

Alpha 1

Who Is Jesus?

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This morning we continue with our series of messages based upon the topics discussed in our new Alpha class. While I'm preaching on the same topic, the presentation at the class on Wednesday will be entirely different content. We are hoping those who participate in Alpha will also come on Sunday morning to reinforce the topic of the week.

If you would like to participate in Alpha, it is not too late to come. Come this Wednesday evening between 5:30 and 6:00 for the evening meal. Then the class will meet from 6:30 to 8:00 to explore the question "Who is Jesus?"

Even John the Baptist wrestled with this question.

Matthew 11:2-6

When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples ³to ask him, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?"

⁴Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: ⁵The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. ⁶Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me."

When Jesus began his ministry, John the Baptist was unreservedly supportive.

When John first laid eyes on Jesus, he turned to his followers and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." (John 1:29) John encouraged his disciples to follow Jesus. Several months later he is questioning who Jesus is: "Are you the one?" What happened to cause him to doubt that Jesus was the Messiah—the chosen One—the Lamb of God?

Perhaps one reason is because of what John the Baptist is experiencing in his life at this time. He is in prison. John was the sensation of the nation. Multitudes came to hear him preach. He was the Billy Graham of his day. He denounced corruption in the government and among the religious leaders. He called on sinners to repent. He even called on the king and queen to repent of their sins. Her majesty did not take kindly to

they were sinners. She convinced her husband, King Herod, to throw John in prison.

John is beginning to wonder: “If Jesus is the Savior of the world, why is my life such a wreck? Why would Jesus allow me to be thrown into prison unjustly? How can I believe in him when he is allowing my life to fall apart?”

There is another reason why John would experience some doubts about Jesus. He was offended by some of the things Jesus was saying. We can infer this from verse 6: “Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me.” While in prison John heard what Jesus was doing and saying. He found it offensive. How can Jesus make exclusive claims: “No one comes to the Father except through me.” “I and the Father are one.”

John is asking the same questions that many people ask about Jesus today. How can I believe in Jesus when he is allowing so much suffering in the world and in my life? How can I believe in Jesus who is so offensive in some of the things he says and does?

John is struggling emotionally with what is going on in his life and intellectually with the offensive things he hears about Jesus. If Jesus is all powerful and loving, how can he allow innocent children to suffer? How do we know that he really is the Son of God? Jesus does not say, “How dare you ask such a question!” Jesus answers John’s question.

What do we learn about Jesus from John’s questions and Jesus’ response?

First of all from John’s question we learn—we will not discover who Jesus is if we demand Jesus to meet us on our terms. John does not say, “Prove to me that you are the one by getting me out of prison.” He simply asks, “Are you the one?” One of the thieves on the cross mocked Jesus by asking, “If you are the Son of God, take yourself

s right now.” In other words, “Prove to me who you are by solving my problem.” Many people come to Jesus and make similar demands: “If you really are the Son of God, heal me from this illness and then I will believe in you.” “If you really are the Son of God, don’t let me remain unemployed any longer. Find me a job today and then I will believe.” “Heal my marriage, then I will believe.” “Find me a husband or a wife, then I will believe.” The thief on the cross assumes he knows how his life should be lived. It should not include hanging on a cross. He thinks he knows who he is and what his life should be like. If Jesus can deliver what the thief thinks life should be then he will believe in Jesus. John does not say, “I know I should be out of prison, therefore I know that if you are the Son of God you will get me out of prison.” John asks: “Are you the one? If you are then whatever you ask of me or allow me to go through will be worth it. You will go with me and you will bring glory into my life either here or in the life to come.”

Many people search for Jesus on their terms. The thief on the cross demanded: “Get me down, then I’ll believe.” When we come to Jesus with conditions, we are in charge. We don’t ask, “What does Jesus want for my life?” We tell Jesus what he ought to do for us. We set his agenda. We put ourselves in the role of God. Only the creator of life knows what is best.

John asked the right question: “Are you the one?” Until I know the answer to that question, nothing else matters. Is Jesus the one? Is he God in the flesh? Is he my Creator, Lord and Savior? Once that question is answered affirmatively then everything else falls into place. It changes my perspective about everything: my illness, my marriage or singleness, my job or lack of a job. If Jesus is Lord, then he is in charge. He defines my life and sets the agenda. He tells me what I need to do with my life, rather

what I think he should be doing in my life. If we come to Jesus with our demands, we will not discover who he is.

