

More than a Man

Scripture: Matthew 16:13-17

Code: B231218

Many people acknowledge Jesus at Christmas in a way they wouldn't the rest of the year. They might tip their hats to His existence or even nod their heads to His exemplary life. But for the masses, He remains the still depiction of the baby in a manger, as they hurry by nativity scenes to attend their festivities. So, Christmas after Christmas, the obvious question goes unanswered: *Who is Jesus?*

Jesus asked His disciples the same question in this way: "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" (Matthew 16:13).

This question introduced the climax of Jesus' teaching ministry. It was, in effect, the apostles' final examination, consisting of but one question, the ultimate question that every human being must face: Who is Jesus Christ?

How we answer this question is of monumental importance, because our eternal destiny hinges on it. It is a question that no one can escape or avoid. Every soul, as it were, will be pinned against the wall of eternity and forced to answer that question.

For some two and a half years, Jesus had been moving to this moment—teaching and reteaching, affirming and reaffirming, demonstrating and re-demonstrating, building and rebuilding the truth of who He was in order to establish it completely and securely in the minds and hearts of the twelve disciples.

During the previous several months, the Lord had largely shunned the crowds and the Jewish leaders. His encounters with them were few, brief, and terse. The misguided multitudes wanted to make Him their political deliverer from the military bondage of Rome and the capricious ambitions of Herod. The scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees were, for the most part, thoroughly convinced He was a threat to their corrupt religious system and were determined to be rid of Him, by taking His life if need be.

As He spent more and more time alone with the twelve, Jesus went more often into Gentile territory and stayed longer. He withdrew to the fringes of Palestine in order to be free of the misguided and fickle adulation of the multitudes and the growing hostility of the Jewish religious leaders.

Matthew 16:13 introduces this episode, "Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi."

The city of Caesarea Philippi was originally named Paneas (or Panias), after the Greek god Pan, who, according to pagan mythology, was born in a nearby cave. Caesar Augustus had given the region to Herod the Great, who built a temple in Paneas in honor of the emperor. Herod's son, Philip

the tetrarch, inherited the land, greatly enlarged the city, and renamed it after Caesar. He added the name Philippi both to gain honor for himself and to distinguish this Caesarea from the one on the Mediterranean coast west of Jerusalem.

Caesarea Philippi was located about twenty-five miles northeast of the Sea of Galilee and forty miles southwest of Damascus, on a beautiful plateau near the headwaters of the Jordan River. A few miles to the north, snow-covered Mount Hermon rose to a height of more than nine thousand feet above sea level. On clear days the majestic mountain can easily be seen from northern Galilee towns such as Capernaum, Cana, and Nazareth.

Caesarea Philippi was but a few miles from the ancient Jewish city of Dan, which for centuries had been considered the northernmost boundary of the Promised Land, the southernmost being Beersheba (see Judges 20:1; 1 Chronicles 21:2). On the north it was the last outpost of Israel and had always been especially susceptible to pagan influence.

The location provided Jesus and the disciples welcome relief from the hot Galilean lowlands and from the pressure of the Jewish leaders and the threat from Herod Antipas.

From Luke 9:18 we learn that Jesus posed His all-important question to the disciples just after He had spent time praying alone, and from Mark 8:27 that the group had not yet arrived in the city of Caesarea Philippi proper but were passing through some of the villages on the outskirts. At this crossroads of heathenism and Judaism, Jesus left a time of intimate fellowship with His heavenly Father and confronted His disciples with the question that every person and every religion must one day answer:

[Jesus] was asking His disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets.” (Matthew 16:13–14)

“Son of Man” was Jesus’ most common designation of Himself and is used of Him some eighty times in the New Testament. It was clearly recognized by Jews as a title of the Messiah (see Daniel 7:13), but because it emphasized His humanness, many Jews preferred not to use it. No doubt it was for that reason that Jesus did prefer it—to focus on the humiliation and submission of His first coming and His work of sacrificial, substitutionary atonement.

