

New York Times bestselling author of *The Emmaus Code*

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THE TRUE  
JESUS

UNCOVERING THE DIVINITY OF CHRIST  
IN THE GOSPELS

# INTRODUCTION

**I**n my last book, *The Emmaus Code*, I detailed how each of the Old Testament books points to Jesus Christ. This assertion was surely shocking to some, but it was hardly my idea. The title refers to Jesus' encounter with two of His disciples on the Emmaus road, near Jerusalem, in one of His resurrection appearances. Joining the distraught pair as they walk down the road, Jesus asks what they are discussing. As "their eyes are kept from recognizing him," the disciples ask Jesus if He is the only visitor to Jerusalem unaware of the things that recently occurred there. He asks, "What things?" and they tell Him the religious authorities crucified and buried a great prophet they had hoped was Israel's redeemer. On the third day His tomb was found empty, and some women said they had seen angels who had told them He was still alive.

The disciples prove themselves doubly blind—they fail to recognize Jesus and fail to understand that He is the Messiah promised by the Old Testament scriptures. So Jesus opens the scriptures to them and shows

how they all point to Him (Luke 24:27). Later, during a meal with Jesus, the disciples' eyes "are opened," and they finally recognize him (Luke 24:31). After Jesus vanishes as quickly as He'd appeared, they exclaim to each other, "Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?" (Luke 24:32).

From this inspired New Testament account we know that the Old Testament prefigures Jesus Christ throughout, and that the two Testaments form a single, continuous chronicle whose focus is Jesus Christ. He is foreshadowed, typified, and prophesied in the Old Testament, and in the New Testament He brings God's redemptive plan to completion. The New Testament presents Jesus as God in the flesh—a human being Who fulfills the Old Testament prophecies, perfects the Old Testament offices of prophet, priest, and king, and becomes the perfect, once-and-for-all sacrifice and the culmination of God's salvation plan for mankind.

This book picks up where *The Emmaus Code* left off. Just as *The Emmaus Code* is both an Old Testament primer and a showcase for the pervasiveness of Christ in each book, *The True Jesus* is a primer on the Gospels that highlights the Christ-centeredness of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. It emphasizes Christ's dual nature as fully human and fully divine, examines His teachings and miracles, and celebrates Him as the promised Savior and long-awaited King who ushers in the kingdom of God.

The centrality of Christ to the Old Testament may be surprising to many, but everyone already believes the New Testament—especially the Gospels—is all about Christ, right? In a sense this is true, but we must dig deeper and train our eyes to see the real person of Christ and His works on our behalf. The New Testament isn't merely a manual on Jesus' ethical teachings or a handbook of abstract moral lessons. It is not a collection of embellished ancient tales of a mythical deity who upstaged the pantheon of Greek and Roman gods with his charisma and a kinder, gentler message.

Instead, it is a God-breathed account of the Son of God, Who lowered Himself to become a human being and directly intervene in human history, experienced all the indignities of human existence, walked among us, taught us, and lived a sinless life. He suffered, died, and was resurrected, thereby conquering Satan, sin, and death, and providing a

means of salvation for all those who place their trust in Him. “The central message of the New Testament,” declares Graeme Goldsworthy, “concerns God incarnate, Jesus of Nazareth, who did for us what we could not do for ourselves, in order to bring us, a lost people, back to God.... No New Testament document makes sense apart from the central affirmation that Jesus Christ has come among us as the bringer of salvation.”<sup>1</sup>

“The first question that must be addressed concerning the New Testament,” writes Mark Dever, “is, did the deliverer whom God promised in the *Old* Testament actually come? The New Testament answers that *Old* Testament question with a resounding yes! And he is not just an ordinary human deliverer, he is God come in the flesh. The one and only Son, Jesus perfectly displayed the Father, so that God’s people might know him and be delivered from their sins. The New Testament squarely focuses on Christ. He is the heart of it all. He is the center of its message.”<sup>2</sup>

We must, then, read the New Testament—just as we read the Old Testament—with awe. We should delve into it not just with our eyes, but also our hearts, trained on Jesus Christ. “Seeing and savoring Jesus Christ is the most important seeing and savoring you will ever do,” affirms John Piper. “Eternity hangs on it. When I speak of *seeing* Jesus Christ, I don’t mean seeing with the eyes of your head, but the eyes of your heart.”<sup>3</sup> When we read, study, and meditate on the Good News, we must delight in the Savior and be grateful for the hope He provides us. As the Apostle Paul tells the Ephesians, “I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe” (Eph. 1:16–19).

