THE DILEMMA WE ALL FACE

It's the great debate: Is there a God or not? Let's take it one step further and ask, “Is Jesus really God?” There's a lot riding on the answer. It only makes sense to keep an open mind while figuring out the dilemma. Looking at the facts in Scripture as well as stories from contemporary lives, What If It’s True? reflects on the questions we all ask. So go ahead . . . open up this booklet and read the words with careful consideration. It’s worth your time.

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What If It’s True?
What Jesus Means for You

Pascal’s Wager

Mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal said that when it comes to our greatest question, there are only two possibilities: either there is a God or there is not. He also noted that everyone...
“wagers” their lives on their chosen response. It cannot be ignored.

So how are we to assess Pascal’s Wager? Blind faith is irrational, but blind cynicism leads only to hopelessness. Careful investigation and thoughtful consideration seem the wisest course of action.

Even if we approach Pascal’s Wager with skepticism, we still have reason to inquire about the nature of spiritual beliefs. If God does exist, our conclusion may lead us to personal discoveries far better than we thought possible.

Our Daily Bread Ministries

1 Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*, #233.
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While in her 20s, Kirsten Powers vacillated between atheism and agnosticism. Raised as a nominal Christian, she had begun to question the faith of her father, abandoning it entirely in college. Eventually she entered the political world and gained an appointment to work in a US presidential administration. Her circle of friends and coworkers was, as she puts it, “overwhelmingly atheist.” Living a fulfilling professional life with intelligent
and engaging friends, Powers gave little thought to what she might be missing.

SIMPLY DEFINED, 

**atheism** is the belief that there is no deity. 
**Agnosticism** asserts that knowledge about God is unattainable, that is, we can never know if a higher power exists.

Eventually Powers began dating a man who believed in Jesus. She candidly let him know that she would never share his spiritual beliefs. But then he asked her a question about faith in Jesus that left her unsettled: "Do you think you can keep an open mind about it?"

Powers assured him that as a reasonable, rational human being, of course she could keep an open mind. Yet she remembers thinking, *What if this is true, and I’m not even willing to consider it?*

If we are honest, all of us—skeptics and believers alike—can identify with Powers’s dilemma: Who was Jesus? Is there a God? Does he matter to us today? How can we know what to believe?

Indeed, when it comes to Christianity’s claims about Christ, the biggest question is simply this: *What if it’s true?*

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What If Jesus Is Who He Claimed To Be?

For two thousand years, Jesus of Nazareth has been known as the founder of one of the world’s major religions. Many also see him as a provocative teacher and a good moral example.

But a careful review of history doesn’t give us the luxury of thinking that Jesus was only a great teacher or a good moral example. If he was not who he claimed to
be, then the options are quite limited. Jesus must either be who he said he was, or he was an evil or deluded man. There are no other logical options.

Because Jesus is such a monumental historical figure, we are unwise to dismiss his claims without careful scrutiny. Did he perpetrate a colossal hoax on humanity? Or is there more to the story? What did Jesus really say about himself? A good place to start is by looking at the written accounts of those who knew him well and observed his ministry closely.

**Jesus claimed to be divine.** In John’s record of Jesus’s life, we find Christ confronted by the religious leaders of Israel. During the course of a heated debate, he claimed to know God in a way that they did not. John quotes Jesus as saying, “I tell you the truth, before Abraham was even born, I Am!” At that point they picked up stones to throw at him” (John 8:58–59). The religious leaders perfectly understood Jesus’s implication. He claimed to be deity, and that claim enraged them.

> The religious leaders recognized the phrase I Am as the name God called himself when he spoke to Moses from the burning bush (Exodus 3:13–14). They interpreted Jesus’s bold claim as blasphemy—a capital crime under Jewish law.
Matthew, Mark, and Luke all report that Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I, the Son of Man, am?” (Matthew 16:13 NKJV). Simon Peter replied, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (v. 16; see also Mark 8:27–30 and Luke 9:18–21). Jesus affirmed Peter’s bold assertion.

