

Right Questions, Wrong Answers: A Study of World Religions

• Lesson Four •

Who Is Jesus?

1. Jesus is more than a prophet
2. Jesus is more than an example

Worship

A meditation based on various passages from Scripture*

Leader: In that day you will say: “I will praise you, O LORD. Although you were angry with me, your anger has turned away and you have comforted me.

Group: **Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid. The LORD, the LORD, is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation.**

Leader: With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. In that day you will say:

Group: **“Give thanks to the LORD, call on his name; make known among the nations what he has done, and proclaim that his name is exalted. Sing to the LORD, for he has done glorious things; let this be known to all the world.**

Leader: Shout aloud and sing for joy, people of Zion, for great is the Holy One of Israel among you.

All: **Oh, worship the King, all-glorious above; Oh, gratefully sing his pow’r and his love, Our shield and defender, the Ancient of Days, Pavilioned in splendor and girded with praise. (CW 243:1)**

Leader: “Great and marvelous are your deeds, Lord God Almighty. Just and true are your ways, King of the ages.

Group: **Who will not fear you, O Lord, and bring glory to your name? For you alone are holy.**

Leader: All nations will come and worship before you, for your righteous acts have been revealed.”

Group: **“The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever.”**

All: **Lord, I will tell, while I am living, Your love and grace with every breath
And greet each morning with thanksgiving Until my heart is still in death,
And, when at last my lips grow cold, Your praise shall in my sighs be told.
(CW 242:4)**

*Isaiah 12:1-6; Revelation 11:15; 15:3,4

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you are the Savior of all people. You want all to know and love you in faith. Help us know you more completely. Speak to our hearts through your Holy Word, and graciously grant that we recognize you alone as the way to everlasting life and peace. Help us fix our eyes on you, for in your perfect life and innocent death, we see the love of our Father and find reason to use our lives in service to your name. For your name’s sake. Amen.

Introduction

Consider the ways Jesus is viewed today. Some regard him as a fine teacher, whose words of wisdom have value for all people. Some portray him as a fine example of love and patience, worthy of our emulation. Others consider him a martyr, who so firmly believed in what he was saying that he was prepared to die for it. With which of those statements would you agree? disagree?

*It’s hard to argue with **teacher**. Jesus taught the disciples. He teaches us through the Word. **Example** is acceptable as well, since he certainly did give the greatest example of love ever seen by human beings. Perhaps the last one is the only one that we would feel uncomfortable with. Jesus was no martyr. He didn’t die for a cause he believed in. His cause for entering the world was to die for the sins of all people.*

All these titles sound pious and seem to be very complimentary, but none of them captures the truth that Jesus is true God and the Savior of the world.

However, Jesus is much more than a teacher or an example. We are wasting our time and energy if Jesus is just a man or a prophet or an example. In his Word, God has revealed to us who Jesus is.

Studying God’s Word

Jesus is more than a prophet

Read Matthew 16:13-20.

1. Jesus certainly knew what the people were saying about him. Why would he ask the disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” (verses 13-15)

Jesus wanted the disciples to reflect on the different answers the Jewish people were giving to that question.

2. What makes Peter’s analysis of Jesus more accurate than the opinions of the people? (verse 16)

*Peter’s analysis was more accurate for a couple of reasons. (1) In calling Jesus “the Christ,” Peter would also have been including the title of Prophet. In the prophecies of the Old Testament, the Christ would speak on God’s behalf as *the* Prophet. (2) Peter confessed that Jesus was God in the flesh, not just a human prophet like Elijah or Jeremiah.*

3. What strong statement does Jesus make about Peter’s confession? (verse 18)

Peter’s confession is the rock on which the church is built. Where there is no confession that Jesus is the Christ, the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, there is no church. That confession will stand as the church’s confession, even though the devil rages against it.

4. How does Jesus demonstrate himself to be *the* Prophet, who wants the gospel preached to the ends of the world? (verse 19)

He gave the disciples the keys to the kingdom of heaven. He gave them the authority to forgive the sins of those who were penitent and to bind the sins of those who were clearly impenitent. The disciples were to bring the message of forgiveness won by Christ to the world.

Do the other religions of the world have a Savior?

Islam: Muslims believe that each person is responsible for his own deliverance. No one can deliver another. Allah will show mercy and compassion to those who show themselves deserving of such treatment by following the Five Pillars. Jesus is considered a sinless prophet, but not a savior.

