

**March 7, 2004**  
**Psalm 1, Galatians 5:1, 13-26**  
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**“Who Is Jesus?”**

“Who is Jesus?” Such a simple and straightforward question. A child could ask it. Our children do ask it—in our homes and in our church schools. And we answer it. But, of course, there are many answers. Jesus was a baby, born in a stable to his mother Mary. He was a young man who lived in Palestine two thousand years ago. He was a preacher and teacher who went from village to village, speaking to large crowds on the lakesides and hillsides and also visiting people in their homes and talking intimately with them in the village square. Jesus was a healer, a miracle worker. The sick would come to him and he would make them well. He was a partisan who looked out for the poor and the needy—his anger rose mightily against those who neglected or oppressed them. He became a threat to the religious and political authorities of the time and, eventually, was executed by the Roman provincial government as a criminal on a cross. On the same day he died, he was buried in a cave outside the city gates.

All that we know about Jesus we learn from four manuscripts called “gospels”—which means “testimonies of good news.” These manuscripts were written by different authors for different audiences in stages over a period of several decades. The earliest was composed approximately 30 years after Jesus’ death. Expectably divergent in many details, these four gospels are remarkably compatible in their basic outline and fundamental message. Oh, and one thing else: each of these ancient manuscripts also reports that, three days after his death and burial, Jesus rose from the dead and, in some mysterious but quite palpable way, appeared first to one or more women at the tomb (how many and whom varies from gospel to gospel); and then to Peter and John and to the other disciples; to two more of his followers, on a road that led from Jerusalem to a little village called Emmaus; and then on various occasions to still others. Finally, after a period of time, according to Luke’s gospel, Jesus “led [his disciples] out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. [And] while he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven” (Luke 24:50-51).

I

“Who is Jesus?” A simple, straightforward question perhaps, but the answer is neither quick nor easy. The first and best answer is, of course, this story—the story of Jesus’ birth, life, death and resurrection. But, oh, what a many-layered and controversial story this is! A fantastic story in so many ways, it is difficult for many modern people to believe much of it at all. A virgin birth, miraculous healings, walking on water, resurrection, ascension into heaven. Is this testimony credible? How unlikely it all sounds to a world shaped from the ground up by modern science. For at least 300 years, ever since Galileo and Newton, scripture scholars and theologians—and, indeed, faithful Christians everywhere—have been asking themselves as carefully and thoughtfully as they can, how to make sense of this story.

Who is Jesus? What can we really know of him? And who is he for us now? These questions are not heretical. One of the truly amazing things about the gospels themselves is that these questions get asked in the Bible itself, over and over again. And they are asked by everyone! The question “Who is Jesus?” is not a question that arises only for us, two thousand years later, or only for moderns skeptical of the supernatural. It is a question that runs through the New Testament itself. Sometime, take an hour and just flip through the pages of the four gospels—or even just one of them—and see how often this question is asked, and by whom, and in how many different ways. You will be astonished. In one way or another, it is asked on almost every page.

It is asked, of course, by Jesus’ accusers and enemies. After he was arrested, Jesus was brought before Caiaphas, the high priest, who interrogates him: “I put you under oath before the living God, tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God.” (Mt. 26:63). Pilate asks him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” (Mt. 27:11). Matthew reports that, earlier, when Jesus entered the city of Jerusalem, riding on a colt, “the whole city was in turmoil, asking ‘Who is this?’” (Mt. 21:11). Early on in their travels with Jesus, the disciples find themselves riding with him in a boat when a storm comes up. They panic and cry out. Jesus calms the storm and, amazed, they ask out loud, “What sort of man is this, that even the winds and sea obey him?” (Mt. 8:27). When he walks on water, they think he is a ghost (Mt. 14:26). When the crowds in his own hometown hear his teaching, they ask: “Where did this man get this wisdom and these deeds of power? Is not this the carpenter’s son? . . . Where then did this man get all this?” (Mt. 13:54-56). Jesus himself asks the disciples, “Who do the people say that I am?” And then, with eyes focused directly on them, he asked the most penetrating question there is: “But who do you say that I am?” (Mt. 16:15).

The question is everywhere in the gospels. It is the question that everyone confronted by Jesus is eventually compelled to ask—whether they are meeting him for the first time or have known of him all their lives. It is the question that the Bible itself begs us not to avoid or dismiss or answer too quickly. It is the question the whole church strives to answer, and yet one to which each of us personally must somehow respond.

