

Who Is Jesus?

Introduction

Few figures in human history have inspired as much devotion, debate, and curiosity as Jesus of Nazareth. Revered as the central figure in Christianity, regarded as a prophet in Islam, acknowledged as a wise teacher by some secular thinkers, and recognized as an influential historical figure by scholars, Jesus' identity transcends religious boundaries and continues to shape cultures, societies, and individual lives. But who is Jesus? How is He understood across traditions, and what does His life mean for humanity today? This perspective details Faith Forward Ministries' beliefs of the person of Jesus; examining His historical context, theological significance, and enduring impact.

Historical Context: The World of Jesus

Jesus was born into a turbulent era in the first century CE, in the region of Judea, then under Roman occupation. The Jewish people of His day were anticipating a messianic figure—someone who would restore Israel's kingdom and deliver them from oppression. Against this backdrop of religious longing and political unrest, Jesus' teachings and actions ignited both hope and controversy.

Jesus is seen as a Jewish teacher (rabbi), a healer, and a figure who attracted followers with His message of the coming "Kingdom of God." The Gospels of the New Testament, provide glimpses into Jesus' life. While some people still debate details, most agree that Jesus was born in Nazareth, practiced itinerant ministry around Galilee and Judea, and died by crucifixion in Jerusalem under the Roman governor Pontius Pilate.

Jesus and Judaism

Jesus lived and taught within the context of Second Temple Judaism. His teachings drew upon the Hebrew Scriptures—what Christians now call the Old Testament—and His ethical imperatives were often radical re-interpretations of Jewish law. He emphasized mercy, forgiveness, love for one's neighbor, and a deepened relationship with God. His parables and miracles, recounted in the Gospels, underscored His message of hope for the poor and marginalized.

Yet, Jesus' approach was not without conflict. He challenged the religious authorities of His day, critiqued the Pharisees and Sadducees for legalism or hypocrisy, and gained both fervent followers and vociferous critics. His claim to a unique relationship with God—as "Son"—and His authority to forgive sins were considered blasphemous by some. It is within this tense religious landscape that Jesus' identity first became a matter of urgent interest and dispute.

The Crucifixion and Its Aftermath

Jesus' public life culminated in His crucifixion, a Roman method of execution typically reserved for political rebels and criminals. The charge posted above His head—“King of the Jews”—emphasizing that Jesus was viewed as a potential threat to Roman rule and Jewish order. For His followers, however, the crucifixion became central to their understanding of who Jesus was and what He came to do.

Shortly after His death, His disciples witnessed that Jesus had risen from the dead—an event that transformed a small, frightened group into bold heralds of a new faith. Their conviction that Jesus was alive and had been vindicated by God became the foundation of Christian belief and mission. The identity of Jesus, then, cannot be separated from His resurrection.

Theological Interpretations: Jesus in Christian Doctrine

For Christians, Jesus is not merely a historical figure or moral teacher. He is the Christ (Greek for “Anointed One”—the Messiah), the Son of God, and the Savior of humanity. These convictions are articulated in the writings of the New Testament, in the early Christian creeds, and in the worship and life of the church.

Jesus as the Incarnation of God

Perhaps the most distinctive Christian belief is that in Jesus, God became human. This doctrine of the Incarnation is encapsulated in the Gospel of John: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). For Christianity, Jesus is both fully divine and fully human.

The implications of this belief are profound. Jesus is the perfect revelation of God's character and will, the one in whom God identifies with human suffering, and through whom humanity is offered reconciliation with God. In Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, we see the fulfillment of God's promises and the hope of salvation.

Jesus the Redeemer

Jesus' death was not merely the tragic end of a visionary's life, but the means by which God reconciles the world. The atonement—the various ways Christians understand how Jesus' sacrifice brings forgiveness and new life—has been interpreted in many ways: as a ransom paid, a substitutionary sacrifice, a victory over evil, and a moral example. The Apostle Paul writes, “In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself” (2 Corinthians 5:19).

We believe that, through Jesus, sin and death are overcome, and a new era of grace is inaugurated. Participation in His life—through faith, baptism, and the ethical pursuit of His teachings—forms the core of Christian discipleship. The resurrection is seen as both the validation of Jesus' identity and the assurance of hope beyond death.

Jesus as Teacher and Example

Jesus is revered as a teacher whose wisdom continues to challenge and inspire. His Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), with its radical call to love enemies, forgive unconditionally, and pursue justice, remains one of the most influential ethical discourses in history. Jesus modeled compassion, humility, and self-giving love, inviting His followers to “take up their cross” and follow him.

