

# (mis)Understanding Jesus

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[ 0 : 00 ] I should probably confess that it's actually coffee in not ditch water and it's black color and juice rather than paint so it wasn't quite as bad as I certainly doubt.

Over the coming weeks I'd like us to do a short series that's actually got two titles. The main title of the series is misunderstanding Jesus.

The main title is understanding Jesus because the aim is to look at key moments of Jesus's life and think about why he came but the other title is misunderstanding Jesus because as we look at these events in Jesus's life I want us to recognize some of the ways in which Jesus has been misunderstood by the culture around us and maybe even by ourselves.

So that's our two title series for the next eight weeks or so understanding Jesus or maybe misunderstanding Jesus.

Today as a kind of introduction to all of that I want to do something slightly different. I want us to look at the first statement made by each of the four Gospel writers which is why we read a little bit from each.

[ 1 : 29 ] All four of the Gospels Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are written to tell us about Jesus. They all have the same subject but they all start in very different ways and each opening sentence tells us profound truths about Jesus and so if we're going to understand him then understanding the first sentence of each Gospel is crucial and so that's what we're going to look at today and I'm going to read them again.

Matthew starts by saying the book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham, Mark, the beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the son of God.

Luke in as much as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the Word have delivered them to us.

It seemed good to me also having followed all things closely for some time past to write an orderly account for you most excellently off of us that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught and John in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.

We're going to look at each briefly. We're going to start with Mark because it's very likely that Mark was the first one to be written and then we'll go on to look at Matthew, Luke and finally John.

[ 3 : 02 ] For each one we're going to just think about the questions, what are they saying, how has it been misunderstood and what difference does it make to us.

So let me start with Mark. What's Mark saying? Well, the key word in that sentence is the word Gospel.

Mark is telling you that the coming of Jesus Christ is good news. That's what the word Gospel means. Now this is one of those words that's so familiar to us all and yet it's so worthwhile thinking about it a bit more.

Mark is saying in his first sentence he's got news for us, he's got a message, he's got a body of information that we need to hear and the content of that message is absolutely brilliant.

And to understand this better we just need to think about the times in life when we hear good news. You hear about a baby being born, someone recovering from illness, someone getting a new job or a place at university, a couple getting engaged.

[ 4 : 09 ] When we hear good news it means that something wonderful has happened and it fills us with joy. In fact, one of the definitions for the Greek word for Gospel, the Greek word Euangelion, one of the dictionary definitions is information that brings joy and that's exactly what the message of Jesus Christ is.

It is information that brings joy, something wonderful has happened. In other words, the first sentence of Mark's Gospel is making a statement that is intended to make you smile.

This is good news. And I want us right now to notice the contrast between that truth and the lie that Satan told Eve at the very beginning of the Bible.

Because in Genesis 3 the serpent came to Eve. I said to the woman, did God actually say you shall not eat of any tree in the garden? And the woman said to the serpent, we may not eat of the trees in the garden, we may eat of the trees in the garden but God says you shall not eat from the fruit of the tree that's in the midst of the garden.

Neither should you touch it, lest you die. But the serpent said to the woman, you're not surely dying. But God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God knowing good and evil.

[ 5 : 39 ] What did the devil do to Eve at that moment? He sowed the seed of doubt in her mind that says God doesn't really want to be good to you.

In fact what God is actually saying is bad news so don't listen to him. Mark's opening sentence smashes that lie.

That the heart of God's plans and intentions for humanity is amazingly good news. But how has that been misunderstood? Well the devil has never stopped telling that lie and humanity has not stopped falling for it.

And we can see that in so many people throughout history and maybe even in our own communities who think that following Jesus is actually going to spoil your life.

And so Christianity is seen as dull news or restrictive news, maybe even as oppressive news and sometimes the Christian church throughout its history has actually done the devil a favor because it's acted in a way that backs up his lie.

[ 6 : 52 ] The result is that people view the gospel in negative terms. They think it's something rubbish. So Karl Marx famously said that Christianity and religion as a whole was a way of keeping the lower classes in their place.

John Lennon sang about imagining a dream world where there was no religion. And even the cartoon The Simpsons has displayed this kind of thing.

I remember once seeing an episode of The Simpsons when I was young and it had a picture of a church and on the front of the church there was a sign, the way you have signs outside churches, and there was like one of these signs which you stick letters on and it was supposed to say the words what a friend we have in Jesus.

But the way the cartoon had been drawn there was a gap in the word friend and the letter ah had fallen off. And so what did it say?

