

Your Answer to This Question Makes All the Difference

Luke 9:28-36

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ February 11, 2018 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

²⁸ Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. ²⁹ And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³⁰ Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. ³¹ They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. ³² Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. ³³ Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah”—not knowing what he said. ³⁴ While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. ³⁵ Then from the cloud came a voice that said, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” ³⁶ When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen. (Luke 9:28-36, NRSV)

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Earlier in Luke 9, just before the passage we just read, we find Jesus alone with his disciples and he asks them this very straightforward question: “**Who do the crowds say that I am?**”

I want to bring that question forward to our time. What sort of answers do you think we would get if we put that question to the crowds today, the question of who is Jesus?

Video Clip Found At:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=johNLhZ5y48>

92% of Americans believe that Jesus was a historical figure, that he actually lived, though that number is steadily dropping. Less Americans, 56% to be exact, believe that Jesus was actually God. About 25% believe he was not divine but merely a religious or spiritual leader like Mohammed or Buddha, more enlightened than us perhaps, but otherwise just like us. Only half of Americans believe that Jesus was sinless, which means that there are actually some people who believe Jesus was God *and* sinful at the same time. About 60% of Americans say that they have made some level of

commitment to following Jesus, though that number is also dropping, especially among younger generations.¹ All this is to say that you will get a wide variety of answers today when you ask the crowds about Jesus.

The same was true when the question was first asked. When Jesus asked his disciples who the crowds said he was they responded with a similar variety of answers. Even then, not everybody believed the same things about Jesus. Some thought he was John the Baptist or Elijah come back to life. Others thought he was another important prophet who’d come along to point people back to God. Some, of course, believed he was a heretic, or a madman, or demon-possessed, somebody dangerous who needed to be stopped.

In the end Jesus put the question to the disciples themselves: “**But who do you say that I am?**” Peter, always the first one in class with his hand up, answered immediately, “**The Messiah of God.**” It was a good answer, and on hearing it Jesus told his friends to keep this revelation secret for now but also told them that because he was the Messiah, he must travel a pathway that would lead to suffering, rejection, crucifixion, and then ultimately resurrection. It was not exactly what they wanted to hear. They wanted to follow a Messiah, yes, but not a Messiah who was headed that direction.

So the question now reaches down to us over the ages. Who is Jesus? And so I ask you, what do *you* believe about Jesus? The church answer, the one that gets us a passing grade on the theology exam, is that Jesus is the Son of God, the Savior of the world and Lord over all creation. That’s the right answer. But do we believe it? Do you believe it? Over half of all Americans give this answer in some form or another. But do our lives then reflect that we actually believe this is the truth? Do we act in ways that demonstrate we really do believe that Jesus is the absolute center of everything?

There is a teachable moment about to happen here, not just for the disciples but for us as well. As they follow Jesus up the mountain to pray, Luke invites us along for the ride. As we go, this question is still running

¹ “What Do Americans Believe About Jesus? 5 Popular Beliefs”, *Barna*, April 1, 2015. See <https://www.barna.com/research/what-do-americans-believe-about-jesus-5-popular-beliefs/>

through our minds: Who exactly is this man named Jesus?

Well, as the story goes, in the middle of their mountaintop prayer time the unexpected happens. The appearance of Jesus suddenly changes. His clothes become blindingly brilliant and then out of nowhere none other than Moses and Elijah show up and begin talking with Jesus. But why these two? Why not Abraham and David? Or Esther and Ruth? Or Noah and Joshua? Well, in Jewish understanding Moses represents the law and Elijah represents the prophets. The law and the prophets, the sum of the Old Testament. These two figures, therefore, symbolize that the entire Old Testament is there on that mountaintop associating, if you will, with Jesus. The message is clear. Everything in Israel which has come before Jesus is ultimately connected to Jesus. Christ is the culmination, the fulfillment, of everything to which the law and the prophets had pointed.

Now, I know some people, even in the church, who are uncomfortable with this idea, this idea that the entire Old Testament and the entire story of Israel points us directly to Christ. But we must accept this truth. Jesus himself, after the resurrection when he met two confused disciples on the road to Emmaus wondering what the news of the empty tomb meant, made this crystal clear. Luke 24:27 records, **“Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, [Jesus] interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.”** Everything that came before Jesus pointed ahead to Jesus, which tells us a great deal about who he actually is, that he is the fulfillment of God’s redemptive work in the world which emerged through the people of Israel.

