

# HOW CAN WE KNOW THAT JESUS IS THE SON OF GOD?

SERIES: JESUS, THE SAVIOR OF THE LOST

by Ron Ritchie

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Jesus made the cover of *Time* magazine for the sixteenth time on August 15, 1988. The issue designed a cover which was composed of details from 17 images of Jesus from a variety of paintings and stained glass images created down through the centuries. On the cover was the question, "Who was Jesus? A Startling New Movie Raises an Age-Old Question." As you may recall, the movie was *The Last Temptation of Christ* in which Jesus was portrayed as a struggling, weak and wild-eyed Christ who only slowly came to see himself as Messiah, and was confused about his message and his ministry.

This movie and its interpretation of the person of Jesus not only caused great debate among Christians, but helped heat up the continuous debate among the so-called biblical "scholars" who continue to look for the historical Jesus from a human perspective. These scholars have concluded that Jesus did not claim to be the Messiah, but that the gospel writers inserted that idea into their writings because they were hoping he was Messiah. They claim that New Testament language is metaphorical in referring to Jesus as the "Lamb" or "Word of God," and thus Jesus did not intend to be taken literally when he proclaimed he was the "Son of God." Many modern scholars downplay the idea that Jesus was God, let alone a member of a complex theological partnership called the Trinity.

In all of this confusion and debate, it is of interest that modern society cannot seem to stop talking about Jesus in one form or another. He simply will not be dismissed. As a result of his continuous presence in the minds and hearts of modern man I believe that the title of "Time" should not have been "Who was Jesus?" but "Who is Jesus?"

As we turn to look at Luke 3:21-38 we want to ask the crucial question "How can we know that Jesus is the Son of God?" If you ask "Who was Jesus?" then you are left in your despair and hopelessness. If you ask "Who is Jesus?" then there is hope in this life and beyond. The way you respond to that question is the difference between heaven and hell for now and eternity.

In the context of this passage, Dr. Luke was writing to Theophilus, a friend from Greece. Luke was living in the port city of Caesarea while waiting for the Roman judicial system to determine the fate of his friend, the apostle Paul, who had been charged with inciting a riot in the Temple area in Jerusalem. In the interim, Luke used his free time to interview Jesus' mother, Mary, and many of the disciples in order to write a full and accurate account of Jesus' life and ministry.

Last week in Luke 3: 1-20 we found that Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist, had been called by God to begin his prophetic forerunner ministry on the banks of the Jordan River. The focus of John's ministry was to "prepare the way of the Lord," offering the Jewish people a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." This would be followed by the appearance of the long awaited Messiah who would " baptize the faithful in the Holy Spirit and fire" (3:16).

Beginning in Luke 3: 21-22 John was in the midst of baptizing those who desired to have their hearts prepared to receive the Messiah when Jesus arrived as one among many to be baptized. It was at this point that the question "How can we know that Jesus is the Son of God" was answered in part by

## **I. The Witness of the Father, Luke 3: 21-22**

Now it came about when all the people were baptized, that Jesus also was baptized. . . .

Matt. 3:13-15 amplifies on this text: "Then Jesus arrived from [Nazareth] Galilee at the Jordan coming to John, to be baptized by Him. But John tried to prevent Him saying, 'I have need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?' But Jesus answering said to him, 'Permit it at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.' Then he permitted Him."

Approximately 18 years have passed since the 12-year-old Jesus was "found" by his parents in the Temple "about His Father's business." Apparently, some time within those years Joseph had died and Jesus had taken up his father's trade of carpentry to provide for his widowed mother as well as his brothers and sisters (Matt 12:46f; 13: 55-56). At the age of 30, the Lord was moved by the Holy Spirit to begin his public ministry "to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10).

At this point, the New Age philosophers have speculated that during the "lost 18 years" Jesus had journeyed to the East where he learned various mysteries. Some believe that the true Christ became a skilled yogi and mastered complete control over his body and the physical world around him. According to this theory, Christ tried to teach people that they could do the same thing if they got more in touch with their spiritual selves and their own potential power.

Jesus walked the 70-75 miles from the northern city of Galilee, past the city of Jerusalem, and down the dangerous Jericho Road until he arrived by the banks of the Jordan river on the east side of the oasis call Jericho. When he arrived he saw the people gathered on the banks of the river as John preached and baptized the faithful. Moving towards his cousin, he presented himself to John.

When John realized Jesus' intent he tried to prevent him and said, "I have need to be baptized by you, and you come to me?" While in his mother's womb John had been filled by the Holy Spirit who continued to lead and instruct the prophet throughout his preparation and public ministry. John knew from his mother's stories of his birth and the birth of his cousin that they both were involved in God's great plan of salvation.