Even those outside the Christian faith have found in Jesus an exemplar of integrity, courage, and moral vision. His emphasis on the worth of every person, His association with social outsiders, and His critique of religious hypocrisy have made him a figure of universal appeal. Jesus’ universal appeal opens the doors to sharing His teachings with others to bring them to salvation in Jesus.

Jesus Beyond Christianity

While Jesus is most closely associated with Christianity, His influence extends far beyond the boundaries of the church.

Jesus in Islam

In Islam, Jesus (known as Isa) is honored as one of the greatest prophets. Muslims believe that Jesus was born of a virgin (Maryam), performed miracles, and brought a message of monotheism and compassion. However, Islam rejects the divinity of Jesus and His crucifixion, affirming instead that He was taken up by God and will return at the end of time as a sign of the Last Day. The Qur’an recounts many of the miracles attributed to Jesus and regards him as the Messiah, though with distinct theological meaning.

Understanding how Muslims view Jesus assists us in sharing with them who Jesus really is and what He has done for us. By engaging thoughtfully with Islamic perspectives, we can find common ground—such as the belief in Jesus’ miraculous birth, His prophetic role, and His compassion for the marginalized. These shared beliefs open doors for meaningful conversations and allow us to gently introduce the distinct Christian view of Jesus as the divine Son of God and Savior.

Through respectful dialogue, we can point to passages in both the Qur’an and the Bible that highlight Jesus’ significance. While Muslims honor Jesus as a prophet and Messiah and affirm His many miracles, they do not accept His divinity or the events of the crucifixion and resurrection as Christians understand them. Here, we can lovingly present the testimony of the Gospels, emphasizing how Jesus’ death and resurrection fulfill prophecies and offer hope of reconciliation with God.

Moreover, exploring these differences can prompt deeper questions about the nature of God, forgiveness, and salvation. By building on the foundation of mutual respect and spiritual curiosity, we have the opportunity to share how Jesus, according to Christian

faith, bridges the gap between humanity and God in a way that no other figure does. These conversations, when approached with humility and grace, can foster greater understanding and, potentially, lead others to discover the transformative message of Jesus in the Christian tradition.

Jesus in Other Faiths and Cultures

Other world religions and movements have also engaged with Jesus' identity. Some branches of Hinduism see Jesus as a holy man or even an avatar. In Buddhism, He has been regarded as a bodhisattva-like figure, embodying compassion and self-sacrifice. In Judaism, Jesus is generally viewed as a teacher or, by some, as a misguided messianic claimant—but He remains a figure of interest in Jewish scholarship and interfaith dialogue.

In modern times, Jesus has been appropriated by a wide variety of social, political, and cultural movements. From the civil rights activism of Martin Luther King Jr. to the nonviolent philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi, leaders have drawn inspiration from Jesus' teachings and example, regardless of doctrinal allegiance.

Regardless of how other faiths and cultures view Jesus, they all share with Christianity a profound respect for Him as a holy teacher and moral guide. This shared reverence forms a natural meeting point—a place where conversations can transcend doctrinal differences and focus on the values and lessons that Jesus embodied. In dialogue with people of other beliefs, acknowledging this common ground can foster mutual respect and deeper understanding thus allowing us to share Jesus' salvation with everyone.

Personal Encounters: Jesus and the Individual

Beyond the debates of scholars and the proclamations of churches, Jesus' identity is profoundly personal. He is not just a figure of the past but a living presence, encountered in prayer, scripture, worship, and acts of love. The transformative power of Jesus is attested to in countless stories of changed lives, renewed hope, and deepened compassion.

Jesus is a friend and companion in suffering. He is a light in the darkness and our biggest support through all stages of life. The invitation to “follow me”—which echoes through the Gospels—remains open to each person, calling for response not merely of intellect, but of heart and life.

The Enduring Mystery of Jesus

To ask, “Who is Jesus?” is to embark on a journey with deep personal meaning. The answer has many layers: historical and spiritual, personal and communal, simple and profound.

Whether approached through the lens of faith or history, devotion or curiosity, Jesus stands at the crossroads of the human search for meaning, hope, and love. His words—“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest”—continue to echo through the centuries, inviting each generation to discover anew who Jesus is.

Conclusion

Jesus of Nazareth remains one of the most compelling figures in human history, His identity the subject of endless exploration and passionate belief. From His historical roots in first-century Judea to His global impact across religions and cultures, from the creeds of the church to the poetry of the heart, Jesus continues to stand at the center of the world's moral compass. To know Jesus is to encounter God, who has the power to transform lives, inspire justice, and offer hope. In the end, the question “Who is Jesus?” is an invitation to find out for those who do not know Him to discover who He is, what He has done, and the power of the forgiveness that He offers us. For those who do know Jesus personally, it is a calling to share Him with everyone we encounter.