But this encounter on the mountaintop doesn’t just have us looking backwards but also forwards. Biblical scholars agree that Luke is giving us all sorts of clues here that tie the transfiguration forward to the resurrection. In other words, we are being given here a glimpse of glory which helps us anticipate the fullness of glory which is to come at Easter. For instance, the scene happens on the eighth day, the same day of the resurrection if you consider that the resurrection was the day after the Sabbath, the seventh day. Later in Luke when the women discover the empty tomb early that Sunday morning they are startled when two men in dazzling clothes appear.² Just after Jesus ascends to heaven, two men in white robes again appear to the disciples.³ Later, when the resurrected Jesus appears to

Saul on the road to Damascus he appears in dazzling light, brighter even than the sun.⁴

Who is Jesus? Luke is leaving us little doubt as to how he answers that question. The law and the prophets, all the Old Testament, stand in witness to the fact that this man is the Messiah. The glory surrounding him on the mountaintop that day reveals the future glory that will one day again be his in the resurrection. Peter, James and John, and us along with them, have everything we could ever need before us on that mountaintop to insure that we never again have to wonder about the answer to that question.

Even so, at that time Jesus looked like everybody else. You would have walked right past him on the way to the market and not noticed anything unusual about him. The Christmas carol describes him this way, “Veiled in flesh the Godhead see, Hail, the incarnate deity.”⁵ This is the eternal Son of God, yes, but he’s taken on humanity, become one of us, divinity veiled in flesh, like us in every way except sin.⁶ It’s understandable, therefore, how people get confused. In so many ways Jesus appears ordinary. But here on this mountaintop we glimpse behind the veil. This is a man, yes, but this is also God. He is entirely like us and entirely unlike us all at the same time.

Do we see it? Not everybody did back then, and not everybody does now. You see, this story isn’t just a teachable moment for Peter, James and John. It was for them at that time. But now Luke is writing to us. And just like sleep weighed down Peter and his friends, blurring their vision of what was right before them, the same can happen to us. Closed-mindedness keeps us asleep to the truth as we come to Jesus already having made up our minds about who he is before he even has a chance to reveal himself to us. Sometimes its laziness that gets in the way. Lots of people simply don’t want to think hard about the claims Jesus is making, to work them out, to reason them through. Still others have become comfortably numb, not at all ready to open themselves to the truth before them because the truth can be inconvenient or awkward or painful.⁷ But we are fools if we don’t wake up to what is right in front of us. Plato once said, “The unexamined life is the life not worth living.” Who is Jesus? Don’t sleep through that question. In fact, let nothing in this life hold you back from examining that question down to the very bottom of it.

⁴ Acts 26:13

⁵ From *Hark! the Herald Angels Sing*

⁶ Hebrews 4:15

⁷ William Barclay raises some of these questions in *The Gospel of Luke* (Westminster Press, 1953), 124-126.

² Luke 24:4

³ Acts 1:10

Turning back to the story, though they are still groggy with sleep, when Peter and the others begin to focus on the scene that is unfolding before them they realize that Jesus is deep in conversation with Moses and Elijah. Jesus is talking to Moses and Elijah! Wouldn't you have loved to have been able to eavesdrop? Well, Luke gives us a hint as to what they are discussing when he tells us they were **“speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem.”** The Greek word for departure here in the original text is the word ‘exodus.’ In those days it was a word that had a double meaning. First, it could mean a departure, a going away, as it did in the Old Testament when Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt. But the word exodus can also mean death, in the same way we sometimes refer to a loved one as our dearly departed.

In Jesus' case it means both. And so this account of the transfiguration is a major pivot point in the Gospel story. Everything before this in Luke represents Jesus' public ministry, the teaching and miracles he did among the crowds. But in short order Jesus is going to turn his focus towards his ultimate purpose, towards the reason he came to earth, towards Jerusalem and towards the cross. Later in this same chapter we read, **“When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.”**⁸ In a way, therefore, the transfiguration marks a departure towards the passion, and is the main reason why we remember it this last Sunday before Lent begins.

But his exodus, remember, is not just a departure *towards* Jerusalem but a death *in* Jerusalem. The road Jesus has turned to follow leads him down off this mountaintop of glory and into the valley where nothing but suffering, rejection and death await. Of course, this has been the assigned road all along. The law and the prophets pointed to it, that the only way for the world to be led out of the bondage of sin and death was for the Messiah to come and give his life as a sacrifice. This is the way of the cross, the way of Jesus, which means that it is also the way of all those who would come after him. Jesus said as much to his disciples just verses before, reminding them, **“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.”**⁹

And now maybe it begins to make sense why it was at the very moment when Moses and Elijah turn to leave that Peter steps in. **“Master,”** he says to Jesus, **“it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings,**

one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” It was a stupid thing to say and even Luke betrays the fact that he's a bit embarrassed by the remark when he adds that Peter didn't really know what he was saying.