According to Matthew 3:13, John expected the Messiah to baptize the faithful remnant with the Holy Spirit and fire. He did not expect the Messiah to enter into water baptism-"a baptism unto repentance for the forgiveness of sins." That is why he kept trying to prevent Jesus from being baptized, and why he said, "I have need to be baptized by you." In other words, "I am a sinner in need of forgiveness."

According to Matthew 3:15, Jesus answered, "'Permit it at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.'" Jesus, the perfect "Lamb of God," the sinless one, wanted to be baptized alongside sinners. What did the Lord mean by the phrase, "to fulfill all righteousness?"

In order to meet the full demands of the Law, the Lord was identifying with sinners. Quoting God the Father, Jeremiah 23:5,6, says, "I shall raise up for David a righteous branch . . . and this is his name to which he will be called 'The Lord our righteousness.'" Jesus did not enter the water as a sinner, but his purpose was to identify with sinners. Second Corinthians 5:21 says, "He made him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in him."

The righteousness of God demanded that blood be shed for the sin of man. Jesus was willing to be the righteous Lamb of God who was to sacrifice himself to take away the sin of the world. Therefore, this baptism was a shadow of the cross. Later in his ministry, as he looked toward to the cross, Jesus queried his disciples James and John about their desire to rule with him in the kingdom: "Are you ready to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" (Mark 10:38). Throughout his life Jesus submitted himself to the Law "in order that he might redeem those who were under the Law. . . ." (Galatians 4:5)

Another reason Jesus entered the water for baptism was to identify with the believing remnant. These people had confessed and repented of their sins, had gone into the waters, and then came out to wait on the Christ who would forgive them of their sins and give them the Holy Spirit.

Jesus' baptism also gave John the opportunity to announce the arrival of the Messiah. John 1:31 says: "And I did not recognize him, but in order that he might be manifested to Israel, I came baptizing in water." In the

book "The Words and Works of Jesus Christ," J. Dwight Pentecost says, "John recognized Jesus as Messiah when he presented Himself for baptism, but John was not permitted to reveal to Israel when he by the Holy Spirit understood. It was only after the Spirit descended that John could make a public announcement that the one whom he had promised had now arrived and had begun his ministry. The baptism then was to release John to make a public announcement concerning the coming of Christ."

Luke 3:21 shows us several things that occurred after Jesus' baptism:

. . . and while praying heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove and a voice came out of heaven, "Thou art my beloved son, in thee I am well-pleased.

As the essence of Jesus' life was his relationship to his Father it is not surprising that he "checked in" with his heavenly Father at the beginning of his public ministry. Desiring to do the will of his Father, Jesus' prayer must have been related to his ministry as Messiah. He knew that there would be glory and joy as well as spiritual warfare, rejection by the nation, and betrayal and denial of his own disciples. Finally, he would experience the cross, separation from the Father, and the resulting triumph of the resurrection from the dead. Knowing all that was before him he prayed for love, strength, wisdom, and courage to face the ensuing years of ministry. What an example to us as to how we should be living, trusting without anxiety about the future!

As Jesus prayed, the heavens opened. That which is real, invisible to humanity, eternal, in heaven was suddenly made visible and present to all those standing along the bank. The Holy Spirit then descended upon Him in bodily form like a dove. Although Jesus was indwelt by the Holy Spirit, everyone there witnessed the Spirit coming on the Lord to empower him for the ministry ahead of him. It is at this point that John understood all that God had taught him. John 1:33 says, "He who sent me to baptize in water said to me, 'He upon whom you see the Spirit descending and remaining upon Him, this is the one who baptizes in the Holy Spirit.'" John concluded, "And I have seen, and have borne witness that this is the Son of God."

A voice came out of heaven to announce, "Thou art my beloved son, in Thee I am well-pleased." Jesus, John, the faithful Jewish remnant, as well as the religious leaders, tax collectors, and soldiers all saw the Holy Spirit and then heard the voice of the one and only God confirm Jesus, the carpenter's son, as Israel's long awaited Messiah.

"Beloved son" is a term that means he is the one and only begotten son of God, co-equal and co-eternal with the Father. He is the Son mentioned in Isaiah 42:1: "Thou art my son, my servant, my chosen one in whom I delight. Today I have begotten thee." Jesus did not become the son of God at the baptism, he was the Son of God from all of eternity. Hebrews 1:1-3 states, "God, after he spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets . . . in these last days has spoken to us in his son . . . and he is the radiance of his glory and the exact representation of his nature." As a partner in the divine essence with the Father and the Spirit, Jesus in his limited humanity was publicly blessed by his Heavenly Father. The Father was telling everyone on the river bank that he was pleased with his son's willingness to come to earth in the form of man as the unblemished lamb to take away the sins of the world.