In Matthew and Mark we also read of the high priest interrogating Jesus after his arrest: “I demand in the name of the living God—tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God.’ Jesus replied, ‘You have said it. And in the future, you will see the Son of Man seated in the place of power at God’s right hand and coming on the clouds of heaven.’ Then the high priest tore his clothing to show his horror and said, ‘Blasphemy! Why do we need other witnesses? You have all heard his blasphemy’” (Matthew 26:63–65; see also Mark 14:60–63).

Of all the founders of the world’s great religions, only one ever claimed to be God; that is, Jesus Christ. Is Jesus’s bold assertion about himself possible? If so, where is the proof? What is the evidence that this great spiritual leader really was God incarnate?

“Incarnate” means that God became a man. This does not mean that Jesus was no longer God. Jesus was both fully God and fully man.
The writers of the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John provide us with varied perspectives of the life of Jesus. But they all share the conclusion that Jesus cannot be explained unless he was who he claimed to be. They say that he performed:

- **Miracles of physical healing:** He healed a man with a terrible skin disease (Matthew 8:2–4), reversed paralysis (Matthew 9:2–8; 12:10–13), and cured blindness and deafness (Matthew 20:30–34; Mark 7:31–37).

- **Miracles of nature:** He turned water into wine (John 2:1–11), stilled a storm on the Sea of Galilee (Matthew 8:23–27), and walked on water (Matthew 14:22–26).

- **Miracles of resurrection:** He raised the dead daughter of a religious leader (Matthew 9:18–26), a widow’s dead son (Luke 7:11–15), and a friend named Lazarus (John 11:1–44).

Skeptics naturally challenge that miracles run counter to empirical science, and hence, are impossible. For a more extensive treatment of this legitimate contention, see the bibliography on page 32. The oldest written accounts of Jesus’s life claim that he performed miracles. This was one reason so many people flocked to him, and it was why Herod wanted to see Jesus before he was crucified (Luke 23:8).

Obviously such miracles, if genuine, could take place
only if Jesus were capable of performing truly supernatural acts. According to these accounts, Jesus must have been more than a mere man.

Critics, of course, will say that such miracles are an impossibility; the gospel accounts of miracles are extravagant claims added later. But if we are to keep an open mind, we must admit that the origin of life itself seems impossible without a causal agent—something/one must have planned it all. The possibility of a designer behind the design of the universe also leaves open the possibility that such a designer could choose to visit us in human form.

**Jesus claimed to be the Savior.** In each of the four written records of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, we hear Jesus repeatedly talking about his mission. As his popularity increased, the religious leaders of Israel started worrying about him and his bold claims. About
the same time, he began to discuss going to Jerusalem to die (Matthew 16:21; Mark 9:30–32; John 10:17–18). His followers found such comments unthinkable. Yet after three short years in the public eye, Jesus did indeed go to Jerusalem, where he was rejected by national leaders and crucified for claiming to be the King and Messiah of the Jews.

> When the high priest interrogated Jesus at his trial, he asked him, “Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?” Jesus said, “I Am” (Mark 14:61–62).

Only after his execution did his followers see his willingness to die in the light of a comment made by his forerunner. Three years earlier they had heard a rugged wilderness prophet known as John the baptizer say about Jesus, “Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29).

For thousands of years the religious law of Israel had required the death of innocent animals on altars of sacrifice. All the while, mysterious statements of Jewish prophets referred to a Messiah who would bear the sin of fallen humanity. Yet the meaning of a suffering Savior (Genesis 3:15; Isaiah 53; Daniel 9:26; Zechariah 12:10) remained a mystery until after the death of Jesus.
In the Jewish religion, Messiah refers to the one who was going to come and set all things right. He was God’s chosen person to accomplish his purposes of redemption and restoration.

Christ never contradicted John’s bold declaration about him—“the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” We may reasonably conclude that Jesus saw himself as the sacrificial lamb hinted at by the prophets.

