

Jesus is always No.1

Who is the most important person in history? Computer scientist Steven Skiena and Google engineer Charles Ward developed a system that ranks historical figures in order of significance. Their research produced a book called *Who's Bigger? Where Historical Figures Really Rank*.

To establish their 'significance' ranking, they assessed more than 800,000 names; calculated scores of celebrity and achievement or importance; and then factored in how long, and how long ago, someone lived. Just as Google ranks pages, the authors examined Wikipedia and other sources. For instance, they compared the influence of Aristotle to modern pop singer Britney Spears. Though more people know about Britney Spears, her influence is not likely to endure 100 years from now. But Aristotle was a man for the ages.

Here are the resulting top ten most influential people in history from those 800,000 studied:

1. Jesus
2. Napoleon
3. Muhammad
4. William Shakespeare
5. Abraham Lincoln
6. George Washington
7. Adolf Hitler
8. Aristotle
9. Alexander the Great
10. Thomas Jefferson

Here are a few other notable names on the list:

17. Martin Luther
18. Joseph Stalin
68. Elvis Presley (He ends up sandwiched between Socrates and William the Conqueror.)

Eventually you come to Justin Bieber who was numbered 8,633. How does he compare with Jesus? The authors answer the question this way: *"The significance of Jesus is shown by his mindshare today fully 2,000 years after his death. We don't see the same happening for Justin Bieber."*

So why is Jesus No.1 on the list? It has to do with something called a 'meme,' which doesn't just describe a social media post which spreads far and wide, the original definition of 'meme' refers to a tradition passed down over time. Something so important and so impacting, that its influence endures for a very long time. We measure meme strength, how successfully is the idea of this person being propagated through time. With over two billion followers over 2,000 years after his death, Jesus is an incredibly successful historical meme.

Now fame is a tricky thing. We all understand that, or at least we should, given how quickly yesterday's heroes become today's has-beens and tomorrow's forgotten footnotes. It is said that when a Roman General came back from a great victory in a distant land, during the victory parade as the people watched and cheered, a slave followed behind the General, continually whispering in his ear these words, *Sic transit gloria mundi* – which is translated, *'The glory of the world is fleeting.'* Everything good, everything bad, everything happy, everything sad. It all passes away. All of it is fleeting.

Fame and infamy are alike in this one way. They both pass away. Is there anything on this earth that will last forever? Consider these familiar words:

Luke 1:33 *“He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”*

It is easy to forget how revolutionary this must have sounded in the beginning. Just think about it - those words were spoken by an angel ... to a virgin ... announcing a baby ... who will one day rule the world. And it came out of the blue to an unmarried teenage girl in Nazareth, a tiny village in a remote corner of the Roman Empire. The angel came to her suddenly and made a series of incredible announcements (Luke 1:31-33):

- *You will conceive and bear a son.*
- *You will call his name Jesus.*
- *He will be great.*
- *He will be called the Son of the Most High.*
- *He will rule over the house of Jacob forever.*
- *His kingdom will never end.*

Mary could have asked a follow-up question about any of those things, but being both thoughtful and practical, she asks only about the first one. *“How will this be, since I am a virgin?”* (v. 35) The answer was both direct and even more amazing (vv. 35-36).

- *The Holy Spirit will come upon you.*
- *The power of the Most High will overshadow you.*
- *The child will be holy.*
- *He will be the Son of God.*

The angel adds two other facts:

- *Remember how Elizabeth got pregnant.*
- *Nothing is impossible with God.*

Given this overwhelming information, it is all to Mary's credit how she responded:

Luke 1:38 *“I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.”*

Even now after more than 2,000 years, the angel's message seems mind-blowing. What a series of predictions he made. This week my mind was drawn to the last phrase of verse 33, *“And of his kingdom there will be no end.”* As I thought about those improbable words, I found myself singing the *“Hallelujah Chorus,”* from *Handel's Messiah* - especially the part where the choir repeats *“And he shall reign for ever and ever, for ever and ever, forever and ever.”*

We're not there yet, but where is history going? Philosophers have pondered that question for thousands of years. Is history nothing more than *“a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing”*? Or perhaps history is, as Edward Gibbon suggested, *“little more than the register of crimes, follies, and misfortunes of mankind.”* Should we accept the Hindu view that history is an endless cycle of reincarnation? Or should we adopt a vague evolutionary view that we came up from the slime over the course of billions of years? Where would that lead us? To some positive thinking nirvana where *“every day in every way I'm getting better and better”*?

