

Who do YOU say that I am?

by Rev. Robert Griffith

"Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, He 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." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." (Matthew 16:13-16)

This dialogue between Jesus and His disciples is, in my opinion, one of the most important passages of Scripture in our possession. In particular, the exchange between Jesus and the Apostle Peter is absolutely critical in our understanding of what Christianity is all about. All of Jesus' teaching, miracles and ministry up to this point in time had been intentionally leading to this one question, *"Who do you say that I am?"* Everything hinges on this question for them, for us and for every human who ever lived. According to the Scriptures, everything in your life and everything in eternity is determined by how you answer this question. So who do you say Jesus is? Embodied in this question is the absolute scandal of Christianity. This sets the Christian faith apart from everything else.

Who is Jesus in reality?

There's something we really need to understand about Scripture. In fact, there's something we need to understand about reality and truth. In our culture today, we are being told that reality or truth is anything you believe it to be. But that's just post-modernist nonsense. Truth and reality are defined as that which most certainly is. So the question is not, *"Who is Jesus to you?"* or *"Who do you want Jesus to be?"* or *"Who do you make Him out to be according to your personal convenience?"* The question is, *"Who is Jesus in reality?"*

When we interact with people outside the community of the Church, we hear a number of comments, opinions and criticisms of the Church. We often then fall into the trap of defending the Church as we try desperately to attract people into this shrinking, dying institution. Yet at no point did Jesus ever commission us to 'go into all the world and make Church members.' At no point does the Bible tell us that our mission is to build an organization or invite people to events.

**At no point
does the Bible
tell us that
our mission is
to build an
organization or
invite people
to events**

We are called, commissioned and empowered to do one thing only – to lead people to a person and to make them disciples of that person. That person is Jesus Christ. That's why the only question we need to be asking those people in our family, in our neighbourhood, in our workplace or in the world around us is this: *"Who do you say Jesus is?"* It's all about Jesus.

The Lewis Trilemma ...

C.S. Lewis, the man who gave us the *Narnia* series, *The Screwtape Letters*, *The Four Loves*, *Mere Christianity*, *Surprised by Joy* and a hundred other wonderful books, addressed this question in a BBC radio interview many years ago. Lewis suggested that there are only three logical answers to the question, *"Who do you say Jesus is?"* Either He is a liar, a lunatic or the Lord. This has come to be known as the 'Lewis Trilemma,' even though he was not the first one to put it in these terms. This trilemma actually dates back to the previous century.

Now sometimes, in order to be theological, we first have to be logical. The logical assertion here is that if Jesus told the truth and was in His right mind, then He is most certainly the Lord of all Creation and the Saviour of the world. We need to forget about the relativism of our post-modern age where we are told that you can't know truth or that everyone is right - and just think through this logically. We have to face the fact that everyone can't be right. Logically speaking, someone is right and everyone else is wrong - or everyone is wrong.

Everyone cannot be right, because there are so many conflicting views out there. So that's something we need to realize right up front here. You can't just say, "Well, Jesus is right - for you." No He's not. He's either right or He's not. It's that simple.

Jesus the liar ...

Sooner or later you must face the question, "Who is Jesus?" There are only three logical options. Firstly, He may be a liar. That's a legitimate option. Jesus said that He was the Son of God and more than that, He was God, the Son. He said that He was the Messiah, the Saviour and the only One Who forgives sin and reconciles us to God. So if that's not true, then Jesus is a liar, a deceiver and a fraud. However, there's a funny thing about liars, they almost always get found out and they rarely continue their lie once their true motives have been revealed. When their objective is not achieved, they usually give it up and say, "I take it all back." A liar would certainly never let themselves be crucified to a Roman cross and continue their lie as the life was beaten out of them! No lie is worth that. So, logically speaking, there is absolutely no reason why Jesus would go through what He did for something that wasn't true.

Jesus the lunatic ...