Isaiah 53 says, in part, “He was led like a lamb to the slaughter” (V. 7), “his life is made an offering for sin” (V. 10), and “he bore the sins of many and interceded for rebels” (V. 12).

According to hundreds of eyewitnesses, Jesus did die—and three days later he left the tomb alive. Consider the following:

• Historians acknowledge that Jesus was a real person who gained renown in first-century Israel as a healer and a teacher.

• Historians (Jewish and Roman) also acknowledge that Jesus died at the hands of religious leaders.

• The biblical record tells us that Jesus was seen alive by more than 500 people after his death (1 Corinthians 15:5–6).

• In the crucifixion and resurrection, dozens of Old

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Testament prophecies of God’s plan for providing forgiveness were fulfilled.

• According to the gospel accounts of Jesus’s resurrection, the first people to see him alive again were women. But women were not considered credible witnesses in a Jewish court of law. Had the gospel writers been fabricating the story, they surely would have reported that men were the first eyewitnesses.

• On the night Jesus was arrested, most of the disciples fled in fear, and one of the two who followed him to his trials emphatically denied knowing him. Years later, ten of the disciples were martyred for their faith in the resurrected Jesus. What would have given them this new resolve—unless they knew Jesus’s resurrection to be a fact?

In all of these amazing events, Jesus doesn’t make it easy for us. He said “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). That doesn’t leave us any options. He does not allow us to think that he was just “a good teacher” or “a moral model.”

C. S. Lewis, Cambridge University professor and
a former atheist, observed with refreshing simplicity:

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: “I am 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—on a 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 man 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 up with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.\(^3\)
Jesus’s life had a profound effect not only on contemporaries who were willing to die for him but also on the entire course of human history. How does such a life affect us two thousand years later?

**What if Jesus really is the Creator of all that exists?**

Every December much of the world celebrates the birth of God’s Son into the world. Yet most gift-givers don’t appreciate the significance of the event behind this holiday. Many of the celebrants might not even realize that, according to the original story, Jesus was born into our world as “the visible image of the invisible God” (Colossians 1:15).

In Colossians 1:16–17, Paul wrote:

> For through him God created everything in the heavenly realms and on earth. He made the things we can see and the things we can’t see—such as thrones, kingdoms, rulers, and authorities in the unseen world. Everything was created through him and for him. He existed before anything else, and he holds all creation together.

Who is this that created all things? He is the “visible
image of the invisible God” (that is, Jesus is the God we can see). In verse 13 the writer is more specific. The Creator is “his dear Son.” According to the Bible, Jesus Christ is not only the Son of God, he is also the Creator of the universe! Let’s consider some other Scriptures:

• “In the beginning the Word already existed. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. He existed in the beginning with God. God created everything through him, and nothing was created except through him” (John 1:1–3).

• “He came into the very world he created, but the world didn’t recognize him” (John 1:10).

In his introduction, John intentionally echoes Genesis 1:1 when describing Jesus to his readers: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (cf. John 1:1). And in the introduction to his first letter John wrote, “We proclaim to you the one who existed from the beginning” (1 John 1:1).

• “But for us, there is one God, the Father, by whom all things were created, and for whom we live. And there is one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things were created, and through whom we live” (1 Corinthians 8:6).

• “Long ago God spoke many times and in many ways
to our ancestors through the prophets. And now in these final days, he has spoken to us through his Son. God promised everything to the Son as an inheritance, and through the Son he created the universe” (HEBREWS 1:1–2).

The Bible claims that the Creator came to us in the person we know as Jesus.

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3 C. S. Lewis, Mere Christianity, p. 41.
three

What the Creator Did

The apostle John, in the first chapter of his gospel, wrote: “So the Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father’s one and only Son” (John 1:14).

