

Questions JESUS ASKED



A SIX-WEEK STUDY IN THE GOSPELS

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CHAPTER

1

“Who Do
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“Who Do You Say That I Am?”

Luke 9:18-27

Once when Jesus was praying by himself, the disciples joined him, and he asked them, “Who do the crowds say that I am?”

They answered, “John the Baptist, others Elijah, and still others that one of the ancient prophets has come back to life.”

*He asked them, “And what about you? **Who do you say that I am?**”*

Peter answered, “The Christ sent from God.”

Jesus gave them strict orders not to tell this to anyone. He said, “The Human One must suffer many things and be rejected—by the elders, chief priests, and the legal experts—and be killed and be raised on the third day.”

Jesus said to everyone, “All who want to come after me must say no to themselves, take up their cross daily, and follow me. All who want to save their lives will lose them. But all who

lose their lives because of me will save them. What advantage do people have if they gain the whole world for themselves yet perish or lose their lives? Whoever is ashamed of me and my words, the Human One will be ashamed of that person when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels. I assure you that some standing here won't die before they see God's kingdom."

(Luke 9:18-27, emphasis added)

Our journey through the questions Jesus asked begins with the most foundational and consequential of them all: "Who do you say that I am?" Your answer to that question determines more than your belief about Jesus; it reveals what you believe about yourself, your relationship to Christ, and your perspective on life.

We find the question in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and it serves as the pivot point in each of their narratives. Following Peter's answer to the question, and after some additional teaching from Jesus, we read the story of the Transfiguration, which becomes a literary gateway into the second half of Jesus's ministry, leading to Jerusalem and the events of Holy Week.

The events leading up to Jesus's question differ slightly depending on which Gospel you read. In Matthew and Mark, Jesus posed the question as the disciples were passing through the villages near the city of Caesarea Philippi. He had just fed the multitudes with a handful of loaves and fish, been pressed by Pharisees who sought to trap him, and healed a blind man. Jesus and the disciples were now amid the busy crowds near one of the largest cities in the north. Lots of activity, lots of people, lots of noise: that was Matthew and Mark's setting for this question.

Luke tells it a bit differently. In Luke Jesus is all alone. He had just fed the multitudes and then departed for some time to pray. In Luke, the setting is a pause, a breath, a moment of reflection for Jesus and the reader of the Gospel.

Same question, two settings: the busyness of Matthew and Mark, the quiet and stillness of Luke. Both are an occasion for the key question when it comes to our faith: Who do you say that I am?

I suspect that the most consequential, existential questions of life come at one of those two kinds of moments.

We ask deep questions when life is busy and noisy. Amid the hustle and bustle of daily living, with the pressure of deadlines and spinning plates, and fewer hours in a day than are sufficient to check off every item on our to-do lists, we wonder, “Is this all worth it?”

Amid the noise of competing perspectives and the deepening schisms between polarized ideologues, we ponder, “Whose voice should I listen to?”

We ask equally deep questions when life is quiet. In the stillness and dark of late-night insomnia, with eyes wide open and minds racing, we ask ourselves, “What is the meaning of it all?”

In our most honest, authentic prayers, we cry out to God from the deepest parts of our souls, “Who are you? Where are you? And who am I?”

In busyness or stillness, we may ponder the questions that matter the most.

Then, in Luke, Jesus is interrupted. Just as he often was throughout his ministry, his moments of quiet prayer were cut short—like the time he departed to the other side of the

lake to pray, or like the time he was asleep in the lower deck of the boat while a storm brewed outside. Here, as he found another rare moment to be by himself, his disciples sought his attention. But this time, he turned the interruption into a chance to ask them a crucial question. When the disciples arrived, Jesus spoke first:

“Who do the crowds say that I am?”

The disciples, who had apparently been keeping their ears to the ground and were in touch with the latest public opinion polls, responded with the most popular answers: John the Baptist, Elijah, one of the ancient prophets come back to life.

When we experience something new and awe-inspiring, we use familiar language to get our heads around it.

Those were all understandable answers. When something novel comes along, we tend to take our impressions of it and squeeze it into the old and familiar. When the internet was new, we described it as the “information superhighway,” likening it to a gravel and asphalt road. We adopted the word *email* to liken electronic messages to postal delivery. When the first astronauts traveled into space and sent back pictures of Earth, people used the phrase “big blue marble” to describe what our planet looked like from a distance. When we experience something new and awe-inspiring, we use familiar language to get our heads around it.

Such was the case for this important question that Jesus asked his disciples. Who do the crowds say that I am? *John the Baptist*. Yes, he was like John the Baptist. Jesus was a

compelling voice that called people to repentance, action, and a new way of living. But he was more than that. *Elijah*. Yes, he was like Elijah. Jesus was unafraid to challenge those in power and was always ready to aid the poor and vulnerable. But he was much more than that. One of the *ancient prophets*. Yes, he was like the prophets of old, always speaking a message from God, calling people to obedience and surrender. But Jesus was much more than that as well.

As it turns out, that question was just the setup. It was the opening act for what would be the most important question Jesus would ask his disciples—and us:

“And what about you? Who do you say that I am?”

Our journey through the questions of Jesus begins with this, the most significant one of all.

Peter’s answer was clear—“The Christ sent from God.” *The Christ*, he said. The one foretold by the prophets, the one we have awaited for generations, the one whose arrival had been in motion ever since the fall of Adam and Eve in the garden.

