

IN PURSUIT OF JESUS

Who He Is and
Why It Matters



INTRODUCTION

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Ask enough people who Jesus is and you'll certainly get a wide variety of answers. The answers people give are conditioned by everything from worldview to personal experience. But this is nothing new. People have been debating and arguing the identity and significance of Jesus since he lived.

What is written about him—what he did and what he

said—creates controversy. It pushes people to deal with Jesus. He is not someone who can simply be ignored. People have always had differing responses to him. By looking at the responses of some who saw and heard him, we can understand our own reactions and the reactions of others.

Our Daily Bread Ministries

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ONE

Who Am I?

MATTHEW 16:13–14

Leaving the crowds behind, the leader takes his group to a place far away from the ears and eyes of the curious, the excited, and the skeptical. Stopping, he turns to face his trusted friends.

Here it's safe. It's private. It's the right place to have a serious and necessary conversation. And he poses a question.

“Who do people say that I am?”

It's a set-up for a follow-up question, yet the answer will reveal the effect of the last several years. Years of speaking, of miracles, of touching hearts, minds, and bodies. What were the people saying about Jesus?

The answers offered are varied—almost humorous.

“John the Baptist!”

“Elijah!”

“Jeremiah or one of the prophets!”

These are mostly logical speculations. Each answer has something fundamentally similar. Each of these individuals called the Jewish people back to faithfulness to God. But each answer also suggests something about those who offered that opinion.

John the Baptist. This appears to be the uninformed response of the uninterested. While Jesus and John the Baptist had similarities, it's impossible for the two to be the same man. They both preached at the same time. They had even stood together in the river while John baptized Jesus. Suggesting Jesus is John seems to indicate that the responder knew *someone* was doing *something*, but didn't necessarily care to sort it all out.

Elijah. A more informed response. The people who thought this were likely those who knew Elijah's significance in Israelite history. Elijah was expected to return to minister to the people of Israel before “the day of the Lord,” which included the coming of the Messiah. These people are religiously interested and informed; they were looking for something from God. They were wrong, but they were headed in the right direction.

Jeremiah or one of the prophets. This may be the response of the traditionalists and culturalists. Israel had a long history of prophets speaking to them. Almost since her beginning as a nation, prophets had been a part of Israelite experience. It's possible that those who referred to Jesus as such were simply suggesting that he's just

another in a long line of prophets: *this is the status quo for us as a people and hence, not really all that unusual.*

Two significant puzzle pieces linger in the background of the disciples' response to Jesus's question. The first piece of the puzzle is that the disciples knew what the people were saying about Jesus. They were not simply an isolated and insulated group, oblivious to the culture and the people around them. Jesus's disciples continued to interact with and understand the people to whom Jesus was reaching out. One day soon they would be sent to continue Jesus's message.

Second, despite the common ground of each answer to the others, their differences illustrate that people—even people in Jesus's own time who heard and saw him—had varying opinions about who he was.

It shouldn't surprise us that this is still the case. Varying opinions about Jesus exist around the world, some radically different, others similar yet undeniably distinct.

Jesus asked his disciples how the winds of opinion about him were blowing through the towns and villages. His response doesn't seem to be surprise or disappointment; he almost seems to have expected the public's mosaic of his identity. What he does say in response is to ask his followers another question, but we'll ask that one later.

Jesus created more than a little stir, and people reacted in different ways. Many people had questions about who he was and what he was doing.

TWO

The Confused

MATTHEW 11:1–6; MARK 6:14–29

Jesus had a reputation for performing miracles. Several times, the Gospels record that when people heard he was in town they brought *all* the sick to him to be healed. And he healed them all. From fevers to demon possession to raising the dead, Jesus performed the miraculous in a variety of ways and for anyone and everyone.

John the Baptist (Jesus's cousin) was in prison. He knew of Jesus's reputation, the things he was doing. Yet here he is, sitting in a jail cell for calling out the immorality of Herod taking his brother's wife. The forerunner of the Messiah, stuck in jail for doing his job.

It's from his cell, and in confusion, that a fundamental

question formed in John's mind. A question that needed an answer. The answer carried life-altering significance. John sent his disciples to ask Jesus a simple yes or no question: "Are you the one, or should we expect another?"

Up to this point John seemed to know better than anyone who Jesus was. He had made an out-of-the-blue statement about Jesus being the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world when he (John) baptized him (Jesus). John even demurred from baptizing Jesus saying that Jesus should baptize *him*. This indicates that John thought Jesus was at least a more significant person than he was. It's possible that John innately knew Jesus was the Messiah. While he was in his mother's womb, fetal John seemed to react to the approach of the embryonic Jesus; John's mother exclaimed that the baby in her belly "leaped for joy" when Mary (pregnant with Jesus at the time) greeted her.

Yet despite this seeming certainty, when things go afoul of expectations John sends his own disciples to ask Jesus if he is indeed the Messiah. The confidence that caused John to say, "Look! The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" had devolved into questioning confusion. Why was he confused? Why the question?