The idea that God was among us is more important than any of us can absorb. If it is true, then we can only scratch the surface of the thought that the little one
bundled up in that crude stable manger was in fact our Creator. Yet this is the claim of the Bible:

- **God was in a human body.** The most astounding miracle of all history is that God became a man. This is the amazing reality of Christmas: God came in human flesh!

- **God lived among us.** Jesus did not come to observe life. He came to experience it. He walked on the ground he himself had created.

- **God showed his goodness to us.** Jesus didn’t just come, live a secluded and easy life, and then return to a better place. He lived here experiencing the conditions, sufferings, and temptations we all live with.

### How the Creator Loves

In Revelation 1:5–6, the apostle John wrote: “All glory to him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by shedding his blood for us. He has made us a Kingdom of priests for God his Father. All glory and power to him forever and ever! Amen.”

John also wrote: “God showed how much he loved us by sending his one and only Son into the world so that
we might have eternal life through him” (1 John 4:9).

From other Scriptures we learn more of what this love means. For example, consider the following:

**He released us from our sins by dying in our place.** This is the assertion of Hebrews 2:9: “What we do see is Jesus, who was given a position ‘a little lower than the angels’; and because he suffered death for us, he is now ‘crowned with glory and honor.’ Yes, by God’s grace, Jesus tasted death for everyone.”

**He removed the barrier that prevented us from enjoying a relationship with God.** If we believe what the Bible says, God has not abandoned us; we have abandoned him.

According to the Bible, the Creator of the universe went to the cross and died for our sins so that we could be made right with God. “This is real love—not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins” (1 John 4:10).

What a powerful thought—the Creator hung on a cross, dying for people who were living on death row. He gave his life so that others could live not on their own merits but by the merits of the perfect One who died on their behalf.
He served as our high priest. In the Old Testament, there were three offices in the leadership of the kingdom of Israel: king, prophet, and priest. The New Testament not only calls Jesus our Creator, but our King, our Prophet, and our Priest. We do not need any other mediator between God and us except Jesus Christ.

\[\text{In ancient Judaism, not everyone could approach God. The high priest was the one person who could represent the people in the presence of God.}\]

- “There is salvation in no one else! God has given no other name under heaven by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

- “Therefore, since we have been made right in God’s sight by faith, we have peace with God because of what Jesus Christ our Lord has done for us. Because of our faith, Christ has brought us into this place of undeserved privilege where we now stand, and we confidently and joyfully look forward to sharing God’s glory” (Romans 5:1–2).

- “So then, since we have a great High Priest who has entered heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to what we believe. This High Priest of ours understands our weaknesses, for he faced all of the
same testings we do, yet he did not sin. So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most” (Hebrews 4:14–16).

These thoughts from the Bible tell us that our Creator himself died for our sins to bring us back into the relationship lost in Eden. That’s the essence of Jesus’s words: “The Son of Man came to seek and save those who are lost” (Luke 19:10).

What if it’s true that the Creator cares for me?

Several years ago the American public was introduced to a television program called Who Wants To Marry a Multimillionaire? In actuality, it amounted to little more than a beauty pageant with only one judge—a proposing groom hidden behind a screen. The prize was marriage to a multimillionaire.

The show contained all the usual trappings of a pageant. The pack of “contestants” was whittled down from thousands to the fifty who made the show, to ten semifinalists, then five finalists. It ended with a wedding right on stage. (Predictably, the prenuptial agreements were signed beforehand.)
The entire event seemed bizarre and surreal, but it provides a window into human nature. One of the contestants said, “It’s really not about the money.” And the multimillionaire stated, “We are all here because we have been unlucky at love, and we are hoping something magical will happen.”

Our initial reaction may be to dismiss those assertions. But if we take them at face value, we catch a glimpse of human beings desperate for a relationship that offers to meet their needs, however idealized it may be.

We all long to give and receive love, to experience and share intimacy, to care and to be cared for, to enjoy someone’s full attention. Yet so many of us go through life without ever entering into a satisfying relationship.

But it’s not just the need for any relationship that characterizes us; it’s the need for a meaningful relationship with our Creator.

