

Questions

GOD ASKS US



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# Who Do You Say That I Am?

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Have you ever read through one of the Gospels in one sitting? There are some huge benefits. You get to know Jesus better. You see more clearly how his life unfolded through its different phases. You develop a deeper understanding of what he taught and what he stood for. In a nutshell, you notice things about Jesus and the Gospel story that are easily missed when you only read a few verses at a time.

If you sit down and read straight through Mark's Gospel, one thing stands out almost immediately: the Gospel clearly divides into two halves. Of the sixteen chapters, the first eight are full of life and action. Jesus moves from village to village—sharing the good news of God's availability, freeing those imprisoned in the grip of evil, healing the sick, feeding the hungry, stilling storms and seas, telling parables, and having a fruitful time of ministry.

Then midway through the eighth chapter, the mood changes. It becomes more tense and urgent; a sense of danger fills the air. Jesus begins to talk about suffering and tells his disciples that following him will not be easy. This turning point revolves around a question asked by Jesus. He had taken his disciples to Caesarea Philippi, a region north of Israel, on the slopes of Mount Hermon, by the source of the river Jordan. It would seem that he wanted to be alone with them, away from the crowds. He needed to talk to them about a potentially explosive matter. Who did they, his closest companions, think he was? They had witnessed his miracles, listened to his teachings, experienced his companionship. But what did they believe about him? This was the burning issue: "Who do you say that I am?" (Mark 8:29)

This question strikes a relevant chord. We live in a day and age that is fascinated by the figure of Jesus. More books have been written about him in the past thirty years than in all the centuries before. Movies like *The Passion of the Christ* become box office hits. Scholars debate the authenticity of his words and actions as recorded in the four Gospels. It's hard to remain neutral about him. Small wonder that our response to the question "Who do you say that I am?" shapes our lives more than our answer to any other question. Let us take some time to wrestle with it ourselves.

Excerpt from *Questions God Asks Us*, pp. 86-87

# Who Do People Say That I Am?

**Read Mark 8:27-9:1.** After Jesus heals the blind man at Bethsaida, he and his disciples set out toward Caesarea Philippi, about 25 miles north. As they walk along, Jesus takes the initiative in probing his disciples' thoughts concerning himself: "Who do people say that I am?"

The disciples' answers list the same popular opinions already mentioned in Mark's Gospel (see Mark 6:14-15). Some, like Herod, see Jesus as a reappearance of John the Baptist. Others see him as Elijah, who according to Scripture would return to earth to usher in a new age (Mal 3:23-24). Still others identify him as one of the prophets. People envision him not as anything significant in himself, but merely as a new manifestation of an important figure from the past.

**"But who do you say that I am?"** This is the question at the heart of the Gospel, addressed not only to the disciples but to every reader. All that Mark has recounted so far has led up to this question. **Jesus** has appeared in Galilee as an **authoritative teacher** and **miracle worker**. He has spoken of himself as **the bridegroom of God's people** (2:19), **Lord of the sabbath** (2:28), **physician** (2:17), and **founder of a new Israel** (3:14).

Jesus' actions have prompted awe and curiosity, but he has also been met with **repeated resistance** by the **religious authorities, his family, and even his own disciples**. Everyone who encounters him must wrestle with the question: **Who is he?**

Peter acts as spokesperson for the Twelve. His reply is emphatic: **"You are the Messiah."** For Christian readers already familiar with the Gospel message, Peter's affirmation may seem like an obvious conclusion to draw from all that has occurred. But the rehearsal of popular opinions in 8:28 helps to convey that, in its real-life context, it represented a penetrating insight, an earth-shattering revelation that broke through the current notions of what the Messiah would be.

Mark has already disclosed Jesus' identity for his readers at the very beginning of the Gospel (1:1). But now for the first time the disciples, in the person of Peter, display a clear recognition of who Jesus really is. Peter's confession of faith is the turning point in the Gospel. It is a breakthrough. The eyes of Peter's heart have finally been opened to see the importance of all that Jesus has said and done so far.

