

## What Makes Jesus Unique?

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This is a unique passage, so unique I won't be able to adequately cover everything, but let's consider what makes *Jesus* unique by asking three questions. First, how is Jesus' suffering unique? A lot of people suffer. Second, what makes Jesus' death-resurrection different from other death-resurrection tales? Third, if Jesus is so unique, so important to history, why didn't he stick around? Why disappear? 3 questions: What makes Jesus' suffering, death-resurrection, & disappearance so unique?

### How is Jesus Suffering Unique?

We've seen a lot of people suffer this year, suffer at the hands of sin and evil (Syria, Paris, Brussels, Charleston). How is Jesus' suffering any different? By what he suffered *for*. Peter says: "*Christ suffered once for sins.*" Do Syrian refugees or the people of Emmanuel AME suffer *for* sins? Well, they certainly suffered *because* of sins. They were unsuspecting victims at the hands of evil. But did they die *for* sins? On Thursday evening, Jesus has a dinner party with his best friends and after they're done, they went out to one of their favorite spots and sang together. They're tight. But this isn't any old dinner party. It's the Last Supper, and Jesus looks around the room, knowing every single friend will abandon him, and decides to go through with it. As he serves them bread and pours the wine Jesus says, "*In this cup is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins*" (Matt 26:28). Jesus is *not* an unsuspecting victim; he's a willing sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins. So his suffering is unique in that it is *for* sins *not because of* sins. Which raises a question, What is sin? Do I really need forgiveness? **Sin** is an insoluble problem. It's the stain that doesn't come out easily. Ignoring it doesn't make it go away. We can try to water it down by calling it a mistake, imperfection, or brokenness but that doesn't actually help. Say a doctor misdiagnoses you treating you for arthritis when you actually have cancer. The pain gets worse. Some suggest you may have cancer. Wouldn't you insist on a proper diagnosis? A second opinion? To heal, to get the stain out, we have to discover, to admit, what's really in us. **Sin is the unavoidable reality that we are willfully disinterested in the most glorious, beautiful, powerful, loving, and true Being of history.** It is a disease that causes aversion to Glory. It is willful disinterest in perfect love. Sin, instead of enjoying God's perfect love, tries to squeeze love out of other things. In Steinbeck's *Of Mice of Men* Lennie has a pet mouse he keeps in his pocket. But there's a problem—Lennie doesn't know his own strength, the weight he puts on the mouse. He ends up petting it so heavily, he crushes it. We often try to force love/satisfaction out of things *incapable* of bearing our weight: relationship, career, experiences crushed under our god-sized demands. This is sin. Willful disinterest in true Love. **Jesus desperately wants to rescue us from our willful rejection of him.** But how? Peter says, "*For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous.*" Here's a clue. To be righteous is to be consistent, true to one's character. God sets the bar with character that's consistently just *and* loving. His justice and his love compel him not to misdiagnose our status. We are unrighteous, inconsistently just and loving. Sin is the disease and unrighteous the symptomatic status. Both must change. And to change the status, you have to deal with the disease. **We need the forgiveness and righteousness of God.** We need our sins healed

and our unrighteousness made righteous. How? Jesus suffers for sin *to bring us to God*. The word bring means to put in the presence of. Somehow Jesus can deal with our disinterest, put us face to face with that glory, that beauty, that righteousness. That his sufferings are so unique that they are *for the forgiveness of sin and to bring us face to face with God*.

