Who is Jesus?

Mark 8:22-9:1
Key Verse: Mark Mark 8:29
"But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Messiah."

Who is Jesus? This is perhaps one of the most important questions to get right. If you were to ask people today, “Who is Jesus?” what kind of answers would you get? Some people might say “I don’t know,” and others might say he was a made up, fictional character. Still others might say he was a great teacher, or a great prophet, and nothing more. A couple of my Hindu coworkers believed that he did exist, and that he was a guru, or spiritual teacher. There’s a New-Age author who wrote two books on Jesus, and claims to have studied the Bible extensively, but his first book on Jesus is a fictional account of how Jesus journeyed through confusion and doubt to come to find God, and his second book, a non-fiction self-help book, describes Jesus as a great teacher of enlightenment, or God-consciousness. In his book he writes, “I want to offer the possibility that Jesus was truly, as he proclaimed, A savior. Not THE savior, not the one and only Son of God. Rather Jesus embodied the highest level of enlightenment. He spent his brief adult life describing it, teaching it, and passing it on to future generations. Jesus intended to save the world by showing others the path to God-consciousness.” I don’t know how one can read and study the Bible, and come to those conclusions, because the Bible directly opposes his ideas and states clearly and in simple terms what we are to believe (see John 20:31). But the human mind, our flesh and blood can only comprehend so much. How did Jesus save the world? Who is Jesus? Even the brightest minds in the whole world will not be able to come to the right answer, because there is a darkness, a corruption that blinds us. The knowledge of who Jesus is and what he has done can only be taught and shown to us by God himself, through His word. In the first chapter in the book of Mark, we learn about who Jesus is. Week after week, we learned about the things he taught through parables, and studied about the miracles he performed the prove his identity. In today’s passage, we get a reminder of who Jesus is, and what exactly he came to do, and through this, may God grant you conviction so that you may be able to answer this question confidently and correctly: “Who is Jesus?”

We begin in v.22, “They came to Bethsaida, and some people brought a blind man and begged Jesus to touch him.” The town of Bethsaida was on the northern tip of the sea of Galilee, and it was the birthplace of Peter, Andrew and Philip. In Matt 11:21, we also learn that Bethsaida was one of the towns in Galilee that did not repent and believe in Jesus despite the many miracles performed there. This might explain why Jesus took the blind man by the hand, and led him out of the village, because unbelief was rampant in the town. But this also became an opportunity for Jesus to minister to this blind man personally and privately. After Jesus took him outside the village, he spit on the man’s eyes and put his hands on him, and asked, “Do you see anything?” This might sound like a strange, maybe even a gross procedure, but how many here have cleaned their contact lenses by putting it in their mouth? I don’t wear contacts, but I think I’ve seen more than a couple of people do that. In some cultures, saliva is seen as a disinfectant, although, with

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scientific data today, there might be a greater risk of bacterial infection than disinfection using saliva, so I won't encourage this practice. Now Jesus could very well have just spoken to the man to receive his sight, but instead he went through this exercise, making it a personal and intimate experience. He would not have "hocked a loogie (gathered up mucus)," I think it would have been a gentle application of pure saliva.

The man answered Jesus, "I see people, they look like trees walking around." His sight was restored – but not perfectly, only partially. Why would Jesus do this? Perhaps it was to show that he has complete control over his power, and can administer healing to an exact degree that he sees fit. He can heal fully, many people at one time, and he can heal partially, one person at a time. At the minimum he did restore the blind man's sight, which is a miracle, even though his vision was still blurry. Now Jesus didn't just stop here, and say, "Well, that's all I got, sorry." Once more he put his hands on the man's eyes, and "voila!" his eyes were opened, his sight restored, and he saw clearly. Maybe Jesus did this to heighten the man's anticipation and excitement. He first restored his sight, and the man got a little excited, and then he gave him perfect vision, and undoubtedly the man must have been so grateful. Jesus sent the man back home, saying, "Don't even go into the village." The man must have lived outside of Bethsaida, and Jesus, either to judge the unrepentant town, or to avoid another crowd of people coming after him, instructed this man to avoid the village and go straight home.