Jesus’ priority ministry in the world was to reveal Himself, to teach and to demonstrate who He was. He therefore began the examination by asking His disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” The people to whom the Lord referred were the Jews, God’s chosen people, to whom the Messiah was sent first (Romans 1:16; cf. John 4:22).

It was not that Jesus was unaware of what the people were saying about Him, but that He wanted the twelve to think carefully about those popular perceptions. He was not concerned about the opinions of the unbelieving and hypocritical scribes and Pharisees, some of whom had even accused Him of being in league with Satan (Matthew 10:25; 12:24). He was rather asking about the thoughts of those who looked on Him positively, although uncertainly, and who recognized Him to be more than an ordinary religious leader. After hearing His teaching and witnessing His miracles, what was their final verdict about Jesus, the Son of Man?

“Some say John the Baptist,” the twelve replied. Perhaps following the frightened assessment of Herod the tetrarch (Matthew 14:1–2), some of the Jews believed Jesus was a reincarnated John the Baptist, come back from the grave to continue his ministry of announcing the Messiah. Like Herod, those people recognized that Jesus’ miraculous power was unexplainable on a human basis.

Others believed Jesus was a reincarnated Elijah, considered by most Jews to be the supreme Old Testament prophet, whom the Lord was to send again “before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord” (Malachi 4:5). In modern Jewish Passover celebrations an empty chair is reserved at the table for Elijah, in the hope of his one day coming to announce the Messiah’s arrival.

Still others said Jesus was Jeremiah, another of the most revered prophets. In the apocryphal book of 2 Maccabees (2:4–8), Jeremiah is said to have taken the Ark of the Covenant and the altar of incense out of the Temple and hidden them on Mount Nebo in order to preserve them from desecration and destruction by the Babylonians. Some Jews thought that before the Messiah returned to establish His kingdom, Jeremiah would return to earth and restore the ark and the altar to their proper places in the Temple. The same apocryphal book pictures a white-bearded Jeremiah handing a golden sword to the great Jewish hero Judas Maccabaeus to use in overthrowing the Greeks (15:12–16).

Some of the people perhaps saw in Jesus something of the character and message of John the Baptist. Some saw in Him the fire and intensity of Elijah; and still others saw in Him the lament and grief of Jeremiah. In all three of those identities, however, Jesus was thought to be only the Messiah’s forerunner, who had come back to life with God-given miraculous powers.

The rest of the people who recognized Jesus’ uniqueness did not speculate about His particular identity but simply considered Him to be one of the prophets who was “risen again” (see Luke 9:19).

In each instance the people considered Jesus to be a forerunner of the Messiah but not the Messiah Himself. They could not deny His supernatural power, but they would not accept Him as Messiah and Savior. They came as close to God’s ultimate truth as they could without fully recognizing and accepting it.

Since Jesus’ day, much of the world has similarly wanted to speak highly of Him without recognizing His deity and lordship. Pilate said, “I find no guilt in this man” (Luke 23:4). Napoleon said, “I know men, and Jesus was no mere man.” Diderot referred to Jesus as “the unsurpassed”; Strauss, the German rationalist, as “the highest model of religion”; John Stuart Mill as “the guide of humanity”; the French atheist Renan as “the greatest among the sons of men”; Theodore Parker as “a youth with God in His heart”; and Robert Owens as “the irreproachable one.” Many in our own day share those same views. But all those titles and descriptions fall short of identifying Jesus as He fully is—the Messiah, God in human flesh.

After the disciples reported what the multitudes were saying about Him, Jesus then asked, “But who do you say that I am?” Next time, we’ll look into the correct answer to this all-important question. The twelve knew that most of the people’s views of Jesus were inadequate. Now they had to answer for themselves.



(Adapted from [The Deity of Christ](#))

Available online at: <http://www.gty.org>

COPYRIGHT (C) 2025 Grace to You

You may reproduce this Grace to You content for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Grace to You's Copyright Policy (<https://www.gty.org/about#copyright>).