



ENCOUNTERING JESUS IN THE SCRIPTURES

*He appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve.
Then he appeared to more than five hundred
brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive.*

—1 CORINTHIANS 15:5–6

SCRIPTURE READING

Either before you arrive or as you wait for class to begin, find this short passage from Sacred Scripture in your Bible or through an online search. Reading it will prepare you for this week's material.

—Acts 3:12–21

OPENING PRAYER

Keep safe, O Lord, we pray,
those whom you have saved by your kindness
that, redeemed by the passion of our Lord, Jesus Christ, your Son,
they may rejoice in his resurrection.
Who lives and reigns for ever and ever.
Amen.

SESSION 6 VIDEO LESSON: ENCOUNTERING JESUS IN THE SCRIPTURES

As you watch the video lesson, refer to these key highlights. Feel free to use the space provided to take notes.

- ◆ The Christian faith proclaims the truth that Jesus is alive in the present tense.

- ◆ Christians are seeking above all to know Christ according to his deepest identity.

- ◆ There are important things that history can tell us about Jesus and the time in which he lived out his earthly life. For example, the religious, social, and political background of first-century Palestine; the different groups, or “parties,” in Judaism at that time (like Pharisees and Sadducees); the significance for a first-century Palestinian Jew of the things Jesus is reported to have said, and so forth.

- ◆ Knowing the true identity of Jesus is only possible by faith, yet a faith fully consistent with history.
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- ◆ Faith is built on what happened in history, and history points to faith.
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Wisdom of the Saints

[Jesus] will show us the way; we must look at His life—that is our best pattern. What more do we need than to have at our side so good a Friend, Who will not leave us in trials and tribulations, as earthly friends do? . . . When we are busy, or suffering persecutions or trials, when we cannot get as much quiet as we should like, and at seasons of aridity, we have a very good Friend in Christ. We look at Him as a Man; we think of His moments of weakness and times of trial; and He becomes our Companion. Once we have made a habit of thinking of Him in this way, it becomes very easy to find Him at our side.

—St. Teresa of Avila

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Take a moment to answer these questions with a partner or with the group.

1. Why is purely historical knowledge about Jesus insufficient for the Christian?

2. How does Scripture communicate to us the deepest, true identity of Jesus?

3. How can history be used well or badly (misused), in coming to know Jesus?

4. What does it mean to say “the whole Bible is about Christ”?



Catechism Connection

Jesus accepted Peter's profession of faith, which acknowledged him to be the Messiah, by announcing the imminent Passion of the Son of Man. He unveiled the authentic content of his messianic kingship both in the transcendent identity of the Son of Man "who came down from heaven," and in his redemptive mission as the suffering Servant: "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." Hence the true meaning of his kingship is revealed only when he is raised high on the cross. Only after his Resurrection will Peter be able to proclaim Jesus' messianic kingship to the People of God: "Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified."

—CCC 440

LIFE APPLICATION QUESTIONS

Discuss these questions with a partner or the group, or meditate on your own.

1. How well do you think you know Jesus as a person? What might you do to come to know him better?

2. When others ask you about Jesus, what do you say? What should you tell them?

3. Have you ever been challenged about whether it is reasonable to believe that Jesus is the Son of God? How did you respond? How would you like to respond if you were asked today?

WITNESS TO CONVERSION

After concluding your group discussion, return to watch the second video where converts to the Catholic faith discuss their conversion and how they live today as Catholics.



Rome to Home

In Christ and through Christ God has revealed himself fully to mankind and has definitively drawn close to it; at the same time, in Christ and through Christ man has acquired full awareness of his dignity, of the heights to which he is raised, of the surpassing worth of his own humanity, and of the meaning of his existence. All of us who are Christ's followers must therefore meet and unite around him.

—Pope St. John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, no. 11

KEY TERMS

Christ: From the Greek translation of the Hebrew word *Messiah*, which means “anointed.” (In the Old Testament, prophets, priests, and kings were anointed with oil.) In the case of Jesus, being called “Christ” or “the Christ” corresponded to the Jewish expectation of a messiah who would save his people. Further, the Gospels depict him as “anointed” in his human nature with the Holy Spirit for the sake of his saving mission.

Gnostic Gospels: Later texts (in some cases, written several centuries after Christ) that combine elements of Christian belief with other elements of ancient Near Eastern religions, producing a Christian-seeming form of what is in fact an early heresy or, in some cases, perhaps even a non-Christian religion. These so-called “gospels” are sometimes touted by skeptics as providing an alternative account of the life of Jesus. They are not regarded by serious historians as credible evidence, however, since they originated much later than Jesus, were likely composed in geographic locations distant from Palestine, and do not indicate familiarity with the life and customs of first-century AD Palestine (that is, the historical context in which Jesus in fact lived).