It may seem obvious that Christians should focus on Christ. In our modern culture, however, some believe they needn’t dwell on Him but on a bland, undemanding message they wrongly presume He taught. They have swallowed the lie that Christianity is simply a feel-good

religion that promises its faithful adherents health, wealth, and other temporal rewards. John MacArthur rejects this view as unbiblical. “In a word, what Christianity offers you,” says MacArthur, “is Christ, Jesus Christ. . . . The surpassing theme of the Scripture, the surpassing theme of the New Testament, in particular, is Jesus Christ. And in not having Christ, you have nothing. And in having Christ, you have everything.”<sup>4</sup> Christianity is about knowing Christ—and the New Testament, beginning with the Gospels, reveals who He is.



My previous two Christian-themed books were in large part polemics. In *The Emmaus Code* I attempted to show that the Old Testament prefigures, prophesies, and promises Christ throughout, and that Jesus was the God-man the Old Testament promised. In *Jesus on Trial* I shared my own experience as a skeptic who came to faith in Christ, and I devoted much of the remainder of the book to apologetics—defending the Christian faith. In both books I started with a premise and marshaled evidence to support it, relying heavily on the research and insights of the giants in apologetics and theology.

This book is different.

*The True Jesus* is not a polemic in the same way the previous books were. In those books I debunked liberal critical scholars of Scripture who challenge the Bible and Christ from every imaginable angle. They dispute the divine inspiration of Scripture and the notion that Scripture is inerrant. They raise doubts about the authorship of many biblical books and about when they were written, arguing that some books such as Isaiah were compiled by multiple authors.

They further speculate that the Old Testament books were manmade constructs as opposed to God-inspired works, that they are more allegorical than historical, that the God of the Old Testament is different in character from the God of the New Testament, and that Jesus was a mere human being Who was not actually crucified and Whose resurrection is mythical. They argue that Jesus did not claim or believe He was the Messiah, that Jesus and the Apostle Paul presented conflicting views of Christianity, that there were initially many competing versions of the

Gospels, and that the four Gospels were canonized for reasons other than their authenticity and reliability.

In short, you can name almost any aspect of Christianity, from the integrity of the scriptures to the legitimacy of core Christian doctrine, and you can find a critic who has challenged it.

This criticism has taken its toll over the years. It seems that every other year some writer pops out of the woodwork to advance his “new” idea that not only was Jesus not divine, but that He in fact never existed. Moreover, a torrent of criticism from ostensibly Christian scholars, when coupled with the attacks by secular skeptics, has done a real number on the Gospel. Our universities and intellectual elites often treat Christianity as mythical and Christians as superstitious, science-denying, ignorant rubes. These challenges have also made their way into the Church itself and its seminaries, diluting the Gospel message and eroding the credibility of Scripture. This trend should concern all Christians because the more the Gospel is seemingly undermined, the fewer converts to Christ there will be. Thankfully, armies of Christian apologists and conservative scholars are fighting back for the integrity of the Christian message and the glory of Jesus Christ.

I addressed many of these issues in *Jesus on Trial*, in which I tried to show that the Bible truly is the inspired Word of God and that we can rely on it as historically and factually accurate. Some friends suggested that I take a similar approach in this book—that I explain the Gospels primarily by presenting and annihilating the major attacks being leveled at them.

But I have something else in mind.

While in this book I do address various historical and critical challenges to Scripture, this is not my main concern. My primary goal is to introduce you to the true Jesus of the Gospels, and the best way to do that is by helping you sink your teeth into the Gospels themselves. Yes, I contend that the Gospels are the inspired Word of God and that they reveal Jesus Christ as a human being and the Son of God, but I don’t make a systematic argument to prove that or to disprove opposing arguments.

Rather, I let the Gospels speak for themselves. As I frequently argue, the Bible is its own apologetic. If people immerse themselves in

Scripture, they will come to see for themselves that it's the Word of God—and hopefully, they will accept Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior. The Bible itself affirms this in passages such as Romans 10:17—“So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ”—and 2 Timothy 3:15—“From infancy, you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.”

Since I became a believer, I've been immensely excited about the Bible, including the Gospels. They change lives every day. They reassure believers and transform skeptics into Christians. As a former skeptic, however, I also understand that many people are intimidated by the Gospels and by the prospect of reading them for themselves and fully understanding their meaning. Even when they do make an effort, some quickly grow frustrated in trying to keep track of all the events, or in deciphering the seemingly obscure meanings of the messages, or in trying to comprehend all the elements of a story told in four separate accounts.

