

Who Was Jesus?



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Matt. 16:13–16, John 20:26–28, 1 Cor. 1:18–27, 15:3–7.*

Memory Text: “When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say the Son of Man is?’ ” (Matthew 16:13, NIV).

From the earliest days of His ministry, there was discussion and debate about Jesus. How interesting that those discussions continue, even today. They began with the people of His own times and from His own town. “ ‘Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?’ they asked. ‘Isn’t this the carpenter’s son? Isn’t his mother’s name Mary . . . ?’ ” (*Matt. 13:54, 55, NIV*).

It is what might be called *the scandal of the particular*: The Messiah had to come from somewhere, all right, but not from a place so familiar to us, and certainly not from a family that is just like the rest of ours! In one form or another, the same fundamental concerns expressed by these local townspeople concerning His identity have framed the debate about Jesus across the centuries, heightening the mystique around Him.

Who, indeed, was Jesus? Why was He confused with other prominent Jewish characters? What were the challenges to Jesus’ integrity and identity in the centuries following the New Testament era? How convinced were the Bible writers of His identity, and why? These are some of the questions that our first week’s lesson will examine.

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, April 5.*

Not the Baptist *(Matt. 16:14)*

The question raised by Jesus' own townsfolk (*Matt. 13:54, 55*) came up repeatedly during His public ministry, and in a variety of ways, as people in the different areas of Palestine encountered Him. Thus, as He went through the region of Caesarea Philippi with His disciples, some six months or so before the final showdown of His life, He felt the need to draw them out on the critical question of the day: "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" (*Matt. 16:13, NIV*).

Read the disciples' response in Matthew 16:14. What does this say about their familiarity with the theological questions of the day? Why do you think Jesus wanted to bring up this issue at this specific time?

The report on what people were saying about Jesus probably provides insight into how different individuals and groups experienced His ministry in their own setting. How was it possible for some to think that Jesus could be John the Baptist when the two were contemporaries? And what aspects of Jesus' ministry may have resembled that of the Baptist?

For possible answers, consider the following passages:
Matt. 3:1–3; 4:12, 13, 17; 14:1, 2; Mark 1:1–5.

Today, of course, we hardly can understand how it was possible to confuse Jesus with John the Baptist. But given the absence of mass communication in the first century and the abundance of secondhand information and rumor, confusion came easily. After all, the ministries of John and Jesus were not without parallels, as the passages above show. But those who had actually encountered John should have been left with no uncertainty (*Matt. 3:11, 12; Mark 1:6–8*).

It is easy to look back at the mistakes of others and wonder how they could have done what they did. What lessons can we learn from watching these mistakes that can help protect us from making the same kinds of mistakes?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Matthew 16:13–15*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Understand that Jesus’ life and ministry were not just myths, but He was truly the Messiah—Son of the living God.

Feel: Sense a need to be one with Jesus—a personal Savior to every believer.

Do: Profess that Jesus came to save a fallen world from the disastrous effects of sin.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Who Do Men Say That I Am?

- A** The question of Jesus’ identity was repeated throughout His ministry.
- B** The disciples were familiar with who Jesus was.
- C** Jesus wanted the disciples to be sure of who He was, in spite of what others were saying.

II. Savior or Prominent Historical Figure?

- A** In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, new scientific criteria would be applied to the study of the Bible.
- B** Rational thought replaced the biblical view of a divine being coming to rescue humanity from sin.
- C** Jesus was no longer presented as a Savior but as a historical figure—a good man and teacher who lived long ago.

III. Biblical Faith Prevails

- A** By the twentieth century, the scientific view of Jesus began to waver.
- B** Today, the Christian point of view prevails among many—upholding Jesus as the Savior of a sinful world.
- C** Our faith in Jesus rests on the accounts of the disciples, who witnessed the many miracles of Jesus and testified that He was the Messiah.
- D** Jesus Himself claimed to be the Son of God.

► **Summary:** Over the centuries there has been much debate about the true identity of Jesus. However, in spite of scientific applications to Bible teachings, faith in Jesus as the Savior of the world prevails.

Not Elijah or Jeremiah or Some Other Prophet

Read again Matthew 16:14. That people should mistake Jesus for John is one thing. But for Elijah? Or Jeremiah? Or some other Old Testament prophet? Where did such ideas come from?

Elijah was the fearless prophet of Mount Carmel fame, the fire-brand who had the temerity to confront Israel's recalcitrant king and demonic wife. He was the one who held forth alone against the combined religious establishment in Ahab's corrupt regime (*see 1 Kings 18*).

Jeremiah ("the weeping prophet"), coming upon the scene at a time of intense national ferment and crisis, conveyed a message to his compatriots that could not have been more unwelcome to the national mood—and he paid for it, too (*Jer. 20:1, 2, 7, 8*).