God's Word



For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

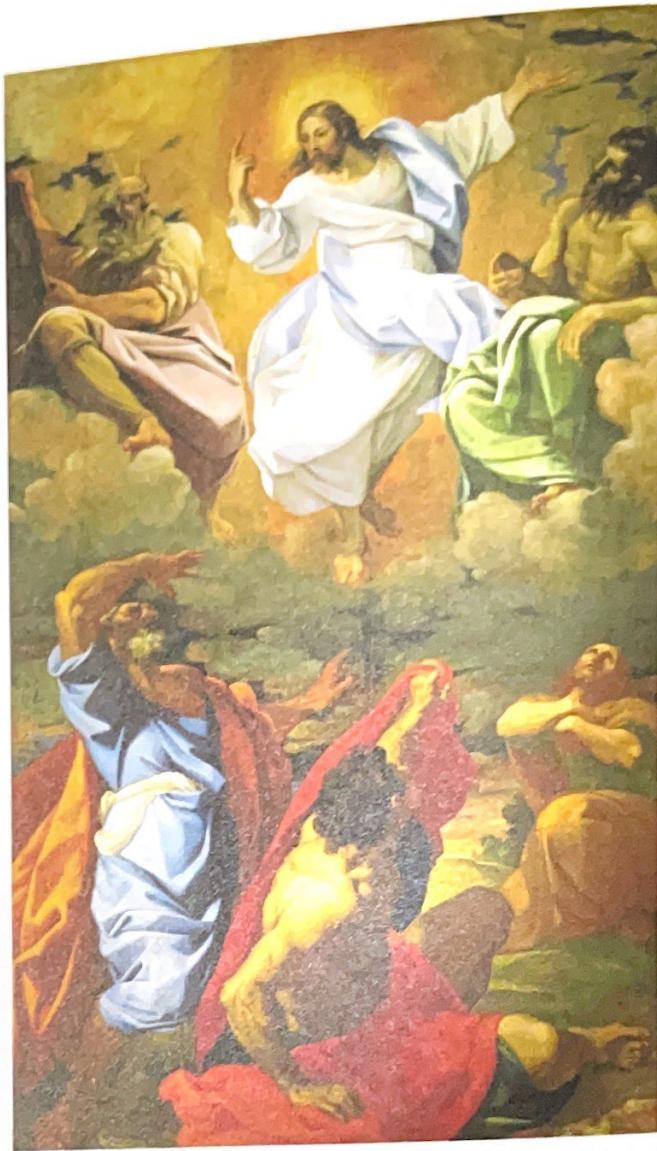
—1 Corinthians 1:22–25

CLOSING PRAYER

LEADER: Our Help is in the name of the Lord.

RESPONSE: Who made heaven and earth.

All make the sign of the cross.



AT HOME REVIEW

Read this review of the material. Write down any questions you still have after doing so.

Who Is Jesus?

“Who is Jesus Christ?” Many people have asked this question, and it is a fundamentally important one. Indeed, it is perhaps the most important question for our lives—our identity as Christians, and even our eternal destiny, are tied to its answer.

Over the next three chapters, we will examine different facets of this question. In this chapter, we will begin with history. One might naturally assume that, since Jesus was a figure in history, asking the question “Who was Jesus Christ?” is principally a historical question.

And yet the Christian faith proclaims that Jesus is alive, existing in the present tense, and that you can know him. In fact, this is one of the most fundamental truths that we know by faith. And more profoundly, we know that Jesus is God and man, our Lord and our Savior.

Still, history is important and helpful for us in learning about Jesus. After all, he did live in a concrete historical moment in time and in an actual place: during the first century AD in Palestine. Many people met him, heard what he said, and witnessed the miracles he worked. Some of them passed on their eyewitness testimony to others, and some of it was written down in the various documents that came to be known as the New Testament, which is primarily made up of some early Christian letters and the four unique texts we call “Gospels.”

We can study these documents from the perspective of history, doing our best to piece together the sequence of events that occurred over two thousand years ago. But the historical method, as a human science, is not able to produce knowledge that exceeds what reason itself can know.

Think about what we read in the Gospels: many people encountered Jesus during his earthly ministry, but only some of them discerned something deeper about his identity that caused them to become his disciples. As Christians, this is precisely what we are after: *coming to know Christ himself, according to his deepest identity, and being capable of bringing other people to encounter him in the same way*. But this requires that Jesus’s deepest identity *be revealed to us*. It cannot simply be known by what is perceptible to the senses, or accessible by normal human knowledge, and so it cannot be directly known by purely historical study.

Think about the famous “confession” of St. Peter at Caesarea Philippi. Jesus asks him, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter answers, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” Jesus responds, “Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven” (Mt 16:15–17). From this, we learn that the true identity of Christ is not knowable by

flesh and blood (in other words, by normal human means). It requires a supernatural revelation. And this identity of Jesus, that he is the “Son of the Living God,” is obviously of the highest importance. If it is true, then it changes everything about the way we look at him.

This means that, while history is *important*, it is *not sufficient* to bring us to know the true identity of Jesus. For this, a revelation—and hence *faith*—is necessary.

Even so, we shouldn’t disregard history when we’re speaking about Jesus. What is the right way to use history in our search to know Christ?