With John's amazing statements about Jesus, and given the incredible things John was hearing that Jesus was doing, it's not difficult to imagine that his hopes had reached dizzying heights.

In Israel, the idea of the Messiah carried with it a

variety of notions and ideas—who he would be and what he would do. Jesus’s disciples certainly had specific ideas. Every Israelite seemed to have an idea of what Messiah meant.

Messiah was supposed to usher in God’s kingdom, to set things right for Israel. The least part of that was Israel would be her own again: political independence.

John may have been thinking: *How am I sitting in a Gentile ruler’s prison? Others are getting their miracles. The things Jesus does sound like Messiah, but it doesn’t make sense that I’m here. If he is who I think he is, the kingdom should be coming back to Israel . . . and I shouldn’t be sitting here in prison.* Not unreasonable questions—if Jesus was the Messiah. Something didn’t seem add up.

Here he is, sitting in a jail cell for doing God’s work, and the one bringing God’s kingdom was here! To top it off, all these others are getting what they want and need from Jesus. The kingdom seemed to be coming and everyone was getting in except him. *Have I missed something? Is the Messiah not who I thought he was?*

How does Jesus respond? Not with disappointment that John had to ask. There is no note of sadness that a once strong believer and supporter was now asking a basic question. (It may have even been encouraging that John was asking, given that others were assuming a different identity for Jesus.) Instead, Jesus’s response embraces the question, validates John’s confusion, and offers encouragement to those seeking answers. “Tell John

what you see. The blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are healed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor hear the good news.” These were signs of the coming of the kingdom of God, the arrival of the Messiah.

Translation, *The kingdom and good things are coming. Yes, I am the Messiah and I am ushering in the kingdom of God.*

But John was hunched in his prison cell—which is even more odd when we remember that Jesus started his ministry by reading about freedom for prisoners (SEE LUKE 4:18–20). John never got his miracle. Others were released from prison. Peter was escorted out of his cell by an angel and an earthquake set Paul and Silas free. Yet not only did John remain in prison, he was killed and his head offered as a gift to a young girl and her mother.

Sometimes we wait and wait for something that never comes. And so we ask questions about Jesus because what we are experiencing doesn't seem to add up. Our understanding and expectation of Jesus doesn't fit with our circumstances and our confusion leads to questions. And sometimes the answers lead to more questions.

But that wasn't all Jesus said to John. After Jesus told John's disciples to tell their imprisoned, confused, and suffering leader that the hopes and longings of others were being fulfilled, he ended with “Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.”

Why would anyone stumble because such good things were happening? Perhaps this message is intended solely for John, but it may be helpful for us too when we

face the confusion of missed expectations. Jesus is telling John not to give up hope in the kingdom or the Messiah because others were experiencing the miraculous—and he wasn't. Jesus's encouragement was (and still is) this: Even though you don't get what you want, even though this may not be exactly what you were expecting, it doesn't mean I am not who I am.

When life leads to confusion, it's ok to ask questions of Jesus, to want to understand who he is and how he works. Jesus can meet us in that confusion, even when the confusion undermines what had once been bedrock certainty. Whether we have known Jesus for a long time or are still trying to figure out the first pieces of the puzzle, questions and confusion are accepted and engaged.

John had to learn a hard lesson. It's difficult to accept good things for others when we want—when we *need*—some good to come our way too. We can become bitter; we can lose faith; we can decide that we are better on our own. God is still God, even when we are confused, frustrated, disappointed, and just waiting. Don't lose faith when others receive a blessing and you feel left in the cold and dark. The fact that others are receiving is evidence that Jesus is Jesus, even if the way he works is not exactly what we expected.

THREE

The Skeptical

MATTHEW 13:53–58; MARK 6:1–6

After he started traveling the countryside, preaching and performing miracles, Jesus returned to speak at his home church. Home to share with those he had known the longest, those who knew him best. But things had certainly changed since he was last home. Jesus was now a traveling teacher and miracle worker.

Let's find a seat at the back of the room and watch what happens.

Murmurs of conversation faded as Jesus began to speak. His words floated over the audience; they sat transfixed. The words were captivating; the message unlike anything they'd heard. Exciting, insightful, encouraging.

The murmurs started again. Neighbors lean to each other and comment, excited whispers repeating the memorable phrases and ideas. Like a breeze that forces a deep breath, Jesus's words squeezed into the cracks of hearts and minds.

A surprise was the last thing anyone expected today. But this was great! This was fantastic! This was the kind of message that pushed you out the door and made you want to do something new, different, bigger, better. Who would've thought *this guy* was going to do this? Everyone knew him. He grew up down the road. He helped his dad fix our table. He played with our kids in the back yard.

Wait, this was wrong. It all sounded nice, but the more Jesus said, the more murmurs turned to sarcasm and questions. It was true, the message was brilliant, the delivery engaging. But this, this was Jesus! The downhome perception of him began to reassert itself in the minds of the listeners. Skeptical questions began to roll unfiltered from their lips: "Where did this man get these things?" they asked. "What's this wisdom that has been given him? What are these remarkable miracles he is performing? Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?"