## II

John the Baptist put the question as compellingly as anyone. John was in prison at the time, so he sent his disciples to ask it of Jesus. John knew, perhaps, that he might never get out of prison, and he probably sensed that the violence of the Roman Empire against which he had so forcefully railed would eventually ask for his head—which, in fact, it soon did. King Herod literally put John’s head on a platter and served it up at a royal banquet (Mt. 14:1-12). It is not the least bit unlikely that John the Baptist felt all this coming, and perhaps that is why he sent his disciples to Jesus to ask him directly, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”

John the Baptist was the one to whom Jesus had come for his own baptism in the River Jordan. John was present when Jesus rose from the waters and so he, too, saw the

heavens open and heard the voice from heaven saying, ‘This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased’” (Mt. 3:13-17). This same John, who had seen and heard all this, is the man who—in prison now and facing his own imminent death—still needs to ask, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”

What is John the Baptist asking here? What John is asking, I think, is this: he is asking whether in Jesus we truly do see the promises, purposes, character and power of God made present to us in human form. Do we see in Jesus—despite the darkness—the light of everlasting hope? Do we see in Jesus—however fierce the violence that surrounds and threatens us, or even wells up from within us—the still stronger and more ultimate power of everlasting peace and healing? Do we see in Jesus—even as we struggle with our own fears and failures, sins and temptations—the embodiment of a kind of forgiveness and assurance that releases us from our burdens and frees us for new life? Do we see in Jesus—even as we face our own dying and deaths—a presence so full of life that we know somehow it is eternal? Do we see in Jesus the very face of God?

That is what John was asking. And that, in fact, is what they were all asking—not only Jesus’s disciples, but also the crowds and even his enemies. Whether they loved him or feared him, whether they were astonished by him or threatened by him or were just confused, what they all had to ask and what they all had to decide was whether Jesus was the one who had come from God, was of God, and was God’s living presence among human beings on earth.

### III

How did Jesus answer John’s disciples when they put the question to him? “Go and tell John,” Jesus said to them, “what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.” (Mt. 11:4-6)

Tell John what is going on out here, Jesus says. John can’t see it right now, because he is stuck behind those prison walls. He may never see it, because they are after his head. But tell him it is true. Tell him it is all beginning to come to pass: the seeing and the walking, the cleansing and the hearing, the healing and the hope, the new life and the good news—all this is under way. And tell him that, no matter what, the new thing coming will not and cannot be stopped. Jesus’ answer to John’s disciples is “look around, pay attention, notice what is happening—and tell John what you see.”

But that is not all. By answering the question in the particular way he does, Jesus is sending a message back to John in a code that he knows John will understand. For the specific words Jesus gives John’s disciples to carry back with them are quotations from the Hebrew scriptures, from the book of Isaiah. They are words and phrases from the prophet Isaiah’s great vision of the restoration of Zion, and of the ultimate healing and restoration of creation itself.

“The wilderness and the dry land  
shall be glad,  
and the desert shall rejoice and blossom;  
like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly,  
and rejoice with joy and singing.

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,  
and ears of the deaf unstopped;  
then the lame shall leap like a deer,  
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

A highway shall be there,  
and it shall be called the Holy Way;  
the unclean shall not travel on it,  
but it shall be for God’s people;  
no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.

And the ransomed of the Lord shall return,  
and come to Zion with singing;  
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;  
and they shall obtain joy and gladness,  
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.”  
—Isaiah. 35:1-2a, 5-6a, 8, 10

Tell John what you see going on in my ministry right now, says Jesus, but be sure to put it to him in exactly this way and he will know that these are not simply isolated, one-time, extraordinary events. They are, tell John, precisely what he has hoped they would be. They are, in fact, what, on the day of my baptism, the Spirit of God said they would be. They are the first fruits and sure guarantee of God’s ultimate promise to Israel and to the whole of creation. This is, indeed, the fulfillment of God’s promise of redemption.

Who is Jesus? He is the one who is to come, the promised Messiah, the very face of the living God. We do not need to keep looking for someone else. We don’t need to keep wondering whether God’s promises are sure or whether there is some other power more powerful than God’s own grace. No, all these questions are resolved. So, whatever happens, live in confidence, live in hope. “Blessed are those who take no offense at me.” Happy are those—sustained and assured and free to live are all those—who get it, who see that this is what the whole thing is all about.