

The Story: Believe In Me
By Jason Huff
Psalm 2:1-8, Hebrews 1:1-9, Mark 8:27-38

Today's final Scripture reading is from Mark 8:27-38. Listen now to the Word of God. "Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, "Who do people say I am?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Christ." Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him. He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. "Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men." Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels.""

Who do you say I am? Six little words make up the greatest question Jesus ever asked of His disciples. It's also the greatest question Jesus ever asks of us. The way we answer with our words and our lives determines our eternal fate. If you don't know how to reply, your soul is in mortal jeopardy. How you answer this question can determine whether or not you live in peace with God in this world and the next. Most of you know me as a laid-back sort of guy; I don't use scare tactics and I don't feel the need to be "in your face." But the theme of this week's chapter in *The Story* is of supreme importance – because if you say you are a believer in Christ, what we're going to talk about today is the primary content of what you need to believe.

In the last few weeks, we've seen all the things that Jesus does. He teaches. He heals. He performs miracles. He upsets the status quo and the teachings of the self-righteous Pharisees. He travels from place to place talking to ordinary people about repenting of sin and following God. But apart from what He does, who is He?

As the passage today tells us, the people thought a lot of things about Jesus. Some thought He was a great rabbi and amazing teacher. Others gave Him credit for being a prophet, a visionary who could speak God's Word to His people and see into the future. These were true, of course, but they weren't nearly enough. Still others knew their Scriptures and remembered that the book of Malachi promised that Elijah would return before the Day of the Lord, the point at which God would judge all the nations. They assumed that somehow Elijah had returned as Jesus. Still others had such a respect for the ministry of John the Baptist that when John died, they mistakenly thought that he had returned to life as Jesus. Confusion reigned. Jesus was so extraordinary that everyone knew He was special. They just couldn't figure out what that meant.

That's when Jesus put the question to His disciples. Those He met on the road for a few minutes at a time, who He taught for a day or two or three, it made sense that they weren't sure of His true identity. But the disciples had been with Him for years, hearing each lesson taught several times, privy to the explanations of the parables, seeing His daily life and His eagerness to obey the will of God the Father. If anybody knew Him, it would be them. What did *they* say?

This incident is recorded in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and all of them record Peter's response that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ – the term that means “anointed one.” From our study of the Old Testament, we know that the “anointed ones” were kings – Saul and David were anointed by Samuel to become the first kings of Israel. But it means more than that. In Matthew and Luke, Peter explains further, saying that Jesus is God's particular anointed one and is the son of the living God. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus commends Peter because this truth was revealed to him by God and not from himself. But in all the gospels, Jesus warns them not to tell anyone of this truth.

Why not? It's because the Jewish people had a very different expectation of the messiah than what He truly was. As the anointed one, the Jews expected that the messiah would be a warrior-king like David, who would overthrow Rome and establish a permanent golden era for Israel. He would destroy the enemies of God by force and finally give Israel its rightful place in the world. And many people were willing to be a part of this messiah's army. You might have heard of somebody who forcefully defends their views as a zealot. Well, the term comes from the original Zealots, who were part of a Jewish religious party dedicated to removing the Romans by force. At least one of Jesus' disciples, Simon, was identified as a Zealot. Had Jesus said the word, thousands of these Zealots and their sympathizers would have been more than happy to try and take Jerusalem and Rome by the sword on His behalf.

But Jesus didn't want that at all. As He immediately explains, the role of the messiah is not that of a warrior-king but of a suffering servant, one who is abused by the religious leaders and dies by their hands and rises again. The messiah would not set the physical kingdom of Israel free from Rome; instead, the messiah would set free all who came to Him from their bondage to the kingdom of this world, from their bondage of sin and death and judgment. He would release them to become joyful servants of the Most High God. But to do that, Jesus would have to suffer and die. He was to be the sacrifice made to satisfy the Law, to pay the penalty for sin, to turn aside the wrath of God against those who had turned away from Him.

Even for those who weren't zealots, this isn't what they had in mind. Peter refused to believe it, telling Jesus that He shouldn't speak that way, that he and the disciples would defend Him. But just as Jesus complimented Peter's faith, He also spoke harshly against Peter when Peter talked about getting in the way of God's plan. Jesus quickly speaks to the crowd and the disciples about their need to become servants willing to lay down their lives for God just as He plans to do. They must be willing to abandon everything to proclaim His name and the salvation that will come from His death on the cross.