Yet as the story unfolds we see that this confession is only the beginning. To grasp that Jesus is the Messiah is not the same as understanding what it means to be the Messiah. Now begins a period of instruction in which Jesus will unveil the mystery of his calling to be a humble, suffering Messiah who will lay down his life for his people—and the disciples' calling to follow in his footsteps. With this in mind, Hudson reminds us that the disciples' understanding of Jesus would develop gradually, just as it does for us today:

*Our understanding of Jesus usually develops and deepens over time. When Peter answered Jesus' question and said to him, "You are the Messiah," he was still on a journey toward knowing who Jesus really was. Calling Jesus "Messiah" at this point in Mark's Gospel did not mean that Peter was calling him "divine" or "the second person of the Trinity" or "God." That fuller understanding of Jesus' identity would only come later for Peter. Similarly, when we wrestle with this question, we may also find that it will take some time before we fall on our knees at the feet of Jesus and cry out, "You are my Lord and my God."*

This question and Peter's answer marked a turning point in Mark's Gospel. And our answer can become a turning point in our own lives. To answer this question, however, we must develop a personal knowledge of Jesus—keeping company with him in the Gospels and walking closely with him in our own lives.

# Keeping Company with Jesus in the Gospels

How do we come to know Jesus? How can we deepen our friendship with him? How does Jesus want us to live our lives together with him? To those who want to know more about Jesus, Hudson offers a simple starting point: “**Keep company with Jesus in the Gospels.**”

As we follow Jesus through the pages of the Gospels we are reminded of what God is like and how we can live in partnership with God. Reflecting on his reasons for recording the words and actions of Jesus, Gospel-writer John explains: “But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah” (John 20:31). Almost every line in his book, and in those of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, has the power to lead its readers into an enriched relationship with Jesus, provided that we engage these books with a sense of expectant encounter.

Knowing this to be true, godly men and women throughout history have encouraged other Christ-followers to constantly meditate on the person of Jesus as he is revealed in the Gospels. Hudson encourages us to do the same with this simple exercise:

- Set some time aside, an hour or so, to read through a Gospel at one sitting. It can be helpful to do this more than once over a period of time.
- As you read, keep company with Jesus. Catch a glimpse of his relationship with God whom he called “*Abba Father.*” Witness the deep intimacy and closeness between him and the Father.
- Notice the way he relates to people, especially those who live on the fringes of his society—tax collectors, the prostitutes, the lepers, and so on.
- Listen to the words he speaks and the message and he brings. Explore the way in which he sees the world. Watch what he does and the manner in which he does it.
- After watching, hearing, and walking with Jesus throughout these stories, how do you respond to him? Who do you say that he is?

## Developing a Personal Knowledge of Jesus

Keeping company with Jesus in the Gospels is one essential component in coming to know who he is. But it needs to be balanced with another kind of knowing. We build up what could be called historical knowledge. Yet we may still miss knowing who Jesus really is. We need another kind of knowledge as well – a *personal knowledge of who he is from our own experience of him* [the same kind of knowledge we have about someone who we have known and lived in close relationship with for years].

The first knowledge about Jesus comes mainly from our immersion in the Gospel stories. The second is a deeper knowledge that comes when we give ourselves to him and begin to follow him. We will not come to know who Jesus really is without bringing these two ways of knowing together. This process does not happen overnight. Like getting to know another human intimately, it will take a lifetime and perhaps even longer.

Excerpt from *Questions God Asks Us*, pg. 91

Bringing the story of Jesus in the Gospels together with the story of our lives takes time. And getting to know Jesus personally, inviting him into the details of our own experiences and relationships, takes courage. Many of us have experienced the struggle of fully giving ourselves to another person, and it can be even more difficult to do this with someone who we cannot physically see each day. As with any intimate relationship, entrusting our lives to Jesus doesn't happen over night. Hudson writes, "Usually it happens gradually, one day at a time, as we learn to trust the love of Christ that we have seen in the Gospels. Difficult as trusting ourselves to Christ may be, it is only within such a personal relationship that we will come to know in our experience who he really is."

This calls us to consider what we mean when we say that we *believe* in Jesus. When we talk about "believing" in Jesus there is a certain content to it. By believing in him we come to believe particular things about him. To be sure, there is a picture of Jesus drawn inside each of our hearts and minds. This picture, formed over the years through various influences, significantly shapes the way we live our daily lives.

