



Speaker:
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Who is Jesus?

Series: The Gospel of Mark • 27 of 27

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Our reading today is from Mark's Gospel, chapter 8, and we're beginning at verse 22.

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I said to you last week we were at a pivotal point in Mark's narrative. Even today we'll see a clear shift in Jesus's attitude as he prepares his disciples for his final days on Earth. We start moving very quickly now to the final week in Jerusalem, and that week alone takes up around a **third** of Mark's Gospel. Someone described Mark's work as the story of Calvary with a very long introduction!

We left the story last week with Jesus and the disciples in a boat. You'll remember he rebuked them for their lack of understanding and hardness of heart. *Beware of the leaven of sin*, he told them.

Today, we catch up with the missionary group as they land in Bethsaida. It's a village on the North Eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee. It's a significant place. It's where Simon Peter and his brother Andrew were from, and it was the hometown of Philip, too. Jesus had miraculously provided food for between 5000 and 10000 people there. It was while the disciples were sailing to Bethsaida that Jesus was seen walking on the water.

And yet with much blessing comes much responsibility. Paradoxically, the more blessed you are in this life, the more cursed you are in the world to come should you not respond appropriately **to** those blessings. One of the other Gospels records Jesus railing against Bethsaida. He makes it plain that after all the miracles done there, the appropriate response from the people would be to repent. Dreadfully, he tells them they'll fare worse at the judgement than all those infamous cities of the world like Tyre and Sodom.

Adding to the list of blessings Bethsaida had received, Jesus today heals a blind man there. You'll note, like the man on the stretcher let down through the roof, the faith of others is involved in this episode too.

Either his family or his friends brought him to Jesus and begged Jesus to heal him. And even if they've seen miracles before, even been a part of them, it still takes real faith to believe a man who's blind could ever be able to see clearly just like others.

When our friends and family are ill, we usually think it's best to ask God to make them better. And let it be an encouragement to you that, if the hard hearted people of Bethsaida had faith Jesus could heal, so much more should we be prepared to petition God on behalf of those we care for who are ill or in pain.

We noticed recently Jesus's miracles are sometimes done in unusual ways. This one's also unique. It's the only one where a healing is done in two stages. Firstly, Jesus put some spit on the man's eyes like he did with the mute guy's tongue. He put his hands on the man. He asked him what he saw, and the blind man reports he's regained some of his vision. He sees men walking about, and they look like trees.

(Some people assume by this the man was at one stage in his life not blind. They say if he'd always been blind he wouldn't know what a tree looked like. But that's not a valid assumption. Blind people can get an idea of the shape of objects through touch. He would have leaned on many a tree during his blindness, and I'm sure he was very familiar with the shape. All he's doing here is telling Jesus he sees men in the shape of tree trunks.)

Jesus moves on to Step 2. He puts his hands on the man's eyes. This time, when the man looks up, he sees everything clear as day.

We shouldn't jump to conclusions about why Jesus healed in these two stages. But as you know I often throw in some suggestions for you to think about and study. Some have compared the man's physical blindness to the disciples' spiritual blindness. They were at a point where they had some spiritual vision. They've been following Jesus. They travelled about testifying about him. They knew he was from God. But it's clear from what we've seen in previous weeks, and what we're about to look at today, the disciples certainly needed a second touch from Jesus to give them that revelation of who he really was.

And we should also take from this the perseverance of God with his saints. It says here in Philippians 1:6, "...being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ."

When we read of Peter's profound confession, we might not be surprised many have identified it as the central point of Mark's Gospel. This is the first time we read of any of the disciples openly stating Jesus was the Christ of God.

The power of this confession is undermined by what follows. Jesus addresses the disciples, although it wasn't a secret meeting; the public could listen in if they wanted. He starts telling them about his final days where he'll die. Peter pulls him up about it. He doesn't like what Jesus is saying and tells him so. It's almost unbelievable what he's saying. *You are the chosen one of God, the prophesied Messiah, the Christ of God... But what you just said is wrong, and I'm going to enlighten you...*

Jesus' response was cutting to say the least. He's speaking to Peter, but addresses him as "Satan". And this raises a whole load of questions, so I'd like to take a few minutes to examine this.