What a fiend we have in Jesus. That was an awful thing to say but it clearly showed that Matt Groening who's created The Simpsons has a very negative view of Christianity.

[ 8 : 06 ] And Karl Marx, John Lennon and Matt Groening, they are world famous people. They're geniuses in terms of their own achievements.

I don't agree with them but they're very capable individuals and they're not devils but they all saw Christianity as bad news.

And I don't know the reasons for that, maybe they had bad experiences, I don't know. Whatever their reasons, they saw Christianity as something that was just rubbish, not good news.

And the fact that they did that means that they have misunderstood Christianity and they do not know what they are rejecting.

And maybe you're the same or maybe you know people who are the same. Maybe you're putting off the Gospel because you think that it's going to take away your smile.

[ 9 : 08 ] In other words it's going to kind of spoil or restrict your life. If that is how you are feeling you've got to realise that any Christianity that takes away your smile permanently is not biblical Christianity.

Yes, there's times when we weep and mourn as Christians, that's because we live in a broken world and we are broken people. But the fact that Jesus has come means that Christianity is brilliant news.

And that's because he's come with a message of healing, of forgiveness, of restoration, of mercy and of the greatest love that the world has ever seen.

So what difference does that make? The result is that in the Gospel we have good news for absolutely everyone. So is the Gospel good news for the pregnant teenager? Is the Gospel good news for the middle-aged man who can't get a job? Is the Gospel good news for the person who struggles with same-sex attraction? Is it good news for the addict, whether an open addict or a secret one?

[10:23] For the grieving, for the wealthy, for the poor or for the dead ordinary? Is it good news for the people who've been bruised and battered by life again and again?

Too right it is. It is brilliant news. But to find out why we need to look at what the others are saying. So let's go to Matthew. The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham. What's he saying in his first sentence? Well, at first glance, this may be, you'll be forgiven if you think, well, that's maybe the least exciting of all the Gospel openings. And as a first sentence for the whole of the New Testament, it can at first glance seem a bit underwhelming.

But at first it's easy to whisk us. I want to try and suggest today that this is one of the coolest sentences in the whole of the Bible. The key thing we need to recognize is that Matthew's pointing us backwards.

[11:29] In his first sentence he's saying, the coming of Jesus is fulfilling all the promises that God gave in the Old Testament.

In his language, he's immediately sending us back there. Now, in order to understand the significance of this, I want you to try and step into the world of a first century Jew.

So I want you to use your imagination. I want you to imagine that you live in Palestine in the first century. I want you to imagine that you are at your granny's house, which is near Bethany, not far from Jerusalem, and it's the year 2080.

So you've gone to visit your granny and she's drawn out your family tree on the floor in front of the fire. So the names in this illustration are fictional, but the events are historical.

First of all, she tells you about your great, great, great, great, great, great, great grandfather, Joshua Murdo. He was a farmer near Jerusalem in the days when Josiah was king.

[12:35] And so he would take his sheep and his cattle up to the temple. It was a stunning building in the heart of the city. He lived in wonderful days, but just before he died, he heard rumors that the Babylonians were coming and that the nation was under threat.

Then she tells you about your great, great, great, great, great grandfather, Donnie Mordecai. He was one of the ones who came back from the exile. And so he helped to rebuild the ruined city that the Babylonians had destroyed, and he eventually managed to get the family farm going again.

Then she tells you about your great, great grandfather, Colom Isaac. He fought in the Jewish rebellion against the Greeks that took place in between the old and the New Testament.

He hated how the Greeks were changing their Jewish ways. And then when the Greek king tried to turn the temple in Jerusalem into a shrine for Zeus, he was ready to fight.

And because of him, for about a hundred years, we had our own rulers, thanks to what he did. But all of his brothers died in fighting.

[13:57] And then she tells you about your grandfather, her husband, Chorus Jeremiah. She says he worked the farm for years, and he was so devoted to God and to his family.

But when the Romans came and took over, we had to start paying taxes. To begin with, we managed. But there were two years where we had a poor harvest.

We couldn't afford to pay the taxes so that Romans took our farm. He tried to get other work, but he was older and weaker by then. No one wanted to hire him.

And by the time he died, we'd lost everything. Now we have no farm, no freedom, no king.

All we can do is hope that one day God's Messiah will come.

[14:53] That is what it was like for the Jews at the start of the first century. That was their great hope because they'd lost their nation, lost their freedom, and everything they had was just a shadow of what it used to be.

They had this great history, all these wonderful promises made to Abraham, the great miraculous exodus from Egypt, the glory days when David was king in Jerusalem.

