

Who Am I?

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Text: Matt 16:13-20

I recall some years ago a friend abandoned her family, divorced her husband, and left the community. I happened to meet her sometime afterwards and asked her why she had done what she had done. “I just had to find my head.” I’ve heard people say, “I need to find myself.” The age-old quest of self-identity – who am I? Why am I here? What is the purpose of my life? For some, it is an existential question. That is, the answer to why they even exist, or why they should continue to exist becomes crucial to life itself. We’ve heard people talk about an identity crisis. It seems common among teenagers as they struggle to find their place in the world, and a lot of it has to do with what they will do with their lives, how they will make a living, who they will marry. In some ways, it is about expectations. What do we expect out of life? We ask the questions that no one else can answer; we have to find the answers for ourselves. We can seek guidance from parents, teachers, others that we respect, but ultimately it will be up to us to sort it all out and make sense of life.

Jesus asked the question, too, but in a different way. We’ll get to that in a moment.

But first, a quick reminder: A few weeks ago, we discussed C. S. Lewis’ “trilemma.” I quoted extensively from his *Mere Christianity*, but just briefly let me reiterate the last paragraph:

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: ‘I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept His claim to be God.’ That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic – on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg – or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a 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 with any patronising nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.¹

That means that we must decide whether we believe Jesus was a liar, perhaps demon-possessed, in which nothing he said can be accepted; whether he was a lunatic, in which, again, nothing he said can be accepted; or whether he was, as he said he was, the Son of God, the only option for believing anything he said. You cannot pick and choose, as the scholars of the Jesus Seminar tried to do a few years ago. They sat around a long table, examining the words attributed to Jesus and tried to decide which ones were probably what Jesus said and which ones were probably

¹Lewis, C. S., *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), p. 52

not what Jesus said. They were trying to de-fang Jesus, to make him less God and more man, to eliminate his deity and reduce the Christian faith to one human philosophy among many.

I told you also of Thomas Jefferson's attempt to de-legitimize Jesus by devising a cut-and-paste version of the New Testament that eliminated all the miraculous and anything Jesus said that might have been construed to attribute deity to him. Jefferson was a deist who believed in what he called "Nature's God," but that God was not personal and was a distant and disinterested deity.

Then, last week, as I was introducing Paul's discussion of the resurrection of Jesus, I told you that there are two primary obstacles to faith for many people. One, of course, is the resurrection, and I talked about the six theories that help people deny the reality of the physical resurrection of Jesus. But the other is important for our time today, and that is the objection that Jesus never called himself God. Muslims will phrase it this way: Show me where Jesus said, "I am God, worship me." I showed you three specific places where Jesus plainly claims deity, and on two of those occasions the Jews present picked up stones in order to stone Jesus to death for the grave and unforgivable sin of blasphemy. How dare he claim to be God! I encourage you to go back and re-read that sermon to fix those in your mind. But then it follows quite simply that if Jesus is God, he wouldn't have to tell them to worship him. If he were God, worship comes as a result. We bow down and worship God.

So, with Lewis' "Trilemma" in mind, and with the claims of Jesus in mind, we can turn to our text. *When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?"*

First, let's understand why Jesus chose this location. Caesarea Philippi was a thoroughly Roman city, a gentile city at the far northern boundary of ancient Israel. Located in the ancient territory of Dan, it was once referred to as Baal-Gad or Baal-Hermon. The Greeks had renamed it Panias after the god they worshiped there: Pan, half goat, half man, and his consort, the nymph Echo. From a cave came a stream, a large spring that fed the Jordan River. Ancient Canaanites, idol-worshiping Israelites, Greeks, and Romans had all built shrines there. Some believed that sacrifices thrown into the cave were necessary to appease Pan. Pan was the god of fright, and from his name we get our word "panic." On the cliff walls around the grotto are carved niches for statues of Pan and Echo. When Rome took control, Augustus gave the city to Herod the Great, who built a marble temple to Augustus and renamed the city, Caesarea Philippi to distinguish it from the port city of Caesarea Maritima and also to honor Herod's son, Philip the Tetrarch who made the city his administrative center. Ray Van der Laan says that "to the pagan mind, the cave at Caesarea Philippi created a gate to the underworld, where fertility gods lived during the winter." They considered the water flowing from the cave as a symbol of the underworld. The gods rode the river as they traveled to and from Hades. We translate the Greek word *hades* as "hell." So, Jesus took his disciples to what was known to the world as "the gates of hell." Keep that in mind as we go on.

It is not known whether Jesus entered Caesarea, but here outside the city at the grotto of Pan, Jesus asks the disciples a question: *"Who do people say the Son of Man is?"* In a world of gods and goddesses, what sets Jesus apart? Why should we care about Jesus?

The disciples replied with the usual answers. *"Some say John the Baptist."* That was Herod's fear about Jesus - that he was John the Baptist resurrected. But some thought that John himself was the Messiah, as evidenced by his own disciples and the crowds that flocked to hear his

call to repentance. But John had declared, “After me comes one whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Mt 3:11). And John the Beloved declared that John came only as a witness to the light (Jn 1:7).

