

“Which Jesus?”

Introduction to the “I Am” series

September 9-10, 2017

Who is Jesus? He never wrote a book; and yet, more books have been written about Him than anyone else. He never painted a picture, so far as we know; and yet, the world’s greatest art, the world’s greatest dramas, the world’s greatest music, the world’s greatest literature has Jesus of Nazareth, as its inspiration. Jesus never raised an army, yet hundreds of thousands have died for Him. He never traveled more than 70 miles from His birthplace; and yet, 2,000 years later people all over the globe know His name. When He died He had only a handful of followers; and yet, today, over 30% of the world’s population — the largest grouping of humans on Earth — call Jesus their Lord.

Who is this Jesus? It’s not a new question. 2,000 years ago people in Israel were discussing the same question. Please turn with me to **Matthew 16**.

After a season of intense ministry, Jesus took His followers away from the crowds so they could get some peace and quiet. They walked 25 miles north from the Sea of Galilee to a place called Caesarea Philippi. I visited there when I traveled to Israel, and you can see it too if you go to Israel with me next April. You can pick up a brochure at the Welcome booth.

This town is in a quiet, rural place ideal for relaxing. The Romans occupied Israel during that time, and they built up the town. They named Caesarea Philippi after a Caesar. During Jesus’ time, the town had become a center for pagan worship. The cave you see in [this picture](#) was filled with altars to Roman idols.

As Jesus stood with His disciples in the shadow of those pagan altars, it became a defining moment. Those 12 men had been following Jesus around Israel for nearly 3 years. They had watched Him minister to people. They had seen miracles happen right in front of their eyes. They even did some preaching and healing in His name. They had seen a lot. Now the time had come for them to answer the crucial question: Who is Jesus? Each of us will be confronted with that question at some point in our lives, and we answer the question in two stages.

In **Stage 1, we consider what do others say?** You can call this the “Yelp” stage of faith. Before I make a hotel reservation, I go online and look at what other people said about the place. I failed to do this on our last trip, and checked into a motel that was terrible. Later I looked online and saw a review that said, “Don’t bring your wife to this place unless you want a divorce.” Fortunately, Linda forgave me.

When we first hear about Jesus, it is from other people. Their opinion of Jesus becomes a factor in the way we think about him. **Matthew 16:13** says, *When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?"* The disciples might have been glad Jesus asked that, because they could try out some possible answers without having to risk giving their own first.

In **verse 14**, they tell him of the various theories they've heard people floating about who Jesus was. *They replied, "Some say John the Baptist;* John was a powerful preacher who told people to repent of their sin. King Herod was offended and executed him. Jesus' preaching was powerful too, so they figured He was John reincarnated.

Others say Elijah; The Old Testament prophesied that before the Messiah came, a prophet *like* Elijah would appear. That's what people meant when they said Jesus was Elijah. (Actually, Jesus said John the Baptist was that Elijah figure.)

and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets." People realized that somehow God was speaking through Jesus' teaching, so, they put Jesus in the category they knew: prophet. Today, almost every religion teaches that Jesus was a prophet, or at least a good teacher.

Some will say that Jesus was just a normal man like anyone else; nothing more. They will say that He was a good teacher, but nothing more. Lots of our friends and neighbors believe that.

In a recent survey¹ of the 5 mile radius around our North Fayette building, people were asked whether or not they agreed with the statement, "Jesus actually rose from the dead as the Bible teaches." About 75% of Americans believe Jesus rose from the dead. Do you think that the percentage in our area is higher, lower or about the same? It's actually lower -- by a lot: only 52% of our neighbors agree. Lots of our neighbors believe Jesus was a good moral teacher and no more. The survey revealed that the average West Hills resident is a lot less likely to believe Jesus to be the son of God than the average American. He was just a man who was a good moral teacher.

Let's examine that idea for a moment. C.S. Lewis argues that it is foolish to say that Jesus was a great moral teacher but not God. Jesus said He is the son of God. That leaves us with only a few options about who He was.

Option A: Lunatic. He thought He was God but He really wasn't. That means He was a lunatic. I have met people who claimed they were Jesus. I did

¹ MissionInsite; Quadrenium Project. Prepared for WPA Conf. UMC, version 212; 6/28/2017

not believe they were great moral teachers. I was not tempted to follow them; in fact, I wanted to ease away! They were clearly mentally unstable.

Option B: Liar. He knew He wasn't the Son of God but He tried to convince people He was. That makes Him a liar. The teaching and example of His life are not consistent with that of a deceiving liar, though.

Option C: Lord He was telling the truth: He is the son of God. Those are our three choices.

As C.S. Lewis wrote: "Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call him Lord and God. But let us not come up with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that option open to us. He did not intend to."

Jesus asked His disciples about His Yelp review, "Who do people say that I am?" When the disciples gave him the answer, Jesus didn't even comment. That isn't the most important question. Jesus was not primarily interested in what the person on the street thought about who He was. What He wanted to know was: ¹⁵ *"But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"*

Stage 2 of answering the question "Who is Jesus?" is my personal response. The crucial question is, "Who do YOU say that I am?" This is the most important question for no one can answer this question for us. At some point, it is not enough to say, "Well, my grandmother thinks this... or, my best friend thinks that... or, Beyoncé thinks this..." At some point, we each need to answer, "Who do YOU say that I am?"

Jesus waited three years to ask the disciples this question. He did not expect them to know right away. Until that time, they had surely thought about who this guy was that they were following. At first they called him "Rabbi." Then, they saw the miracles and they began to wonder.