Judaism: Since they teach that people are inherently good and therefore capable of doing God’s will, Jews have no real need for a savior. While people may sin, it is more in the nature of a mistake than a damnable offense. People can earn forgiveness for themselves through repentance, prayer, and good action. Many Jews still look for a Messiah, but that Messiah is primarily portrayed as one who will usher in an era of goodwill on earth. Jesus is rejected as a false prophet.

Hinduism: Man is basically good and needs to become aware of the truth. There is no need for a savior in Hindu thought. Each person is responsible for freeing himself or herself from the endless cycle of reincarnation by achieving good karma.

Buddhism: The individual is responsible for gaining enlightenment and thus freeing himself or herself from suffering.

His Word in My Life

Muslims recognize Jesus as a messenger from Allah, calling him a sinless prophet. Muslims consider Muhammad the last and greatest prophet of Allah, a prophet who Jesus promised would come.

1. How do these statements contradict what the Bible says about Jesus?

According to this, Jesus is a prophet of lesser value than Muhammad. It’s bad enough that Jesus is considered merely a prophet, but Muslims go so far as to say that he wasn’t even the greatest prophet, though he was sinless. Muslims offer Jesus nothing more than faint praise.

2. Suppose you are talking to a Muslim. He is willing to grant that Jesus is a sinless prophet. How could you use that statement to witness to him?

You might say: “Doesn’t Jesus’ holiness testify to the fact that he is more than a man? What mere man could live in complete obedience to the law of God in thought, word, and action? Even if you were somehow to live without sin the rest of your life, you still would not be sinless because you have already transgressed God’s commands. Jesus was able to live perfectly because he is God become man. As God and man in one person, he could do what we could not: He could live perfectly in our place. He loved all people with such intensity that he allowed himself to be considered guilty of our sins and endure our punishment.”

Orthodox Jews maintain that the Messiah promised on the pages of the Old Testament has not yet come. In none of the branches of Judaism is Jesus even recognized as a prophet, let alone the Messiah.

The Jews were the chosen people of God and the caretakers of his Word. Yet they rejected Jesus. What important warning for us is there in their experience?

Don't take the Word for granted. We cannot assume that the Word will remain with us forever if we are not making it our own through regular meditation on it. We must not think that we could never lose the Word, our faith, or our orthodoxy.

Who is Jesus? This is an important question because eternity hangs in the balance. Jesus is more than a prophet. He is the Prophet. He is the Christ, the one the Father appointed to come into the world. He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. The church that doesn't confess Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God, is no church, no matter how spiritual or religious it may seem.

Jesus is more than an example

Read Colossians 1:15-23.

1. What proofs does Paul offer regarding the divinity of Jesus? (verses 16-18)
 - (1) He created the world and everything in it—only God can be credited with the creation of the world.
 - (2) Everything was created for him.
 - (3) He is before all things—only God can be described as eternal.
 - (4) He holds all things together—only God has power to preserve all things.
 - (5) He is the head of the church.
2. Agree or disagree: Jesus entered into this sin-filled world to teach people how to live at peace with one another. (verses 19 and 20)

Disagree. Jesus entered the world as his Father's means of reconciling sinners to himself. God created peace between himself and sinful people in the innocent life and death of Jesus. To say that Jesus came to teach peace is to sell him short. Jesus came to create peace between sinful man and a holy God.
3. Why was Jesus' blood able to effect peace between God and human beings? (verses 19 and 20)

Because Jesus is God (all of God's fullness dwelt in him), his death counts for all people. Had he been just a sinless man, he could only have saved himself. Because he was also God, the sacrifice he offered covered the sins of all people of all time. The Father accepted the Son's sacrifice and declared the world innocent of sin.
4. The Gentiles in Colosse had been religious people. They believed in gods. Why, then, would Paul say that they had been “alienated from God”? (verse 21)

They were alienated from God because they did not see Jesus as their Savior, as the one who had created peace between them and God. No matter how zealously they worshiped their gods, they did not know the true God and, therefore, were alienated from him.

5. What has God done for all people through the death of the God-man, Jesus? (verse 22)

God has declared all people innocent of all sin. As a true human being, Jesus could take the place of all people under the law and render perfect obedience to God in our place. As true God, his death could be valid for all human beings.

6. What can we do to make sure that we “continue in [our] faith”? (verse 23)

We remain firm in the faith by giving our attentions to the means by which God first created faith in our hearts: the gospel. Only those who hear the gospel and rest on its message of full and free forgiveness in Christ will live at peace with God forever. Since we know the blessings we have received through the gospel, we have reason to turn to the gospel each day so that the Spirit has opportunity to strengthen us.

