

Mark: Who is Jesus?

Mark 8:27-30

By [Dr. Derek Thomas](#)

January 9, 2005

The story is told of John Duncan, “Rabbi Duncan” as he was affectionately called...nineteenth century professor of Semitic languages at the Free Church College in Edinburgh...a man of considerable ability in many, many languages...the story is told that his students wondered whether he prayed in Hebrew. And two of them, apparently, one evening made their way to his door, his bedroom door, and overheard his prayer. And in the course of his prayer, it was the words of that hymn, *Fairest Lord Jesus*, that he was reciting in his prayer.

We return now this evening to the Gospel of Mark, and at this particular point, in many respects, this is a turning point in the Gospel of Mark.

Jesus’ ministry in Caesarea Philippi is often seen by Bible commentators—both in Mark’s Gospel and especially in Matthew’s Gospel—as the turning point. It is from this point onwards that Jesus begins in earnest to speak of His impending death in Jerusalem. As perhaps never before in His ministry, the focus now of almost everything that He has to say will take Him inexorably to Jerusalem and to His crucifixion.

We come this evening to Mark, chapter eight, and verses 27 through 30. Before we read the passage together, let’s come before God in prayer.

Once again, O Lord, we bow in Your presence. We need Your help at every turn, and especially as we read Your holy word. Holy Spirit, come and grant us illumination we pray; enlighten our eyes, our minds, our hearts, our affections, that we might read, mark, learn and inwardly digest for Jesus’ sake. Amen.

Hear with me now the word of God.

“And Jesus went forth, and His disciples, into the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way He asked His disciples, saying unto them, ‘Who do men say that I am?’ And they told Him, saying, ‘John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; but others, one of the prophets.’ And He asked them, ‘But who say ye that I am?’ Peter

answereth and saith unto Him, 'Thou are the Christ.' And He charged them that they should tell no man of Him."

Thus far God's holy and inerrant word.

It's difficult to find anyone who is critical of Jesus. Paul, yes! The church, most certainly; but not Jesus. Jesus is seen as the fearless critic of the establishment. He's seen as the champion of the poor. He's seen as the friend of social outcasts, the advocate of love and tolerance. But who is Jesus?

Dan Brown, the author of *The DaVinci Code*, thinks Jesus is the son of a relationship between Mary and Joseph, and that Jesus married Mary Magdalene, and that their daughter, Sarah, was whisked off together with Jesus to France...with Mary Magdalene, to France...and that the genes of this relationship are now part of the Merovingian Dynasty.

The retired Bishop of Newark, John Shelby Spong, believes that the narratives about Jesus in the Gospels are Midrash.¹ That is, they're part of an ongoing Jewish way of telling stories, and that what we read in the Scriptures about Jesus is not to be read as though there were lying behind it any particular historical facts; they're just a way of telling stories. They were not intended to say anything factual about the details of the birth or the life of Jesus.

Dr. Barbara Thiering (she's an expert on the Dead Sea Scrolls, a lecturer in Australia) —she says Jesus was part of a sect that lived near Qumran; was married, had three children, then he divorced and remarried, and he didn't die on a cross.

The Jesus Seminar folk—Robert Frunk and John Dominic Crossen—using a color-coded system...red for authentic, gray for not authentic but close, and black for definitely not authentic...voted that only eighteen percent of the statements or the sayings of Jesus that are recorded in the New Testament are true, or probably true. "Put simply, their red-letter Bible doesn't have a lot of red in it."

Turning to the central issue of the resurrection of Jesus, the *Seminar* released

¹ Midrash. In Rabbinic Judaism, a running exposition and ever-evolving commentary upon the Hebrew scriptures, i.e., the Tanakh. Exegetical materials attached to the (Hebrew) Scriptures, written and preserved by the scribes. Study of the Midrash has generally confirmed the Gospels' picture of first-century Judaism. They sometimes take the form of stories or retellings and elaborations of the stories at hand. The Midrash is the second major body of the oral Torah (after the Talmud), consisting of halachic or homiletic material couched as linguistic analyses of the Biblical text. An individual text of midrashic material is also called a Midrash. Often people use the word "midrash" to mean a post-biblical story that "fills in" some "missing" aspect of a biblical story or embellishes it. A more technical definition of traditional midrash might be: a teaching, legal or homiletic, that is derived through the word-play between the teacher's words and one, or usually more, biblical texts. From the Hebrew "to interpret, to explain," the halakhic or haggadic traditions transmitted as an explanation or commentary on a biblical verse. There are separate volumes of midrashim for each of the biblical books

the following conclusions: that the resurrection of Jesus did not involve the resuscitation of a corpse; it wasn't something that could be recorded on a video camera; that belief in Jesus' resurrection does not depend on what happened to His body, that the body of Jesus decayed as do other corpses.