Or should we conclude with the cynics that life is meaningless, an eternal cul-de-sac that leads to nothing at all? Where is history going? No question is more important because the way you view history ultimately shapes the way you view your own life. If you believe that history is going nowhere, then your life is just a momentary blip on the radar screen of the universe - you pop up, you fly across the screen, you disappear, never to be heard from again. If history has no goal, then life has no meaning, and every man and woman is left to their own devices.

From God's point of view, history is His story, the record of God's dealings with the human race. The Bible teaches that the universe had a definite beginning at a definite point in time. And it teaches that man didn't come up from the slime in some crazy accident of evolution. The Bible shows us how history is the slow unfolding of God's purpose on the earth.

The Old Testament prophets spoke again and again of a coming kingdom on the earth. Abraham caught a glimpse of it, Moses saw it from afar, David learned about it directly from God, and the prophets filled in the details. They foresaw a time when God's Messiah would rule the world. In that day, the lion will lie down with the lamb, and all nations will stream into Jerusalem.

The New Testament writers add two very significant details:

- 1) The promised Messiah is none other than the Lord Jesus Christ, and
- 2) The kingdom of God will not ultimately be established until Jesus the King returns to the earth in person.

That is where history is going. The kingdom of God is what history is all about. It's the goal toward which everything else is moving. It's the last chapter in a story that started in the Garden of Eden. Let me give you a Reader's Digest condensed version of what history is all about.

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. He then placed Adam and Eve on the earth and made them stewards over the whole planet. But when they disobeyed, they surrendered their stewardship into the hands of Satan. From that day until this, the whole world has been the domain of Satan. It is still God's world by creation, but Satan usurped God's authority and set up a counter-kingdom to the kingdom of God. From that day until this, the earth has been the central battlefield in a war between those two competing kingdoms.

But that's not the whole story. Once the world fell into enemy hands, God determined to win it back at any cost. That meant sending his message through kings and prophets and priests and judges and poets. It meant raising up an entire nation through whom He would bless the earth. But ultimately it meant that He had to enter the conflict. In order to take the world back from Satan, God entered the human race in the person of His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

God actually declared war at Bethlehem.

Ever since Eden, a battle has been raging between God and Satan for the control of planet earth. When Adam and Eve sinned, Satan struck a blow for evil. From that time until this very hour, sin has reigned in every corner of this planet and has found a home in every human heart. All the pain and suffering we see around us – every bit of it – can be traced back to that fateful moment in the Garden of Eden. Since then, the armies of evil have been on the march in every generation. They have landed wave after wave of soldiers on beachheads around the world. There are times when it seems as if the battle is over and evil will reign forever. The bad guys often seem to be winning. But if Christmas means anything, it is this: **God wins in the end.**

At Bethlehem God launched a mighty counteroffensive that started with a tiny baby boy named Jesus, born in a scandalous way, in a barn or cave, to a young couple who were alone. The world had no idea what God was up to. Only in retrospect do we now understand.

When we run the clock forward to the end of His life, when Jesus was crucified, it appeared Satan might win. For many hours it seemed certain he had won, that the battle was over, and God had been decisively defeated. Then Sunday came, and with it, the empty tomb and the risen Saviour. Suddenly it became clear to everyone - even to Satan - that Jesus was the victor in the great battle to reclaim the earth and the hearts and souls of God's children.

The world is still in darkness, but here and there the followers of Jesus have established outposts of the kingdom, little pinpoints of light that promise better things to come. Meanwhile the battle rages on between the two kingdoms - King Jesus on one side and Satan on the other. In these last 20 centuries, the light has spread until it seems like there are a thousand points of light chasing away the darkness. In many other places, however, things look darker than ever. That's the history of the world up until this present moment. But it is not the end of the story.