But by the time you came to the first century, they'd lost their king, lost their freedom. Their national identity was under threat, and God's promises had still not been fulfilled.

The first sentence of Matthew's Gospel tells you that the waiting is finally over.

God has not forgotten his promises. Everything that they've been waiting for has now been fulfilled. In other words, Matthew's first sentence is a statement saying, everything has changed now.

[16:03] And in particular, he makes a link to David and to Abraham. Now when you hear the name David, you should be thinking kingdom. And when you hear the name Abraham, you should be thinking family.

Jesus has come as God's king, and Jesus has come to establish God's family. Now how does that sometimes get misunderstood?

Well I think it's the case that these two aspects of Matthew's first sentence are among the most misunderstood of all the claims of Jesus. And the nature of the misunderstanding is in terms of massive colossal underestimation.

So when we say that Jesus is the son of David and that he's God's king, that doesn't mean that he's going to come and rule in Jerusalem and fight off the Romans.

That means that there is not one square inch of the universe that does not belong to him and that doesn't come in, come under his rule. It's so easy to think that today that Jesus is weak, that's a colossal underestimation.

[17:17] And when we say that Jesus is the son of Abraham, that means that he is calling people from every single nation into his family. No matter who you are, no matter what mistakes you've made, no matter what bruises and scars you carry, there is a place for you in that family.

It's so easy to think Jesus probably doesn't care about me, that is to misunderstand Jesus. That in fact is a colossal underestimation.

God forbid that we ever underestimate the power and authority of Jesus the son of David. And God forbid that we ever underestimate the love and care of our brother Jesus, the son of Abraham.

But what difference does all that make? Well, Matthew's opening sentence is telling you that God does not give up. God is keeping his promises and in Jesus everything changes.

He's come as a king to defeat evil, to restore creation, to rule and defend his people. And he's come to call us all into a new humanity, a new family and through him all the nations of the world are being blessed.

[18:43] He's changing everything and that of course means that he's changing us as well. As our king, he gives us a new way to live and we want to follow him and obey him.

And as our brother, he gives us a new status, one that we could never earn.

He's come to heal us, restore us, welcome us into his family and give us all the right to become children of God.

The coming of Jesus changes everything. And that's why I can stand before you today and say that Jesus has made a massive difference in my life.

More than I could ever describe, Jesus has done so much for me. It's more than 20 years, way more than 20 years since I became a Christian.

[19:46] It's just been fantastic. It doesn't mean it's always been easy but boy it's been good.

Jesus changes everything. And he can do the same for you and he can do the same for everyone out there in Kerala and to the ends of the earth.

But maybe when I say all that you have doubts and you think well that all sounds great but how can we know it's true? Well if you've got doubts you need to go to Luke and look at his first statement.

What's Luke saying?

Well I won't read it all. There's lots I could say. I want to focus on a key word in verse 4. Luke's written all of this stuff to theophilus that he may have certainty concerning the things that have been taught.

Now these words are actually very famous because they are an example of the highest standard of Greek literary technique. So Luke was an outstandingly good writer.

And so this paragraph here, this sentence here is at the same standard as the highest scholarship of his own day. And the fact that that's the case is that Luke is showing us that he's presenting us a serious piece of historical literature.

[21:07] So he knows what he's doing. He's spoken to eyewitnesses. He's checked the facts. He's put everything into an orderly account. He's poured hours and hours of research into ensuring that what he's written is true.

In other words Luke's Gospel opens with a statement to tell you that what you are about to read is trustworthy. And I think that's something that's been majorly misunderstood over the years.

Ever since the Enlightenment and right through until today there's been one of the biggest misunderstandings of Christianity is the idea that you can believe it as a kind of religious or spiritual outlook on life.

But it's not really factual or historical or certainly only parts of it are. And the result is that you have faith placed over here and reason placed over here and the two are kept secret and separate.

The world around us is full of people who have that mindset. They might value aspects of Christianity. They say Jesus, he had good example, good teacher, I quite like him. But they don't accept the historical accuracy of the Bible and the events that were recorded.

[ 22 : 17 ] But if Luke was standing here among us today and we said to him, well thanks so much for this book that you wrote. Obviously we know it's not factual but we value the teaching it contains.

I think if you said that to Luke he would look at you and say, what are you on about? Have you not read the first sentence that I wrote?

Luke is not giving us a book full of nice religious meditations. Luke is introducing a book of facts that you can trust.

And that's why the reference to eyewitnesses is so important. Eyewitnesses are grounded on eyewitness testimony of all the remarkable events that took place.