The healing of the blind man was an actual event, but it can also serve as a metaphor for our spiritual sight. First of all, who was it that gave the blind man his sight? It was Jesus. Likewise, it is Jesus who gives us sight. John 1:9 calls Jesus "the true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world." 1 Pet 2:9 describes Jesus as the one who calls us out of darkness into his wonderful light. This light is the truth: it is the truth about God, the truth about the world, the truth about sin, the truth about righteousness, and the truth about salvation. The light is the knowledge of Jesus, given to us by Jesus himself. Notice also, the two-stage restoration of this man's sight. In the same way, in Jesus' first coming, we received the gospel, the promise of our salvation. We feel a peace in our hearts that transcends all understanding, we experience the love of God that compels us to love others, we notice the guilt of sin and turn away from it. But we are still in our flesh, we still have troubles, and trials, and struggles. But we have been given a glimpse of the possible, a small taste of heaven. When Jesus comes again, we will see clearly. We will see him clearly, and we will see the glorification of our bodies, the realization of the Bible's promises, we will see clearly the actualization of the kingdom of God here on earth when he comes again. Now we see but a dim image like in a weak mirror or glass, but thank God, because if we see this now, we will see Jesus face to face later. Though a blur, for now Jesus has given us sight.

After this event in Bethsaida, Jesus and his disciples head north to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. This town was located around 25 miles almost directly north of Bethsaida. It's about the distance of the Chicago Marathon today, or from here to Woodfield Mall in Schaumburg, or from here to the Orland Park suburb. It's maybe about a 2-day journey on foot. It has been about 2 years since Jesus began preaching, and Jesus takes them up here to prepare his disciples for the

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final part of his ministry and beyond. It was a kind of retreat from all of the commotion and conflict going on in Judea and Galilee. Here Jesus would teach them more in depth about who he is, and what he was going to do. Look at v.27. On the way to Caesarea Philippi, he asked them, "Who do people say I am?" Jesus wanted to know, after 2 years of teaching, what did the masses learn about him? Not that he didn't know already, but this was to help guide them to a deeper understanding of who he is.

Look at what they replied in verse 28, "Some say John the Baptist; and still others, others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." <buzzer sound> Wrong. All wrong. The people got it all wrong. Although to be named among John the Baptist and Elijah was a great honor, these answer fall way short of who Jesus is. For anyone else it would have been a great compliment, but for Jesus it was a bit of a demotion. Jesus was a contemporary of John the Baptist, they had very similar ministries, they preached the same thing. They were even related, they were cousins born 6 months apart. It can be no surprise they confused him with the Baptist. Elijah is known to have not died, but was taken up alive into heaven. The book of Malachi promised his return, and actually it was fulfilled by John the Baptist. He came in the spirit of Elijah, to make a people ready for the Lord (Luke 1:17). But they confused Jesus with him too. After 2 years of preaching, this was the conclusion? Was Jesus' ministry a failure? It wasn't, but here we can see that flesh and blood cannot discern who Jesus is, because he was not what they were looking for.

This darkness only made the light shine even brighter. Now that he heard what the general population thought about him, he put the same question to his disciples. Look at v.29, can we all please read v.29, " 'But what about you?' he asked. 'Who do you say I am?' Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah.'" <bell sound> Correct, that is the right answer! "You are the Messiah." The answer just flowed naturally from Peter's heart, out to his lips. (Personal confession of faith) So what was he saying? What does it mean that Jesus is the Messiah? It means that he is "The One," "The Chosen One." For centuries the Jews were looking for and waiting patiently for a deliverer of the Jewish nation, the hope of Israel. God had promised through the prophetic writings of the Old Testament that he would send a Savior (Isa 42:1, Dan 9:25, and more) to the Hebrew people to lead them to glory and be their king. That man was sitting right in front of and smiling at Peter. Peter just confessed that Jesus is the Son of the living God, the King, the Redeemer, the Deliverer, the Savior.

Despite the general population losing faith and falling away, despite the growing opposition toward Jesus and his ministry, despite what everyone around them was telling them and saying, despite not even understanding what Jesus was saying sometimes, they remained faithful. All Twelve of Jesus' disciples believed this, Peter was their spokesperson and said what everyone else thought. Here we see two classes of people now: the disciples, and everyone else. The disciples are those who confess that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. The prophet Isaiah tells us that the Messiah "had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. (Isa 53:2)" So how could the disciples make this confession, if Jesus didn't look the part? St. Matthew, who documented more detail of this event, gives us a little more

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insight: Matt 16:17 says, “Jesus replied, ‘Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven.’” We take for granted today, that we believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God – but how did you ever come to know that? Unless someone taught you the gospel, you would never come to this conclusion. Unless God opened your eyes, you would never believe. Why? Because of your sinful flesh. Have you ever walked around in a pitch black room, or imagine trying to drive on a pitch black road with no headlights or street lights. You would have no idea where you were going, or where is your left, and where is your right. In the same way the flesh cannot discern God, and will either reject God, neglect God, or will think that he or she is god, and make their own way.

