

KNOWING JESUS THROUGH PHILIP YANCEY'S EYES:  
REVIEW OF *THE JESUS I NEVER KNEW*

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Philip Yancey's book *The Jesus I Never Knew* deals primarily with Yancey's two views of Jesus: his view of Jesus as a child and his view of Jesus from a more informed perspective. The book is divided into three major parts: who Jesus was, why Jesus came, and what Jesus left behind.

In the first part, Yancey develops Jesus' significance for the world. He begins with his own encounter with Jesus in childhood, moves to the various images of Jesus he encountered in his college days, and then to the perceptions of Jesus after the rise of the theologies of the 1970s and following that left him to reconsider all he previously thought of Jesus. From here, Yancey traces a broadly chronological review of Jesus: Jesus' birth, his Jewish background, and his temptation. Yancey finishes the section his observations on Jesus' person.

Of interest is Yancey's reason for writing on Jesus: God came in the flesh. The primary sources for Jesus and his life are the gospels. Yancey also includes some films to help himself and the class he was teaching at the time to understand Jesus better. The emphasis that Yancey takes on Jesus' humanity in this first section is refreshing. In the second chapter, Yancey's focus is on the very human conditions of Jesus' birth. The third chapter brings out the importance of Jewish cultural aspects and geographical features of the land of Israel as they relate to Jesus' upbringing. This chapter was possibly the most impressionable in this section on my perceptions about Jesus, for I have a tendency to neglect these aspects of Jesus' life. As an example, the influence of Galilean manner of speech is something that never crossed my mind, yet such influence is impossible to ignore—perhaps Jesus did have what other Jewish would consider a speech impediment.

The chapter on the temptation is both insightful and problematic. Yancey raises many questions that keep the reader thinking, and then he proceeds to provide an answer to these

questions. I can agree with his many assessments about the significance of the desert temptations and Jesus' responses to them: one in particular is the preservation of freedom of response in the midst of one's own temptation (p. 81). So, too, did I find helpful Yancey's understanding that Jesus resisted the temptations of good to allow for the experience of the bad (pp. 70–72). Where I found Yancey to fall short is his reading into the post-temptation story of Satan's perceived victory, God's restraint, and the relationship to more recent events such as the Crusades and the Holocaust (p. 79). Here, Yancey reaches to make his point, because, at the time of these events, Christ had already defeated Satan by the cross.

I also found the last chapter of part one helpful but troublesome. In this chapter, we read of the gospels' portrayal of Jesus as a person. Quite possibly the biggest hurdle here is in the beginning where we read of Yancey's Sunday school experience. While the experience described here accurately portrays his own incidents and those of others, Yancey quite likely does not represent all Sunday school experiences; on the other hand, Yancey's description of the movies on Jesus is probably more accurate. Much appreciated were his sharp observations from the gospels themselves on Jesus' interaction with others: the scope Yancey covered of Jesus' persona brought Jesus to life for me and made me realize how far I have to go in order to look like Christ.

The second part dealing with why Jesus came was most profound for me. Yancey proficiently unravels some of the most challenging passages in the scriptures. In addition, he expresses well the grace Jesus imparted to others. Lastly, the treatment of miracles, Jesus' death, and his resurrection all were of help to me in certain ways, while leaving me wanting in other ways.

The zenith for this book is found in the chapters on the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount. The heart in the former is the section “Great Reversal,” particularly Hellwig’s list on the poor. The reality that these people impress Jesus cannot be discounted. The comments on each of the Beatitudes are beneficial to contemporary applications. With the latter, Yancey’s examples of Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky to illustrate God’s ideal and God’s grace, respectively, were most powerful: Tolstoy’s drive to live out gospel was most admirable and Dostoyevsky’s illumination of Christ’s life within us express a double-sided truth. As Yancey put it, the Sermon “tell[s] us what *God* is like” (p. 143).

In the chapter that followed, I valued the honest story about Greg (pp. 148–149), for it set the stage for explaining Jesus’ grace. Yancey rightly notes how “Jesus turned upside down the accepted wisdom of the day” (p. 154). He does a fine job of contrasting the prejudices of the first century with Jesus’ disregard of them to express compassion to those in need. With Yancey, I find myself challenged to grow in this area.

The last half of section two was both decent and lacking. For example, the observation of relative infrequency of miracles in Jesus’ own day, along with the understanding that the experience of a miracle was no guarantee that one would come to faith, put into perspective the relative infrequency of miracles in our own. The explanation of the miracles that did happen, however, comes close to a naturalistic rationalization of miracles (p. 168). Yancey thoroughly summarizes the Passion narratives, with fresh insights like the unanswered prayer in the garden and Jesus’ continual focus on others. Lastly, Yancey defends Christ’s resurrection as well as most non-theologians, but for some reason, he seems to overlook Paul’s mention of Christ’s appearance to 500 people at once.

In the last section, Yancey looks to be winding down in his own insights, yet he does not end dully—he ends, in fact, more than adequately. His take on Jesus’ ascension that “Jesus took the risk of being forgotten” (p. 230) is unique. He makes legitimate points about the church’s struggle to live out Christ’s life to the world. Yancey points out the transcendent nature of the kingdom, and the church’s confusion of it with the earthly kingdom. Lastly, in what appears to be his solution, Yancey, touching on the difference Jesus makes, submits his final sketch of Jesus as God manifest in flesh: who God is and what humanity should be. Yancey communicates the hope found in the cross as we live in the twilight of the Ascension and the Second Coming (pp. 273-275).

On a final note, one apparent problem with Yancey is that he continually appeals to the early church and/or the earliest centuries of the church. He gives the impression that this period of the life of the church was more problem free than later centuries. Many of Yancey’s references to later periods of church history tend to single out the more troubling aspects of that time, ignoring at the same time some of the progress made in later church developments in both theology and praxis. However, *The Jesus I Never Knew* is a paradigm-shifting book with a treasure of insights from which one can glean.