They were offended. *We know Jesus! Who does he think he is?*

That they pigeonholed Jesus is not too debatable. There's one question that seals it if one needs convincing, one question that crystallizes their view: isn't this the carpenter?

They were indeed astonished at his wisdom; they wondered at the powerful miracles. But when they thought about him and who he was, they kept him in the place they had always known him. He was still Mary's son, brother to James, Joseph, Judas, and Simon, his sisters likely sitting in that very room. But the carpenter?

Significantly, they asked the question in the present tense. They did not ask, "*Wasn't* he a carpenter?" They asked, "*Isn't* he the carpenter?" His hometown friends were stuck on Jesus as they knew him. He was gone long enough to become someone of significant reputation, but not long enough for people to allow him to become someone other than who they knew.

The question is why. Why pigeonhole Jesus? Why do it to anyone?

A variety of reasons are possible: too many repeated experiences; our own mental ease; our disposition to incredulity. It's possible that we're simply jealous. Maybe there are a hundred more reasons we caricature and categorize. Maybe it doesn't matter why we do it. What is certain is that there are consequences to keeping people where we think they belong. We don't accept them for who they are and don't allow them to do what they can do.

Amazement turned to ridicule as the people of Nazareth pushed Jesus back into the hole they had for him. Whatever excitement Jesus had at his homecoming quickly became incredulous amazement at the unbelief of his friends and family. That unbelief restricted what

Jesus was able to do: “He did not do many miracles there *because of their lack of faith.*”

For Jesus’s hometown friends, they missed out on what Jesus had been doing in the other towns and villages that he visited, the preaching, the teaching, and the miracles. They knew he was saying incredible things in his teaching. They had heard that he was performing miracles of healing. But they did not believe. They did not believe he could be anything other than the Jesus they had known as a carpenter. They didn’t believe that he could be any different than his brothers and sisters, and probably, themselves. And because they couldn’t let him out of that box, they missed what he could have given them.

“He could not do any miracles there.” Pigeonholing Jesus led to unbelief, and unbelief to no miracles.

For those who follow Jesus, this danger is subtle because the holes we put Jesus in may be shallow and difficult to see. It is nevertheless still possible. It’s more likely to take the form of actions we think Jesus does or doesn’t want us to engage in. *We’ve read and interpreted the Bible correctly and then applied appropriately. There is no reason to rethink anything.* This is a kind of pigeonholing in that we are convinced that we are doing what Jesus wants, when in reality we may be missing it entirely. We think we have the same viewpoint, policy, vote, and activity that Jesus would. We think that what we are doing is *the* way to follow Jesus in our current environment. There is no humility that there might be

other valid ways of living for Jesus, let alone that we might be *wrong*. Jesus warned of this possibility and its consequences when he said that those who neglected “the least of these” were really neglecting him.

For those who don't call themselves followers of Jesus, the pigeonholes are likely more obvious: *He was a good man, but not God; miracles are not possible so the Bible (and everything in it) is not true; Jesus is just one way among many; following Jesus doesn't really seem to make a difference.* These holes are not based on any experiences with Jesus. Yet we formulate them in our minds and Jesus is placed firmly and securely at the bottom.

Pigeonholing Jesus doesn't take away his power. Their unbelief didn't make him any less the Messiah, so why not heal people and restore sight to the blind? Because he never got the opportunity. He wasn't allowed to perform any miracles. The blind, deaf, dumb, sick, paralyzed, and possessed were not brought to him in his hometown as they were in other places. The throngs of people following him through the countryside were replaced with an eye roll and a closed door. The life and strength he could have given remained unfulfilled desires. Pigeonholed unbelief closes the door on what Jesus wants to and can do. It closes us off to Jesus.

FOUR

The Antagonist

JOHN 11:45–53; MARK 14:53–65

T

he whole thing was obviously a set-up. That was clear even to those who weren't in on it.

The band of men had entered the hall with a distinct purpose. Those in front purposefully led the way, those in the rear whispered excitedly about what was to come. The man in the middle was the cause and solution to all of it.

Head bowed, hands clasped in front of him, at the most aggressive evaluation, he was unassuming. What did they want with him? To put it bluntly, they wanted him dead. Why? He was, at least by appearance, anything other than threatening.

But appearances can be deceiving. Jesus was a threat,

especially in the eyes of this group. This was the Sanhedrin, the ruling group of the Jewish people, a group comprised mostly of religious leaders—Pharisees and Sadducees. To these men, Jesus was more than a nuisance; he was putting the existence of the Jewish people in peril.

Let's turn back the calendar to see why. Eavesdropping on a private conversation, we can hear the rumored danger: "Here is this man performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our temple and our nation."