Another thing John did not ask was this question: “Are you the one or should we stop looking?” Instead he asks: “Are you the one or should we look for another?” If we reject Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, we will never be able to stop looking. We will keep searching for something to be our Savior and Lord. We will make success our Lord. We will make material things our Lord. We will make another person our Lord. We will seek to find meaning for our lives somewhere. Nothing other than Jesus will fulfill our deepest need for meaning and purpose. Jesus alone can offer us unconditional love, forgiveness, a new beginning, peace and power to live. If he is not the one, we will keep looking for something to take his place. John asks the right question: “Are you the one? Or shall we look for another?”

What can we learn from Jesus’ answer? In order to experience Jesus we need to feel his offensiveness. In verse six Jesus says: “Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me.” Those who are blessed are those who have wrestled with the offensiveness of Jesus, but do not turn away from him. If you don’t think Jesus is offensive, you are not looking at the real Jesus. You are dealing with a fabricated Jesus—meek and mild—who offends no one. If you take offense at Jesus and it causes you to fall away or reject him, then you are not looking at the evidence.

It is a good thing when we are offended because we get rid of the vague, sentimental notions we have about Jesus. When we feel his offensiveness, we are beginning to wrestle with the reality of who he claims to be.

Why was John offended? He was offended by the claims of Jesus and by the Cross of Jesus. If you listen to the claims of Jesus about himself, he sounds like a

person with delusions of grandeur. These are the reports John heard, and they alarmed him.

Jesus made such claims as: “Before Abraham was I am.” When he used the phrase “I am”, everyone in the Jewish community knew that he was using the name of God spoken to Moses from the burning bush. Jesus was claiming to be the “I am”—the eternal God who existed before Abraham and Moses. Jesus said, “I will come back to judge the living and the dead.” God alone is the judge. Jesus again was claiming to be God. “I and the Father are one.” He leaves not doubt that he is claiming full equality with God. He allows people to worship him as God. John thought Jesus made bolder claims about himself than the Messiah should make. For John, the Messiah was a human leader sent by God to rescue the Jewish people from the Roman Empire and make Israel the ruler of the world. But for John, the Messiah was not God in the flesh. The idea that God could become a man offended John the Baptist. And it offends many people today. John had to work through his offense at the claims of Jesus. Either Jesus was a mad man or a power monger. Or he was who he claimed to be: the Son of God, fully equal with God.

John also was offended by the talk about a cross. The cross meant Jesus chose a path of weakness. John expected the Messiah to be a great military leader that could overthrow the Roman Empire. Jesus would be vulnerable and allow himself to be killed. How could he be God in the flesh and allow himself to be killed? The cross still offends many people today. The cross says that we are so lost, so bad that it requires the death of the Son of God to save us. Jesus takes upon himself what I deserve. When I look at the cross, I have to say: “That is what I deserve because of my sins against God.” That is very offensive to many people. We don’t like to think that we are so bad that we deserve the death penalty. But separation from God, the source of life, results in death.

ted ourselves from God and gone our own way. We are under the penalty of death. We need God's grace to save us.

Unless we feel the offensiveness of Jesus, he will never be a transforming presence in our lives. We need to see the real Jesus; not our fabricated ideas about Jesus. We want a Jesus who says, "I love you just like you are and don't want you to change a thing. Come on into heaven." Jesus does love us as we are. But he loves us too much to leave us as we are—broken, incomplete and far short of what we were created to be. Jesus wants to transform us into what he designed us to be. Only the power of God can do that.

If Jesus was inoffensive, why did they kill him? If he was meek and mild, why would have sought to kill him? Why would anyone kill Mr. Rogers? Jesus was crucified because he was offensive. If you don't think Jesus was offensive read the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7)! Jesus did not come offering suggestions, he made commandments. To a rich young ruler he said: "Go, sell all that you have and come follow me." Jesus made people look at themselves and see that they deserved a cross—they deserved to die. Yet he came to offer his life in our place.

Feel offended, but look at the evidence about who he is. Yes he is offensive, but look at what he does: "The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor." Jesus might sound like a megalomaniac, but look at how he lives and what he does. He does not try to oppress the weak or arouse the crowds to join him in conquering Rome. Instead he came to set every weak person free. He came to save all his children with grace by offering his life for them.

The greatest offense of all is that I have to honestly look at how bad I am and that it is impossible for me to save myself. I have to admit that I need a Savior. When

we are beginning to see the real Jesus who claims to be God in the flesh and the only way for us to be saved. Jesus said: "I am the way the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." At that point we either turn and walk away or we fall on our knees and call him Lord and ask him to be our Savior. How will you respond to the real Jesus?