The second option is that Jesus was a sandwich short of a picnic; a hamburger short of a happy meal. Perhaps He had been smoking too much wacky weed and He was a little loopy. To claim to be God and the Saviour of the world is a little over the top. If you go down to the shopping centre tomorrow, stand in the middle of the crowd and start proclaiming, "I am the way, the truth and the life ... I am the creator of the universe and the only mediator between God and all humanity ..." there will be a response. If you start telling people you are God in human flesh and that you have come to save the whole world and call all of God's lost children home, it won't be long before some nice men in white coats arrive and take you away and give you a very comfy room in a special motel, where the walls are padded and the doors are locked. Therefore, given Who Jesus claimed to be, one logical explanation is that He was a lunatic, not in control of His own mind and caught up in this ridiculous illusion which ended up costing Him His life.

However, this 'lunatic' was responsible for some of the finest words ever spoken on this planet – not the words of one who had lost control of his senses. In fact, the greatest scholars of all time agree that there is nothing in human literature that even compares to the three chapters we have in the gospel of Matthew which comprise Jesus' sermon on the mount. Some scholars say that even the opening verses of that sermon, in Matthew 5, were written in such a way that we have nothing that compares to them. They were written in such a way that no scholars then or now can contradict them or find fault with them. Lunatic? Perhaps, but you know we pay homage to this lunatic every time we write the date? Most of the world still stops at Christmas and Easter to acknowledge the importance of this lunatic's birth and death. No other single human being has impacted our world as much as this man. It's hard to conclude that such a man was not in control of His senses.

Jesus the LORD ...

So that leaves us with one option and it's the most scandalous, outrageous and confronting of all the options. If you cannot believe that Jesus was a liar, or a fruit-loop from the funny farm, then here is your only option: Jesus Christ was, still is and will continue to be exactly Who He said He was: He is the Lord; the Christ; the Messiah; the Son of God and God, the Son; the Lord of all creation; the Lord of the Church; the Lord of your life. Therefore, when Jesus looks you in the eye today, or any day in your life, and asks, "Who do you say that I am?" – you have three possible responses. You can call Jesus a bold-faced liar; you can call Him a lunatic and have pity on the rest of us lunatics who are following Him; or you can bow your knee to Jesus Christ, the Lord and Saviour of the world. Of course, you may try to argue with me here and say there are other options and there are people out there will tell you it's not this simple. But I would like to know where you and they studied logic. Either Jesus was telling the truth or He wasn't. If He wasn't, then that was either the deliberate deception of a master manipulator or it was the desperate cries of a mentally ill man. There really are no other choices here.

Now please don't misunderstand me. I am not telling you what you must believe. I am not suggesting you have to believe that Jesus is Lord. You can believe whatever you want and so can everyone else in the world. But what I am telling you is that you only have three options.

Decision time

So you need to decide what you believe. Is Jesus a *liar*, a *lunatic* or *the Lord*? Or if you want to be more colloquial, is Jesus *bad*, *mad* or *God*? Each of these options are hard to accept for a variety of reasons, but they are the only options we have.

Here's something very important about our text. In verse 13 we read, "*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.*" Now these, in and of themselves, don't seem like bad guesses. Most men of Jesus' day would be honoured to be mistaken for one of those great prophets. But this is actually a terrible response from the disciples. There's something even worse than making Jesus out to be a liar or a lunatic – and that's making Him common – making Him like anyone else. There, in that, lies a great danger. When we say He is like this prophet or that prophet, it's as though we have a bookshelf full of comparable prophets and we just slide Jesus in amongst them. We cannot do that! Jesus does not give us that option. He is the only one Who said He is God, become man, the eternal Son of God Who robed Himself in human flesh and dwelt among men and women. No other prophet said that, can say that or will say that. Jesus stands apart from them all and to make Him like other prophets is worse than calling Him a liar or a lunatic!

It's a scandal ...