With history’s tools, it’s possible to uncover truths about the events that underlie the Gospel texts, and the history of the texts, too (things about the human author, how the text was edited, its sources, its historical context, its meaning for its original hearers and readers, and so forth). For example, we understand more about Jesus’s actions when we know more about the temple in Jerusalem, where Jesus (and later the apostles) frequently taught the people—to know how it was governed, who was in charge of it, and why the scribes and Pharisees were so upset when Jesus prophesied that the temple would be destroyed.

But sometimes historians bring a skepticism about matters of faith into their historical research. This can lead to a misuse of history. For example, some say, “the Gospels themselves have internal inconsistencies in the chronology of events, and even worse, they are written as religious texts with an agenda—they are false or mythologizing about the figure of Jesus. You can’t trust them. You can only trust what historians can verify about this ancient figure, Jesus of Nazareth.” Some historians and others go even further, saying, “We can use other sources to go back behind the Gospels to discover the hidden truth about Jesus that the Gospels are distorting or covering up.”

There are three important replies to these sorts of arguments.

First, the faith claims made about Jesus are at the core of the New Testament. If a historian systematically sets aside these kinds of claims as non-historical, he is really setting aside the best historical evidence (the New Testament texts themselves) about who Jesus was. To filter away faith claims, supposedly to get to what is purely “objective” or “historical,” is

in fact to distort and even to falsify the very historical data itself, because above all, what those sources are trying to communicate is that Jesus is Lord, the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

Listen to how the Gospel of St. John explains it: “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name” (Jn 20:30–31). The texts of the New Testament were not written to be like a newspaper report, handing on chronological facts in a neutral voice. Rather, they were written *so that you would believe*, and a good historical reading of the sources should recognize that the best evidence points beyond mere historical facts, to the true identity of Jesus, which is revealed by God as a matter of faith.

What is more, there are not historically credible alternatives to the New Testament that can give us reliable historical knowledge about Jesus. Virtually all other ancient sources about Jesus (like the apocryphal or gnostic gospels) were written much later, and not by eyewitnesses to his life. Trumpeting them is a fad, and serious historians recognize this.

We shouldn’t be upset to discover that sometimes the Gospels do not strictly agree on small points of historical detail; they weren’t written to document such details but to tell what is most important about Jesus. We would not be surprised if four different friends of ours told our life story in four slightly different ways. In the end, the Gospels do strongly and clearly agree on the fundamental truth that “Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God,” the savior of the world.

Second, the argument of the secular historian presumes that faith claims were layered on top of the historical figure of Jesus and that they fundamentally distort that figure, or at least obscure him from view. But this is also wrong, especially if Jesus really was who the Gospels claim he was. That is, if there is a deeper reality about his identity that can only be known by faith, then what faith teaches about Jesus does not obscure but illuminates what we can know about him from history.

In the end, “mere history” can only tell us about a sequence of events and not about the inner identity of Jesus or the true meaning of his life.

For this, faith is required. So the historical critical investigation of the Scriptures is always going to yield something incomplete for the Christian, unless it is incorporated into faith and adjusted for it.

This brings us to a third point: there is *one* real Jesus, not a Jesus known by history and another Jesus known by faith. Jesus is a real figure in history whose real identity can only be known through faith. Faith is *built on* what happened in history. So in fact, history and faith interpenetrate each other—or, perhaps said better, faith presupposes and incorporates history, and history points to faith. They should never be separated in the first place.

There is one final big-picture point to keep in mind. From the perspective of the Catholic faith, *it is a mistake to read the Bible purely as a collection of ancient documents*. Rather, we hold that Scripture is divinely inspired. God himself is truly and primarily the author of Sacred Scripture.

Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, human authors composed the books of Scripture in such a way that their intellect and activity was strengthened and elevated by the divine light of grace. The Bible is, therefore, rightfully understood as a unified whole. This is why we claim that, in truth, the whole Bible is about Christ!

This is precisely how Jesus taught his own disciples to read the Old Testament. Do you remember the story about his appearance on Easter Sunday evening to the two disciples as they walked along the road to Emmaus (see Lk 24:13–35)? The disciples are discouraged and depressed. They had loved and followed Jesus, only to see him crucified and killed by the Romans on Friday. Now, on Sunday, they were leaving Jerusalem, perhaps headed back to their homes. Jesus meets them on the road and walks with them, but they didn't know it was Jesus. He asks them what they are speaking about. They say, “Jesus of Nazareth . . . and how our chief priests and rulers delivered him up to be condemned to death, and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel” (vv. 19–21).

Jesus replies, “O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” And St. Luke adds: “And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself” (Lk 24:25–27).

That is, Jesus taught them that the Old Testament was about *him*. And this is precisely the way that the Church reads the Bible as a whole. Jesus comes as the fulfillment of all of the hopes and prophecies for a savior that God had given to his chosen people over many centuries. In fact, God had long prepared a people for himself; he had prepared them precisely in order to be the people from whom and through whom a savior would be born for the world.

This savior is Jesus, proclaimed by the Catholic Church as the son of David and the fulfillment of the Old Testament, who lived and taught in history and who rose from the dead. This man is also true God, our Lord and our Savior.

I STILL HAVE THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

DIGGING DEEPER

Pope Benedict XVI. *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*. Translated by Adrian J. Walker. New York: Doubleday, 2007.