Firstly, some comments about the word *Satan*. The Old Testament Hebrew word and the New Testament Greek word are very similar to the one we use in English. In Hebrew, we find the word *sataan*, while in Greek it's *satana*. The word is employed in slightly different ways. I'd sum it up like this: in a general sense, the word means "accuser", but the context might direct us to read it as "adversary" or "slanderer" also.

I know many people assume the word must always refer to the devil, but that's not correct. Anyone who accuses or opposes another could be described as a satan. But of course there's one being who's noted for his sinful accusations, oppositions and slandering. This is the devil himself, and this is why he's given Satan as an actual name.

Just so there's no confusion, whenever you see the word "Satan" in the New Testament, it refers to the devil. It's only in the Old Testament where there's any debate about whether the word refers to the devil himself or some other accuser.

It might interest you to see a holy being in scripture described as a "satan". Numbers 22:22 says, "And God's anger was kindled because he went: and the angel of the Lord stood in the way for an adversary against him." The word translated "adversary" is *sataan*. My own view is this angel of the Lord is none other than Jesus Christ—not incarnate, but in a human form. In theology we call this a Christophany. Whether this was Jesus Christ or a created angel, the point is *sataan* can refer to both holy opposition and sinful opposition.

The question I think needs addressing is what Jesus meant by saying to Peter, *Get behind me, Satan*. Has Peter now been completely taken over by Satan? To show why this is an unreasonable conclusion, I thought we'd look at three verses from the New Testament.

1 Corinthians 5:5 – "...to deliver such a one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus." A wilfully disobedient believer can be shunned by the church, and this is compared to handing him over to Satan temporarily but with their ultimate benefit in mind.

Luke 22:3 – "Then entered Satan into Judas surnamed Iscariot, being of the number of the twelve." Here, Satan is described as entering into a person. But this is associated with apostasy, and so not applicable to Peter.

And later on in that chapter in Luke, in verse 31, we read: "And the Lord said, 'Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat...'" Satan would have loved to have entered into Peter as he did Judas, but Peter had the Lord on his side. Jesus told him he'd prayed to the Father on his behalf, and this was to assure Peter of his safety in Jesus.

Those verses help to give us a better perspective on what Jesus meant. I'll offer three possibilities:

1. Satan had such an influence on Peter at that moment they could be addressed as one. Peter had become *like* Satan because at that moment he was demonstrating the same attitude Satan had. As an illustration: if a Communist started preaching his Socialism at me, I might try to shut him up by saying, *That's enough, Stalin!*
2. Peter was being addressed first, then Satan. Some of the informal translations of the Bible express it in this way. However, none of the most accurate translations put it like that. They all say Jesus was speaking to Peter only.
3. The word should have been translated merely as "opposer". Given all the other references in the New Testament are translated as the name "Satan", this seems unlikely.

I think the first point is the right one.

What I really want to talk about today is **the identity of Jesus Christ**. The questions he asks the disciples and their responses are very important. I'd like us then to consider these three things: who the people of Jesus's day thought he was; who his disciples thought he was; and finally, who we think he is.

Who the world thought Jesus was

I think Jesus asks **two** questions to highlight that there should be a difference between what the world thinks and what the disciples think. They've been with him. They've sat at his feet and been taught. They should think differently.

It's reported to Jesus many people had a high opinion of him. Some thought he was John the Baptist, reincarnated. Remember, John had a large following. Thousands came to him to declare their repentance towards God, and they marked it by subjecting themselves to John's baptism.

Others thought he was a reincarnation of Elijah. And he also was an important figure. He's used as a representative of the whole body of Old Testament prophets. He took on the enemies of God single-handedly and defeated them in the power of God. And a few thought he was one of the other prophets from the scriptures—or perhaps a new one.

We can see why people thought this way. Jesus preached the kingdom of God with power and authority, just like the Baptist. He performed miracles and was persecuted, just like the Old Testament prophets. And no one, aside from a revelation by God, would think Jesus to be God in the flesh. He looked like a man from down your street. So the people's conclusion, if not a spiritually enlightened one, did at least make sense from a human perspective.