As for the rest of God's faithful prophets in the Old Testament, Jesus in His scathing woes upon the scribes and Pharisees left Israel's treatment of these godly stalwarts for the last, as if to suggest that it was the central point He wished to make: " 'So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets' " (*Matt. 23:31, NIV*).

What significance do you see in the fact that Jesus' contemporaries identified Him with these particular personalities?

To have been mistaken for any of the characters included in Peter's response in Matthew 16:14 was clearly a high compliment. These were spiritual giants whose sterling character held deep resonance in Jewish society. But however flattering, such comparisons (as we have come to know) fell utterly short of truth. If Jeremiah had said, for instance, that he was the light of the world, history would have considered him demented. And however spectacular the victory on Carmel, had Jesus quailed in the face of threat, as did the ancient hero of Carmel, we now would not be falling at His feet in reverence. The confusion of Jesus with these ancient stalwarts, however gratifying and intriguing, falls completely short of the reality portrayed in the Gospels.

What is the main difference between Jesus and all these other prophets, and why is that difference so important to us? *See John 1:1–5, 17:5, Heb. 1:1–3.*

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Just for Teachers: We focus this quarter on Heaven’s most important gift to us—Jesus! Nothing in history is as great or as significant as the Person of Jesus; His life and ministry; His teachings and His promises; and His death, resurrection, and return. Each lesson this quarter presents an opportunity to motivate your class to discover anew the wonder that Jesus is. At the end of each lesson, class members should be led to have a fresh and life-sustaining experience with Him.

A thousand questions confront us each day, but none is so crucial as the one that Jesus Himself raised: “ ‘Who do people say the Son of Man is?’ ” (*Matt. 16:13, NIV*). A truthful answer provides meaning to our life in the midst of chaos and defines our destiny in terms of eternal life and fellowship with God.


Discuss with the class two aspects of this question. First, who do people today say Jesus is? Consider atheists, Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, scientists, philosophers, and others. What do they say about Jesus? Second, who do you say Jesus is? How does your answer affect your life?

► **STEP 2—Explore**

Just for Teachers: Who was Alexander the Great? Who was Abraham Lincoln? Who was Mahatma Gandhi? Who was Martin Luther King Jr.? Who was Karl Marx? Knowing the right answer to these questions may or may not make any difference to the way we live. Not so, the question, Who is Jesus? Explore with the class the importance of this question.

Bible Commentary

Matthew 16:13–17 is basic to the understanding of Christ and His mission. When Jesus asked the question, “ ‘Who do people say the Son of Man is?’ ” He was challenging every generation and every human being

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The Fascination Continues: Part 1

The New Testament does not speculate about Jesus. It simply presents Him as the divine Son of God. Nor does it answer the numerous concerns about Jesus' being and person that would occupy succeeding generations. Yet, in all the discussions and arguments, there was a rock-bottom acceptance of the centrality of Scripture and the basic identity of Jesus Christ.

But the so-called Age of Enlightenment (of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) would change all that. No longer would Scripture constitute the foundation of discourse about Jesus. Instead, new methods and criteria being applied to the study of other ancient documents also would be applied to the Bible. With everything now subject to rational analysis and criticism, supernaturalism—a foundational presupposition of biblical faith—was rejected. The traditional biblical view of a human race steeped in sin and needing divine rescue was replaced by humanism, an optimistic belief in human capacity and progress.

The change of outlook was so radical and far-reaching that many thought they were witnessing the end of Christianity. Religion was considered obsolete, and reason, once the handmaid of theology, became its acknowledged mistress. The result was that the focus now shifted from the Jesus described in the Gospels, the Jesus of our salvation, to the historical Jesus, supposedly the real Jesus as He actually existed without the theological baggage superimposed by the Gospels and later Christian piety. In other words, this Jesus, whoever He was, surely was not the Savior of the world.

As you reflect on these developments, consider the following: (1) The Gospel writers were very confident in the truth of what they had written (see *Luke 1:1–4*). What does Luke say about what he is writing? Why can we trust it? (2) One of those eyewitnesses that Luke speaks about was Peter, who himself had to confront doubters and skeptics (see *2 Pet. 1:16–21*). Though Peter is speaking here about issues wider than the single one about Jesus' identity, how might we use his approach to secure ourselves against the Enlightenment onslaught we are discussing here? (3) Paul also needed to address the issue of Jesus head-on. How did he argue the case? See *1 Cor. 1:18–27, 15:3–7*.

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

with the need to face the issue honestly and squarely. Three common attitudes emerge: indifference, admiration, and acceptance.