The confession of Jesus as the Son of God continues. When Jesus walks on the water, those in the boat worship Him, calling Him the Son of God. At the resurrection of Lazarus, his sister Martha confirms it to be true. The gospel writers claim it. And at His eventual trial, Jesus Himself confirms that He is God's own Son.

But it doesn't end there. When we think of a father and a son, we think of two different people. Yet there is an incredibly special, unique, even unfathomable relationship between the persons of the Trinity – the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are differentiated, but they are all still God. And this is what got Jesus into so much trouble with the religious leaders of His day. They knew He was claiming to be equal to God the Father revealed in the Old Testament. In John's gospel, Jesus makes eight statements about Himself with the phrase “*eigo eimi*”, which means, “I am.” He says, “I am the bread of life.” “I am the good shepherd.” “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” “I am the light of the world.” “I am from above.” All of these claims were things that could only be true of God Himself.

Now remember in the Old Testament, God tells Moses that His name is “I AM WHO I AM”. When Jesus says to the crowd, “Before Abraham was, I AM,” Jesus is claiming that He is God. And later, when the soldiers and Pharisees attempt to take Jesus to trial, He identifies Himself as “I am.” When that happened, the crowd took a step back and fell to the ground. Jesus' claim was understood by even His enemies. That's what He was crucified for – Jesus received worship and made Himself equal to God, which made Him guilty of blasphemy in their eyes. And yet His miracles, His teaching, and His words convinced even some of the Pharisees that He was exactly who He said He was.

Herein lies the heart of the gospel, its very core. It begins and ends with who Jesus is. And what you make of Him determines what you really believe. This morning, I want to show you why there can be no middle ground; either you buy into Christianity or you don't, whether this is the ultimate waste of time or the ultimate redemption of time. It all has to do with Jesus' claims to being the Son of God and the second person of the Trinity.

Many years ago, theological thinker C.S. Lewis came up with a great paradigm that explains the dilemma we face in Jesus. It's become known as the “liar, lunatic, or LORD” discussion. Here's what Lewis says in so many words...you have only a few options when it comes to Jesus. The great teacher option taught by many of the world's other religions about Jesus is impossible for a couple of clear reasons. First off, Jesus claimed to be the Son of God. He claimed to hold the power of salvation exclusively in His hands. He dismissed the possibility of being saved through other faiths. The vast majority of His teachings point not to some universal truths everyone can practice but to Himself as the new Adam, the Son of Man through whom humanity could be redeemed.

The first possibility is that Jesus was a liar, plain and simple. He was deliberately misleading people into believing that He was someone He wasn't. His teachings were just a way to convince people of the fraud He was trying to perpetrate. The miracles Jesus did are hard to explain, and the Pharisees that opposed Jesus never denied that He did them. They said that Jesus did them by the power of demons. Or perhaps they were all just tricks – smoke and mirrors. But if this is the case, then Jesus cannot be a great teacher. In fact, He would be an imposter on a grand scale. If Jesus claimed to be the Son of God, and not just that but God Himself come to earth as fully human and fully God, if He wasn't, then His lie is among the greatest horrors ever perpetrated on the world.

The other possibility is that Jesus wasn't deliberately lying but was genuinely deluded. He believed what He said about Himself but was mistaken. If that's the case, His teachings are impossible to believe too...because how can you trust the words of someone who is convinced He is God? But not just would He be deranged, He would be the world's greatest sociopath, so completely convinced of His own delusion that He would live and die for it. The miracles would have been untrue as well – a masterful illusion by a crazy man so charismatic that He could convince the crowds of anything.

If Jesus was a liar or a lunatic – if He wasn't who He said He was – then there's nothing to learn by going to church. There's no way to sort the truth from the lies; they all flow together. It would be ridiculous to follow the words of a man who intentionally deceived people or was Himself deluded. But if the Bible itself isn't true and the words of Jesus are false, then the ramifications extend far beyond just Jesus' status as a good man or good teacher. The morals and ethics on which we base our lives are relative and not absolute. There are no standards of right and wrong except for what we personally decide. But even beyond that, the idea of life after death becomes dim at best. We have no assurance of God's love for us. We have no assurance of salvation. The rest of the world's religions do not agree with one another about how best to live or to please God. If you can't trust the words of Jesus, then the ancient philosophy was right – “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.” If Jesus cannot be trusted, then simply put, we have no hope. Death is the end of all things.