The fear was that Jesus, because of his miracles, would gather such a following that Rome would see him and Israel as threatening to revolt against their control of Judea and the surrounding territory. A threat like this would result in not just military occupation but active domination, destruction, and perhaps extermination. Like the White House or Statue of Liberty to the U.S., the Eiffel Tower to France, the pyramids to Egypt, or the Great Wall to China, the temple was a national symbol to Israel. The idea of losing it was losing something fundamental to Israelite identity. If the temple was taken, their religion was gone, the defining characteristic of Israelite culture smashed to rubble.

The thought of losing the temple—their identity, their connection to God—pushed this group to the point of panic. It's understandable. When catastrophic change looms, it pushes us to the edge, and decisions about how

to confront those changes reveal a great deal about who we are and what we hold most dear.

With your identity threatened, and your way of life hanging in the balance, how would you respond? How did this group respond? “You know nothing at all! You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish,” said Caiaphas, high priest and leader of the Sanhedrin. Self-protection—sacrifice one for the sake of the many. It was a difficult decision and one with significant ramifications.

Now, inside the palace of the high priest, this threat stands. His activity, and in their minds his very life, poses a risk to their existence as a nation and a people. As the governing body of the Jewish people, it was their responsibility to look out for and protect the best interests of Israel. Now was their chance to address this threat. The course of action had already been decided. It was time to find the way to enact it . . . *better one dies than the whole nation*. But murder was out of the question. This was a religious group after all, and their adherence to their adopted moral code was strict and primary. So how to get rid of this man?

Capital punishment was applicable to a variety of crimes (sins) in Israelite law. All they needed to do was to convict him of one of these crimes. But which one? The trial proved difficult as Jesus’s whole life was basically lived in the open. Everyone knew what he had said and what he had done. These very things were

ironically the cause of fear for the Sanhedrin, yet they were nothing that would condemn him by their laws.

In the end it was one of the more serious crimes that they laid at his feet: blasphemy. Religiously speaking—and religion was paramount to the Jewish people—blasphemy was as heinous and abhorrent as a crime could be. So appalling was blasphemy, that immediate vigilante justice was usually attempted when it was identified.

Their question exposes their agenda, and there is little doubt of their desired outcome.

“Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed one?”

“I am.”

Gavel bang. Guilty. Sentenced to death. Second-fastest court case in history. “Why do we need any more witnesses? . . . You have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?” The agreement was unanimous. He was worthy of death. For the Sanhedrin, stage one of the mission was accomplished. We’ll look at stage two later, but for now, let’s boil this down and see what’s left.

Jesus’s miracles and his following pushed the Jewish leaders into a place of critical decision. They saw his activities as a risk to the people of Israel. If Jesus continued to do miracles, especially like raising people from the dead, “everyone” would believe in him. Belief in Jesus was the risk, not to their personal power, position, or control; the risk was that Rome would see Jesus and his followers as a threat to its control. That

was a threat that would lead to the destruction of the Jewish people. It would lead to a loss of life, practice, and identity.

The Jewish council faced a choice of significant magnitude. The choice boiled down to two options: side with Jesus or stop him; *with* Jesus or against him. Each side had its ramifications. They chose what they thought was best for the Jewish people. To choose against Jesus kept the temple. It kept the people. It kept their identity, security, and way of life.

Jesus had done enough to convince many that he was someone to follow. He was indeed the Messiah. The Sanhedrin, like those who believed, could have followed Jesus, in fact some of them secretly did. But following Jesus wholesale, acknowledging him as the Messiah, risked giving up the very things they were trying to protect, the things most important to them as the Jewish people.

That is what Jesus does. He presents us with—very nearly forces us into—a choice. Will we follow him, giving up our own ideas of identity and security? Or will we choose our own ideas of identity and security? This is both a one-time choice and one we are faced with every day.

The Sadducees and Pharisees made their choice. They chose to stop him because of—and in a strange sense *despite*—the things he was doing. They chose to act in what they thought was the best interest of the Jewish people. But it was a choice against Jesus, a choice that led to his death.

We must choose as well. Will we choose to side with the man who performs miracles and raises people from the dead? Or will the threat he poses to our meaning, identity, and security lead us to find a way to get rid of him to protect those things that we think are most important?

FIVE

The Curious

JOHN 18:28–40

What is truth? It's a fundamental question. Everyone asks it in some way at some point. The answer drives our sense of meaning and purpose and what we pursue. Objective or subjective, our view of truth shapes our interpretation of life.

As important as the answer is, the how and reason why it is asked are just as important. To some, the answer seems so obvious and straightforward that anyone who asks must have a hidden agenda. They assume that it's asked dismissively and with sarcasm. To others, no matter how many times it is asked, it is a legitimate question asked in curiosity with a sincere desire to know—a humble

question in which the asker recognizes the limitations of their own knowledge.

Conversations about the nature of truth are not uncommon. It is discussed in both theoretical terms and in practical and personal settings. It may be that this question has unique significance in current discussions, but it isn't bound exclusively to our time. And one story in which this question was asked has significant implications for all of us.

Home of Pilate, Roman governor of Judea, circa AD 33.