Who is Jesus?

Jesus is asking His own disciples this very question. "Who do men say that I am?" He's going to go on and ask, "Who do you say that I am?" but for now He's asking them the question, "Who do men..." (who do the people of Galilee, for example...of northern Galilee, where He's been ministering and from where most of these disciples have come)..."Who do men say that I am?"

Jesus is in Caesarea Philippi. It's the ancient city of Banias. It's about as far north as Israel ever went, about about 25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee, about 125 miles from Jerusalem. In its recent past the Greeks have constructed a shrine to one of their pantheon of gods, namely Pan, the god of herds and shepherds...herdsmen and shepherds.

Following Alexander the Great, of contemporary fame, of course, following the exploits of Alexander the Great from about 195, 198 BC or so, a major battle took place here in Caesarea Philippi, where Antiochus the Great defeated the Egyptians and took Israel for the Seleucids

After Herod died in 4 BC, it came under the authority of Herod's son, Philip, who renamed it Caesarea Philippi—after himself, of course, but also and wisely so after the Caesar—Tiberius Caesar.

Later, in the time of the destruction of Jerusalem, AD 70 or so, there would be gladiatorial shows held here in Caesarea Philippi, where executions for the sport of the people would take place. It's a significant place. Those of you who have been to Israel have probably been on a tour of Caesarea Philippi, and you've been to the so-called location of the shrine of the god Pan.

And here one of the most significant exchanges in the Gospels takes place: a conversation between Jesus and His disciples. And He's asking His disciples this question. It's a fundamental question. I can't think of a more important question: "Who is Jesus? Who do men say that I am?"

And these disciples are somewhat confused; we've seen that in the Gospel of Mark. Their views about Jesus are in the process of formation, but they are by no means, even at this stage, definitive. And so there are many answers now being given as to who Jesus is. Some say that He's John the Baptist. John the Baptist is dead, of course; he's been executed. But there was a belief and especially by Herod Antipas, who put him to death, that he would come back to life again and

haunt him. And there were some who were saying that Jesus is John the Baptist come back to life again. Others were saying that He is Elijah. There was a long-standing belief in Israel that Elijah would come back again. You remember: he never died. He was taken to heaven in a chariot of fire, and there was a growing mythology surrounding Elijah's return and what Elijah perhaps would do; and especially so because the very last book of the Hebrew Bible, the book of Malachi, mentions the return of Elijah. Jesus will identify Himself later as that Elijah figure, the one who would come in Messianic robes; but there were those who now believed that He was Elijah and that perhaps the great Day of the Lord had actually dawned, and all the implications of that.

Clearly the prevailing sentiment was that Jesus was a great man. He was a religious figure of some importance. People have always held views like that about Jesus—that He's a great teacher, that He's a great leader, that He's a great influencer of people. He's one of history's great figures. After all, approximately a third of the world's population—something like two thousand million people on the face of the globe today—state that they are followers of Christ in some form or another.

He inspires all kinds of followers. He inspired a band of ascetics, monks, hermits like John the Baptist, who ate locusts and wild honey, and wore sandals...and there were sects down through the ages—John the Baptist-like figures—who saw in Jesus a call to asceticism. Byzantine art portrayed Him as *Pantocrator*, the cosmic figure more god than man. Medieval art portrays Jesus as a pale complexioned figure with a halo on His head and His feet never quite touching the ground.

At the other end of the scale, in the Enlightenment Period, late seventeenth, early eighteenth centuries, they saw Him as the teacher of common sense. One of your own Presidents, Thomas Jefferson, published two editions of the Gospels with all references to the miracles removed, based on that very portrayal of Jesus Christ.