Now here is the scandal of Christianity. There's no scandal in saying that Jesus is a Lord or Jesus is a saviour or Jesus is a prophet. The scandal of Christianity is that Jesus is the Lord, the Saviour and the only mediator between God and humanity. That's the scandal of Christianity and to those people who identify as Christians today, let me warn you: if you deny that scandal; if you try to weasel out of that truth; if you somehow try to ignore or water down the fact that Jesus is the only Saviour of humanity; if you try to make your faith more user-friendly and less confronting to your peers and family so they like you more - then you will have denied Jesus Christ. Jesus did not say, "*I am a way, a truth and a life.*" Jesus said, "*I am the way, the truth and the life and no one ... not one person on this planet – past, present or future – will come to Father unless they come through Me.*" Now we don't want to be the killjoy at the dinner party; we don't want to be mean-spirited to people around us; we don't want to confront the power of Islam when there are so many lovely Muslim people around us today. But we are not the ones who said that Jesus is the only way to God. Jesus said it and we should never forget that. All around me today I see compromise after compromise in the Church as we white-wash our exterior so we are more acceptable. Acceptable to what? To a fallen, dysfunctional, Godless society. Why would we ever want to be more acceptable to a broken world which has rejected God?

**If I did not
tell you that
Jesus is the
only way to
God then I
would be lying
and I would not
be a Minister
of the Word**

We seem far more concerned about the opinions of the unregenerate, worldly people around us than we are about the Word of God and the Lordship of Jesus Christ. When I stand up in 2019, in a world gripped by post-modernism and relativism and declare, as I am now, that Jesus Christ is the way, the truth and the life and that there is no way of being reconciled to God except through Him, I know that grates against everything the world wants you to believe and, tragically, everything a growing number of our own preachers in the Church now want you to believe. But I have no choice! If I did not tell you that Jesus is the only way to God then I would be lying and I would not be a Minister of the Word. I would be the propagator of heresy, false teaching and a doctrine taught by demons - which the Apostle Paul warned us would become a reality in the last days. (1 Timothy 4:1)

So when Jesus looks me in the eye today, or any day, and asks me, "Who do you say that I am?" there is absolutely no hesitation at all in my response: "You are the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the living God." And in saying that, I also gladly accept all the implications of Jesus being Lord of the universe. Is the same true for you, right now? Or are you still questioning how Jesus can make such an exclusive claim?

Jesus stands alone ...

Well, let me share something with you from a highly respected Theologian by the name of Loraine Boettner. He speaks about Jesus as the only 'expected' person in all of human history.

"In all the history of the world Jesus emerges as the only 'expected' person. No one was looking for such a person as Julius Caesar, or Napoleon, or Washington, or Lincoln to appear at the time and place that they did appear. No other person has had his course foretold or his work laid out for him centuries before he was born. But the coming of the Messiah had been predicted for centuries. In fact, the first promise of His coming was given to Adam and Eve soon after their fall into sin. As time went on various details concerning His Person and work were revealed through the prophets; and at the time Jesus was born there was a general expectation through the Jewish world that the Messiah was soon to appear, even the manner of His birth and the town in which it would occur having been clearly indicated." (Lorraine Boettner, *Studies in Theology*, p.160)

Now you can go back through all the other religions of the world and you will not find this to be the case for Mohammed or Buddha or anyone else. There are no ancient documents, nor are there multiple prophecies pointing to their coming. None of those religious gurus were ever expected. There is nothing about where they would come from, what would be their lineage, what they would teach or achieve or do ... nothing at all. But we have all of that and more about Jesus Christ. Speaking of Jesus, the historian Philip Schaff says it perfectly:

"A character so original, so complete, so uniformly consistent, so perfect, so human and yet so high above all human greatness, can neither be a fraud nor a fiction. The poet, as has been well said, would in this case be greater than the hero. It would take more than a Jesus to invent a Jesus." (Phillip Schaff, *The History of the Christian Church*, p.109)

**If Jesus
is not
the
Messiah
there
is no
Messiah!**

The other thing we need to understand about Jesus and all the prophecies which preceded His coming, His life and His death, is this: If Jesus of Nazareth is not the Messiah; if Peter's answer was wrong and Jesus is not the Christ, the Son of the Living God, then all those prophecies from God failed. If Jesus is not the Messiah, then there is no Messiah. If Jesus Christ is not Who He said He is and He has not saved us, then nobody will save us because so many of those prophecies were time-specific. The time of Jesus' birth and the location were a specific prophecy from God. That was the time when the one and only Saviour of the world would be born. So if it's not Jesus, we have no Saviour and the Messiah will never come.