Again in v.30, “Jesus warned them not to tell anyone.” The word here for warn is actually very strong. He warns them strongly not to tell anyone. Why not at this time? It was because Jesus had more work to do before the people could really understand the Messiah. They had a faulty understanding, for example, after Jesus fed the 5,000, they wanted to make him king by force, not because they believed in him but because they their stomachs got filled. They wanted Jesus to keep giving them food, the food that spoils, but they cared not for the bread of life: the worship of Jesus as God.

Although the disciples believed that Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of the living God, at this point they didn’t see the full picture of what being the Messiah meant. The crowd didn’t understand, but neither did the disciples. It was something Jesus would need to teach them, and was about to teach. Everyone knew that the Messiah was a King, and that he would come to deliver the Jewish nation, conquering all of God’s enemies in the process, even overthrowing Rome and establishing Israel as the world power. Their view of the Messiah was one who would come in royal robes, political power and great glory. They overlooked something very important, and Jesus would teach them was being a Messiah really entailed. Look at v.31, “He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.” Everyone overlooked that the Messiah would be a suffering servant, and that his Messianic majesty must first be preceded by sacrificial suffering, so that the he would be made perfect through suffering. The Messiah would even be killed, but there was a hope, there was something glorious in what Jesus said. After three days, he would rise again. Jesus not only predicted his death, but also his resurrection from the dead. Jesus’ suffering would not end in death, but in overcoming death with life. This was what he looked forward to.

Verse 32 says, “He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.” Woah woah woah woah. Only minutes after Peter made such a great confession of faith, he takes Jesus aside and begins to rebuke him. Who does he think he is? What happened here? Before we ourselves judge Peter too harshly, consider that he said these things out of a great love for his Master. He could not bear that someone he loved so dearly would talk about his own rejection, suffering and dying. Think about if your mom or dad said, “My dear child, I must suffer many things at the hands of my enemies, and I tell you, they’re going to kill me, seriously, and literally

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my life will be taken from me." What would you say? Your gut reaction may be to say, "No mom, never! Look mom, you're the CEO of this mega company, you can fire those scoundrels!" The problem with this is that it was in direct opposition to Jesus' mission and why he came, and Peter became so overwhelmed with his natural affections that he overstepped his boundaries with the Lord. His human feelings would become a stumbling block to Jesus, so this had to be met with a strong and swift response.

Look at v.33, "But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. 'Get behind me, Satan!' he said. 'You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.'" You know something was going to happen when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples. He was seeing if they were also in agreement with Peter, so his rebuke would also be to them, but through Peter. Jesus said "Get behind me, Satan!" This was a very stern and harsh rebuke. It was the same thing he said to Satan when he was tempted in the wilderness about receiving a kingdom. This was the issue – Peter only had in mind human concerns, not the concerns of God. This is a case where even our best intentions can get in the way. Peter wanted ease and comfort for his Master, not realizing that would come at the cost the salvation of the whole world. To avoid the cup of suffering was a similar temptation Satan would hurl at Jesus to take him off his mission. Our flesh cannot understand the concerns of God, and if we do not keep in mind the concerns of God, and think only of our human concerns, we will by default align ourselves with Satan. Here Peter did not outright reject God; he was not in open rebellion to Jesus nor did he embrace Satan, but he only had human concerns in mind, and Satan could take advantage of that. As one modern day preacher (Dave Guzik, Calvary Chapel Santa Barbara) writes, "Even a sincere heart coupled with man's desire can lead to disaster."

Our human concerns are usually selfish concerns, they are for our own ease, comfort pleasure, but the concerns of God are the salvation and sanctification of souls. These concerns of God will often require us to give up our human concerns to accomplish his goals, as Jesus teaches. Look at v.34, "Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: 'Whoever wants to be my disciples must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.'" Notice these words are not just for his inner circle of the Twelve, but for all who wish to be his disciple. Remember we said earlier, we find two classes of people: those who know him, his disciples, and those who don't, everyone else. If you want to be his disciple, you must deny yourself. This doesn't mean you have to sell your home and your car, stop going to restaurants or buy some clothes for yourself. The Lord knows you need these things. But this means to stop living selfishly. You see this on the pages of Redditt, an Internet bulletin board, for example, of a married couple who decide not to have kids because it would interfere with their lifestyle – but then one person decides they want kids, secretly gets off birth control, gets pregnant, and the husband is considering divorcing her, and the people who post overwhelmingly support his decision. To deny yourself is to give up some of your ease, your comfort, and pleasure, if that's required, to serve another person. It means to stop living for yourself only, but be willing to give yourself for others. And this is what it means to love. Php 2:3-4 say it this way: "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility, value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the

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interests of the others."