Jesus and Pilate stood regarding one another. Pilate was the one with official authority. He was the one who could make things happen. He held life and death. In fact, that was the reason the Jewish council had brought this man here in the first place. They wanted him executed (stage two of the plan from the Antagonists section).

Pilate met Jesus as a judge meets a defendant. This was a trial. Judge and accused stood face to face. This hearing revolved around one significant question. Pilate took the direct approach: "Are you the king of the Jews?" The answer to this determined the outcome of this trial: verdict and sentencing.

After a bit of cat and mouse, an answer comes. "My kingdom is not of this world. . . ." *Yes, I am a king. But my kingdom isn't one you'd find on a map.* Fastest court case in history. Open and shut. Guilty as charged. If only every court case were as quick and as easy as this. Claim of kingship was sedition against Rome, punishable by death.

But Pilate wanted to release Jesus. “I find no basis for a charge against him.” That stands in direct contradiction to the stated facts of the exchange. Pilate asked directly about the charges, and in essence, Jesus pleaded guilty. Not only was there basis for charge, there was evidence for conviction. But instead of the expected outcome, Pilate attempts to do the opposite.

What made the difference? What would lead a Roman official to suggest releasing someone who claimed to be a king? Perhaps the answer lies in the few lines between Jesus’s claim of kingship and Pilate’s attempt to release him. This is where the question of truth is asked:

“You are a king, then!” Pilate accepts his guilty plea.

“You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.”

“What is truth?”

What a question! And the fact Pilate asked this to someone who had made some significant claims about truth makes it all the more fascinating. Jesus has prayed for his followers to be sanctified in the truth and said, “[God’s] word is truth” He also told his disciples that he himself is the truth, “I am the way, the truth, and the life . . .” Jesus had a unique and intimate relationship with the truth. Pilate probably hadn’t heard these statements by Jesus, and he may not have understood all the implications of his questions to Jesus.

After asking this fundamental and weighty question

(with no recorded response), Pilate returns to the Jewish leaders who brought Jesus to him and pronounces not just a not guilty verdict, but claims that there isn't even a basis for a charge. This exchange is the hinge between the guilty plea and the suggestion of release. It is the reason for Pilate's verdict.

It's possible that Pilate thought Jesus was mentally unstable. Perhaps he was dismissing all charges on the grounds of insanity.

Jesus told Pilate that his kingdom was not of this world and that if it was, his subjects would fight for him. It's possible that Pilate saw this as no threat to Rome (a kingdom not of this world cannot threaten the power of Rome). Perhaps Pilate heard this answer and took pity on someone who seemed to be mentally unbalanced. A kingdom not of this world sounds like a kingdom of imagination. How many of us are the rulers of our own imaginary kingdoms?

That scenario is plausible, and if true, it renders Pilate's question about truth to the first category—dismissive and asked with sarcasm.

But this doesn't really explain the attempt to release Jesus though. Even a mentally unstable man can pose a threat, especially if he has a following of people. The idea that Pilate would want to release someone who could gather a crowd and motivate them to action simply because Pilate thought they were delusional doesn't really stand up. Threats to Rome were serious business.

But what if the question was asked sincerely?

Jesus has claimed a kingdom, spoken of his servants, and made a proclamation about those who belong in and to this kingdom (those who know the truth). All of this points clearly and convincingly to a guilty verdict. Rather than wipe his hands at a closed case, Pilate responds with a question.

Pilate's question is perhaps a mark of genuine curiosity. Jesus probably had Pilate's interest long before this meeting. It's highly unlikely that he was unaware of a miracle worker who had been traveling his jurisdiction for three years. Curiosity about Jesus would have been understandable.

In this exchange, Jesus says something that leads Pilate to ignore the charges and tacit admissions of sedition and suggest letting Jesus go. Before the last utterance by Pilate to Jesus (the famous question), Jesus made a significant claim. He said that there is an inseparable connection between his kingdom subjects and the truth.

Pilate's famous response "what is truth?" has characterized his interaction with Jesus for millennia. It's tempting to read that as a question in line with a current postmodern mindset. Hearing that question from the 21st century, we're likely to think that Pilate was suggesting there is no objective truth, that truth is determined in the mind of the subject. But the likelihood that Pilate was that far ahead of his time is quite slim.

What if Pilate was not posing a philosophical question,

but instead asking what characterized those who belonged in Jesus's kingdom? *What, Jesus? What is it that those on your side support?* Remember that Jesus views both God's word and himself as fundamental expressions of the truth. In another sense, to the reader, Pilate was asking about Jesus's identity—Who are you, Jesus?

Pilate may have been curious, not about the nature of truth per se, but specifically about its relationship to those who hear and follow Jesus and about who Jesus himself was. It's possible that Pilate is trying to reconcile a “not of this world kingdom” with this claim that suggests its subjects are indeed part of this world, and Pilate is wondering how it was that those subjects were identified.

