

## **QUESTION(S)**

Matthew 16:16-18

As a lad growing up in Nazareth, Jesus could see the snow-capped mountains of Mount Herman in the distant North. Every boy fantasized about climbing to the top. Not a day went by when Jesus didn't imagine such adventure. Now, almost thirty years later, Jesus remembered that childhood dream as He walked into the region of Caesarea Philippi, the northern-most point of all His journeys.

It had been days since He stopped to rest. Leaning against a massive boulder at the base of Mount Herman, 1,150 feet above sea level, Jesus took a long breath and an even longer time to reflect. Life had been a blur of preaching, teaching, and healing. Jesus was burned out. Truthfully, He was peopled out. He was weary of the crowds. He was thankful to be walking alone, with only His small circle of closest companions beside Him.

Beside the rock where He now rested was a deep cavern full of crystal clear water. This water, springing from inside the mountain, served as a source for the Jordan River, life to the valley below. Near this spot the Greeks built a shrine to their mythological god, Pan. Pan was pictured as a small man with the horns, legs, and tail of a goat, a thick beard, snub nose, and pointed ears. He was supposedly a god that dwelt in deep water caverns during the day and wandered the mountains at night, playing his flute. Pan was considered a symbol of the universe, and the personification of nature.

Jesus knew the stories of how Pan, a jokester, came out of the grottos to frighten travelers, farmers, shepherds, or anyone else who had camped for the night. Anyone who experienced a sudden, unexplainable fright was said to have been attacked by Pan. Such fear was described as having a “Pan-attack”; and is the etymology behind our English phrase, “panic attack.”

It amazed Jesus that people assigned deity to things that could not be explained, or things made of stone and wood; but such was people’s desire for a God they could see, feel, and touch. Ironically, this was the very reason Jesus came to earth—to give mankind a glimpse of a God they could see, feel, and touch. Instead of arousing fear, Jesus—God in the flesh—came to offer hope and peace.

With all these thoughts crowding His mind, Jesus restarted His trek up the mountain. In a rare quiet moment, He wondered aloud to His friends, “So tell Me, who do people say I am? What do people think of me?”<sup>1</sup> An interesting question posed 2,000 years ago. A question that still resonates across time, with great impact today.

Jesus tried to be clear about who He was and why He was here. He tried to keep things simple. He healed the sick, forgave sins, taught with authority, and performed miracles; but the masses just didn’t get it; at times even His disciples didn’t get it. They thought He was a prophet, a teacher, a good person, someone to follow, someone full of wisdom. Their answers generally showed respect, but most often a lack of understanding. Most people rejected Jesus, not because they didn’t like Him, but because they misunderstood who He was and what He was all about.

## **What Do You Say About Jesus?**

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 16:13.

What do you think of Jesus? How would you answer His question? You can reject Jesus, or you can accept Jesus, but one thing you cannot do is ignore Him. He demands a response from you, and how you respond has consequences for this life, and the life to come.

Television talk-show host Larry King made a very perceptive comment when he was asked who he would most like to have interviewed from across history. One of those he named was Jesus Christ. “What would you have asked Him?” Came the questioner to Mr. King. “I would like to ask Him if He was indeed virgin born, because the answer to that question would define history.”<sup>2</sup>

Jesus asked His disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?”<sup>3</sup> The disciples responded, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”<sup>4</sup> Notice: No one said He was the Messiah, and no one said anything negative. Jesus had a good reputation, but people’s thoughts of Him were not good enough. You could categorize their response into three differing opinions about Jesus.

First was the popular opinion – “John the Baptist.” John the Baptist was a popular preacher. He was executed by Herod, and so thinking Jesus was John either meant that John had been raised from the dead, or reincarnated; or the spirit of John had entered Jesus, enabling Him to do the miracles He did.

Second was the religious opinion – “Elijah.” Those who knew the Old Testament knew that Elijah (or someone like Elijah) would come before the Messiah came.

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<sup>2</sup> Ravi Zacharias. 1994. *Can Man Live Without God?* Dallas: Word Publishing (xvii)

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 16:13.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 16:14.

Remember, there had been no real prophet of God (or voice of God) for more than 400 years. Great anticipation was building that God was going to send a prophet, followed by the Messiah.

Third was the uninformed, or apathetic, opinion – “Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” There were many prophets in the past, and many people walking around in that day who considered themselves prophets—a better idea would be philosopher or teacher. Thus, saying that Jesus was one of the prophets was to minimize His impact. It was saying that He was only one of many prophets and no more important than any other prophet.

Today, there is still a popular opinion, religious opinion, and an uninformed / apathetic opinion of Jesus. The popular opinion is that He was an important historical teacher and ethical person. The religious opinion is that while He was an important historical, religious, person, He is not the only way to God, but one of many ways (or sons) of God. The uninformed / apathetic opinion is that He is no more, or less, important than any other teacher. You see these opinions expressed in many different ways.

Jeremy Bowen, the presenter of a British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) documentary on Jesus stated, "The important thing is not what He was or what He wasn't—the important thing is what people believe Him to have been."<sup>5</sup>

A few weeks before he died, Benjamin Franklin said, “As to Jesus of Nazareth...I have...some doubts as to His divinity, though it is a question I do not dogmatize upon,

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<sup>5</sup> Alan Wilson, Nyon, Switzerland; source: Alex Webb, "Looking for the Historical Jesus," BBC News Online,(3-26-01 column).

having never studied it, and think it needless to busy myself with it now, when I expect soon an opportunity of knowing the truth with less trouble...”<sup>6</sup>

When asked why she gives money to homeless people, Pamela Anderson answered, “If I refuse one of them I’d be like, ‘Oh my God. What if that was Jesus?’” In *Spin* magazine, Ozzy Osborne commented, “There is a thing called God or Nature or the Universe or whatever...”. Alice Cooper told *The London Times*, “Drinking beer is easy. Trashing your hotel room is easy. But being a Christian, that’s a tough call. That’s rebellion.”<sup>7</sup> Martin Luther, however, got it right when he said, “No other God have I but Thee; born in a manger, died on a tree.”