“Others say Elijah.” Isaiah had prophesied *a voice of one calling in the desert* (Is 40:3). Malachi heard God tell him, *“I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me”* (Mal 3:1). The gospel writers refer to these messages as referring to John the Baptist, but tradition had grown up that the messenger to precede the Messiah would be Elijah. Elijah had not died but had been taken to heaven in a fiery chariot (2 Ki 2:11). Even today, Jews celebrating Passover reserve a seat and open the door expecting Elijah to announce the coming of the Messiah.

“Still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” Isaiah had been commissioned as a messenger to his people (Is 6:5-10). Jeremiah had spent his career calling his people to repentance. Hosea had been a messenger of repentance. Joel warned the people of the Day of the Lord (Joel 2:28-32). But the anticipated prophet was based on God’s promise to Moses in Deuteronomy 18. When Moses went up Mt Sinai to receive the Law, the people were frightened by the thunder, lightning, and smoke on the mountain. They begged Moses that God should not speak to them directly, but only through Moses (Ex. 19:18-21). So, as Moses neared his own death, God made t his promise: *“I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their fellow Israelites, and I will put my words in his mouth. He will tell them everything I command him”* (Dt 18:18). The prophet would be like Moses.

Then Jesus ask the pivotal question: *“But what about you? Who do you say I am?”* This time there was no hemming and hawing, for Simon blurted out, *“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”* Did Simon even know what he was saying? Did he really believe what he said? Had he been contemplating who Jesus really was? It was an impulsive, spur-of-the-moment response, and I suspect Simon may have been surprised by his own statement. But Jesus recognized it for what it was. Simon had a sudden realization, given by the Holy Spirit, of who Jesus really was. Jesus notes that Simon did not reason it out – *“This was not revealed to you by flesh and blood.”* In other words, Simon had seen all the miracles, heard all the teachings, but had not realized who it really was in front of him. He didn’t learn from his experience. But when Jesus asked the question, *“Who do you say I am?”*, Peter suddenly understood. We might call it Peter’s “Aha!” moment. Everything he had seen and heard suddenly came into focus.

Theologians will tell us that there are two forms of revelation. The first is “natural revelation.” It’s what we learn and know about God from the world around us. It is what prompted Copernicus and Galileo to explore the stars. It is what prompted Newton to study physics. It is what led Blaise Pascal to the reality of faith. It is what Mendel studied in genetics, and what Linneas discovered in taxonomy. It is what Bach and Handel heard in music. They discovered God through the miracles and mechanics of creation. The second form is “special revelation,” and I believe it takes two forms: the first is through the Scripture. God inspired men to write down their encounters with deity. The Bible is God’s story, the story of God’s relationship with man. But the second form is informed and limited by the Scripture. It is what comes to us in those “Aha!” moments when what

we see in the Word, what we see in Jesus, comes suddenly into focus. It happens when we realize that we are sinners in need of a Savior, and what happens to us when the Holy Spirit purifies and sanctifies and empowers us. It happens when, in Bible study, we suddenly grasp the truth of what we are reading. It is this special revelation, this “Aha!” moment that Peter experienced here.

Jesus commended Peter essentially for paying attention. He called him blessed because he did finally understand. And all who figure this out, who come to this realization, are blessed along with him. It is, indeed, a life-changing moment, this recognition of deity.

Now the next bit has become controversial, but there are two things we need to know here. Jesus changed Simon’s name to Peter. It is not just a name, but a play on words. In Greek, πέτρος (petros) means “rock” or “stone.” We get our words *petrified*, turned to rock, *petroleum*, from the rocks, and *petroglyph* (rock picture), from it. In Aramaic, it is *kepha*, from which the name Cephas comes (1 Cor 1:12). The controversy comes from the words of Jesus, which I don’t think ought to be controversial at all. “*You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church ...*”

What is the “rock” Jesus is talking about? Some say it is Peter. Thus Peter (and his successor) is the head of the Church. Others say, and Scripture says, that the rock is Peter’s confession, that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. Christ is the Rock, the Cornerstone that had been rejected by the builders (Mt 21:42; Eph 2:20) and Peter himself said it in 1 Peter 2:4-8 - that Jesus is the Rock upon which the Church is built. Paul says it in 1 Corinthians 10:4. Referring to the Exodus, Paul wrote, *They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ.* It is upon the Rock of Christ that the Church is built.

And second, recall their location. Jesus spoke these words at what many in the world considered to be the “gates of hell.” This grotto of Pan, with statues of Pan and Echo, with daily sacrifices to Pan, with a long history of idolatry, predated Israel. The Canaanites had sacrificed to the fertility gods Baal and Ashteroth here. The Israelite tribe of Dan followed suit and named the place Baal-Hermon and Baal-Gad. The Greeks renamed it Panias and worshiped the god of fear here. The river itself was the highway to and from the underworld for the gods. And Jesus stands here and declares that even hell itself cannot stand against the mighty name of Jesus, cannot withstand the truth of the Risen Savior. And you, the bearers of that name, have the “keys of the kingdom,” have in your witness the power to lead people to Jesus, salvation, and freedom in Christ. Hell itself cannot stand up against the bold witness of those who unflinchingly declare that Jesus Christ, the Son of the Living God, is the Rock of salvation. Hell itself must give way in the face of those who confess the name of Jesus.

But what about you? Who do you say Jesus is?