

THE ONE AND ONLY (PART 1) EASTER 2021

When we lived in Nairobi, Kenya, I was friends with a Hindu priest who offered to give me a tour of the temple where he performed his duties. He was especially eager to show me a particular shrine, and on the way to it he led me down a large hallway that was lined with portraits of dozens of the “gods” that Hindus worship. I had studied Hinduism a little and had learned some things about some of the gods that were portrayed in these images. There was Brahma the creator and Siva the god of fertility; there was Ganesh the god of wisdom, Vishnu the god of protection, and Laxmi the goddess of wealth. There was Hanuman the Monkey god and Rama and Sita and Shakti.

At the time I was so accustomed to seeing these portraits that I was not paying much attention, until about halfway down the hall I saw *one* that made me stop in my tracks. Compared to the others it was not a particularly eye-catching portrait, and it was much smaller in its size. It was a picture of a man, and it looked very familiar.

I asked the priest, “Who is this?”

“Don’t you know?” he said. “That’s Jesus.”

Jesus? I was puzzled. “Why is *He* here?”

Now he was puzzled. “Don’t *you* believe Jesus is God? We do. We believe He was a god, and we worship Him just like you do.” He smiled at me and seemed very satisfied with himself.

Jesus: One of the 336,000,000 gods in the Hindu religion. A God who is respected and revered and worshiped by Hindus, but who is not nearly as great and powerful and interesting as, say, Brahma or Siva.

In Nairobi where we lived at that time many of our friends and neighbors were Muslims. I did not know until I read the *Koran*, their holy Book, that Muslims, too, revere Jesus. The *Koran* says He is a great prophet, along with Abraham, Moses, and Mohammed. The *Koran* says that He was born of a virgin and lived a *sinless* life; that He was the Messiah, and that one day He will return to this earth in power and glory.

Jesus: One of 124,000 prophets in Islam—a prophet whose words are esteemed; but whose words are certainly not definitive and definitely not the *most* important words.

It is interesting to me that in almost every religion in almost every country in the world Jesus has a good reputation. His *followers* don’t, necessarily, but Jesus does. At the very least He is recognized as a major spiritual figure who has made an important contribution to our understanding of God and morality. He is considered a spiritual “VIP” who is deserving of honor.

I guess what I’m trying to say is that for most people in the world Jesus is acceptable and respectable on some level. In a recent poll, Jesus ranked as the most admired person in history.

But let’s be very clear about something. It’s one thing to admire Him; it’s one thing to accept Him as a revelation of God; it’s one thing to believe that He was a great prophet or spiritual guide. It is quite another to believe that He is who He said He was, and it is quite another thing to come to grips with those assertions in relation to yourself. But that is what really matters.

Opinions about Jesus abound and responses to Jesus vary. But there is only one opinion that is true and there is only one response that will give you eternal life.

When Jesus began His ministry on this earth, He chose twelve disciples. They saw

Him heal the sick, feed the multitudes, calm the sea, cast out demons, walk on water, and raise the dead. And often they were astonished, prompting them to whisper to one another, “Who is this man?”

One day Jesus pinned them down. He asked them, *“Who do you think I am?”*

In typical fashion Peter was the first one to open his mouth. He said, *“You are the Christ (Messiah), Son of the living God” (Matthew 16: 16).*

And Jesus responded, *“Blessed are you Simon, son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven” (Matt. 16:17).*

Jesus was no ordinary or even extraordinary man. He was not merely a religious leader who lived an exemplary life. He was not just a gifted teacher or a charismatic prophet or a miracle worker who attracted a large following. He is the long-anticipated Messiah, the eternal Son of God.

God. Not a representative of God, but God in the flesh. God! The One who created the universe. The One who is sovereign, infinite, all-powerful, all-knowing, unchangeable, holy, righteous, and just. God! Who voluntarily left His throne in heaven, who temporarily laid aside many of His divine attributes and became a human being; who became subject to the weaknesses and temptations and vulnerabilities of humanity, yet never once sinned; who went, resolutely, to a cross, upon which He suffered and bled and died, upon which He experienced His Father’s fierce wrath against sin, even though He Himself had never done anything wrong.

Why did He do it?

Jesus Himself declared, *“For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son” (John 3:16).* He became a man because He loves us. He emptied Himself of His glory because He wants to be friends with us. Not because we deserve it. None of us do. The Bible says that *“All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23)*, and that *“There is no one righteous, not even one” (Romans 3:10).* We’re all sinners, unable to obtain God’s favor through our own efforts. We’re dead in our sin, the Bible says. *“But because of His great love for us God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in sin—it is by grace you have been saved” (Eph. 2:4-5).*

There’s not a person alive who is able to secure his own salvation. We needed someone to pay the penalty for our sin that we could never pay, someone to experience the punishment we deserve so that we wouldn’t have to. That’s why God became a man—so He could secure it for us. He came to this earth because we were helpless to save ourselves. He took our sin upon Himself because He was the only One who was qualified to satisfy God’s justice, since He is the only One who has ever lived who has never sinned. So, He became our Substitute. He died in our place, so that we wouldn’t have to be punished and be separated from God forever in hell.

