

Luke 9:18-22
An Unavoidable Question

Each when I teach World History, after covering the ancient world and introducing the faiths of Judaism and Christianity, I have students write an essay entitled “What I Believe.” I receive them by the dozens, and in reading them over find that the vast majority of my students say something to the effect of “I am a Christian.” But when they give the explanation for their faith - that is what makes them a Christian - the answers are surprising.

The fundamental question, “who do you say that I am” (v. 20), is one that must be answered by every person living. It is unavoidable. Not to answer is an answer. The question of who is Jesus is the fundamental question of humanity. People can form different opinions about this doctrine or that, this style of worship or that, this preacher’s skill or that, but Jesus alone is the issue. Talk and speculation about the gospel is not sufficient. We cannot avoid a decision because there are too many opinions.

And there are no shortage of answers. For two thousand years people have been giving their answer to that question. Books have been written, movies made, philosophies invented, and multi-national meetings held, all to try to give some answer to the question. Our own recent past has seen the varying quests for an “historical Jesus” come and go for more than a century. The common denominator for each of them is an unwillingness to accept Scripture as the inspired Word of God.

The Bible clearly states its purpose for existing, “these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God” (John 20:31). The testimony offered is straightforward and clear. Consider the following examples, which we have encountered so far in our study of Luke:

Gabriel to Mary at the annunciation, “³²He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; ³³and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end” (Luke 1:32-33).

Zacharias speaking a blessing over his son John,

“⁶⁸Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,

For He has visited us and accomplished redemption for His people,

⁶⁹And has raised up a horn of salvation for us

In the house of David His servant . . .

⁷⁶And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;

For you will go on before the Lord to prepare His ways;

⁷⁷To give to His people the knowledge of salvation

By the forgiveness of their sins” (Luke 1:68-89, 76-77).

The angel to the shepherds, “¹⁰Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; ¹¹for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:20-11).

Simeon, “For my eyes have seen Your salvation” (Luke 2:30).

John the Baptist, “¹⁶As for me, I baptize you with water; but One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to untie the thong of His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

¹⁷His winnowing fork is in His hand to thoroughly clear His threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into His barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire” (Luke 3:16-17).

God the Father, “You are My beloved Son, in You I am well-pleased” (Luke 3:22). The disciples themselves were beginning to understand. Peter, after the great catch of fish, pleaded “go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man!” (Luke 5:8). All of them wondered after the calming of the sea, “Who then is this, that He commands even the winds and the water, and they obey Him?” (Luke 8:25).

The Setting

Luke again is very indefinite as to time and place. Luke places this event directly following the great feast, but the other gospel writers have Jesus ministering in the Gentile regions of Tyre and Sidon, and then crossing the Sea of Galilee to preach in the Decapolis. Luke ignores this part of Jesus’ ministry (about one year of time) perhaps because Mark has already recorded it, and perhaps because it better fits his own narrative flow. Having had the disciples wonder “Who then is this” (Luke 8:25), and then Herod asking “Who is this man about whom I hear such things?” (Luke 9:9), it seems appropriate that the identity of Jesus finally be revealed.

As Luke begins this passage, we see a change in the emphasis of Jesus. The disciples have now been with Him for more than two years. During the main part of His ministry in Galilee, Jesus had dealt with crowds. They pressed in upon Him, pulled at His clothes, interrupted His teaching, and followed Him around the Sea of Galilee. Now Jesus was going to focus on His disciples. He generally sought places of seclusion to better be able to impact these twelve men.

Caesarea Philippi is located about fifty miles southwest of Damascus. It is a scenic place, with Mount Hermon, a snow-covered 9000 foot peak, in the background. It was near the northern boundary of ancient Israel, and had originally been built by Greek settlers after the conquests of Alexander of Macedon. They named it Panion, after the god Pan, a god of shepherds and wild areas, who was worshipped in a cave outside the settlement. After the Romans gained control of the area, it had been enlarged and beautified by the tetrarch Philip Augustus. He renamed the place Caesarea, in honor of Caesar Augustus. It was given the appellation Philippi to distinguish it from the more southern port city of Caesarea.

The Question

The question Jesus put to His disciples was simple and straightforward. “Who do the people say that I am?” (v. 18), He asked. By people, Jesus meant the uncommitted masses that followed Him around hoping to see signs and wonders. They acknowledged His power to do miracles; indeed that was what many of them came out to see. They knew Jesus had powers beyond any normal man. They recognized He was different. He could heal, cast out demons, and create food. He even could raise the dead. Clearly, He was no normal man.

In response, the disciples claimed to have heard many different theories about who Jesus was. Some had heard people say He was “John the Baptist, and others say Elijah; but others, that one of the prophets of old has risen again” (v. 19). The answers given by the disciples were similar to that given to Herod when he asked the same question (Luke 9:7-8). These groups may have seen Jesus as a forerunner of the coming Messiah, but not the Messiah, himself. Whether people said Jesus was John the Baptist, or Elijah, or another prophet was all the same - those were all men. None was God.

There were some who did think Jesus was the Messiah. But those who did, had the wrong opinion of a Messiah. This is evidenced by the fact that they wanted to make Him king (John 6:15). They saw the Messiah as a political ruler who would break the yoke of Roman oppression. The crowds had not yet turned against Jesus. They were still on His side. But they saw Him not as the Messiah He had come to be.