To others these figures of Elijah are reminiscent of some of the great freedom fighters of the world. Jesus is like Che Guevara. When I was a student—it dates me somewhat back into the Sixties, I know—but there were students who wore tee shirts with a picture of Che Guevara. They wouldn't have known Che Guevara from Santa Claus, but they wore his picture on their tee shirt. Fidel Castro has spoken of Jesus as “the great revolutionary.”

Some of you have read Upton Sinclair's novel, *They Call Me Carpenter*, written in 1922. It's based in New York, in a church, St. Bartholomew's Church, and a picture of Jesus in a stained glass window comes to life. They begin at first to call Him “Mr. Carpenter”, and later they call him “Prophet Carpenter.” He goes about healing people and delivering people from sicknesses, and he delivers a Mary Magna from prostitution; and then he begins, Amos-like, to castigate the rich, and

draws the ire of the people, and they call him a Trotskyite, and a Bolshevik, and they capture him and pour gallons of red paint on him. And he escapes, and he leaps back into his window, and behold, it was all a dream.

Who is Jesus Christ?

According to the latest banner research, as a group the nation (America, that is) about equally divided on whether Jesus lived a sinless life; and more surprisingly, of those who regard themselves as born again only seven out of ten think that He was [sinless].

C. S. Lewis, the oft quoted, remarked in *Mere Christianity* that “anyone who claimed the kind of things that Jesus claimed could not possibly be a great moral teacher or a prophet. He would have to be either God or else a lunatic of the order of the man who claims to be a poached egg.”

Who is Jesus Christ?

It's the most important question that we can ask, and people are still asking it two thousand years later after the birth of Jesus Christ, in the wake of the movie, Mel Gibson's movie *The Passion*, who is Jesus Christ?

And that's what Peter is answering. Jesus turns to Peter. “Who do you say that I am?” And Peter answers, “You are the Christ.” Some of you, of course, will remember the longer version of it in Matthew's Gospel, in Matthew 16: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” And you remember Jesus' words: “Flesh and blood hath not revealed this unto you, but My Father which is in heaven.” And then, you remember the great statement in Matthew 16 about building His church: “His name is Peter, and on this rock I will build My church and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.” But here in Mark's Gospel we have the shorter version, the more condensed version, because Mark is always for the more condensed version: “tell the story quickly” is Mark's motto! “You are the Christ.”

Christ means more than just a surname. He's Jesus Christ, but not in the sense of Derek Thomas. It's not the equivalent of Thomas. It's not His surname or anything like that. *Christ* is the Greek title; it's the name *Christos*, which translates the Hebrew for *Messiah*, for *the anointed One*. In the Old Testament there were three groups of people who were anointed: they were prophets, priests, and kings. And that's in part the reason why, especially in the Reformation and especially in the writings of John Calvin we have come to think of Christ along those three offices of Prophet, Priest, and King.

The Qumran community in the centuries prior to the birth of Jesus had long since

believed—it was part of their reason for existence—that Messiah would come; that the great deliverer, that promised deliverer of Israel, would come. There was a fervent expectation of Messiah in the Qumran community. The idea of a king-like figure who would come and restore the fortunes of Israel was prevalent in the day and age in which Jesus was born. The disciples were well aware of it. They held some of these views themselves.

Ever since the collapse of the Davidic monarchy, King David's line, ever since the Babylonian captivity of 586 BC, Israel for 600 years had been a nation in captivity. They had been enslaved in some form or another to a foreign power, and there was a longing, an immense longing amongst certain groups of society for this deliverer, for this Messianic figure to come and deliver Israel from its bondage.

Jeremiah had prophesied that great statement in Jeremiah 23: “The days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will raise up David, a righteous branch, a king who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. It was what they heard when they went to synagogue, it was what they heard on the great feast days in temple worship in Jerusalem, that Messiah would come; that a better day would dawn, that the darkness would be driven from the land, and that the occupying forces (and currently they were the Romans) would be banished.