So let me ask you again, who do you say that Jesus is? Is He everything He said He is? If you are not a Christian and you are reading this then I hope this question will haunt you and continue haunting you until you answer it. I don't say that because I am mean and want to haunt you – but because this is the single most important question you will ever be asked to answer in your life. The implications of your answer are life-defining.

Spiritually discerned ...

Reading on from our text, beginning at verse 16: "Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And Jesus said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven." This is really important to understand. I have just gone to a lot of trouble to explain many things to you and lay out the truth of Who Jesus was and still is, but unless you understand this verse, I have wasted all my time.

In order for you or me to truly believe in Jesus Christ and accept Who He is and embrace His way, His Truth and His life, we need a supernatural work of God in our lives. It was God Who opened the Apostle Peter's heart and revealed Truth to him. The same supernatural work of God is required for you and me to fully embrace Christ as our Saviour and Lord. Simply put, spiritual truth is always spiritually discerned. The carnal, fallen, sinful, wayward mind of a human being can neither comprehend nor apprehend spiritual truth from God. God needs to speak into our lives supernaturally through the Holy Spirit. (see 1 Corinthians 2:2-16)

So here's another question for you: if you are in agreement with me at the moment; if what I have said here resonates with you and you find yourself nodding in affirmation, then how can you know, I mean really know, that this truth affects you in any way? The Bible says the truth will set you free. Well, how can you know you are set free? How does this truth I have shared with you actually impact your life? I could walk out on the street and start interviewing people right now and a number of them would agree with me about Jesus. They may have been to Sunday School decades ago and they may even say, "Yes, I believe Jesus is the Son of God." But if I was to follow them home and be with them 24/7 and observe their life, would I see any evidence of their belief in Christ? There are people in our world today who will acknowledge with their words that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and the Messiah but their lives have not changed to reflect that reality. There is no transformation. There is no regeneration. There is no new birth into the Kingdom of God. Their talk doesn't match their walk. To those people Jesus is saying, "Why do you call me Lord, when your heart is far from me?"

Religion is external, superficial and powerless. The Christian faith is internal, life-changing and powerful

There is a huge difference between declaring that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God and believing in Christ, the Son of the Living God and allowing that truth to transform your life. Even Satan believes that Jesus is the Messiah, but Satan most certainly has not allowed that truth to renew his mind and transform his heart. That's the difference between religion and the Christian faith. Religion is external, superficial and powerless. The Christian faith is internal, life-changing and powerful. There are millions of people who have just adopted or inherited a religion which has been built around the historical Jesus of the past and His teaching, but they are yet to actually meet the present, living, reigning, life-changing Jesus here and now.

They may have made some kind of proclamation *about* Christ at some point in their life but they are yet to experience true transformation *in* Christ. Christianity is not about buying a rule book and then deciding you want to follow the rules. That's not Christianity. That's life-destroying legalism. That's religion. We can't declare that Jesus is Lord and then decide how Jesus will interact in our life. If Jesus is Lord, then Jesus gets to decide what our life will look like under His Lordship and that could be radically different to what we want or expect.

Let's go back to our passage in Matthew 16. Peter has just made this wonderful confession and declared that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the Living God. But Peter didn't really know what he was saying. Like so many today, Peter spoke the truth but was not living that truth yet. The words which just came from his lips were pure, faultless and God-breathed but Peter didn't have a clue what they meant for him personally at that point and he was about to learn a very painful lesson in his very next encounter with Jesus. Reading from verse 21 it says this:

"From that time Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day."

So we are talking about something much more than just a Prophet here. We are talking about a Redeemer and unless we understand what that means, then we will be as ignorant as Peter was when he spoke those words which he didn't understand. Let me put it this way. If on this very day you decided you wanted to be a disciple of Christ and you wanted to make a commitment to follow Him and live for Him and witness for Him and do everything you could for His glory, what would you do next?

You might buy a new study bible and spend hours reading it, highlighting verses and following everything you read to the letter so that you are sold out for Jesus. I can tell you right now, none of that will have any impact on where you spend eternity or how victorious your life is this side of the grave. It's all worthless religion and dead works - unless, all those things are the fruit of something else – and that 'something else' is the transforming work of Christ your Redeemer deep in your spirit.

Christ Crucified ...