### How is Jesus death-resurrection unique?

So how does it work? Peter: *Christ suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous to bring us to God being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the Spirit*. It's through death-resurrection. You might think, what's so unique about this? Ancient cultures that have tales of gods dying and rising, like Orpheus and Osiris? Many predate Christ, so what the big deal with Jesus dying and rising? Well, *first* we have to consider that Jesus was "*put to death in the flesh*." This means he's a historical not mythical. Virtually no historian debates his that today. Unlike the ancient dying and rising gods, *Jesus actually lived and died*. Second, we should ask, Is it mere coincidence that these dying and rising stories fill the world? Some Xns would say it's the Devil distorting the true story. Others would say its Christianity copying earlier stories. But atheist and literary scholar, C.S. Lewis struggling with this very question, *came upon the idea that these repeated themes must come from somewhere*. That in the great myths we have evil villains, people in distress, and heroes who fight the darkness. Why can't we shake the story? Lewis reasoned that for a story to be compelling, you have to have bits of reality and truth in them. Suffering stories strike a nerve, rescue stories pull on hope. Death-resurrection stories tell us we need to be reborn. If this is true, is it any surprise that we would find narratives all over the world that mimic the real story of the world, with Orpheus doing down to the death to rescue his bride, and Osiris rising from the dead to give life and fertility to Egypt? The world reborn thru a flood, dead womb of Sarah brought to life, the return of Superman from certain defeat? We have to consider that these stories might be echoes of the true story. If not, why imagine them, iterate them, retell them? If not, in some sense the virtues of redemption and justice are a fiction. But if they are invested with reality, with fragments of truth, where do they point? Lewis concluded they point to the story of Christ, because it is the true story of the world, the archetypal story. He comments that these similarities occur, **not because the authors were lucky, but because they were wise**. That death and resurrection stories point, not to new seasons but to new life, the life we all want in the resurrection story, the story of Jesus. What makes it the stand-out story? His death deals with the insoluble problem of sin and our status of unrighteousness. In the death of Christ, sin is righteously punished. Willful disinterest in the eternal glory beauty and love of God, a crime of highest proportions, is justly sentenced. Death. But instead of us dying, the sin of the world heaped on the sinless One, willfully crushed, like a mouse under weight of our idolatrous demands. *God is just; sin is punished*. But where does that leave us? He hangs, from the cross, not with vengeance in his teeth, or curses under his breath, but exhales, "*Father, forgive them for they know not what they do*." But we have to heed his words, take the medicine to be healed. He suffers *once*. "It is finished." You need not and cannot pay God back. So how will you live? As a forgiven wreck? A pardoned perpetrator? Oh no, that cuts the story in half, leaving out the resurrection. The righteous dying for the unrighteous *but not bringing us to God*. Jesus sees the story through. He rips through sin and death!—made alive by the Spirit. He walks out of the grave, making his way down the dark hall of death, lights clicking on

overhead, one by one, with each stride of resurrection life, until he bursts back into the world, the firstborn from the dead. The beachhead of heaven, a deposit of new creation. To all who shift their weight on Christ—resurrection life—you too climb out of the grave, the lights clicking on for you, and you step out, and face Glory. He’s been there all along. In the resurrection, Jesus puts his glory on you, his perfect love in you, transfers his status—righteous—to you. Forgiven & righteous. Jesus death-resurrection is unique in that *it actually* happened and that it fulfills and exceeds all the other tales.

### **What is unique about the Ascension?**

This brings us to our final question: Why leave, if Jesus is so unique, so glorious, why not stick around? The passage says, “[who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.](#)” This is a bit strange. I mean, if God exists, and God is Jesus, wouldn’t it have been easier for everyone to believe him if he stuck around? Why send the best proof of the Christian story packing to heaven? To answer this, we need to consider what Jesus is doing in heaven at the right hand of God. **First, salvation is not complete until Jesus stands before God.** We need an advocate, a lawyer, a priest to stand before God and say, they are forgiven and they are righteous. But if the lawyer leaves or stays, we have no representation. Hebrews 7:26 “[Consequently, he \[Jesus\] is able to save to completely those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.](#)” He always stands before the Father pleading our case, bearing our names: salvation complete, they have my righteousness, they have my love. **Second, salvation is not complete until someone overthrows the powers of evil.** What good is it to be forgiven with righteous status only to struggle forever with sin in an unjust world? This gets back to those who suffer because of sins, to the suffering and evil around the world. When Jesus ascends to God’s right hand, its like when an all powerful and righteous heir is ascending to the throne. All the enemies go running in fear. But they won’t run until the king is on the throne (try to keep him from getting on the throne by killing him). They don’t back off until he’s proven he’s the one, until he’s seated as **the most glorious, beautiful, powerful, loving, and true King of all.** So Jesus ascends to the throne as the true King, and when he does angels, authorities, and powers cower. Evil is put on notice. Battles ensue but the end is near. This is what the strange bit of our passage is probably talking about, that after Jesus was made alive by the Spirit, he announced his victory over evil imprisoned spirits from the time of Noah back who refused to honor God and promoted terror on the earth. **As King. Jesus promises creational salvation, and as priest he completes our salvation,** once and for all. Every tear wiped away. Everyone who hopes in him made new. Jesus is our man in heaven—the pledge that salvation is complete, evil is on notice, and a new creation is coming. Jesus is utterly unique. He makes the story end like we all really want it to—with a new beginning, a new heavens and earth, where peace and righteousness dwell. Jesus secures a future depicted in myth and promised in legend. This is the uniqueness of Jesus.