

CRACKING THE DA VINCI CODE¹

What If God Was One of Us?

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Almost a decade ago there was a popular song sung by Joan Osborne, now used as the theme song for the TV show *Joan of Arcadia*, which asks:

What if God was one of us?
Just a slob like one of us
Just a stranger on the bus
Trying to make his way home

This is a good question, but notice the anthropomorphism that underlies the question. Anthropomorphism is the attributing of human traits to God, and it has been going on as long as there have been human beings. For example, if I say that “God’s heart aches with sorrow,” I have attributed to God a physical characteristic— “heart”—and I have attributed to God an emotional characteristic— “sorrow.” The assumption is that God might be made in our image, that God might have our limitations and our shortcomings, that God might have our desire to search for home or seek a goal in life. There are both advantages and disadvantages to such an approach. On the one hand, it is good that God is seen as personal and approachable, that he is seen as someone to relate to. On the other hand, to attribute our limitations to God would seem to render God incapable of helping us.

But, what if God *was* one of us? What if the sovereign, transcendent Creator actually became a personal, intimate Companion? What if the God who made us in his image were to make himself in our image? What if the God who is not flesh and blood actually

¹This is the last in a series of six sermons. For one who may wish to read more about Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code*, there are two books I highly recommend: Darrell L. Bock, *Breaking the Da Vinci Code: Answers to the Questions Everybody’s Asking* (Nelson, 2004), and Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel Code: Novel Claims About Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and Da Vinci* (InterVarsity, 2004). Helpful for this lesson were three books in particular: Luke Timothy Johnson, *Living Jesus: Learning the Heart of the Gospel* (HarperCollins, 1999); N. T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is* (InterVarsity, 1999); and John Stott, *The Incomparable Christ* (InterVarsity 2001).

became flesh and blood? What if God was one of us?

The Apostle Paul, writing around 62 A.D., penned these words:

Who [Christ Jesus], being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something
to be used to his own advantage;
rather he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.

And being found in appearance as a human being,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name [Lord—v. 11] that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:6-11, TNIV).

Jesus Christ was God, and he became one of us.

The Apostle John, writing at the latest in the last decade of the first century A.D.,
authored these words:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was
God. He was with God in the beginning. . . . The Word became flesh and made
his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only
Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth (1:1-2, 14, TNIV).

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Joseph, who was engaged to Mary, was told by an angel: “‘The virgin will conceive
and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel’—which means, ‘God with us’”
(Matt 1:23, TNIV).

What if God was one of us? What if God was actually and really with us? These are
a good questions, but there is a problem with them—and the problem lies with the word
“was.”

It makes a big difference whether we think someone is dead or alive. To the person
in either of those conditions, it probably makes an even bigger difference! But it
certainly also matters to anyone interested in that person.

When someone is dead, even someone we knew when they were alive, we may be
able to learn more about him or her as time goes by. If the person was famous, their

words and deeds will continue to circulate. Research might uncover proof of actual words and deeds, and we might also discover how these were understood and interpreted by those who survive. But the only way we will hear again from the person himself or herself is if some previously undiscovered deed or unpublished word is made public. And even then, we say, “I didn’t know she thought that back then. How interesting.” We hear about it now, but the information is about someone no longer here. We hear an echo from the past, not a new word in the present.

When someone is alive, we have a completely different set of expectations. People who are alive are still capable of doing new things and saying new things. They can surprise us. They can show up on our doorstep, contact us in the middle of a family reunion, or arrive at our bedside when we are sick. Even if we are separated from a living person for a long period of time, or circumstances keep us far apart, we are able to say, “She is my friend,” or “He is my brother,” in a way different not only in tone but also in meaning from the way we say, “She was my mother,” or “He was my teacher,” about someone who has died.

When someone is still living and we are in relationship with that person, our knowledge of the person is always growing because new data is still coming in. It is possible to address a living person and ask, “What did you mean by that?” or “Do you still think that?” and expect an answer. In the presence of this person, we can observe how he or she acts with others. Even more important, we can experience first-hand how she or he acts toward us and with us. Our knowledge of a living person is continually expanding and constantly changing.