Your problem is not your personal sins or disobedience - it never has been - and that is why your righteous living and obedience will have no impact at all on your relationship with God because your salvation is not built on your confession of who Jesus is; your salvation is not built on your obedience and righteous living. Your salvation and eternal life in the presence of God was secured for you in the death of Jesus Christ and all of that happened before you were even born - before you even knew what the word 'sin' meant. I have devoted the best part of my life to preaching the truth about Jesus Christ. I have done all I can do plus some to teach people about Jesus - but here's the hard truth: All my hard work, all my preaching, all my ministry and service means nothing unless it flows from one single truth: **Jesus Christ died for sinners.** My hope is not in my ability to follow Him. My hope is not in my service or Church attendance. My hope is in Jesus Christ, Who died for sinners. That's what Peter and the other disciples didn't understand yet and many people in the Church today still don't understand. Look at what happened after Jesus told them He was going to die and be raised to new life:

"Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You." But (Jesus) turned and said to Peter, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's."

What a roller-coaster ride for Peter. How did he go from *"Blessed are you Simon Barjona ..."* one minute, to, *"Get behind me Satan! You are a stumbling block to me ..."* the next minute? Peter really didn't get it. He had just declared the truth about Jesus and so now he thinks this Messiah is going to reign as king, kick the Romans out and restore Israel to its former glory. Everything will be fine then.

What Peter failed to understand was that Jesus didn't care about the Romans. They were irrelevant. Jesus only cared about the real problem ... the only problem ... which was that every man, woman and child on this planet were broken and condemned because of the sin which had taken the whole world captive. Jesus came to set the captives free and the only way He could do that was to die in our place. Impulsive Peter says, *"No way! Not on my watch! You aren't going anywhere. You are the Messiah!"* Then Jesus looked His best friend in the eye and said, *"Get behind me, Satan."* What Jesus effectively said was, *"Flesh and blood did not reveal that to you Peter, but the Father of Lies (Satan) just spoke through you."* We didn't just need a Saviour we could follow – we needed a Saviour Who could reconcile us to God, transform us into His image and then empower us to live in Him, through Him and for Him. That could only come through the death of Jesus.

During the renovation of our Worship and Ministry Centre last year, I was able to have some interesting conversations with the tradesmen – especially the ones who worked on the inside under the shadow of the cross. One of those men was alone with me one day and I saw him look up at the cross and pause. He then said, *"You know, I came to Sunday School here when I was a boy."* I said that was great and welcomed him home. He laughed and made some remark about his life not really measuring up so he had no right to call this place home. He was surprised by my response when I said, *"No, me either."* He looked at me in disbelief and said, *"You're joking. You're a man of the cloth, if you don't get to heaven we're all screwed!"* In one brief encounter, that man explained the reason why Churches are emptying and Christianity has become irrelevant. People just don't know the gospel and have believed lies about God and the mission of Christ. I paused, then asked him, *"So how good do you think we have to be to get into heaven?"* He scoffed and said, *"More good than me, that's for sure!"*

I bounced back again and said, *"Me too! In fact, for any of us to get into heaven we have to be 100% perfect, pure, spotless and holy from the day we are born until the day we die."* His frown returned and he said, *"Well none of us is that good and we never will be."* I turned and pointed to the cross he had been staring at and I said, *"He was ... and that's why that cross is there, to remind us what He did to get us into heaven."* I then got to share the truth of the Gospel with this 'rough around the edges' tradie – a truth which even some Church people don't fully understand. There are still a lot of people in the world who think that they and Jesus, working together, are going to get them into heaven and they are wrong. If I took your best thoughts, your best words and your best deeds and brought them before God Who is Holy, Holy, Holy, you would still stand condemned in sin.

Now you might be protesting now and thinking, *"I'm not that bad. I'm not a murderer or a prostitute. I am far better than many people I share this planet with."* Well, let me explain it this way. What's the greatest sin? Well, I'm not sure we can answer that or if it's even a valid question, but just for the purposes of this illustration, let me ask you what the greatest commandment is? Jesus said the greatest commandment is, *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength."* Do you realize that you have never done that? Not one second of one day in your whole life have you ever loved the Lord our God with ALL your heart, soul, mind and strength. We are so full of self. That's why we have more mirrors than Bibles in our homes. That's why our mirrors are hung in plain sight and our Bibles are closed. We are all about self.