That leaves us with the third option – that Jesus told the truth, that He was indeed the Son of God, literally Emmanuel, “God with us.” If that is the case, if Jesus was God in the flesh, fully human and yet fully divine, then we have an answer to all the questions that confront us. If Jesus was just a man and not God, then He sinned by receiving the worship of His disciples and the crowds. We spent several months reading through the Old Testament learning how God would not allow His people to worship any other gods but Himself. If Jesus sinned by receiving worship that should be directed to God alone, He has no power to save us and again, we would have no reason to follow Him. But if Jesus was Himself divine, the Son of the Father as He claimed, His perfect life and atoning death cleanse all who would come to Him in faith. He has within Himself everything necessary to reconcile us, even in our sinfulness, with the Father.

That's the good news of Jesus' claim to being the Son of God. If Jesus is genuinely God's Son, then we who trust in Him and believe He is the Son of God are forgiven. We have hope. His words of life are true. God is preparing a place for those who believe. God has made a way for sinners to be made holy and righteous in His sight so they may enter His presence. There can be no doubt – God loves His creation, He loves us, and He was willing through Jesus to forsake all the glory that is rightfully His to be one of us, to live with us and die with us while we were still in rebellion against Him, in order to save us from sin.

If Jesus is the Son of God, then we are justified by faith before God. God doesn't see our sin when He looks at us; instead, He sees the righteousness of His Son. And even better, it's not just pretend; it's not a legal fiction, as some have called it. Through the Holy Spirit, God begins to change us so that we are not merely called righteous, but at the final judgment, He will have truly made us righteous. It's kind of like when you go to the dealership and buy a new car and take out a loan. From day one, we say that you own a new car, even though you're going to be paying on that car for a few years. When you accept that Jesus is the Son of God, the Savior who cleanses you from sin by His blood, God calls you righteous and accepts Jesus' sacrifice on your behalf, even though you still may sin, even though you are in no way perfect. But over time, God will work in you; He will make you perfect and mold you truly into the image of His Son.

And here's the really great news – when you buy that car, you're the one who makes the payments every month. But when God purchases you with His blood and begins the process of transformation inside of you, He's the one who does the work. He is the one who makes it all happen. Our part is simply to allow the Holy Spirit's work to happen inside of us, to allow the Holy Spirit to guide and direct our actions. Our part is to say “yes” and let God's work unfold in us and through us. All the works we do – all the people we share Christ with, all the needy we feed, all the mourners we comfort, all the sick we tend to and pray for – all of those actions come not from ourselves but God working in us, driving us on to be an ever-greater representation of His Son and His love for the world.

But be aware...when you acknowledge Jesus as the Son of God and as your Savior and Lord. As Paul says in his first letter to the Corinthian church: “You are not your own; you were bought at a price.” You are now a temple of the Holy Spirit, called to honor God with your body and mind and life. Those things that the world considers important, money and fame and power and sex and indulgence in whatever you want – those things are not the goals of the Christian life. Declaring that Jesus is the messiah means that you are renouncing the life you had before to claim the life Christ has purchased for you with His blood. It's a denial of the old self. It's also a daily choice. It isn't a one-and-done thing. The New Testament talks about the Christian life as one of perseverance, of running a marathon and gaining the crown of life after running the full race. It's also a life that faces rejection. Those who reject Christ will reject Christ's servants. It is not the promise of an easy life.

But what a life it is! To know that God loves you, that the maker of the universe has reached down His hand and saved you, that He has chosen you from before the creation of the world to be His child, that even in your rebellion and sin He would experience the suffering of this life and the agony of death on a cross for you...when you say that Jesus is the Son of God, worthy of all your praise and worship and time and energy, you will know the joy that comes from knowing that He is your savior, that your life has meaning and purpose, that through Jesus' gift you are declared righteous before God and are accepted and beloved in God's sight. God's grace will overflow through you to others, even in your most difficult days, because you will know the love of your Creator. You will know love is real. You will know He is real.

“Who do you say I am?” It's a question every human being must one day answer. Will your life show that you believe Jesus is the Son of God, the Savior? What will your answer be?