In one sense, the people were right. Jesus was a prophet. But he was so much more than that. More than they can imagine. *He was the Christ. The Messiah.*

It's so strange and saddening then to hear Jesus announce he's going to be verbally and physically abused, and ultimately killed, by the very religious people who were most looking forward to the coming of the Messiah. Jesus wasn't taken by an angry mob of atheists to be put to death, but by some of the best of humanity. He wasn't crucified because of some hasty misjudgement but as a result of careful deliberation. His accusers, religious "satans", had the background of the finest moral and legal standards in the world. The commentator France calls this "the paradox of an unrecognised Messiah". They waited centuries for their Messiah. And when he stood in front of them, they did all they could to have him killed as soon as possible.

The world today isn't much different. Apart from the small minority of argumentative atheists, people believe Jesus existed. You can ask them if you like. I fully expect you'll get the same response as I've always had. They'll tell you he was a good man, no doubt. They'll confess him to be a great teacher. But like the Pharisees, they'll stop short of declaring who he was really.

Who his disciples thought Jesus was

When the disciples heard Jesus ask a second question, it was Peter who stepped up. *Who are you? Why, you are the Christ! You are the Messiah prophesied long ago. You are the chosen one, the one who will deliver Israel!*

When Jesus goes on to refer to himself as the "Son of Man", it's no accident. Although the title's used in the Bible to describe mortals, it's also used to describe a Messianic figure. In the book of Daniel, we see this title used in connection with suffering, enthronement, and authority. So the two titles are very much connected.

What does "Messiah" mean then? It's the same title as "Christ". It refers to "the anointed one". Now there were numerous people in the Old Testament who were anointed. But there was always this Jewish belief in an anointed one above them all. Every generation of Jews was brought up on this expectation of the coming Messiah.

However, the Jewish understanding of the Messiah's role was flawed. They understood the deliverance of Israel *carnally*. They expected *material*, rather than *spiritual*, prosperity.

I've mentioned this fault in Jewish interpretation of the scriptures on previous occasions. They find it difficult to understand anything except in a literal sense. For example, I heard a Jewish teacher say the right hand of God means we should treat our right hands as good and our left hands as bad. So they do some things only with their right hands and some only with their left. They seem oblivious to what the phrase "right hand of God" symbolises.

I've even seen this tendency in the professing church. Mostly in the Pentecostal churches. One told me "to mount up with wings like eagles" had something to do with birds rather than a promise of deliverance to the church. I suppose it's because of this literal perspective they interpret the Book of Revelation the way they do. Whereas we saw it as a book of

pictures, they wish to read it as literally as possible, and this results in some bizarre interpretations.

But getting back to the passage, we now have a better idea of what the Jewish expectation of the Messiah was. Peter was acting according to his heritage. He believed in a Messiah. He even believed Jesus was the Messiah. But at the back of his mind was this constant expectation that Jesus was the one to bring about military conquest on behalf of the Jews and institute a golden age of material prosperity. His confession may have been flawless, but the understanding behind it was utterly wrong.

Who do YOU think Jesus is?

Can there be a more important question that can be posed to the whole of mankind? There's a poster on the side of our church building asking the question, *What think ye of Christ? "Who do you think Christ is?"* A right understanding of who he is necessary for a right relationship with him.

By the looks of it, Jesus regards it as far more important his disciples understand who he is than anyone else. Just look at the harsh rebuke he aims at Peter. No one else was ever addressed in this way by him. None of the religious hypocrites or pagan Romans received a sterner rebuke than this.

Peter was chief among the apostles. He'd been taught face-to-face by the master himself. **Yet see how quickly he went from this outstanding testimony to an undermining of the work of Christ.** His false understanding of the Messiah caused him to be outraged by Jesus's speech. *What, will our glorious leader be taken like a common criminal and killed? Really? Is that the king of Israel's plan?*

We should treat this as a warning. If someone like Peter can have a faulty understanding of who Jesus is, so too can all his followers. Take time, friends, to nurture a correct view of Jesus. Not only will you please your master, but you will be greatly blessed as you grow in knowledge of him and his work of grace.