All over the world, in those little outposts of the kingdom, the followers of Jesus are praying "*Your kingdom come,*" and as they do, they set their gaze toward the Eastern sky and wait for the Son of God to personally and visibly return to the earth. When He at last comes, He will trample Satan under his feet, set right the wrongs in the world, and reign as Lord. That day has not yet come, but it will come, and indeed it is coming.

Almost a century ago now, two famous essays were written about the life of Christ - 'One Solitary Life' and 'The Incomparable Life.' Josh McDowell reprinted them in his book *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*. I have combined the two and made a slight revision because taken together, they paint a vivid picture of who Jesus really is.

Two thousand years ago, a man was born contrary to the laws of life. He lived in poverty and was reared in obscurity. He was the child of a peasant woman and worked in a carpenter's shop until he was 30. Then for three years he was an itinerant preacher. He never owned a home, never wrote a book, never held public office. He never went to college and never set foot in a big city. He never travelled 200 miles from the place where he was born.

He possessed none of the usual traits that accompany greatness. He had no credentials but himself. In his infancy he startled a king; in childhood he puzzled doctors; in manhood he ruled the course of nature, walked upon the billows as if on pavement, and hushed the sea to sleep. He healed the multitudes without medicine and made no charge for his service.

While still a young man, the tide of popular opinion turned against him. His friends ran away. One of them denied him. He was turned over to his enemies and went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed on a cross between two thieves. While he was dying, his executioners gambled for the only piece of property he had on earth - his coat. When he was dead, he was taken down and laid in a borrowed tomb.

Two thousand years have come and gone and today he is the centrepiece of the human race and the leader of the column of progress. He never wrote a book, yet no library could hold all the books written about him. He never wrote a song, and yet he has furnished the theme for more songs than all the songwriters combined. He never founded a college, but all the schools put together cannot boast of having as many students.

He never marshalled an army, nor drafted a soldier, nor fired a gun; and yet no leader ever had more volunteers who, under His orders, have made more rebels stack arms and surrender without a shot fired.

He never practiced psychiatry, yet He has healed more broken hearts than all the doctors far and near.

How great is His influence? All history is divided by His coming - BC and AD. We call this year 2023 in honour of his life.

The names of past leaders have long been forgotten. The great men of Greece and Rome are dusty names in the library of time. Scientists, philosophers, kings, generals and theologians have come and gone, but the name of this Man abounds more and more.

Though time has spread more than 2,000 years between the people of this generation and the scene of His crucifixion, yet He still lives. Herod could not destroy Him, and the grave could not hold Him.

He stands alone on the highest pinnacle of heavenly glory, proclaimed of God, acknowledged by angels, adored by saints, and feared by devils, as the living, personal Christ, King of Kings, Lord of Lords, the Saviour of the world.

This is the Christ of the Bible. This is the Jesus we worship. This is the true Christ of the Christian faith. This is the One in whom we have believed. He is our Lord and Saviour. We celebrate His birthday each year at Christmas.

If our greatest need had been education, God would have sent a teacher.

If our greatest need had been money, God would have sent a banker.

If our greatest need had been advice, God would have sent a counsellor.

But since our greatest need was forgiveness, God sent a Saviour.

His name is Jesus. He is Christ the Lord, the Son of God who came from heaven to earth.

God's answer is wrapped up in a baby named Jesus. And not just any Jesus, but only the Lord Jesus Christ revealed in the New Testament. He alone is the Lord from heaven. He alone can save us.

The familiar words of Phillips Brooks are a delight at this point:

How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given.

So, God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven.

No ear may hear his coming but in this world of sin,

Where meek souls will receive him still, the dear Christ enters in.

That's why Jesus is the most important person in history. No one else could do what Jesus has done. That's why His movement now encompasses more than two billion followers. If you were going to publish a truly accurate list of the most important people in history, Jesus would always be number one, and there would be no number two because no one compares to Him.

With that happy thought, I hope you have a very merry Christmas!