I. Indifference

Nazareth typifies indifference to, and rejection of, Christ: “ ‘Isn’t this the carpenter’s son?’ ” (*Matt. 13:55, NIV*). Yes, Jesus was a carpenter, but He was more than that. It is this additional dimension of the nature of Christ—that Jesus is God in the flesh—that offends many. Nazareth was blind and indifferent to Christ for the same reason that many today are indifferent to Him. Christ makes His appearance not as a good teacher, or a miracle worker, or a consummate dispenser of wisdom but as One who demands to Himself absolute adherence as the Son of God. That claim to divinity is too bitter to swallow for those who are seething in self-importance. And self is the first thing Christ commands us to give up.

Nazareth saw Jesus as its Son, confined to a geographic and historic locale. But Jesus cannot be so confined. He is the Creator of the world and the Lord of history. And what’s more, He must ever be understood as God’s self-disclosure to sinful humanity. He is Emmanuel—God with us (*Matt. 1:23*).

Consider This: Why does indifference to Jesus mean denial and rejection?

II. Admiration

Admiration of Christ as a great man, a towering moral authority, a teacher without peer, a great prophet, has been history’s common verdict. The disciples themselves answered Christ’s question by referring to what others were saying about Him—that He was John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets (*Matt. 16:14*). Each offered a recognition of dignity and authority. Each was a symbol of moral and spiritual courage against evil of his time.

Christ is greater than these. Yet, who has ever defined or lived ethics as Jesus did? Who has ever taught the magnificence of love as Jesus in the

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The Fascination Continues: Part 2

The so-called historical Jesus movement was founded on the belief that we still can find in the Gospels sufficient data to reconstruct the portrait of Jesus as a historical figure, notwithstanding the theological tampering by the early church (as alleged by Enlightenment thinking). The new approach to studying Jesus was seen by its advocates as scientific, and thus in keeping with the mood of the times.

The trend held sway until the twentieth century, when new studies helped undermine this whole movement, showing how this historical Jesus idea was utterly unscientific and subjective. Studies exposed the entire rationalistic enterprise as a miserable failure.

The historical studies of Jesus are long, winding, and complicated; and they need not detain us further, except to mention the so-called Jesus Seminar, a contemporary group of radical scholars determined to succeed where other historical quests before them failed. Their goal is to “‘rescue Jesus from the spin doctors’ who wrote the Gospels.” —Roy Hoover, in Kenneth L. Woodward, “The Death of Jesus,” *Newsweek*, April 4, 1994, p. 39.

Few today take the Jesus Seminar people seriously. (After all, how seriously can you take people who argued that instead of being resurrected, Jesus, after His death, was eaten by dogs?) Today, the prevailing Christian position insists that Christianity stands on a firm, historical foundation. Notwithstanding two millennia of criticism and controversy, Jesus remains the undisputed Master of the centuries.

In one of his most penetrating rejoinders to the intellectual sophisticates of his day, Paul zeroed in on the essence of the Christian proclamation: “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (*1 Cor. 1:18, NIV*). Why is the message of the Cross so important for us today, as well?

Read also 1 Corinthians 1:18–27. What message is there for us in those verses? What are some of the things we believe that just cannot be explained by the “wisdom of the world” (vs. 20, NIV)? In what ways has “God made foolish the wisdom of the world” (vs. 20, NIV)?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

parable of the good Samaritan or the lost son? Who in the endless drama of world history spoke and modeled a kingdom of grace?

Yes, Jesus is a person without match. He is worthy of all admiration. But that's not the answer Christ expects. He demands an either/or answer: Either He is God or He is not.


Consider This: Why is admiration of Jesus—as a good man, a remarkable teacher, or a martyr—not an acceptable answer?

III. Acceptance

Answers to who Christ is vary. However laudable such answers may be, Christ is not interested in adoration or flattery. What others say does not matter. Individual decision must not be colored by crowd psychology or another's perception. Jesus' demand is personal and intimate: "What do you as a person say?" To this pointed question came the profound reply from Peter: " 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God' " (*Matt. 16:16, NKJV*). Peter's confession unequivocally accepts that Christ is of God and that He is the Messiah. Such a Christological confession cannot come from human discovery, and Jesus was the first to point this out: " 'Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven' " (*Matt. 16:17, 18, NKJV*).

To know Christ, we must turn to God's revelation. Only those who accept His revealed Word and the working of the Holy Spirit will be able to say that Christ is "my Lord, my God" (*John 20:8*) or with Paul, "God blessed for ever" (*Rom. 9:5*). Such a confession is a result of *not knowing about Christ* but *knowing Him*—in person, in faithful acceptance, and in loyal obedience.

Consider This: Why did Christ's ministry often involve one-on-one situations (*Matt. 19:16–23, Luke 18:35–42, 19:1–10, John 3:7, 1:43–49, 4:21–24, 5:5–9*)?