Why did people get it wrong? There was no worldly reason to claim Jesus as Messiah. He had no political power or position. He had no wealth or army. He had nothing to recommend Himself. For many, though they had all the information necessary to make the right decision, their own pre-determined notions drove them to error. They had made up their minds that the Messiah would be a political leader who would free them from Roman oppression. They would accept no other. His prediction of His coming death showed the power of prejudice. Even His own disciples would not believe Him because they had made up their minds what kind of Messiah He had to be.

Another reason is that some people feared man. John 12:42-43, ⁴²“Nevertheless many even of the rulers believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they were not confessing Him, for fear that they would be put out of the synagogue; ⁴³for they loved the approval of men rather than the approval of God.”

We are not much different today. People still have their own ideas about what Jesus ought to be like. Man still tries to make God in his own image. The constant retort must be “what does the Bible say” not what do I think or what is the current, popular opinion. And even today, people still fear man and refuse to acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah, and Lord of their life. Our faith must stand alone in confrontation with the world.

The Answer

Jesus followed their response with another question. This one was more direct. “But who do you say that I am?” (v. 20). Jesus wanted His disciples to make an open profession of faith. Then He could help them begin to understand what kind of Messiah He had come to be. That is to say, Jesus had to teach them in what sense He was the Messiah.

Peter spoke first, but as nobody contradicted him, we can assume that he spoke for all the disciples. “Peter answered and said, ‘The Christ of God’” (v. 20). The word, *Christos*, is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word meaning “anointed one.” Peter and the disciples knew Jesus was not just another prophet, or the risen John the Baptist. In Matthew’s account, the reason is given why Peter had this illumination. According the Matthew, Jesus answered Peter by saying “Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 16:17). It is a vivid reminder that we are called and chosen, not simply wiser than everyone else.

One might think that since the disciples had received this understanding, this would be the appropriate time to spread the truth. Yet Jesus said no. He “warned them and instructed them not to tell this to anyone” (v.21). Why this injunction? Perhaps Jesus knew people would continue to interpret the idea of a Messiah in a political sense. They had wanted to make Him king and would do so again if this truth were known publically. He had no intention of being crucified as a political insurgent. That was not the kingdom of God He had come to preach.

Luke gives us the answer. Jesus continued, “The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed and be raised up on the third day.” (v. 22). The words used by Jesus are strong and unequivocal.

Calling Himself the Son of Man, Jesus predicted His death. This was a messianic title from Daniel 7:13-14,

“¹³I kept looking in the night visions,
And behold, with the clouds of heaven
One like a Son of Man was coming,
And He came up to the Ancient of Days
And was presented before Him.
¹⁴And to Him was given dominion,
Glory and a kingdom,
That all the peoples, nations and men of every language
Might serve Him.
His dominion is an everlasting dominion
Which will not pass away;
And His kingdom is one
Which will not be destroyed.”

Jesus began to emphasize this aspect of His ministry to His disciples because it was necessary. Jesus had not contradicted Peter, therefore He had not denied He was the Messiah. But He did need to clarify what that meant exactly. Jesus needed to make certain the disciples knew exactly what kind of Messiah He was. This was more important because it was unbelievable. That the Messiah would die was a difficult idea for any Jew to grasp. It contradicted all they had expected for centuries.

Finally, we must not forget that this was inevitable. The word ‘must’ states that explicitly. The Passion of Christ was a ‘must’ for three reasons. First, it was God’s preordained will, “He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all” (Romans 8:32), Second, it fulfilled prophecy

“²For He grew up before Him like a tender shoot,
And like a root out of parched ground;
He has no stately form or majesty
That we should look upon Him,
Nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him.
³He was despised and forsaken of men,
A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief;
And like one from whom men hide their face
He was despised, and we did not esteem Him.
⁴Surely our griefs He Himself bore,
And our sorrows He carried;
Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken,
Smitten of God, and afflicted.
⁵But He was pierced through for our transgressions,

He was crushed for our iniquities;
The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him,
And by His scourging we are healed.
⁶All of us like sheep have gone astray,
Each of us has turned to his own way;
But the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all
To fall on Him.
⁷He was oppressed and He was afflicted,
Yet He did not open His mouth;
Like a lamb that is led to slaughter,
And like a sheep that is silent before its shearers,
So He did not open His mouth” (Isaiah 53:2-7),

Lastly, it met the demands of the Law. ¹⁸“So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men. ¹⁹For as through the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous” (Romans 5:18-19).

That Jesus predicted His death shows it was voluntary. He was not delivered up because He was weak and could not avoid it. It was the result of the eternal counsel of the Trinity. Jesus lived His entire life with Calvary before Him.

Jesus was “rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes” (v. 22). The elders were lay members of the Sanhedrin, highly privileged patrician families in Jerusalem. The chief priests were the high priestly families. The scribes were trained theologians versed in the Torah, experts in the Law. Each of these had every opportunity to acknowledge that Jesus was the Messiah, but, with a very few exceptions, they refused to do so.

Jesus suffered “many things” (v.22) at the hands of these men. They included the agony of Gethsemane, the whipping and beatings, the crown of thorns, and the cross.

Why it Matters

When Israel worshipped a golden calf, 3000 Israelites died (Exodus 32:28). When Israel asked for a king, their political power in the region declined and they eventually lost their homeland.

Conformity with the world is not endorsed by Scripture. Two examples will suffice.

“And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12:2).

¹⁵“Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. ¹⁶For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. ¹⁷The world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever” (1 John 2:15-17).

Take Aways

We all must answer the question. And our answer is given not just by the words we say but the life we live.