According to the Bible, Jesus was God’s plan to restore our relationship with Him (John 6:44; 1 John 4:10).
In his book *The Call*, author Os Guinness writes:

We cannot find God without God. We cannot reach God without God. We cannot satisfy God without God—which is another way of saying that our seeking will always fall short unless God’s grace initiates the search and unless God’s call draws us to Him and completes the search.

If the chasm is to be bridged, God must bridge it. If we are to desire the highest good, the highest good must come down and draw us so that it may become a reality we desire. From this perspective there is no merit in either seeking or finding. All is grace. The secret of seeking is not in our human ascent to God, but in God’s descent to us. We start our searching, but we end up being discovered. We think we are looking for something; we realize we are found by Someone. As in Francis Thompson’s famous picture, “the hound of heaven” has tracked us down.

Francis Thompson (1859–1907) was an English poet who wrote “The Hound of Heaven” in response to his keen awareness that in love, grace, and mercy, God relentlessly pursued his heart. Addicted to opium, Thompson was homeless for several years.
C. S. Lewis looked back on his journey to faith in Christ and discovered that “God closed in on me.” He wrote, “Amiable agnostics will talk cheerfully about ‘man’s search for God.’ To me, as I then was, they might as well have talked about the mouse’s search for the cat.”

Yes, the seeking is real, but who seeks whom? The Creator of the universe is seeking you!

The great prime minister of the Netherlands, Abraham Kuyper, declared,

“There is not one square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, ‘Mine!’”

As the Creator, everything belongs to him and he is claiming that which he himself has made.

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5 C. S. Lewis, *Surprised By Joy*, p. 179.
The search for a truly loving relationship can seem like chasing after the wind. In the midst of our search, the Bible assures us that the Creator of the universe cared so much for us that he came seeking us.

In a world of loneliness, despair, and rejection, the Bible offers hope and encouragement. We recall the
words given to a blind beggar named Bartimaeus: “Cheer up... He’s calling you!” (Mark 10:49). Yes, the Creator cares for us! With that truth in mind, consider the words of American astronaut Guy Gardner. Reflecting on the wonders of space he said:

It’s very hard to think this must have happened by chance. . . . You realize at the same time that there had to be a Master Designer, a Creator of this planet. And to me that makes life all the more special. Because that tells me that instead of me being something that just came along in the course of time to live and die, that instead of a meaningless existence, I have Someone—who cares for me—who has made me and cares about me.7

◆

**What if it’s true?** If Jesus is who he claimed to be, and if the Creator really does care for us, then everything now depends on our willingness to trust him. If Jesus is God in the flesh, then apart from him we will never know real joy, real meaning, or real peace in life. He is our Creator and he seeks a personal relationship with us.

Carefully consider what the Bible says:
For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him. There is no judgment against anyone who believes in him. But anyone who does not believe in him has already been judged for not believing in God’s one and only Son (John 3:16–18).

Ultimately, Kirsten Powers, now a political commentator and columnist, kept her promise to her boyfriend to remain open to the question of faith in Jesus. Her journey from skepticism to faith was slow. She began to read the Bible to see what it really said. Still, as she puts it, “I didn’t feel any connection to God, and frankly, I was fine with that.”

Reluctantly, Powers attended a Bible study. She describes it this way: “I don’t remember what was said
that day. All I know is that when I left, everything had changed. I’ll never forget standing outside that apartment on the Upper East Side and saying to myself, ‘It’s true. It’s completely true.’ The world looked entirely different, like a veil had been lifted off it.” Powers concludes, “I was filled with indescribable joy.”

Kirsten Powers’s dilemma highlights the soul-crisis of each one of us: What if it’s true? Wherever your spiritual journey finds you at this moment, we hope that you will keep an honest and open mind.

If you have any questions, or if you would like additional material to study, please contact us. We’d enjoy engaging in a respectful dialog with you that will help us all better understand what really matters in life.


Reflections
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