Part of me can't blame Peter. He was overwhelmed with wonder. He's watching Jesus talking to Moses and Elijah! I can remember more than one occasion in school when a girl I thought was beautiful would actually say something to me and I would be so overwhelmed with wonder that this angel was actually taking to me that I would inevitably say something stupid and realize it was stupid the moment words were out of my mouth. I can only imagine what stupid thing I'd say if I met Jesus, Moses and Elijah on a mountain one day.

But I'm not sure we can blame Peter's response entirely on nerves. Surely by now he has been following Jesus long enough to know that Jesus has in mind traveling a road that is not going to be easy and so, truth be told, he's not so sure he wants to follow Jesus down that road. Better to stay here on this mountaintop. Let's build a little chapel up here. Shut the world out. Sing some songs. Worship together. Enjoy some good fellowship. Bathe in the light of God's blessing and glory. And if we're honest are we not tempted to want the same thing. Isn't there something in all of us which would like our Christian faith to lead us to a place of security and comfort, to help us escape the hardness of this world rather than turn and throw ourselves headlong back into it? Of course there is. You're just like Peter. So am I. The road of sacrifice, submission and suffering that Jesus leads us down is not a road we are dying to travel with him. Who is this Jesus? That can't be who he is.

And it is in that moment when a voice from heaven breaks in. **“This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!”** The words are reminiscent of the words spoken from heaven on the occasion of Jesus' baptism when, at the beginning of his public ministry his Father made sure to confirm both his identity and his calling, saying, **“You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.”**¹⁰ Now Jesus' calling to set his face towards the cross is not only confirmed by the presence of Moses and Elijah but by God in heaven. This road of suffering and death does not nullify or contradict Jesus' messiahship but confirms it! As we follow after Jesus, therefore, the realities of suffering and death in the world do not *stand in the way* of discipleship but *are the way* of discipleship. There is glory at the end of the road – we've been given a dazzling glimpse of that here! – but the road along the way is narrow and hard.

⁸ Luke 9:51

⁹ Luke 9:23-24, NRSV

¹⁰ See Luke 3:22

Let me try to make this simple. Following Jesus is not complicated. It's just not. It's hard, but it's not complicated. If you were going to follow me today it would simply mean that you would go where I go and do what I'd do. Specifically that means that you'd be going with me to a meeting after worship, then on to baseball practice this afternoon, then home for dinner, and so on, and in those places you'd do the things I was doing. No different with Jesus. To follow Jesus means to go where he goes and do what he does. And in this world we can sum up where Jesus is going and what he is doing this way – he came to give his life away. It is crystal clear that in his life Jesus did not come to join the world. He also did not come to separate himself off from the world. He came to give himself away for the sake of the world, and that is what he will ask of any one of us who comes after him to follow him.

Understand that doesn't necessarily mean physically dying for the world as Jesus physically died for the world. That may happen and certainly many Christians down through history have literally given their lives for their faith. But for us, this sacrifice is likely more about a daily dying to ourselves that imitates Christ.

For instance, instead of seeking revenge against those who have done us wrong we offer forgiveness instead. That's a death. When we come across enemies in this life who hate us and want to do us harm, we respond with love. That's a death. When faced with the choice of associating ourselves with those who will raise our status or those who will lower our status, we choose associations, as Jesus chose associations, with those who will do nothing positive for our status in this world. That's a death. We give up trusting in money and material things to bring us security. That's a death. In all instances we think first about what Jesus would want instead of what we would want. That's a death. We speak truth even when it's unpopular and extend grace even when it isn't returned. That's a death. We love people who are not lovable, welcome people we'd rather not welcome, serve people who don't deserve to be served, and look for the image of God in people in whom we can't imagine such an image exists. That's a death.

Following Jesus will lead us down a hard road. Why would anybody follow Jesus down a road that leads to a dying of oneself day after day? Well, there is the voice of the very God of heaven declaring from the clouds, **"This is my Son, the Chosen; listen to him."** Who is Jesus? Who really is Jesus? Whether or not we will follow him depends entirely on how we answer that question. And if we wake up from our sleep and open our eyes and realize that he truly is Savior *and* Lord, what choice do we have. What choice is there? We

must listen to him. We must follow. Where else can we go?

Tim Keller, a pastor and writer in New York City, tells of the time he finally woke up enough to answer this question for himself. In 1971, Keller, a young man at the time, went to hear a woman named Barbara Boyd give a talk and she shared two illustrations which changed his life. First she said,

If somebody says to me, 'Come on in, Barbara, but stay out, Boyd,' it's a bit of a problem, because I can't separate them. It's not like the top half of me is Barbara, and the bottom half of me is Boyd. So if you won't have Boyd, you can't get Barbara. If you're going to keep the Boyd out, I can't come in at all! So to say, 'Jesus, come into my life, forgive my sins, answer my prayers; do this for me, do that for me—but don't be the absolute master of my life; Jesus, Savior, come in; but Lord, stay out,' how can he come in at all? Because he's all Savior, and he's all Lord. He's Lord because he's Savior. He's Savior because he's Lord.

