

Who Was Jesus?

Date: April 22, 2018 **Place:** Lakewood UMC **Occasion:** Case for Christ series **Texts:** John 1:1-14; Matthew 14:13-20 **Themes:** apologetics, Jesus, witnessing

Lee Strobel was the award-winning legal editor of the Chicago Tribune. He begins his book, *The Case for Christ*, by telling about a murder trial that he covered. The prosecution had presented its case and the defendant was found guilty. It appeared to be an open and shut case. He reported it as such.

But after the trial was over, he got a phone call from one of his informants, who gave him new information to consider. Pursuing the lead, he got the police to reopen the case and re-investigate the evidence, this time looking at *all* the evidence, and not just the “facts” that seemed to support everyone’s forgone conclusion. The man was found innocent.

He then goes on to say he was a confirmed atheist, believing that the things people said about Jesus, God and the Bible were mostly myth, but hardly factual. That is, until his wife told him she had become a Christian, and she began to change in some very subtle but very noticeable ways. And she asked him to consider the evidence.

So, with all of the investigative journalism skills he had acquired as a legal reporter, he began to investigate the claims that were made about Jesus. That’s where we’re headed in the next six weeks. Looking at the evidence and considering whether the claims about Jesus are worth believing.

Some of you, no doubt, already believe. But do you know *why* you believe? If someone asked you to prove your faith, would you have anything to share with that person? Some of you have questions, maybe even some doubts. You *want* to believe that it’s all true, but you’re not totally

convinced yet either. And some of you, let's be honest, are down-right skeptics. You won't believe it, unless someone presents an airtight case, and no one has been able to do that for you, yet. I'm glad that you're all here, and I hope you keep coming back.

People have had opinions about who Jesus is, since the very beginning. In the Gospel lesson, Jesus asks his disciples who people say that he is, and they give him a variety of answers. It was Peter, though, who pronounced that Jesus was the Christ, the long awaited Messiah.

But can we believe him, just based on the words we read out of this book? Is this book trustworthy as a witness? Can we believe what it says? After all, haven't there been dozens of translations?

How do we know this is a reliable witness of what really happened? Maybe you've asked those very questions, or maybe someone has asked them of you. How did you answer them?

One woman on the street was interviewed for the video portion of the study we're doing. And she said this: "I don't believe we'll ever know if Jesus was really what everyone says he was. I think it's a lot of folklore. I think it's a lot of historical misrepresentation. It's a lot of wishful thinking. But I don't think we know. And I don't think there's any way to prove what has been claimed about Jesus for all these years."

What would you say to her? Would you just let it go, not wanting to get into an argument? Or would you *like* to be able to say something to her, maybe not to argue with her, but at least to get her to think?

C.S. Lewis wrote this famous passage in his book *Mere Christianity*, which, by the way, is a classic in Christian literature and I highly recommend it. C.S. Lewis writes:

“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 – on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg – or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this was, and is, the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse.”

“You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon, or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”

So, what do you think? Was Jesus a lunatic, a liar, or was he truly the Son of God? And how can we know for sure? We’re going to be looking at the evidence in the coming weeks, because for some of you, you still haven’t decided, who Jesus was and is.

And this is going to be an important study for others of us, because it’s going to give us some tools to be able to talk about our faith with our unbelieving friends, not to argue with them, but to offer them the evidence and let them decide for themselves.

As we close, I’d like for you to consider this. It’s a short article I remember seeing 30 or more years ago, but it still gives me goosebumps to read it. Its food for thought and it has the simple title of “One Solitary Life.”

“He was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He grew up in another obscure village, where he worked in a carpenter shop until he was thirty. Then for three years he was an itinerant preacher. He never had a family or owned a home. He never set foot in a big city. He never traveled two hundred miles from the place he was born. He never wrote a book, or held an office. He did none of the things that usually accompany greatness.

“While he was still a young man, the tide of public opinion turned against him. His friends deserted him. He was turned over to his enemies and went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed to a tree between two thieves. While he was dying, his executioners gambled for the only piece of property he had – his coat.

“When he was dead, he was taken down and laid in a borrowed grave.

“Twenty centuries have come and gone, and today he is the central figure for much of the human race. All the armies that ever marched, and all the navies that ever sailed, and all the parliaments that ever sat, and all the kings that ever reigned, put together, have not affected the life of the human race upon this earth as powerfully as that one, solitary life.”

(Author unknown).

So let me ask you, what level of confidence do you have – that Jesus is an actual historical figure? How confident are you that the existence of Jesus Christ is a matter of legend, or wishful thinking, or solid, convincing evidence? Just as he asked his disciples, so I ask you: Who do you say that Jesus was?

Let us pray:

“God, we gather in this church as a people of faith. And yet, we all have questions. Lord, we believe, help us in our unbelief. In the coming days and weeks, o Lord, we pray that you will help us keep an open mind, consider the evidence, and come to our own conclusion about the man Jesus. For many of us, we call him Lord. Bring us all to the place where we can do so with faith and confidence. In His name we pray, Amen.”

This sermon borrows heavily from the book *The Case for Christ*, by Lee Strobel, Grand Rapids Michigan: Zondervan, 1998, 2016; pp. 13-23; and the study guide by the same name and author, pp. 9-11.