We all know that God is holy, right? That's good news, but it's also bad news. It's good news because we wouldn't want anyone but a holy, pure, righteous God running this universe, would we? We would not want the omnipotent, holy, Creator and Lord of the universe to have the character of Hitler would we? We would want a holy and righteous God. That's comforting to know. But it's also really bad news that God is holy and righteous because we are not. Now here, my friends is where I am going to give you the heart of Christianity. If you retain nothing other than what I am about to share, I will have served my purpose. I am about to tell you what your greatest problem is in this life. All your other problems fade in comparison to this one problem. It's a problem for us but it's also a problem for God. Here it is:

If God is good, He can't forgive you

If God is righteous and holy, He cannot forgive you. You find this problem all the way through the Bible. You see it in Exodus, you see it in Psalms and in the book of Proverbs. You see Paul wrestling with this in Romans chapter three. If God is holy and just, how can He simply turn His back on your sin?; how can He cover your sin?; how can He cast your sin away from you as far as the east it from the west? In the Psalms and in Romans chapter four it says that God 'covers' our sin. How can a holy God do that?

Herein lies the great problem in the Bible. God is righteous and because He is righteous, because He is holy, but also, because He is love ... God hates evil. God hates sin. Some people will tell you that God is love and therefore He cannot hate. But those people don't understand God at all. It is *because* God is love in His very essence that He *must* hate everything that would set itself up against His love. God hates evil and He cannot just turn His back on your evil or my evil or anyone else's evil. So the greatest challenge we see in the Bible is how can God be righteous, holy and just and still forgive wicked men and women? How can He do that? The answer is found in the person of Jesus Christ and that is why the cross is the symbol of Christianity because it was on the cross that God dealt with this dilemma of sin. God is holy and pure. Perfect holiness must condemn sin and unholiness. The two cannot cohabitate any more than darkness and light can occupy the same space. Just as you cannot go forwards and backwards at the same time, so a holy God cannot withhold His justice and condemnation on all sin.

**All the
religion and
Church-going
you want
to offer
to appease
this holy
God is
never
going to
cut it**

All the religion and Church-going you want to offer to appease this holy God is never going to cut it. You were born into a sinful, rebellious humanity. Your personal sins are only a symptom of your birth-defect. You were born sinful and under the judgment and condemnation of God. Unless God could find a way to deal with your sin and still love you, then you and me and all humanity would have never been able to come into the presence of this Holy God. The only people in heaven are perfect people, righteous people, holy people. They are the only people who can be in the presence of God. It's that simple.

God's solution to our problem ...

So God in His righteousness, condemns you and me and all sinful humanity. But God in His love becomes a man and lives the life that you and I and all people before us could not live. Jesus lives a holy, sinless, obedient, righteous life before God and He does so as a human being. He then receives the 'wages of sin' which is death. Not because He sinned, but because He chose to 'become sin' and bear the consequences of sin on our behalf. Jesus goes to Calvary and He dies an agonizing death on our behalf. Now, when I say 'agonizing' I am not thinking about all that stuff you have heard in Easter sermons all your life. I am not talking about the brutality of a crown of thorns, the lashes of a whip on the tender flesh of His back, the utter torture of being nailed to a wooden tree and stood up for all the world to see as the life slowly drained from you.

That is not the agony of Calvary friends! The true agony of Calvary is embodied in the words of Jesus when He cried out, *"Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani."* ("My, God, my God, why have You forsaken me?"). The agony of Calvary is when the Father allowed the sin of the world to crush His son to death, which forced Him to turn His back on His Son.