Now Jesus asks, "Who do YOU say that I am?" Peter was the bold one. He stepped up to answer. *Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."* Ding, ding, ding -- right answer! How did He get that right? ¹⁷ *Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven.* That verse tells us that **God enables us to realize Jesus is Son of God.** It wasn't that Peter was smarter than everyone else. God showed Peter who Jesus was. That was the only reason he got it right.

God the Father was also telling other people that Jesus was His son. When Jesus was baptized before He began His ministry, **Matthew 3:17** tells us, *And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well*

pleased.” But none of the disciples were with him at that time, so they didn’t know.

Right after this moment in Caesarea Philippi, Peter, James and John will see Jesus Transfigured on the mountain, and God will repeat the same words in **Matthew 17:5** *...a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!”* But that hadn’t happened yet, so they didn’t know. Peter answered Jesus’ question based on what God had allowed him to believe.

It works the same way for us, too. Jesus asks us, “Who do YOU say that I am?” People will have all kinds of theories: prophet, man, martyr, revolutionary, enlightened one. When we conclude that He is the Son of God, it is because God the Father has shown us that in our spirit and our answer to that question will determine our destiny.

IV. Jesus starts to show Peter some of what will happen because of his conviction that Jesus is the Messiah. **Matthew 16:18-19** *And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”*

These verses apply both to Peter in a unique way, and to us in an on-going way. First, **recognizing Jesus as Lord blesses us with an eternal community.**

When I married Linda, I didn’t fully realize that when I marry her, I also get her family as part of the package: her mom, her dad, her step-dad, her step-mom; they all become part of my family. And my family became hers! I was only 21 when we got married, so I didn’t really grasp this concept. It didn’t dawn on me that it would impact who will be in our Christmas pictures for the rest of my life. It influences where we would be around the table at Thanksgiving and where we would be spend vacations, to name just a few minor details. I didn’t stop to think that marrying her family determined who my kids would call grandma and grandpa and cousin. Now fortunately, this has been a positive thing, well mostly. Like all families, we have some moments that require patience. But overall, it’s positive and I’m thankful for our extended family. For example, my father-in-law was instrumental in me becoming a pastor.

In the same way, when you say, “Jesus is my Messiah, the son of the living God” and choose to follow him, you get a family, too. There are a bunch of people who come along with Jesus! They are called “the Church.” There is no getting around this deal; the Church comes as part of the package. You want Jesus? He’s got a family. You want heaven? Guess what, it’s filled with other people who follow Jesus, too. If God is your heavenly Father, then all those who

follow Jesus become your brothers and sisters. This is a blessing, not a burden! Sure, they won't all think like you, vote like you, or like the same music you do. But they are your family, and you will spend eternity with them! To say, "I love Jesus, but I can't stand the church" is like getting married and then telling your new wife, "I love you, but I can't stand your sister or parents." If she loves her family, that won't go over well.

Jesus *loves* His family! In fact, He died for them. We change the world as the Church, not just as individuals. Consider the hurricane relief in Houston. The Church will be involved long term there. Millions of believers will donate, thousands will serve there. For years. Together!

This verse tells us that Jesus is continually building His church! Jesus tells Peter, *on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.* "Upon this rock I will build my church." What rock? For Peter, the "Rock" was a double-meaning word play. The name Peter can also be translated to "Rock." For Peter, this meant that he would be a leader in the early church. He was the one who preached the first sermon at Pentecost when the church was born.

For us, "Rock" refers to Peter's statement of faith in Jesus. It means that whenever anyone recognizes and follows Jesus as Lord, they become part of the people of God. It means that a statement of faith in Jesus is what the church is built on and "the gates of Hades" would not overcome it. Hades is the place of death. This means the church is eternal; it's been persecuted, but you can't kill it. It might be stamped out in a certain place for a while, but you can't kill it. For nearly 2,000 years the church has endured and triumphed, and it always will. You are part of an eternal community: a family that will support you, a force that will help change the world, and a community that will encourage you to follow Jesus.

As we go into the *I Am* series, we urge you to get into a small group so that you can experience that community in a holistic way. You will be able to grow best that way. It's important to worship together with people on the weekend: you enter the presence of God, get teaching and receive from Him there. Small group, however, is where you do the other parts of following Jesus. It's where you learn to forgive and to love better. It's where you hear what is going on in people's lives so that you can learn from their example. It's where we minister to each other and to the community. These are vital to our growth. If you are not part of a small group right now, get connected for the next 5 weeks, at least. You will be a little bit stronger in your faith at the end of those weeks if you do.

Second, **recognizing Jesus as Lord blesses us with Spiritual authority.** Jesus said, *¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven;*

whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” There is a little mystery to what Jesus meant here. It can get deep quickly. Let me just say this: Peter opened the kingdom by preaching about the risen Jesus for the first time ever and that opened the kingdom of heaven to thousands. When we share the gospel, it opens the kingdom to people. We don’t do this on our own authority, but on Jesus’.

As part of the church of Jesus, we are given the authority to minister in His name. For example, Jesus told us to pray in His name; that means with His authority. When we end a prayer “in the name of Jesus,” that isn’t just a religious way of signing off, like “over and out.” No, it is like a policeman saying “stop!” It is not Joe Smith as a guy saying stop, it is the authority of the law represented by his badge. When you pray in the name of Jesus, it is as if Jesus is the one praying that prayer and you are using His authority. What a blessing!

We have authority over the works of Satan. When we face sin, we don’t have to let it defeat us. When we forgive others, it releases the power of God in people’s lives and pushes back the darkness of bitterness and division.

Jesus asks us the same question, “Who do you say that I am?” Each of us must answer. In the end, it doesn’t matter much what other people say about Jesus.

Next week we begin the “I Am” spiritual growth series. There is no better focus for us than to be looking at what Jesus says about who He is. It can be an exciting fall for you.