I said to you Jesus was to fulfil the great prophecies of Isaiah, particularly in chapter 35. He didn't come to take revenge on behalf of the Jews and provide them with a better lifestyle. **As Messiah, he was to bring in a deliverance for his people that would last for eternity.** Through his death and resurrection, he would bring in salvation to the true Israel of God: all the elect throughout all ages, both Jew and Gentile.

This declaration Jesus makes in our passage is another indicator of the change of direction of Mark's Gospel. The emphasis is moving away from miracles and turning instead to Calvary. Peter's confession is the backdrop against which Jesus begins to explain to the disciples exactly what his mission was. *Defeat the Romans? No: **they're going to torture me.** Conquer the world? No: **the world is going to kill me.***

Jesus was most certainly a prophet, and the chief of all the prophets. But he was also Christ. What he's revealing to his followers is how he's to accomplish this great salvation predicted so long before.

He had to suffer and die. The sins of his people were laid on him. The Father treated him as if he were the thief, rapist and murderer. And he punished this, his own son, with all the fury those sins deserve—and much more. God demands the death penalty for sin. Someone had to die. And in the message of the gospel is that stark reality: either Jesus dies in your place, or you take all the punishment for your own sins. **And such is the extent of your sin, there will never be a time when you'll have paid off your debt to God.** And THIS is why we talk of a “lost eternity”.

Jesus Christ suffered and died. The suffering was not a pretence, and neither was the death. But this man was more than a man. He was the son of God. The grave opens its arms to welcome multitudes in, but this man walked right out! After three days he rose again, exactly as he predicted.

And having risen from the grave and ascended to heaven, he now reigns. All the authority of heaven was handed to him. On Earth, he preached about the kingdom of God, and now he sits and reigns, showing himself as its king. And in mockery of the kingdom of Antichrist, he ordains to be crucified with a sign above his head declaring him to be the King of the Jews. And we now understand what this title what really means: he is the Lord of his church. Remember what we came across in Revelation? Revelation 11:15–17 – “And the seventh angel sounded; and there were great voices in heaven, saying, ‘The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ; and he shall reign for ever and ever.’ And the four and twenty elders, which sat before God on their seats, fell upon their faces, and worshipped God saying, ‘We give thee thanks, O Lord God Almighty, which art, and wast, and art to come; because thou hast taken to thee thy great power, and hast reigned.’”

And as we talk about Jesus suffering, dying, being resurrected and reigning, I want you to remember this: we are united to him. This isn't merely a declaration by God that we are part of Christ's group. Nor is it limited to our relationship with him in this life only. **We are joined with his body.** We are *one* with him. Theologians call this the “mystical union with Christ”.

The New Testament is clear on this. Because of our union with Jesus, we're said to have experienced those things he experienced. In a way hard to fathom:

- When he suffered and died, we suffered and died with him.
- When he rose from the dead, we rose again with him.
- And as today he reigns on high, so we reign with him.

To understand this properly is beyond me. It's as if *I* was hanging on the same cross. It's as if *I* died and shared his grave. It's as if, when he marched out of the realm of Hades, he took *my* hand and brought me out. **And it's as if *I'm* now sat on his very throne ruling the world.**

How can I possibly relate to that? But that's what the scriptures say. Consider Romans 6:3–4 – “Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.”

The work of the Holy Spirit in converting us is described as a baptism. And the *water* baptism we subject ourselves to is not the true baptism itself but a *picture* of it. And when the Holy Spirit does his work in a man, woman or child, this mystical union is formed. In this, our punishment falls on Christ Jesus and his holiness is applied to us.

What do you think of Christ? Do you confess him as the Christ? Is he your saviour? Is he the Lord of your life? Then consider your wonderful privilege. You are eternally united to Jesus, the Prophet of prophets, the great High Priest, and the King of all creation. How blessed you are!

Amen.