The Jews, then, had this expectation of Messiah. There had been some glimpses that Messiah might in fact have come. There was the so-called Hasmonean Dynasty—we're going back a couple of hundred years before the birth of Jesus. The Roman Empire sent Antiochus Epiphanes IV out of Egypt and back up into Syria, and on his way back up into Syria he ransacked Jerusalem. He pillaged the temple, desecrated the temple. It's prophesied in the Book of Daniel. And as a consequence of that colonization of Jerusalem there arose the so-called Maccabeans, and one especially, Judas Maccabeus (and some of you might know an opera or two in the figure of Judas Maccabeus), and he was a great figure for the Jews. He was a freedom fighter, and for a very small period of time it looked as though Israel would once again be free from foreign domination, but it wasn't to last. Judas Maccabeus was not the Messiah.

Later Pompey's seizure of Jerusalem in about 63 or 64 AD would bring about similar expectations of a coming Messiah.

“You are the Christ,” Peter says. You are the Messiah. You're the One that the Old Testament has spoken about. Of course people had all sorts of ideas about what “Messiah” actually meant, what the term *Christ* actually meant, and that's in part why Jesus says now to Peter and the rest of the disciples, don't tell anybody that I am the Messiah, because I need to instruct you as to what Messiah actually means. After all, for the Qumran community it had meant going into some kind of ascetic lifestyle; for Herod it had meant political compromise; for the Zealots it had meant taking up a sword and fighting the Romans.

Who is Jesus of Nazareth?

Peter says, "You are the Christ." You are the Messiah: the Messiah of Old Testament expectation. He's God's deliverer of His people. What exactly did Peter understand? I don't know. I suspect that Peter is speaking beyond his understanding. I expect that it's one of those things that Peter blurts out, and he really believes it, and then when you ask him what it is that he believes...he's not sure. Jesus is going to instruct him. We'll see part of that instruction next week, and part of that instruction will be teaching that the Messiah is someone who will have to die on a cross in Jerusalem. It wasn't, I think, part of Peter's understanding of what a Messiah would look like, because for the vast majority of people, Messiah would be a political figure. He'd be a man with a sword in His hand to send the Romans packing, and make Israel significant on the global map once again.

And Jesus has to re-teach, and reinstruct Peter; and so He says to Peter, "Right now, don't tell anyone about this." Peter had heard Jesus say to a man, "Your sins are forgiven you." And no man can say that, only God can say that. Peter had seen with his own eyes Jesus walking on the Sea of Galilee. He'd seen Him calm a storm with a word. He'd seen Him feed five thousand men, and perhaps ten or twelve thousand in all, and on another occasion four thousand, with just a few loaves and fishes.

He'd heard and seen Jesus say and do astonishing things. He'd glimpsed something of Jesus' greatness. Peter was a Jew, and his father Jonas before him, and Jonas' father before him, and on back through the generations they'd been hoping for the coming of the promised Messiah, the age when God would put everything right. With His mighty arm He would shake the people free again, and He'd bring to pass the crushing of Satan's head, and the occupying forces would be driven and banished from the land.

There were pictures, weren't there, in the Old Testament of deserts turning into gardens and orange groves; and spears would be turned into gardening implements; and the kings of the earth would come to Jerusalem and they'd bow and acknowledge the mighty Maker of heaven and earth; and God would set His Messiah on the throne of David, and He would be "wonderful counselor, the mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace."

Yes, You're the Messiah, Peter says. You're the One. You're the Christ. You're the promised One. You're the deliverer. But Peter hadn't put it all together yet. I think Peter spoke, as I said, beyond his understanding. Peter saw this: that Jesus of Nazareth was Messiah. God was working in his heart. God was removing the blindfold that naturally lies over every Adamic heart, opening his eyes to see who Jesus actually is. God gave him faith to believe that Jesus truly was Messiah,

and Peter is ready to cast his lot on this man, the One who is more than man, the god-man, Jesus Christ.

Millions have found that to be true. They've examined Jesus and said, "He is the deliverer. He frees me from my sin. He's a Savior, a mighty Savior." Isn't that what the angel said to the shepherds in Bethlehem? "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." This Messiah is a Savior. He's a deliverer—He's a deliverer from sin!

He's a deliverer from the guilt of sin, and that, my friends, is our greatest need.

That's our greatest need, and that's what Peter needs to learn: that the biggest problem that we have is not the Roman Empire, it's not the occupying forces of the land in which we live; the biggest problem that we have is the barrier that sin causes between us and God. And Jesus is the One who delivers us from that barrier.

In Sunday School this morning I was teaching on Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and I came to this wonderful, wonderful section where Christian finally loses his burden.