And, the *Christ*. That is, the *Messiah*. Christ, from Greek, and Messiah, from Hebrew, both mean “Anointed One.” Jesus is the Anointed One, the Christ, the Messiah. No other person in history had received or deserved this title, and no one would thereafter. Though prophets, priests, and Judah’s kings were anointed, the anointed one—the Christ—came to mean in the Second Temple period a figure sent by God, who would usher in God’s kingdom. Jesus, Peter says, is that figure. The Christ. Luke is the only Gospel to use the verb form of the word, *chrrio*, “to anoint,” when Jesus used it in his very first public sermon, in the synagogue, in Luke 4:18-19:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me.
He has sent me to preach good news to the poor,
to proclaim release to the prisoners
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to liberate the oppressed,
and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*

For Luke, Jesus is “the Christ” because he has been *anointed* by the “Spirit of the Lord.” That is the only qualification and requirement necessary for being the Christ, and it is exclusive to the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

But there is one more thing Peter said. Jesus is not only “the Christ”; he has been “sent from God.” He is not simply a human being who transcended into divine status. He is not merely a good teacher who shared holy teaching, or a miracle worker who showcased God’s power. He was sent from God, or in other translations, simply, “the Christ of God.” In other words, Jesus has a divine origin. He is from God. The early church saw everything Jesus did, wrestled with what it meant, and came to this conclusion: Jesus was one and the same as God. Jesus the Christ was God who had come down to be a human among us. Not just a messenger of God, like John the Baptist, or a spokesperson of God, like Elijah, or a representative of God, like the ancient prophets. When Peter said that Jesus was the Christ sent from God, he expressed the church’s first insight into this great mystery.

Jesus was God, anointed by God, sent by God.

In this one verse, in this one question by Jesus and in Peter’s clear and direct response, we see the full Trinity on display, long before it would be codified as a doctrine of the church.

Jesus, the Son of God, was sent by God the Father and anointed by God the Spirit.

That, in a nutshell, is the answer to the question, “Who is Jesus?”

So that’s it, right? The most important question in the entire Gospels was answered correctly by Peter, and that ought to do it, right? From here, all Peter and the disciples would have to do is share that answer, communicate that message, and the gospel story could be over, and this book that you are reading could end right here. Right?

Not so fast. Because here we discover that the *right* answer is not always the *complete* answer. Especially when it comes to Jesus.

Remember again how Jesus asked the question: “Who do you...*you*...say that I am?”

The question for you and me to answer is not simply, “Who is Jesus?” To use our three-category framework from the introduction, this is more than just a factual question. It is not enough to answer it with doctrinal accuracy or theological clarity. We can answer factual questions correctly, as Peter did. Nor is it simply an interpretive question, inviting us to form opinions about Jesus based on his words and actions and the testimonies of others. To answer it evaluatively—that is, fully and completely—we need to decide what impact the answer will make on our own lives. Anything less is a mere intellectual exercise. And Jesus came to influence much more than just our minds.

This is why Jesus responded to Peter and the disciples the way he did. He did not say, “That’s right. Good job, Peter.”

Instead, “Jesus gave them strict orders not to tell this to anyone,” then taught that he must suffer and die. In essence, Jesus told them, “OK. I am the Christ sent from God. But there’s more to it than that. In fact, don’t say a word to anyone about your answer to my question, because it is incomplete. It’s only partially right. It’s a good start, but there’s more to know.”

Here is exactly what he said in response: “The Human One must suffer many things and be rejected—by the elders, chief priests, and the legal experts—and be killed and be raised on the third day.”

Then, in verses 23-27, he drilled down on the specifics of what this would mean for them.

“All who want to come after me must say no to themselves, take up their cross daily, and follow me. All who want to save their lives will lose them. But all who lose their lives because of me will save them. What advantage do people have if they gain the whole world for themselves yet perish or lose their lives? Whoever is ashamed of me and my words, the Human One will be ashamed of that person when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels. I assure you that some standing here won’t die before they see God’s kingdom.”

If you really believe that Jesus is “the Christ of God,” then everything in your life ought to change. You need to say no to yourself, take up the cross, and follow Jesus. You need to lose your life in order to save it. Gaining the whole world or saving your reputation no longer matters. The only thing that matters is orienting your entire life toward living out the kingdom of God.

Are you ready to answer the questions Jesus asked?

We all have questions for God, but growth happens when we turn things around and ask what Jesus wants to know about us. Why are you terrified? What do you live for? Who do you say that I am? In *Questions Jesus Asked*, author Magrey deVega explores six of the most provocative questions Jesus posed to others. When we dare to raise them, these questions bring us a fuller appreciation for the wisdom, power, and presence of God in our lives.

Jesus is the answer? Jesus is the question! He asked plenty, and still asks questions of us. Magrey deVega, like a trusted friend, a wise sage, sits with us in this thoughtful book as together we reflect on the simple but transformative questions Jesus raises, waiting for the answer that is an inquiring, courageous life of sticking close to him. What a gift deVega has opened up for us!

James Howell, Senior Pastor, Myers Park United Methodist Church

Magrey deVega brings us on a journey from Jesus's factual, interpretive, and illustrative questions to experiencing Jesus himself. DeVega dives into the often-uncomfortable questions we sometimes wish Jesus had never asked in order to bring about our own spiritual growth.

Matt Rawle, author of *Jesus Revealed* and *The Heart That Grew Three Sizes*

*Jesus's habit of asking insightful questions led followers to go deeper and desire more. Questions hold great processing power, and in *Questions Jesus Asked*, Magrey deVega invites readers to wrestle with six of Jesus's most challenging questions. For all those curious and courageous enough to expand their faith, this study is for you!*

Rachel Billups, pastor and author of *Be Bold: Finding Your Fierce*



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