The dead, on the other hand, stay still. Their deeds are ended; their words are complete; their power—however impressive it may once have been—is gone. Others have quite literally taken their place, walking over the spot where they lie buried. The dead neither move nor complain. And our memories of the dead, regardless of how precious these memories may be, lie rooted in the past. The dead person *was*; the living person *is*.

The most important question concerning Jesus, then, is this: *Do we think he is dead or alive?*

If Jesus is dead, there are a number of ways in which we can relate ourselves to his

life and his accomplishments. And we might even, if some obscure bit of data should turn up, hope to learn more *about* him. But, if he is dead, we cannot expect to learn more *from* him.

If Jesus is alive, however, everything changes. It is no longer a matter of our questioning a historical record, but it is a matter of our being put in question by One who has broken every rule of ordinary human existence. If Jesus lives, then it must be as life-giver. Jesus is not simply a figure of the past in this case, but a person in the present; not merely a memory that we can analyze and manipulate, but a being who can confront us and instruct us. If Jesus lives, what we learn *about* him must include what we continue to learn *from* him.

This seems to be one of these very few choices that allow no equivocation, no waffling, no straddling the fence. There is no middle ground between dead and alive.² If Jesus is dead, then his story is completed. If he is alive, then his story continues.

It is the confession of Jesus as resurrected Lord and Savior that distinguishes the Christian view of Jesus from every other view. *For everyone else, Jesus is another dead man; for Christians, he is the Living One.*

One sad morning, Mary Magdalene and a group of women journeyed to a tomb to anoint what they expected to be the lifeless remains of One they had hoped would be their deliverer. They had no idea that the tomb would be empty. Just imagine how Mary felt, having had her hopes dashed that perhaps Jesus was the One from God that generations had hoped would come to deliver them. I can imagine her thinking about the time she had spent with Jesus, especially the time when he cast the demons from her and restored to her wholeness of life. Maybe she thought about occasions when she sat at his feet listening to him teach about God and the coming kingdom. Perhaps she pondered what she had seen a few days before, Jesus hanging from a cross, still asking that those who sent him there be forgiven. No one really knows what Mary thought about as she journeyed with some of her friends to anoint what she expected to be a corpse. But surely thoughts about the One she had followed were in her soul. Whatever she was thinking, everything in her world changed when she reached the tomb. She got the

²Even in the delightfully entertaining movie *The Princess Bride*, the hero is not *really* dead but only *mostly* dead.

surprise of her life that also was the surprise of life. The tomb had no human remains. Jesus was alive. God had raised Jesus to new life to show the way to life.

Lois Cheney, in her book *God Is No Fool*, offers this meditation:³

Once upon a time
There was a God
Who so loved the world
That he gave his son
His only son.

And they took that son
And they hung him on a cross
And that son died
And they buried the son—
Sealed him up tight.

But God said,
“Oh no you don’t”
And he rolled back the rock
He unsealed the son
And his son came out
Came out walking and breathing
And he was Alive.

And he’s alive today
And he walks around
And he stalks around
Breathing life and life
Every morning, just before dawn
For thousands of years
Little grim people—
Preachers and bankers and
Storekeepers and students—
Sneak up to the grave and
Roll back the stone
To seal it up tight.

And every morning
God roars
“Oh no you don’t!”
And he flings back
the stone.

³Lois A. Cheney, *God Is No Fool* (Abingdon, 1969), 114-116.

And out walks Jesus
All over again;
Out stalks the
Grinning, striding
Jesus.

Tight-lipped
Little people
Hover all day
Around the tomb
And cover it with
Incense
And bow before it
And walk before it
And sigh before it;
And pray to it
And sing to it
And weep to it
And lean on it.

And no one
Notices
Or at least
They pretend not
To notice,

The living
Breathing
Walking
Talking
Jesus

Out on the
Edge, calling
“Hey!”
“Hey you!”

Jesus Christ, he is not dead; he is risen. He is not silent; he is calling. Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.

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