On an equal level with denying yourself is to take up your cross and follow Jesus, and if you thought denying yourself is hard, this to me seems even more difficult. Everyone in the Roman world in Jesus' time knew what it meant to take up your cross. It literally meant to go to your death. The cross was the instrument of death for the worst criminals, and crucifixion was perfected by the Roman Empire, and offenders were put on public display to make an example of those who would cross Rome (pun intended). To take up your cross means to accept the sufferings that come with being a follower of Christ: to accept persecution, punishment and if God wills it, even death. This doesn't mean go out there and pick a fight with other groups of people. Whatever punishment that comes from that is at your own expense. But naturally, because the world is at enmity with God, Christians will be the target of persecution, and these are the cases we should endure, embrace and stand strong. The suffering that is rewarded is the suffering for doing good. And finally along with taking up your cross is to follow Jesus. This means to imitate him in every way. He set the example by suffering for us, and by giving his life for us. He also came not to be served, but to serve.

As difficult as these sound, Jesus gives his disciples some warnings and encouragement. In v.35 he says, "For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it." Those who want to save their lives are those who would not deny themselves, take up their crosses and follow Jesus. They rejected the Savior, they rejected the gospel message, and lived for themselves, and thus never received eternal life. But for those who followed the Savior, living for him and for his gospel, because they shared in his sufferings, they will also share in his glory in eternal life. Jesus dives into this idea even deeper in v.36, "What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?" Here Jesus reminds us of the priceless value of a human soul. One soul is worth more than the whole world, because our souls are made eternal, and this world is passing away. John Calvin writes, "Christ reminds us that the soul of man was not created to just enjoy the world for a few days, but ultimately to obtain immortality in heaven." Why were you born? So that hopefully, you would receive the gospel message and enter into heaven! So how careless, how brutally stupid (as Calvin puts it), to be so attached to the world, that you willfully abandon your soul to destruction. When I used to play sports, when I was much younger, "forfeiting" was like the worst word you could here. It means the team just gave up, and will get nothing. So it is when you chase after the things of this world, in the end, you will get nothing.

Jesus puts this same thought in a very interesting way in v.37, "Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?" I think it is ironic that he asks this question. The answer is, that there is nothing anyone can give in exchange for their soul. If you lost your soul, there is no amount of money or no amount of work you can ever do to get it back. The irony is, that while we can't give anything in exchange for our souls, Jesus did give something in exchange for them. Jesus came to exchange his life for ours – that is the work of the Messiah. That is why he had to die. He died to take our death, and in exchange he gave us the life he lived. He exchanged his righteousness for

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our sinful lives in order to save us. He saved us by his death on the cross for our sins and he rose from the dead to seal the deal. Jesus didn't save us by showing us the way to God-consciousness. He saved us by dying on the cross for our sins.

Finally, to encourage them, Jesus gives his disciples a glimpse into his glory. At the moment, Jesus is preparing his disciples for his impending death, and warns them not to be ashamed, because one day, he will come again in his Father's glory with the holy angels. He encourages them even further by saying some standing there will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God, and this can refer to his resurrection and the Holy Spirit's coming at Pentecost. In Jesus' first coming, he gave us the gospel. He took on the nature of a servant, and his radiant glory was hidden. When he comes again, we will see the true nature of Jesus, and the true nature of ourselves: if we share in his sufferings now, we will share in his glory at that time.

Today we learned about who Jesus is. He is the Messiah who came to suffer and die to save us from our sins, and he calls us to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Him. These things sound very difficult to do, but we do not have to rely on our own strength. As we learned today, it was Jesus who gave sight to the blind, and Paul tells us that he is confident "that He who began a good work in you will carry it out to completion until the day of Jesus Christ." We also learned today that human concerns can often get in the way or overshadow the concerns of God, so how can we remedy this? Heb 12:2 tells us to fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith. Today, we can catch a glimpse of who Jesus is, but when he comes again, we will see clearly not only Jesus, but also all of his disciples in full glory in his kingdom.

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