When events are unique like miracles or above all like the resurrection, then by definition they don't happen very often.

[ 23 : 19 ] But the resurrection will never happen again in the sense that it took place in the terms of the resurrection of Jesus. And so eyewitness testimony is crucial and eyewitness testimony is all the more crucial when the event is very unusual.

And to prove the importance of this I want you to use your imagination again. There must be something in one of these waters I'm very imaginative today. But I want you to use your imagination again.

Imagine that it's 50 years from now and I am on Dalmore as an 88 year old boddach. Imagine that. And I'm walking along with my dog and my walking stick. And I meet a couple from America on holiday with a camper van and all of that.

And we start chatting and if you can imagine me as an old man and telling them all about how wonderful Carl away is and how wonderful Dalmore is. And then I say to them, oh, but do you know that over 50 years ago there was a 70 year old 17,000 ton oil rig perched on that rock over there.

[ 24 : 28 ] And we woke up in the morning and it was just there stuck on the rocks. And you know just a few people came along with some welders and some tugboats and they got it off.

I think the American couple would walk away thinking that old guy is a bit crazy. Would I be right? What differences does all of that make? Well, Luke's opening sentence is telling you that you can trust what you are about to read.

And if you read nonsense on the internet or anywhere else that says, you know, the Bible is not historically reliable or anything like that. Think for yourself because it stands up to academic analysis.

The historical expectations for the resurrection of Jesus Christ are satisfied in terms of evidence and eyewitness testimony.

[ 25 : 39 ] Christianity is not asking you to ignore the evidence. It's actually asking you to look at it. Luke's saying, here it is.

I've put it together. And if we bring it all together we can see something amazing. Mark is telling us that he's got good news. Matthew is saying this news changes everything and Luke says this news is totally trustworthy.

But there's even more. And that takes us to John 1.1. In the beginning was the word, the word was with God, the word was God.

What is John saying? Well, this sentence is possibly the most profound sentence ever written.

That term, the word that you can see there used three times. As you may know, it's translating the Greek word logos. So the word in the beginning was the logos.

[ 26 : 41 ] And that's a term that was very familiar to both Greeks and Jews. For Greeks, the logos was the principle that brought coherence, order and meaning to the universe.

So if you were to stand at the end of your house in Macedonia and chat to your friend and say, what holds the universe together? What's it all about? Well, that's the logos.

That's what holds it together. The Jews used the same term, but they identified the logos with God. And so they were like, God is the one who holds everything together and who brings meaning and order and life to the universe.

So for both Jews and Greeks, the logos is what holds the whole universe together. That great foundational ordering principle.

John's first sentence is telling you that the logos is Jesus Christ.

[ 27 : 49 ] In other words, John's gospel opens with a statement intended to blow your mind.

How is this misunderstood? Well, again, it's misunderstood in the sense of being totally underestimated. I want you to imagine that you could zoom out from church today, zoom out from Carlyway, zoom out from Lewis, zoom out from Scotland, zoom out from the earth, zoom out through the solar system, zoom out past the galaxies beyond the universe, beyond time.

In front of you is the whole of history, the whole of time, all matter, all creation, and you're looking at it and you're asking the question, where did this come from and how is it all held together?

If John 1-1 is true, then the answer to that question is Jesus Christ. And so if you could zoom out even further, you would see that it's all in his hand.

Jesus is the logos. He's the explanation for everything, the one through whom all things were made.

As John tells us a couple of verses later, he is the sustainer of all.

[ 29 : 20 ] And what's even more amazing is that if you stretch your mind to that level and ask yourself, what is it that lies at the foundation of reality, of history, of eternity, you discover that the foundation of it all is a father who loves his son, a son who loves his father, and a logo son who by the power of the Holy Spirit was willing to be made flesh and dwell among us in order to save us.

What difference does that make? It tells you that the entire universe and the whole of history comes from the God to whom you are so precious and who he loves so much because Jesus was willing to leave all of that behind to come for you and to save you.

The eternal Son of God became the tiny child of Mary and went all the way to death on the cross so that you could belong to God forever and that there would never be a moment again when you are not with him.

That is why it's good news. That is why it changes everything and that is why you can believe it and boy you better believe it.

Amen. Let's pray. Father, we thank you for the Gospel of Jesus Christ, that brilliant news.

[ 31 : 13 ] We thank you that Jesus is the Son of David, the Son of Abraham in whom all your promises are fulfilled. We thank you that in your Word we have eyewitness testimony that gives us certainty about all of these things and we thank you that the Word became flesh and dwell among us.

We praise you God for such an amazing Savior. Amen.