Pilate may not have been interested in becoming someone who listened to the truth or being part of Jesus's kingdom, but neither was he obviously outright dismissive and sarcastic. He may have been curious enough to ask questions. If sincere, it was a deeply significant question. He wanted to know what was this truth that made people hear and follow Jesus. He wanted to know more about this man before him who had admitted to being a king, to having servants, and who identified those who were part of his kingdom. Pilate wanted to know what it meant to be in Jesus's kingdom.

Pilate is a lot like us. Whether we are encountering Jesus for the first or the one-thousandth time, there's something about him that triggers curiosity and questions.

What Jesus said to Pilate is still true. Those on the

side of truth listen to him. What Pilate asked remains a significant and important question, not because truth is relative or debatable, but because truth identifies those who are in his kingdom. Those who want to know Jesus continue to ask questions. They continue to seek the truth.

SIX

The Rescued

MATTHEW 8:23–27

By no means were the wind and the waves an atmospheric or environmental anomaly. This is how storms happened on the Sea of Galilee—fierce and sudden. The storm itself wasn't all that unusual. Until the end. But then the wind didn't slack and then slowly die. The waves, pushed by the wind, didn't gradually lose their foam and froth. The oddity was how the storm quit. And that's the right way to say it, the storm simply quit—but not by itself. He told it to stop, to be still, and it was. In an instant, smooth as glass.

Jesus's calming a storm doesn't really surprise those who follow him now. After all, we typically meet him

as the crucified and resurrected Lord. Reading that the person who came back from the dead also calmed a storm with a word and a gesture doesn't necessarily have a high shock value. But for those in the boat? Those first followers of Jesus, the ones he himself called and were just getting to know him? Telling nature what to do might have caught them a bit short.

It happened one day relatively early in Jesus's time of teaching and miracles, he was pressed by the crowds (understandable given that he had been healing people of various sicknesses). They pressed him tight enough that he wanted to get into a boat and get to the other side of the lake to get a little room to breathe.

In the boat with his closest followers, some of whom had been career fishermen—used to the water and its ways to say the least—Jesus lay down in the stern and fell asleep. The group floated to the other side propelled by the wind and the oars. The trip was not more than 10 miles, heading southeast from Capernaum on the northeast to the shore by the region of the Gadarenes. Could have been even shorter depending on where they intended to put ashore on the east side of the lake. Their trip was a bit more exciting than they anticipated.

Storms have a way of forming quickly on the water. Especially in areas surrounded by mountains or hills, the mix of pressures and temperatures can change the atmospheric conditions in a hurry. “Getting set for a blow” some might say as the sky darkens and the clouds descend.

On the water isn't the most comfortable place to be when a wind sea starts to build. A three-hour boat ride can become a harrowing rush for the shoreline. Only it didn't look like they were going to make it to the shoreline. Feet were already resting in water on the bottom of the boat from the waves rolling over the gunwales. The only place the boat looked to be headed was the silty bottom.

Water from above, water over the sides, wind keeping them from making it to shore. The landlubbers on board were understandably terrified, maybe even the seasoned fisherman. Imagine being one of the non-fisherman that day—maybe been on a boat once or twice in a calm sea, now caught in a gale and seeing the “salty dogs” start to get concerned over the chances of making it through the storm . . . that's panic territory. And that's just what they did, at least some of them.

Where was Jesus? Still catching 40 in the stern.

Sleeping?! This was all hands on deck if there ever was a time.

“Save us!” We're about to drown and you're taking a cat nap? Do something!

They may have been asking him to help man the oars or pleading for a miracle (probably the latter). They woke Jesus with a simple and despairing plea: “Save us! We're going to drown!” This was a foxhole prayer, the request of someone certain that the end is near. Jesus, look at what is happening. There is no way out unless you do something! Please, do something!

So Jesus does. He saves them all. But first he tells them they have little faith and asks why they are so afraid.

That is an odd question. Sitting up in the back of a boat that is being swamped with rain and waves, whose gunwales are getting closer and closer to sea level, a boat that the wind and waves are keeping from shore, he asks why they are afraid! Look around, Jesus! We're about to drown! That's why we are afraid. We are going to die.

But they didn't. As scared as they were of the storm and the sea, Jesus did something that scared them even more. As though it were a petulant child, Jesus scolded the raging storm, told it to stop. And it did!

Their fear grew and deepened as they wondered what kind of man commands the wind and the waves.

They had seen Jesus perform miracles. He had healed lepers, fevers, and various other diseases. They knew he could do some incredible things. That's why they asked him to save them. As fierce as the storm was, it's unlikely that the plea to be saved was a request to trim the mainsail or pull on an oar. They were asking for a miracle. And they got one. They got a miracle so big it scared them. A miracle so big they realized they really didn't know Jesus all that well.

They got exactly what they wanted from Jesus. They were saved. But it was clearly not what they expected. Their fear and wonder sparking the realization that Jesus, as much as they had seen and heard him, was still a stranger.

The man they had walked away from everything to follow, whom they had heard teach things that no one before had taught, with whom they had spent night and day with, and whom they had seen do the impossible, was a mystery. As much as they knew about him from their time with him, there was still more to learn.