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Messiah, Son of God *(John 17:3)*

Who Jesus was is not simply a theological proposition to be proved or disproved. No, we are dealing here with the faith of untold numbers over the centuries. If Jesus is not what they have believed Him to be, then they have all been clinging to falsehood and fables and are all lost. If Jesus was simply a man who lived two thousand years ago in Palestine, then the Christian church has been involved in the most reprehensible hoax in the history of the world.

How do the following texts get at the heart of the issue?

Matt. 1:22, 23

Matt. 11:2–6

Matt. 22:41–45

Mark 14:61–64

John 20:26–28

The reaction of the disciples as they witnessed the miracle of the calming of the storm (*Matt. 8:23–27*) should be ours, as well: “ ‘What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!’ ” (*vs. 27, NIV*). The night of His arrest, the high priest put a direct question to Jesus and charged Him to answer under oath: “ ‘Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.’ ‘Yes, it is as you say,’ Jesus replied” (*Matt. 26:63, 64, NIV*). And in Pilate’s judgment hall, the governor had his own query: “ ‘Are you the king of the Jews?’ ” Jesus’ response was the same: “ ‘Yes, it is as you say’ ” (*Matt. 27:11, NIV*).

By any measure, these were two extraordinary responses. If Jesus, only the son (as was believed) of a humble carpenter from Nazareth, could have the boldness to answer Yes to Pilate’s question about kingship, He obviously was thinking of realities that transcend this world. And that is what we saw in His response in the high priest’s palace: “ ‘In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven’ ” (*Matt. 26:64, NIV*).

Thus, the Gospels (and the rest of the New Testament) make it clear: In Jesus we have in human flesh the Son of the Living God, the One entitled to extend the exceptional invitation, “ ‘Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest’ ” (*Matt. 11:28, NIV*).

Learning Cycle CONTINUED► **STEP 3—Practice****Thought Questions:**

- 1 “Never can humanity, of itself, attain to a knowledge of the divine.”
—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 412. Why?
- 2 What was Satan’s motive in each of the three temptations he used against Christ (*Matt. 4:1–11*)? Why was it necessary for Christ never to doubt His Sonship? Why is it necessary for us to accept Him as God’s self-disclosure?

Application Questions:

- 1 “They shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us” (*Matt. 1:23*). What does Christ as “Emmanuel” mean to your life in various aspects—mental, physical, social, communal, and spiritual?
- 2 Every religion has a basic message that is traced back to an important person: Judaism to Moses, Islam to Muhammad, Buddhism to Buddha, Hinduism to Krishna. But with Christianity, it is not merely the message of Jesus that is important but Jesus Himself. Begin with Him and then examine what He said and did. Why is the person of Jesus so important?

► **STEP 4—Apply**

Just for Teachers: We learned this week that Jesus is more than a great man, a wondrous teacher, and a profound prophet. He is the Son of God. Encourage your class to share what they can do with this great truth.

Thought Questions:

- 1 Jesus is the Son of God and often spoke of God as His Father. Jesus also taught us to address God as our Father. Is there a difference between His claim and our prayer? If there is, how does that difference affect our relationship to the Godhead?
- 2 As God’s Son, Christ came to reveal the Father (*John 14:9*), to glorify Him (*vs. 13*), and to do His works (*John 4:34, 10:32*). How does being God’s children impact our practical life as children of God?

Further Study: On the issue of Jesus' identity, read Ellen G. White, "Is Not This the Carpenter's Son?" pp. 236–243, in *The Desire of Ages*.

"Who is this Jesus? they questioned. He who had claimed for Himself the glory of the Messiah was the son of a carpenter, and had worked at His trade with His father Joseph. They had seen Him toiling up and down the hills, they were acquainted with His brothers and sisters. . . . They had seen Him develop from childhood to youth, and from youth to manhood. Although His life had been spotless, they would not believe that He was the Promised One."—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 237. "They would not admit that He who had sprung from poverty and lowliness was other than a common man."—Page 239.

"A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic . . . or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronising nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to."—C. S. Lewis, "The Shocking Alternative," in *Mere Christianity* (New York: McMillan-Collier, 1960), p. 56.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 What makes it easier for us, we who live two thousand years after Jesus, to accept Him as the Messiah, than it was for those who lived at the same time as Jesus to accept Him? What makes it more difficult?
- 2 Skepticism about Jesus is likely to continue as long as time shall last. What, for you, is the single most convincing evidence of the validity of Jesus and His saving grace? How could you share this evidence with others in a way that could help convince them, as well?
- 3 We looked this week at how the scientific rationalism of the Enlightenment had been used as a weapon against faith. What are some other types of "isms," or philosophies or ideologies, prevalent in your own culture that work against faith, as well? Most important, how can you meet these challenges?
- 4 As a class, go back over 1 Corinthians 1:18–27. What message is Paul giving that is important for all of us to remember?