Then she shared this second illustration:

If the distance between the Earth and the sun, which is 92 million miles, was the thickness of a piece of paper, the diameter of our galaxy would be a stack of papers 310 miles high. And our galaxy is less than a speck of dust in the part of the universe that we can see. And that part of the universe might just be a speck of dust compared to all that is out there beyond us. And so if Jesus is the Son of God who holds all this together with the power of his word, is this the kind of person you ask into your life to be your personal assistant?"¹¹

Keller says that after she gave these two illustrations Barbara Boyd asked everybody in the meeting to go outside and, for one hour, say nothing. "In silence," she said, "just think about what all this means to you." Who is Jesus? If he really is the Son of God, the Chosen, the Messiah, you must listen to him, for to ignore such a claim is to ignore the very heart of reality itself. And so if you think Jesus probably is the eternal Son of God and think that he probably did die for your sins, but then he's not the very center of your life, the one you are willing to follow no matter where he leads,

¹¹ From a sermon by Dr. Tim Keller given February 9, 2003, at Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York. Edited and transcribed by the C.S. Lewis Institute. Read the full text online at: <https://verticallivingministries.com/2012/05/11/tim-keller-on-the-call-to-discipleship/>

then do you really believe these things about Jesus in the first place?

It's a hard road. Let's just acknowledge that. If we follow Christ he isn't just going to allow us to rest for good in the glory of the mountaintop. And he isn't going to lead us along some comfortable plateau where we can just cruise along day by day. No, he's going back down into the valley where there is mess and pain and suffering, and where we will be called daily to die to ourselves for the sake of the world around us.

Following Jesus is hard. Too hard, actually. And the truth is, we really don't have it in us. Which one of you has it in you even for this one week to go out and completely forgive those who have hurt you, and love all those who hate you, and serve those who have nothing to give you in return, and hold loosely to all things material, and speak the truth regardless of the consequences, loving God and everybody you meet with your whole life? Can you walk down that road this week? I can't.

But here is the good news. This is the gospel. You don't have to walk it. Jesus already did. Who is Jesus? Jesus was and is the eternal Son of God who became one of us, one just like us, veiled in flesh, one who refused to stay in the glory of the mountaintop but turned his face towards the road that led to suffering and death and then unflinchingly walked every step of that road to the very end where, at the darkest part, it turned finally upward towards eternal glory. Jesus has already done what we could never do and so now if we come after him he will carry us down a road he already knows. I love how Hebrews 12:1-2 puts it. These may be my favorite verses in the entire Bible. They are dripping with hope:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.¹²

Because Jesus has already given everything away for us so that all that belongs to him can now belong to us, we are now set free to give everything away for his sake and for the sake of the world he loves. So we keep our eyes on Jesus who has already traveled the road he now leads us down. There is joy set before us just as it was set before him, joy and glory so profound and

permanent that we can endure every painful step along the way because we know where this road leads.

After the voice of God had spoken from the clouds that day on the mountaintop, Peter, James and John looked up and saw that Moses and Elijah were gone. It was just Jesus now, just Jesus there with them alone. We're told they kept silent. You would too. What was there to say? He was all they needed. He is all any of us will ever need. All that was left now was to follow, down off the mountain and back into the valley, not exactly knowing where the road would lead but knowing, or at least hoping, that the one they followed knew the way back to glory.

He did. He still does.

So as you go out from here today, think about what this means to you. Who is Jesus? Your answer to this question really does make all the difference.

Amen.

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The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read Luke 9:28-36 again. What stands out to you from this remarkable account?
2. Why did Jesus take only three of his disciples up the mountain and not all twelve? Why not let the crowds witness this amazing spectacle? And then, why did they decide to keep silent about the whole incident?
3. What does Peter have in mind when he suggests building three tents on top of the mountain? Was that such a bad idea?
4. 56% of Americans say they believe that Jesus was and is God? When you look around our nation today does it seem to you like more than half the people truly believe Jesus is Lord? What's going on here?
5. Imagine God is saying to you, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" What would God mean if he spoke those words to you about Jesus? How would you respond?
6. Who is Jesus? How do you answer that question and what difference does your answer make in your life?

¹² NRSV

7. When you hear Jesus say that to be his disciple you must pick up your cross daily and follow him, what does that mean to you? What does that actually look like in day to day life?
8. Reflect again on Hebrews 12:1-2. In light of the hard road Jesus calls us to follow him down, how do these words bring hope?

Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

Who is Jesus? How do you know?