“What kind of man is this?”

“Who is this?”

It’s a question worth asking regardless of how well we do or do not know him.

SEVEN

The Seeker

MARK 2:1–12

The large crowd was nothing new. Jesus's reputation certainly preceded him, and followed him, and he had duly and undoubtedly earned it. Verifiable healings, exorcisms, authoritative speaking and teaching—the kind of news that spreads pretty quickly—even as a rumor. So a packed house was the least surprising part of the day.

But from there, the surprises built on each other, each one more confusing than the last. The healing itself was actually anticlimactic, a bit of a let-down. Not a disappointment really, just less impressive than what preceded the miracle.

Jesus stood in the middle of the room, facing the doorway so that the people gathered outside could hear

him. His preaching was engaging; it was surprising; and wonderful. The house-gathering was nothing like sitting in the synagogue and listening to the rabbis. Yet, though incredible, it wasn't merely a show or a reputation-building stunt. There was an urgency and sincerity in Jesus that, coupled with the meaning of his message, made him captivating.

The noise was the first hint at the next surprise, a faint but persistent scratching coming from . . . the roof of all places. For the most part everyone, including Jesus, tried to ignore it, until the first bits of plaster fell and rattled across the floor. Suddenly there was a spot in the middle of the ceiling. Jesus moved to the side as pieces of plaster landed in his hair. More dirt hit the floor and the spot on the ceiling grew. Then an eye appeared in the hole. Jesus resumed teaching. The crowd occasionally cast their eyes to the ceiling while keeping ears attentive to Jesus's words.

Finally the scratching and scraping stopped. The hole was big enough to suit the diggers' purpose. There were four of them, visible for the last while as they continued to expand the opening in the ceiling. Obviously they wanted to get to Jesus, but no one knew why. Then they all reached for something, and the hole darkened as they moved the object into place.

Little by little they lowered it down. It was a mat—with a person on it. Everyone's eyes were on him, but his gaze was fixed on Jesus.

The crowd, listening silently until now, began to murmur. Maybe there would be a miracle after all. The teaching was great and worth the trip, but now it looked like the evening's events would get livelier. The man was clearly paralyzed. It didn't require much speculation to figure out what he wanted.

Then the ropes slackened and the man and his mat rested on the floor in front of Jesus. The crowd held its collective breath. Jesus looked at the man, then up at his friends. He saw something in that group. Something that brought a small smile to his face.

“Son, your sins are forgiven.”

There was a moment before the collective breathing began again. Everyone thought Jesus's words were absurd, but for different reasons. The expectant smiles of the man on the mat and his friends wilted. That's not why we're here. Of all the things we need, that is not on the list. We have sacrifices for that.

Some teachers of the law were mingling with the crowd. The absurdity of Jesus's statement was different for them—Who can forgive sins but God alone? This man is blasphemously crazy.

As if “forgiving sins” wasn't a sufficiently shocking statement, Jesus piled on the miraculous by reading the thoughts of the teachers, asking them why they were thinking that he was blaspheming! The answer to that seemed obvious: he was claiming to do what only God could do. In essence he was claiming to be God.

The surprises just kept rolling.

Taking it as a challenge, he asked the crowd, “Is it easier to say your sins are forgiven?” Jesus swept a hand toward the crippled man, “Or to tell him to walk?”

Actually, it’s easier to say the former; there’s no way to disprove it. No one can look behind the scenes at the spiritual reality and say, “Nope! Sins are still here.” Telling the crippled man to get up and walk would be immensely more difficult. That can be demonstrated. Anyone could say “You’re healed,” but actually making the man get up and walk would be another matter.

But if Jesus can do the harder thing—telling him to walk (and he does)—then the former must be true as well. His sins are indeed forgiven.

Accepting his own challenge, Jesus turned back to the man on the floor. “Get up and go home.” Immediately, atrophied muscles grew strong. Tendons and ligaments that had shrunk and hardened from nonuse stretched to perfect length and elasticity. No therapy to ease into life on two feet. There was no pacing himself. He was up and walking, probably antsy to start running, tempted to dance right on the spot.

To the crowd, the man carrying the pallet and squeezing his way through to the door meant something significant: “We have never seen anything like this!” they whispered among themselves. Of course they hadn’t. The miracles weren’t necessarily new, sure. The Jewish Scriptures were full of the prophets performing miracles.

The people in the crowd may not have personally seen one, but they knew Jesus's reputation. So a miracle in itself, though shocking, may not have been a surprise. The real surprise was the forgiveness and its implications.

But what did it mean? What did it mean that Jesus connected healing with forgiving sins? If the reality of the one implied the truth of the other, then there was something to reckon with here. The teachers weren't wrong that only God could forgive. And the cripple was walking away. Not even out of sight yet. Heads turned from Jesus to the man and back.