He did all this because He loves us.

My friends, the claims Jesus made in the Scriptures about Himself, the power He demonstrated, the worship He welcomed, the allegiance He demanded of His followers can only lead you to conclude one of two things. Either He was and is the Messiah, Son of the Living God; or He is a liar and a lunatic. You cannot, in all moral and intellectual honesty, fall somewhere in between.

Who do you say Jesus is? That is the most important question you will ever be asked. Your life—your eternal destiny depends on it.

Listen to these verses: *“Salvation is found in no one else [but Jesus], for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).* And Jesus

Himself said, *"I am the way, the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father except through Me" (John 14:6).*

These statements declare emphatically that if you don't have Jesus you can't have a relationship with God and you can't have eternal life. If this is true it means nothing less than that the universal quest for God ends in Jesus Christ and Him alone. It means that our hope of heaven rests in Jesus—not religion, not good works, not good intentions, not sincerity, but Jesus.

And the reason we can know for sure that Jesus was the way, the truth and the life and that His death on the cross did accomplish what He said it would—the forgiveness of sins, reconciliation with God, and eternal life for all who believe in Him, is because three days after He died *He rose from the dead!* He defeated our ultimate enemy and proved that He has authority over everything.

As I said, opinions about Jesus abound and reactions to Jesus vary. But there's only one opinion that is true, and there is only one response that will give you eternal life, and that is to believe in Him. Believe that He is the Messiah, the Son of God; believe that He died for your sins and that He rose from the dead; believe that when you call out to Him He will save you and forgive you and reconcile you to God and give you eternal life.

THE RESURRECTION MATTERS! (PART 2)
EASTER 2021

What is the ultimate issue of life? I will give you a hint: it is the *same* for every person, no matter what their age, race, class, gender, nationality, or any other social distinction. It is the same for Millennials as it is for Baby Boomers. It is the same for a person who lives in a penthouse in Manhattan as it is for a person who lives in a slum in Africa. It is the same for someone who lived 5,000 years ago as it is for someone who was born in the twenty-first century.

What is the ultimate issue of life?

Contrary to popular opinion, contrary to the attitudes and actions of the vast majority of people in our culture, the ultimate issue of life is not how educated you are, or what kind of a job you have, or how much money you make, or what kind of a house you live in, or how many toys are in your garage. It is not how happy or pretty or healthy or athletic you are. It is not how many people like you or how many good deeds you have done or how many wonderful experiences you have had. It has nothing to do with your personality, your net worth, or your IQ.

The ultimate issue of life is what is going to happen to you on the *Day of Judgment*. The one thing that matters most is what God will say to you on that day about *where* you will spend eternity. Will He assign you to spend eternity in heaven, or will He assign you to spend eternity in hell?

And if this is the ultimate issue of life, then it stands to reason that the most important *question* in life, the question about which every person ought to have absolute clarity is: *How can I be sure that I know how to get to heaven?* Not *only* so I can go there myself, but so I can make sure my loved ones know how to get there, and so that I can tell others how they can get there. For the alternative to heaven, the *only* alternative to heaven, is eternal suffering and torment.

When the Apostle Paul was spreading the Gospel in the first century, he came to the city of Athens, the intellectual and philosophical capital of the world. As Paul went throughout the city preaching about Jesus, some local philosophers became curious, and invited him to give a lecture in their famous marketplace called the Areopagus. Earlier we read that he told the audience about the God who made them, the God who arranged for them to be born into a particular family and live in a particular community, and then orchestrated countless circumstances and events in order to reveal Himself so that they might know Him. And then Paul told them the way they have a relationship with Him.

He said in **verses 29-30**.²⁹ *“Therefore since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by man’s design and skill.”*³⁰ *In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now He commands all people everywhere to repent.”*

Repent of what? Repent of their ignorance that led them to devise a religious system in which they fashioned imaginary gods, and then spent their lives, in vain, trying to please them. Paul says, “Renounce those lies and embrace the truth you have just heard about the one, true God! The God to whom you will one day give an account.” **Verses 31-32a**. *“For He has set a day when He will judge the world with justice by the man He has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising Him from the dead.”* *When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered.*

There was a time when Paul himself sneered at the mention of Jesus’ resurrection. When he was a young man, he hated Christians, and he was a violent persecutor of the

church. On one occasion, he heard the testimony of a disciple named Stephen who would not stop talking about how Jesus had risen from the dead. Paul (who was then called Saul) became incensed when Stephen was talking and looked up and claimed to have seen the risen Jesus standing at the right hand of God (Acts 7:56). This was too much for Saul and the crowd that was with Him. They drug Stephen outside the city and stoned him to death.