With this book I hope to help newer readers become more familiar with the Gospels so they can read the books for themselves and begin a lifetime of spiritual growth through the Word. I want to share what I have learned in my own studies and help ignite a passion in you to appreciate the Gospels—and the entire Bible—the way I've come to appreciate them. They never disappoint.

In short, I want to teach you—to share with you what I've learned, hoping that I can inspire you to learn more yourself. I want this book to serve as a layman's introduction to the Gospels. To achieve that goal, I begin with several chapters outlining the history of Israel between Old and New Testament times, and describing the cultural and religious climate at the time Christ intervened in human history. I also offer a brief overview of the New Testament and a deeper introduction to the Gospels, both collectively and individually.

In line with my belief that the Bible itself is an unrivaled apologetic, I devote the rest of the book—Chapters 5 through 12—to retelling the story related by the Gospels, combining information from all four books into a unified account. This format, I hope, will make the transformative story of Jesus Christ more accessible to readers who may be daunted,

confused, or otherwise discouraged from reading the Gospels directly. But make no mistake—I aim to introduce you to the Gospels as a step toward convincing you to read them yourself. Only if you study the Gospels—and not what others, no matter how learned or convincing, say about them—will you truly be interacting with God.

The Gospels are not like reading some fascinating fictional account of the most wonderful human being the human mind ever conceived, for they aren't fiction and the human mind didn't conceive Jesus. He conceived us. No fiction writer could invent such a character. The perfection and sublimity of Jesus Christ is beyond the capacity of the human intellect and imagination to construct. To read the Gospels in earnest is to come face to face with the living Son of God, Who is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of His nature (Heb. 1:3). No mere human being could act like He acted, speak as authoritatively as He spoke, empathize like He empathized, serve people like He served them, instruct like He instructed, exhibit the wisdom He exhibited, live sinlessly like He lived, sacrifice like He sacrificed, and prove Himself to be God in the flesh and the Messiah, exuding divinity with every breath.

I used to prefer the epistles to the Gospels because they are so rich with theology. But now I realize nothing compares with reading the Gospels, which allow us to witness directly what Jesus actually said and did. We get to experience Him firsthand because the Gospel writers, under the inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit, recorded His words and deeds precisely. Jesus jumps off the pages and comes alive for us once we immerse ourselves in these writings. If we only read what others say instead of the Gospels themselves, or if we get too bogged down chasing alleged inconsistencies in the accounts—all of which can be satisfactorily explained—we'll be reading from a distance, far removed from the amazing account of God becoming one of us in the greatest conceivable act of love.

Sadly, atheists, agnostics, cynics, and skeptics will be denied this experience as long as pride darkens their hearts and clouds their vision. But if they ask God in prayer to reveal Himself to them, they will discover He is there, and He is there for them and has been all along. As for the rest of us, let's not trifle ourselves trying to reconcile every apparent difficulty



Jesus as something He is not. It would be better to avoid church altogether than to attend one that teaches a false Gospel or a culturally pleasing but fraudulent picture of Jesus. He is the creator, and we are His created beings. We cannot remake Him, but He will remake us.

People have advanced many false messiahs and imposter Jesuses in their own image, but none has the power to save us or to transform us into new creations.<sup>5</sup> That is the sole prerogative of Jesus Christ, if we'll follow and surrender to Him. By staying true to the scriptures we will find the real Jesus and enhance our ability to recognize the pretenders. So we must read the Bible seeking to discover Christ and to accept what its inspired words tell us about Him. We dare not change one word of Scripture to make ourselves more comfortable (Rev. 22:18; Deut. 4:2; Prov. 30:5–6). As Paul proclaims, “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16–17). Scripture’s purpose is not to make us more comfortable, but to show us how inadequate and lost we are apart from our Savior and to make us “wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 3:15).

Now let’s begin our journey by taking a look at the four-hundred-year period between the close of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New Testament—a timespan known as the intertestamental period—and examine the land of Israel and the wider world that Christ entered in His incarnation. We’ll also take a bird’s eye view of the New Testament, exploring its historical reliability, literary value, structure, and genres. Then, with that background established, we’ll dive into the Gospels and explore what Jesus said and did to convince billions of people throughout history that He was, and remains, mankind’s Lord and Savior.

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