No one thought they would be encountering God that day. They all came looking for something—teaching, healing, exorcism . . . While it's possible some came thinking that Jesus was connected to God in the same way the prophets of history were, it's unlikely that any of them came expecting to meet God face to fleshy face. But that is exactly what they were confronted with. They came for Jesus; they came for miracles, for insight, direction, encouragement, teaching. But what they got was God.

EIGHT

The Witnesses

ACTS 1:1–11

In the morning light, a timid group gathered with Jesus on a hillside, shifting from foot to foot in anticipation. The anticipation that had been building for years and, just a short while ago, had seemed pointless. But now it was higher than ever. Considering what they had been through in the last month-and-a-half, they could hardly contain themselves.

Jesus had just declared that authority—all authority in both heaven and earth—had been given to him. That authority wasn't really surprising. The disciples had seen Jesus wield it in dozens of ways over the last three years.

They had seen and heard Jesus talk to the demons possessing a man who lived alone and in the graves.

Heard the voice of legions plead with him for mercy and to allow them to possess something else. Jesus sent them into the pigs, which immediately went crazy and plunged into the sea. Pigs don't swim.

Jesus had shown that he could bend the natural world to his command. Caught in a storm, the boat filling with water from above and below, the fear of drowning drove the disciples to panic. But it turned out that drowning wasn't the scariest thing in that boat. Jesus was. He stood in the bow and spoke to the storm. Calm replaced the chaos on the sea just as fear of the man in the bow replaced the fear of dying in the depths.

And how many people had Jesus healed? Some he had touched. Others he spoke over. Some he healed in person and others from across the province. And once a woman healed herself. In the middle of a crowd, she forced her way next to him and grabbed the hem of his robe. She, in her faith, had drawn power from him, and he knew it. He found her in the crowd and commended her for her faith.

Twice Jesus took what would barely feed a boy and turned it into a feast where the leftovers would have fed another crowd. And the disciples still talked about the wine he created at Cana.

Even death bowed to Jesus's authority. A widow's son, a little girl, Lazarus, and even himself. Jesus ripped all of them free of death's grip.

He really did have authority. The gathered group on the hillside all believed it; he had proved it. But never did

he turn his authority and power against Rome. Not once did he move to oust Herod, let alone Caesar. That is, perhaps, until now.

The ragtag group listened with butterflies in their stomachs as Jesus reminded them that all authority was his. Surely, the past years had been building to that moment. The miracles had been a slow burn—building the Messiah's reputation. After the crash of the crucifixion, the elation of the resurrection had evolved into confident expectation—if death couldn't stop Jesus, what chance did Caesar have? Surely the Father's kingdom had come.

So Peter pressed ahead, "Will you now restore the kingdom to Israel?"

It was the question on everyone's lips. How many Jews before them had asked the same question and never heard an answer? After 400 years of silence, God had finally visited his people again, and it looked like all the promises to the forefathers were about to come true. Soon they would have the kingdom, the king, the peace and rest. And it all hung in the air around Jesus while he stood, back from the dead, on a hillside that morning. His life, his mission, they thought, is about to be fulfilled.

The expectation grew thick; it shouldered its way into the group and made its presence known as they waited for his answer. Their faces betrayed their eagerness. And then Jesus spoke.

“It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority.”

The wind fled their sails as suddenly as it had that night on the Sea of Galilee three years ago. No? Or at least, Not now? That can't be right. What else is there to do? Why wait? But Jesus wasn't finished.

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Witnesses. That's their job now. To tell people that Jesus has the authority. To tell them who he was and what he has done. To continue what he himself had been doing. His mission was now their mission. Jesus came to invite people into God's kingdom—not overthrow Rome's. He spent his time demonstrating the life and love of the kingdom. His teaching and his miracles were all directed to the same end.

And now it was their turn. It was their time to go, in the power of the Holy Spirit, and tell of Jesus and invite people into his kingdom. Jesus came to make the way. He came to give his life. He came to bring God's kingdom to more than just Israel, and show them what it meant to be sons and daughters of the king. Now he was going, and he was giving his mission to his disciples. All of his disciples, then and now.

NINE

What Do You Say?

MATTHEW 16:15–20

Jesus wasn't satisfied with what was being said "out there." He turned the question on his closest followers. "Who do you say I am?"

Peter was the first to respond: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Did they all believe this? It's possible that Peter was speaking for the group, that they had had this discussion amongst themselves. Or perhaps this was just Peter's idea. Regardless, Jesus declares this an inspired response, revealed by Jesus's Father in heaven. Revealed how? That's impossible for us to say with absolute certainty. What's important is that Jesus affirms the answer as the truth. He was indeed the Messiah.

Jesus wanted to know what people thought of him not

because his self-perception and self-worth rested on the opinions of others, but because Jesus presented a question that needed to be answered.

People have responded in a variety of ways: confused, skeptical, antagonistic, curious. These responses, and many others, continue today because the question Jesus asked his disciples is still necessary. “Who do you say that I am?” The question filters its way through time and culture to present itself to everyone, and everyone has to answer at some time.

Who do you say Jesus is? 🌿



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