How do other religions define salvation?

Islam: The Muslim’s greatest hope is to survive the day of judgment, when Allah raises all people from the dead and judges them. Those whose faith and good works outweigh their evil works will enjoy everlasting pleasure in paradise.

Judaism: Generally speaking, the primary interest of Judaism is the present life. Some Jews do hope for a life “with the fathers,” but they don’t spend much time defining that life. The Jews who do believe in an afterlife rely on their connection to Abraham as their guarantee for life. They believe that because they are Abraham’s children, they will live forever (as long as they have believed and endeavored to live according to God’s will).

Hinduism: The highest desire of the Hindu is to be released from samsara, the unending cycle of reincarnation based on an individual’s performance in past incarnations. Moksha (or Mukti) is the term for the soul’s liberation from the karma that causes each reincarnation. A state of bliss is the result.

Buddhism: Nirvana is the goal of a Buddhist. Nirvana is the state of being free from desire and attachment to the present existence. Those who are free from desire are also free from suffering, since desire attaches a person to the present life. Buddha described it as bliss.

In all of these contexts, Jesus as Savior means nothing.

His Word in My Life

Only because Jesus is the God-man can he be the Savior of all people. Unfortunately, your Muslim acquaintance rejects the idea that Jesus is God. In fact, if your friend has opportunity, he will have you open your Bible to prove to you that Jesus didn’t think of himself as God. He will point you to passages in which Jesus said that he did nothing on his own authority. He may cite passages in which Jesus referred to God as “my God.” If Jesus recognized the Lord as God, and there is only one God, then Jesus cannot be God. Or so your Muslim acquaintance would argue.

How might a concerned Christian respond to such an argument?

You might say: “You’ve struck on an important issue. In order to rescue all people from the punishment they deserved because of their sins, Jesus had to humble himself to become a man. He had to put aside the full and constant use of his power so that he could be under the law and obey it in our place. When he refers to the Father as ‘my God,’ he is speaking as one who has laid aside his rights as God in order to redeem all people.”

Islam teaches that each person is ultimately responsible for his own soul. Each person must live in such a way that his good deeds outweigh his misdeeds. Since a person, according to Islam, is basically good and capable of obeying the law of Allah, those who wish to have a positive eternal experience must work at it. The best “use” of Jesus, then, is as an example of sinless life.

How could you use this concept of Jesus as a starting point to witness to a Muslim?

You might say: “Jesus was perfect in every way. In thought, word, and action, Jesus lived in perfect obedience to the will and Word of God. When you try to live up to that example, don’t you find yourself falling short? Because we are born sinful, we can never live up to Jesus’ example. Does that ever bother you? Do you ever feel guilty about that? I know I feel that way when I fall short. The answer to that guilt is not trying harder to live up to Jesus’ example. The answer is to look to Jesus as your Savior, who lived perfectly in your place so that he could be accused of your sins and he could die in your place.”

Since Scripture speaks of Jesus’ example, Christians want to imitate him. It is wrong, though, to picture him primarily as an example. Jesus is the Savior. He came into the world not with an eye on setting an example for human beings to follow but “to seek and to save what was lost.” Jesus wants all to see him as the God-man, who reconciled a holy God with sinful people through his life and death. He desires for us to look to him as our Savior, our sole hope for eternal life. Only then will we have peace.

Summary

Many so-called Bible scholars employ rich vocabulary to praise Jesus as an extraordinary man. But in the final analysis, that’s not praise. When people confess and trust Jesus alone as their Savior from sin and death—that’s praise. The five-year-old girl who says and believes, “Jesus died for me to give me heaven,” praises her Savior. In fact, with her simple vocabulary, she has offered more sublime praise than anyone whose words end up describing Jesus merely as the greatest example of all time.

Finally, people in non-Christian religions are only interested in finding someone to guide them to happiness. We cannot expect them to be able to appreciate Christ as their Savior. Only when they realize that their sins condemn them—not just rob them of happiness— will they accept Jesus as their Savior. To lead them to repentance and faith is the task God has given his church.

Life with God

Day 1: Read Mark 5:1-20. Jesus is God.

Day 2: Read Hebrews 2:14-18. Jesus is human.

Day 3: Read Luke 1:26-38. God becomes human through the miracle of the virgin birth. Day 4:

Read Isaiah 53:1-12. The sinless Son of Man accepted the guilt of our sin.

Day 5: Read Matthew 27:45-54. Jesus suffered hell for all.

Day 6: Read Luke 24:1-12. Jesus rose from the dead to prove that he is the Savior of all.