-57).

Christ offers freely the gift of forgiveness and eternal life: “Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life” (Revelation 22:17).

Besides knowing his name, have you come to know Jesus as your Savior and Lord and best friend? “Come and

see what God has done,” the psalmist says, “his awesome deeds for mankind!” (Psalm 66:5). “Taste and see that the LORD is good” (Psalm 34:8).

Scripture gives us many invitations to come to God and personally experience him. Open the Bible and learn about Jesus. Set aside all other arguments and study the person of Christ. Read of his life in the Gospels, the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Listen to his words. Ask yourself who he is and whether you could believe in him. If you hold him at a distance, you will never see him for who he is. Philip simply invited his friend Nathanael to “come and see” Jesus (John 1:45-46).

Have you come? Have you seen him? If not, brace yourself. Because once you see Jesus—I mean see him as he *really* is—you, your worldview, goals, affections, and *everything* will change. And because he never gives up on us, the changes won't stop. He's about growth not death, sanctification not stagnation. That's the key to a Christian life, and it's not boring but adventurous. Jesus, who spun the galaxies into being, paints the sunsets, and taught the humpback whales to migrate, can be comforting and rest-giving, but he is *never* boring!

Our Best Thought

Even if you *have* come and seen Jesus, accepted his invitation, and walked with him for years, you can never

exhaust his depths. Puritan John Flavel wrote, “The longer you know Christ, and the nearer you come to him, still the more do you see of his glory. Every farther prospect of Christ entertains the mind with a fresh delight. He is as it were a new Christ every day—and yet the same Christ still.”

There’s no more worthy subject to set our minds on than Jesus himself. He is “the Alpha and the Omega... the Beginning and the End” (Revelation 22:13).

I thank God that today I don’t just know and love Jesus as much as I used to; I know and love him more. That is to his credit, and I’m deeply grateful. He’s what makes life so exciting and so worthwhile. Like the apostle Paul, more than ever, I want to know Christ (Philippians 3:10).

As the hymn “Be Thou My Vision” puts so beautifully, Christ is our “best thought, by day or by night.” Working on this book and reflecting on the person, words, works, and centrality of Christ has been a pleasure and a joy. I hope these two hundred brief reflections will encourage you to know and love Jesus, and focus your heart and mind on him—the One who changes everything.

1

“I will shake all nations, and they shall come to the Desire of All Nations, and I will fill this temple with glory,” says the LORD of hosts.

HAGGAI 2:7 NKJV

Who is this “Desire of All Nations,” the One people long for, whether they recognize it or not? He’s the Messiah, who came to deliver us.

What’s he like? He’s “the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven” (Hebrews 1:3).

God made us, and we were made for God. It’s God we long for, and Jesus, God’s Son, brings the Father to us. Ultimately, God’s greatest gift is himself. We need the Savior, and he has a name: Jesus (meaning “God saves”).

“He was truly God, and therefore could satisfy; he was truly man, and therefore could obey and suffer in our stead...that God and man might be happy together again.”

George Whitefield

2

*The virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall call his name Immanuel
(which means, God with us).*

MATTHEW 1:23 ESV

Eden's greatest attraction was God's presence. Sin's greatest tragedy was that God no longer dwelt with his people. But this all changed with Christ's incarnation. John 1:1 sets it up: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Then verse 14 bursts forth like fireworks: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory."

God walking with Adam and Eve in the garden was a wonderful preview of the God-man Jesus coming down from Heaven to live forever with people on Earth. After the resurrection, God will come down to live with his people (Revelation 21:3). Jesus is forever God incarnate.

"God became man; the Almighty appeared on earth as a helpless human baby. Nothing in fiction is so fantastic as is this truth of the incarnation."

J.I. Packer

3

*But when the kindness and love of God
our Savior appeared, he saved us.*

TITUS 3:4-5

The miracle of the cross was made possible by the miracle of the incarnation. The angels must have been stunned to see the second member of the triune God become a human being.

The baby born in that Bethlehem barn was God, and he was born to die. His death delivers us from our fear of death. His suffering on the cross atoned for our sins, allowing him to understand and help us.

And incredibly, the incarnation is permanent. Christ rose in a glorified human body that he'll have forever. It's not that Jesus suddenly stopped being a man after the ascension. No, the second member of the triune God will be a human being who reigns eternally on the New Earth.

"He was created by a mother whom he created.
He cried in the manger in wordless infancy, he the
Word, without whom all human eloquence is mute."

Augustine