We are not saved because the Roman's beat up Jesus and killed Him on the cross. We are saved because all of the world's sin – past, present and future – was imputed to Jesus and then God in heaven turned away from His Son. Not because He lacked the moral fortitude to watch Him suffer – no, He turned away from His only Son because His only Son became sin and that dreadful separation from God which you and I should experience for eternity because of sin, Jesus experienced in that moment on the cross. The fullness of a holy God's hatred of sin was poured out upon His only Son on the cross. So when Jesus cried out to God the night before in the Garden of Gethsemane, when He said three times, "Let this cup pass from me." Do you think He was afraid of a Roman sword? When He was sweating blood that night whilst His disciples couldn't even stay awake, do you think He pondered the beatings and the torture of a crucifixion? Of course not! Most of the Apostles and countless martyrs since Jesus have gone to their death singing hymns! Why would death worry their Lord?

The agony Jesus felt in the garden that night had nothing to do with His pending death. His agony then, and even more so on the cross, came from the realization that He was about to experience something He had never experienced before – separation from His Father. He had always dwelt in the bosom of His Father. For eternity Jesus had experienced unbroken intimacy and fellowship with His Father. He had always been the beloved Son in Whom the Father was well-pleased. But on that cross, the Father did the unthinkable - He withdrew His presence from His beloved Son and allowed His holiness to crush His Son to death as He turned His back on Him and the sin He had become. The cup which Jesus begged the Father to take from Him the night before was the cup of God's wrath and judgment against sin. Jesus could have walked away that night. He could have summoned all the angels of heaven to rescue Him from this nightmare. But He chose to drink that cup of wrath and judgment and when He hung on that cross and said, *"It is finished,"* He turned that cup over and not one drop came out. He drank it all. The wages of sin were paid in full – Jesus died. Then that death and sacrifice was vindicated and sealed for eternity when, three days later, Jesus was raised from death to never die again.

So what does it really mean when I say that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God? It doesn't just mean I love His teachings and I follow Him. It means so much more than that. It means I have nothing. I have no righteousness. I have no hope.

All that I have is because of what God did for me in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. *That* is my hope. *That* is my salvation. *That* is what secured my eternal future. Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to the cross I cling. Nothing in my hand. If I even think about adding any of my virtues to what Christ has done, then I don't believe in Christ. I believe in Christ plus something else and that equates to unbelief. *Christ plus nothing* is the gospel. Every virtue flows from the finished work of Christ or it is not a virtue at all.

Justification AND Regeneration ...

There are two equally important doctrines in the Bible which we need to understand. The first is the doctrine of justification. This doctrine says that God, in Christ, has justified sinners. All sin has been atoned for on the cross of Christ, in the death of Christ, and so we have been declared justified before God because of the finished work of Jesus Christ. The other equally important doctrine in the bible is the doctrine of regeneration. This doctrine teaches that when the Holy Spirit of God opens our eyes and ears to the spiritual truth of Who Jesus truly is and what He has done for us, we then choose to embrace that truth personally and allow God to regenerate our spiritually dead spirit as we are born again into the Kingdom of His Son, our Saviour. That regeneration brings transformation. We are changed and we continue to change throughout our lives as we are sanctified – which is when the life of Christ increasingly becomes our life and we are transformed into His image.

**... never, ever,
ever, is our
standing before
God based on
anything we do.
It is always
based only on
what Christ has
done on Calvary,
once and for all**

That's why the Bible says that in Christ we are "a new creation," old things have passed away and all things have become new. So if we truly do believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, then that belief will lead us to embrace that truth fully and the Holy Spirit will regenerate our spirit - we will be made alive in Christ and then, and only then, will we be able to say, with the Apostle Paul, *it's no longer I who lives, but Christ Who lives in me!*

Then, when Christ begins to live within us, our lives change. Our tastes change. Our desires change. Our focus changes. Our priorities change. Our lifestyle changes and we start to live a life which is worthy of our calling in Christ. But never, ever, ever, is our standing before God based on anything we do. It is always based only on what Christ has done on Calvary, once and for all.

Let me give you a very brief lesson in ontology. I have a nature, I have a will and I have activity – things I do. If my heart loves evil, my desire is for evil – for the things of this world: immorality, sensuality, money, power, greed, lust etc. If that's what my heart loves, then those desires will influence my will and my will is what drives my actions.

But if somehow this heart of mine can be changed, if my very nature can be transformed so that the things I once loved I now hate and the things I once hated, like righteousness, I now love, then there's not too much to worry about after that. My new desires will push my will towards a whole new set of actions and when I do sin, it now breaks my heart, because my heart has been made new. This is the regeneration, the transformation which God desires to bring to every man, woman and young person on this planet. This is the purpose of the Church. This is the mission of Christ to which we have all been called.