This was the experience of the early disciples in the New Testament, whose beliefs about Jesus were formed over the years by a number of influences—namely Jesus himself. Their understanding of Jesus would gradually shape the way they understood their own purpose and collective mission, changing their lives forever.

This, too, can be our experience today. Like the disciples, our personal knowledge of Jesus and our relationship with him shows us how to live. Entrusting ourselves to him, we believe that he, more than anyone else who has ever lived, knows the true meaning and purpose of life. **To know Jesus thus involves learning how to live lives that point to the kingdom of God as he did when he walked this earth.** We immerse ourselves in his example and teaching as it comes to us in the Gospels, and we learn from him how to put into practice what we see there.

In addition to gaining personal knowledge about Jesus, something else happens when we entrust our lives to him. Jesus himself says, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them" (John 14:23). **Jesus has promised us that our commitment will bring his constant presence into our everyday lives as a living and tangible reality.**

Hudson describes it well: "In the power of his Spirit, Jesus steps out from the pages of the Gospels. Amazingly, we begin to discover how he can be our living friend today, just as he was for those who left their nets and followed him by the Sea of Galilee. As we walk with him, together with others, he shows us his way for our lives and gives us the power to walk in it. We learn that his yoke is easy and his burden light. Most of all, we discover that we are never alone, no matter what we are going through."

## Answering God's Question<sup>1</sup>

**Who do you say that I am?** Jesus' question echoes down the corridors of history into the present moment. Now it is time for you to explore your own response.

1. **Who is Jesus Christ for you?** *A great human and prophet? A healer who was able to do great miracles once upon a time? Some sort of Superman figure, able to swoop down and rescue you from all your difficulties? Or is he Someone else, Someone more, Someone who is totally and fully human, and yet who all the time is also God revealing God's self to us?* How do you respond?
2. **As we have seen, the best way to begin exploring these questions lies in reading the Gospels. Take some time to do the Gospel reading exercise described earlier.** Ask God to help you see Jesus more fully

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<sup>1</sup> Portions of this section are excerpted from *Questions God Asks Us*, pg. 94-95

as he really is. Ask also to see him, not only as he is in the Gospels but also as he has lived throughout history in the lives of his followers and throughout the universe. Often we can catch glimpses of his beauty and greatness in those who have given themselves to him.

3. **Alongside these explorations, it will be important to engage personally with Jesus.** Getting to know him is far more than just a head thing. It's also about giving yourself deeply to the One whom you want to get to know. Remember, there are two kinds of knowing. *There is simply no way you will come to know Jesus without entrusting as much as you can of yourself to as much as you know of him.* This step involves the simple faith that Jesus is alive and present with us right now and wants to make himself known to all who truly seek him. As always, the important thing is to be completely honest with Jesus. Our understanding of Jesus usually develops and deepens over time. Like Peter, when we wrestle with this question, we may also find that it will take some time before we fall on our knees at the feet of Jesus and cry out, "You are my Lord and my God."

## Discussion

1. What is the most interesting thing you have learned about Jesus recently? How has this recent learning affected your life and relationships?
2. Peter says that Jesus is "the Messiah," but what do you think he meant by that? What did the disciples expect the Messiah to be and to do?
3. In the teaching that follows Peter's confession, Jesus paints a picture of a humble, suffering Messiah who will be rejected and killed. Peter pulling Jesus aside to rebuke him illustrates the disciples' struggle with this description, as it looks very different from their own expectations. Nevertheless, Peter shows us the importance of being honest with Jesus and he grows from this learning experience. In what way do you most struggle with Jesus and his message? How easy is it for you to be honest with Jesus about these things?
4. Our first knowledge about Jesus comes mainly from our immersion in the Gospel stories. The second is a deeper knowledge that comes when we give ourselves to him and begin to follow him. How has this second, more personal knowledge developed in your life (and how have you learned to cultivate it)?
5. Based on your experience, what would you say to someone who wants to know how they can cultivate a personal knowledge of Jesus in their own life?
6. How would you today, using your own language, respond to Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" Who do you say Jesus is? And what does that say about who you are, as a disciple?