Not long afterward, Saul was on his way to the city of Damascus to arrest Christians and put them in prison. Around noon a penetrating beam of light flashed from heaven and shone on him. It was so bright that it blinded him, and it compelled him to fall to the ground. And then he heard a voice that said, "*Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?*"

Saul asked, "Who are you, Lord?"

And the voice replied, "*I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.*"

That simple declaration drastically changed Saul's life, and it would drastically change the course of history. Because when Jesus identified Himself by name He was letting Saul know that He was, indeed, *alive*.

The One who was supposed to be a fraud, the One who's body was supposed to be decaying in a tomb just outside Jerusalem, the One who had made all those "blasphemous" claims about being the Son of God, and the One whose disciples were perpetuating those myths, *was* really, truly the Son of God after all. The disciples were not lying when they said they had seen the risen Christ. Stephen was not lying when he said he saw Jesus standing at God's right hand (7:56). Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified, *really was* alive!

As Saul lay there, crumpled on the ground, he was suddenly jolted into a realization that everything he had lived for and stood for was dead wrong. And everything he had rejected and despised as utter nonsense and blasphemy was, in fact, the truth. And he immediately repented of the lies he had believed and embraced the truth, and that truth set him free; that truth set him on a completely different course.

This is what the New Testament refers to as "conversion". Conversion literally means that you suddenly stop believing one thing, and you believe another; you suddenly stop going in one direction and you go in another. Saul's conversion was a total conversion of mind, heart, and will that changed his life forever.

And I literally mean *forever*. Because coming to grips with the truth about the risen Jesus is eternally consequential.

In Paul's message to the Athenians, he said that God's story is leading to a climax that will impact every one of us, either positively or negatively. That climax is called the Day of Judgment. That Day will reveal, for every single person, whether or not they have responded to God's invitation to receive His gift of salvation and eternal life on His terms.

So, the big question—the ultimate question—is, "What are God's terms?"

Most people naturally believe that God's terms involve doing things that we think will impress Him or please Him. Good works, religious activity, obedience to moral laws. Most people think that if we *do* enough, we will earn God's favor, and we will meet with His approval on the Day of Judgment.

A few years ago, (April 15th, 2014), the *New York Times* featured a story about former mayor of NYC, Michael Bloomberg. At the end of an announcement to pledge \$50 million to promote gun control legislation, he made a bold statement to the media who were gathered. Pointing to his work on gun safety, obesity, and other social issues, he said: "If there is a God, when I get to heaven I'm not stopping to be interviewed. I am heading straight in. I have earned my place in heaven. It's not even close."

Unfortunately, what Mr. Bloomberg has failed to understand is that God is not the least bit impressed with any of the things he has done, or any of the things you and I have done,

for that matter. What is more, it is sheer arrogance—no, it is insanity—to think we can get into heaven on our terms. Our terms don't mean diddly on the Day of Judgment. The only thing that matters is God's terms.

So, what are His terms?

Jesus said, *"I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies" (John 11:25).*

Did you hear that? Jesus said, *"He who believes in me will live..."*

On another occasion Jesus was having a conversation with people who wanted to know the answer to the ultimate question of life. How can we be safe in the end? How can we get on God's good side? So they asked Jesus, *"What must we do to do the works God requires?" (John 6:28).*

Did you notice their assumption? God requires us to work; He requires us to do things that prove our goodness and earn our good standing with God. And they were fully expecting Jesus to say something like, "Keep the ten commandments, go to church regularly, read your Bible, do this, do that..."

But Jesus answered, *"The work of God is this: to believe in the one He has sent" (John 6:29).* Again, Jesus says, **believe**. Believe in Him.

And then Paul, when writing his letter to the Romans, said, *"If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved" (Romans 10:9).*

God's terms for His approval and acceptance are believing in His Son, the Lord Jesus. Believing that He did the work that was required by God for us when He died on the cross for our sins and then rose from the dead. Believing that He is God's provision for our eternal life. Believing that He is the way, the truth, and the life, and that no one comes to the Father except through Him (John 14:6).

The resurrection matters! The fact that Jesus rose from the dead, the fact that Jesus won the victory over man's ultimate enemy—death, the fact that Jesus is alive makes it possible for us to live, forever, with Jesus in the presence of God.

But you must *believe*. You must put all your confidence in Jesus. When you stand before Him on the Day of Judgment and He asks you why He should let you into heaven, there is only one answer that will get you in. "I believe that Jesus died for my sins and rose from the dead! I have put my trust in Him!"