When Jesus told us to go into all the world and make disciples, this is what He meant. We are to lead people to Christ, Who then, by the power of His Spirit, brings spiritual life from death. He breathes life into our spirit so we can discern spiritual truth and then from that transformed nature we can finally answer Jesus when He asks, *'Who do you say that I am?'* We will then know, that He is the Christ, the Son of the living God and the One Who has redeemed us, renewed us and made us alive in Him. Without this regeneration, without this complete transformation, we are not a disciple of Christ; we are not a true believer; we are not part of the Church which Jesus is building; we are not even a Christian.

I want you to imagine you are a farmer with a wonderful flock of sheep and everything is going well until an intruder arrives on the scene – a wolf. Now the wolf cannot be part of this flock without causing all manner of harm and so what's the solution? Well, the farmer could shoot the wolf. That solves the sheep's problem, but it doesn't help the wolf. So perhaps he could put the wolf in a cage and control its actions and feed it well and that means the sheep are safe and wolf gets to live. But that wolf walks up and down that cage every day thinking only one thing – *I need to get out so I can get at those sheep*. That's his nature. The only real solution is a crazy one – but it would work – turn the wolf into a sheep! Change its nature completely and it would no longer want to harm the sheep. I know that's a crazy story, but that is exactly what God offers to us – a completely transformed nature which loves good, hates evil and is programmed to serve God and others.

Years ago this new Pastor came to a small country Church to begin his ministry there. Within a week, one of the elders came to the Pastor and told him about old Bill who lived up on the hill outside town. Bill used to come to Church every Sunday for many years but he stopped coming about five years ago. Not only that, his lifestyle had slipped and he was not living like a disciple of Christ at all. So they told this Pastor it was his job to get Bill back to Church. So he went to visit Bill and whilst they were having a cup of tea the Pastor asked Bill why he was not part of the Church anymore. Bill said, "Oh yes, Pastor I really should be going, but I guess I just got busy and haven't made it back there. I should do that though." Then the Pastor mentioned Bill's drinking problem and him being found drunk in town a few times. "Oh yes Pastor," said Bill, "I really need to stop drinking and get my life back in order. I know that." This went on for a while and Bill acknowledged everything the Pastor said and agreed with him. There was no argument. Well, the following Sunday, as the Pastor was preparing to start the service, the Elder raced into the Vestry and said, "*Pastor, Pastor, you will not believe this – it's a miracle of God. I don't know what you did but Bill has come back to Church. The lost sheep has returned!*" The Pastor frowned and shook his head as he tapped the Elder on the shoulder on the way out and said, "*No brother, that's no lost sheep. That's just a wolf back in the sheep fold. Only God can make him a sheep. Turning up here won't do that.*"

Conclusion

So my brother or sister, before you answer the most important question any human being can ever face, know this: unless your answer comes from a transformed, redeemed, regenerated heart, it is worthless. Peter said the right words and yes, they were inspired by the Spirit of God. However, Peter didn't have a clue what they really meant. That was obvious by what he said next. It was obvious when he drew a sword in the Garden of Gethsemane and cut off a soldier's ear. It was obvious when he denied even knowing Christ three times. It was not until Peter's next conversation with the resurrected Jesus on the beach at breakfast time weeks later that Peter's eyes were completely open. The man who had denied Jesus three times was asked by that same Jesus three times, "Peter, do you love me?" Peter said yes, from the depths of his regenerated, transformed heart and Jesus told him, "Feed my sheep." Peter then became one of the greatest Apostles and disciple-makers we have ever seen.

Prayer: *Spirit of the living God, fall afresh upon us now. Open our eyes that we may see Jesus as He really is. Open our ears that we may hear the Words of Christ spoken into the depth of our being. Open our hearts that we fully and completely embrace this new life we have been given by God's grace and for God's glory. Inspire us, guide us, empower us to live each and every day in Christ, through Christ and for Christ. Amen.*

Robert Griffith

3 January 2019