After asking what others thought of Him, Jesus turned to His disciples and asked, “But what about you? Who do you say I am?”<sup>8</sup> It really doesn’t matter what the popular opinion of Jesus is, or what the religious opinion is, or what the uninformed opinion is. All that really matters is what you think of Jesus, and it matters for eternity.

Peter, as spokesperson for the group, answered, “You are the Christ.”<sup>9</sup> And that is the only correct opinion! The word “Christ” translates the Hebrew word for “Messiah,” meaning “the Anointed One of God.” “Christ” is not Jesus’ last name, it is His divine title. Jesus was, and is, the One promised by God, chosen by God, and anointed by God to be the Savior of the world.

## **The “Gates of Hades”**

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<sup>6</sup> Bruce Shelley. 1982. *Church History in Plain Language*. Waco, TX: Word Books (329).

<sup>7</sup> Taken from the website: [www.thunderstruck.org](http://www.thunderstruck.org)

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 16:15.

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 16:16.

The city of Caesarea Philippi stood at the base of a cliff where spring water flowed. At one time, the water ran directly from the mouth of a cave set in the bottom of a cliff. Many people in Jesus' day believed that spirits and gods lived in the underworld during the winter and returned to earth each spring. They saw water as a symbol of the underworld and thought their gods traveled to and from that world through caves.

Caesarea Philippi was an extremely pagan city. In the Old Testament, this section of Israel was the center for Baal worship. As mentioned earlier, by Jesus' day Caesarea Philippi was the center of worship for the Greek god, Pan. Each spring, residents of the city would entice Pan to come out of the cliffs by engaging in gross immorality that included prostitution and goats. Surrounding Caesarea Philippi streams ran in and out of the cliffs, creating slits, canyons, caverns, and caves. Many Greeks believed that gods and spirits (including Pan) lived in these slits, canyons, caverns, and caves. These entrances became known as "the gates of Hades." Caesarea Philippi had a reputation of being the door to hell.

Now, with that in mind, notice Jesus' response to Peter's answer. He said, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the *gates of Hades* will not overcome it."<sup>10</sup>

Here, in the vicinity of this horrible city, Jesus asked His disciples a question and got His answer; and the church is built on that answer. Peter's answer, "You are the Christ," is the heart of the church. Or, to put it another way: ***It on the confession that Jesus is God's Messiah ("anointed One") that the church is to stand.*** The church

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<sup>10</sup> Matthew 16:17-18.

does not stand on propositional truths or denominational dogmas, but on the confession of faith that Jesus is who He claimed to be!

And who did Jesus claim to be? *The Messiah, sent by God, to bring about God's kingdom on the earth.* And how was He going to do that? By preaching good news to the poor, proclaiming freedom to the oppressed, and healing the blind and the deaf.<sup>11</sup> And how was that going to happen? By giving His life as a sacrifice, and then rising from the dead on the third day.

God's plan was to send His Son to proclaim that God's kingdom was here. Jesus proclaimed that God's Kingdom was here and approaching. Then, He gave His authority to His followers, saying, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation."<sup>12</sup> What was the good news? "The kingdom of God is near..."<sup>13</sup> (The "good news" is the subject for next time.)

But or now, *what am I supposed to do with this information? How does this message apply to my life?*

### **What am I supposed to do with this?**

Running north to south from the Seward Peninsula in Alaska, through western Canada along the crest of the Rocky Mountains to New Mexico, through the tip of South America, all the way to the Panama Canal, runs the Great Continental Divide. This divide is the watershed for our country. When it rains, all the water that goes down one side ends up in the Pacific Ocean, and all the water that goes down the other side ends

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<sup>11</sup> Luke 4:18-19.

<sup>12</sup> Mark 16:15.

<sup>13</sup> Mark 1:15.

up in the Atlantic Ocean. Rain lands on the divide at the same time and in the same place, but where the water ends up is separated by a continent. What you do with Jesus is the single most important issue you will ever face in life. Two people can come to the point of decision about who Jesus is. At that point the two people are together, but if one accepts Jesus and one rejects Jesus, where they land—in this life and the next—will be far from each other. What you do with Jesus is the watershed issued of your life.

Who do you think Jesus is? What are your options? In *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis wrote, “A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said wouldn’t be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic on the level with a man who says he’s a poached egg—or else he would be the devil of hell; you must take your choice. Either this was, and is, the Son of God, or else a mad man or something worse. You can shut Him up for a demon, or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But don’t come up with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great moral teacher. He hasn’t left that alternative open to us. He did not intend to.”

Jesus is either a liar, a lunatic, or He is Lord. If you believe He is Lord that changes everything about this life and the life to come. The title of this message is “Question(s)”; so let me end by asking a few:

- Do you believe Jesus is the Messiah?
- If so, has it changed your life? How has it changed your life?
- How does confessing that He is the Messiah” change everything?
- Are you living life, changing?
- Does any of this make sense?