"I saw in my dream that the highway up which Christian was to go was fenced on either side with a wall, and that wall was Salvation. Up this way therefore did burdened Christian run, but not without great difficulty, because of the load on his back. He ran thus till he came to a place somewhat ascending, and upon that place stood a cross, and a little below, in the bottom, a sepulcher. So I saw in my dream that just as Christian came up with the cross, his burden loosed from off his shoulders and fell from off his back and began to tumble, and so continued to do till it came to the mouth of the sepulcher, wherein it fell, and I saw it no more.

Then was Christian glad and lightsome, and said with a merry heart, "He hath given me rest by His sorrow and life by His death." Then he stood still a while to look in wonder, for it was very surprising to him that the sight of the cross should thus ease him of his burden. He looked therefore, and looked again even till the springs that were in his head sent the waters down his cheeks.

Now as he stood looking and weeping, behold, three shining ones came to him and saluted him with, "Peace be to thee." So the first said to him, "Thy sins be forgiven thee." The second stripped him of his rags and clothed him with change of raiment. The third also set a mark on his forehead and gave him a roll with a seal upon it, which he bade him look on as he ran, and that he should give it in at the Celestial Gate. So they went their way.

Then Christian gave three leaps for joy, and went on, singing,

Thus far did I come, laden with my sin;

Nor could ought ease the grief that I was in
Till I came hither.
What a place is this! Must here be the beginning of my bliss?
Must here the burden fall from off my back?
Must here the strings that bound it to me crack?
Blest cross! Blest sepulcher! Blest rather be
The Man that there was put to shame for me.

You're the Deliverer; You're the Savior; You're the Christ; You're the Messiah. You are the One who is going to deal with the problem of my sin. Peter didn't understand all of that yet. My friends, I wonder this evening do you? I wonder if I can put this question to you tonight: Who do you say Jesus is? Is He your Savior? Is He your Deliverer? Is He the One who will lay down His life on your behalf on the cross of Calvary, for the guilt of your sin? Is He the One who will clothe you with the spotless robe of His righteousness and present you faultless before the throne of His grace with exceeding joy?

I wonder this evening if you know anything of what Bunyan meant when he described Christian's burden rolling off his back, down into that sepulcher and disappearing, and then giving three leaps of joy, because he had found Christ, the Messiah, the Savior.

Let's pray together.

Our God and our Father, we come into Your presence again at the end of this Lord's Day evening. Lord Jesus Christ, You have been seeking us in different ways and different times. You've knocked at the door. And tonight we come and confess that we believe the claims that You make about Yourself are true. You are indeed the Christ, the Son of the living God. We see in the pages of Holy Scripture our Savior living for us, dying for us, rising for us. We come to You, Lord, Savior, Redeemer, Reconciler, Deliverer. We lean upon You entirely. Take away our sins. Grant to us, we pray, the assurance that our sins are truly forgiven and that we have peace with God, and that we are clothed now in the righteous robe of the spotlessness of Christ. And grant, we pray, a new heart and new affections, and a new sense of direction to follow You wherever it is that You lead us, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Please stand, receive the Lord's benediction.

Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.

This transcribed message has been lightly edited and formatted for the web page. No attempt has been made, however, to alter the basic extemporaneous delivery style, or to produce a grammatically accurate, publication-ready manuscript conforming to an

established style template. Should there be questions regarding grammar or theological content, the reader should presume any website error to be with the webmaster/transcriber/editor rather than with the original speaker. For full copyright, reproduction and permissions information, please visit the FPC Copyright, Reproduction & Permission statement

©2013 First Presbyterian Church.

This transcribed message has been lightly edited and formatted for the Web site. No attempt has been made, however, to alter the basic extemporaneous delivery style, or to produce a grammatically accurate, publication-ready manuscript conforming to an established style template.

Should there be questions regarding grammar or theological content, the reader should presume any website error to be with the webmaster/transcriber/editor rather than with the original speaker. For full copyright, reproduction and permission information, please visit the First Presbyterian Church Copyright, Reproduction & Permission statement.

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#) (Thirdmill). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*.

Subscribe to *Biblical Perspectives Magazine*

BPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like BPM itself, **subscriptions are free**. To subscribe to [BPM](#), please select this [link](#).