One author said, "The Father out of a heart of love for his Son and the world was willing to send his Son to earth to die for the sin of lost humanity. The Son, out of a heart of love for his father and the world, was willing to agree with the Father to go to the cross; and the Spirit was willing to strengthen the Son to fulfill the Father's redemptive plan for lost humanity. God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are all interested in our salvation." God the Father officially recognized Jesus as Israel's king, and approved of his person and Messianic ministry.

The religious Jewish community of our Lord's day rejected the idea that Jesus is the son of God. Unfortunately, nothing has changed throughout the years as we too have religious groups who do not recognize Jesus as the Son of God. Let us hear the proclamations of a few of these:

**Christian Science:** "Jesus is the human man and Christ is the divine idea." One sacrifice,

however great, is insufficient to pay the debt of sin."

**Jehovah's Witnesses:** "Jesus Christ is not God. He was the first son that Jehovah God brought forth . . . His perfect life was laid down in death, but not for sin and in punishment."

**Mormonism:** "Jesus Christ by obedience and devotion attained to the pinnacle of intelligence which ranked him as a god, even in his pre-existent state."

**The New Age:** (which is nothing more than a rerun of Eastern mysticism): "The historical person, Jesus of Nazareth, is separated from the Christ consciousness which Jesus attained that is found within himself. Jesus is not the God-man, but one of a long line of "masters" along with Buddha and Krishna who had themselves realized divinity. Jesus of Nazareth then is no longer said to be the only begotten Son of God, the God-man, the Lord and Savior of the cosmos. He is merely one of the manifestations of God throughout the ages. Salvation comes by realizing that you are to "be still and know that you are God," and when you know that you are God you will begin to live Godhood."

I asked a Christian from India why her father remained a Hindu priest, and she quickly replied, "We would all rather be a god than serve one." That sums up the lie of the evil one since the beginning of our humanity in the Garden of Eden. To reject the witness of the Father, the Holy Spirit, John, the believing remnant, and the unbelieving crowd of Jews on the shoreline who heard the voice of the Father is to reject Jesus as the Son of God. If Jesus is not the Son of God we are left in our darkness, helplessness and hopelessness, as well as remaining dead in our sins, shame, and guilt.

How can we know that Jesus is the Son of God? We have seen that we have the witness of the Father, and now we have,

## **II. The Witness of the Fathers, Luke 3:23-38**

And when he began his ministry, Jesus himself was about thirty years of age, being supposedly the son of Joseph, the son of Eli. . .

Now we know that God incarnate in Jesus was born of Mary. According to the angel Gabriel, "He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of his Father David and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and His kingdom will have no end.' And Mary said to the angel, "How can this be since I am a virgin?" And the angel answered and said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you, and for that reason the holy offspring shall be called the Son of God.'"

In verses 3:23-38 we find that Luke included Jesus' genealogy in his gospel in accordance with the Jews' practice of maintaining these records in the Temple until its destruction in 70 A.D. This was important within the Jewish culture, since one of the primary questions a Jew would ask anyone claiming the title of Messiah would be, "Is he a son of Abraham and of the house of David?"

In the Gospels we have two genealogies presented. The first is in Matthew 1:1-17, which begins "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the Son of Abraham." Matthew presented his list of "begats" from Abraham to David to Joseph (who was Jesus' legal father) to Jesus, "who is called Christ" (Messiah). Even though Joseph was not the physical father of Jesus, the fact that he married Jesus' mother would confer on Mary's son the right of inheritance.

. By the Holy Spirit, Matthew established the legal right of Jesus to be the Messiah for God had promised Abraham that out of his loins would come one who would bless Israel. Likewise, God had promised David that his house, kingdom, and throne would be established forever, and that one of David's sons was to come

and rule forever over the house of Israel. Therefore, Matthew wanted to show that Jesus came to fulfill the covenant that God had made with his forefathers.

Writing to the Greeks, Luke took another approach. He wanted to show that Mary's genealogy started with her father Eli, since physically Joseph was not the father of Jesus. Establishing that Jesus as well as Mary was out of the loins of David and Abraham, Luke demonstrated Jesus' legal right to be the Messiah of Israel. Further, he took his audience back beyond father Abraham to ". . . the son of Adam, the son of God" to identify Jesus as not only the king of the Jews, but the second Adam who was to redeem those in need of salvation since the fall of the first Adam. Therefore, looking at the two genealogies, it is clear from Matthew's account that Jesus had the legal right, while Luke likewise confirmed Jesus' lineage in his record.

Some conservative scholars think that both genealogies trace Joseph's line to show the legal as well as the true parentage of Jesus' right to the Messianic title. Others think that Matthew is showing us the legal line of Joseph and Luke is showing us his real parentage through Mary, which also included David and Abraham and the tribe of Judah, of which Eli is Mary's father and Jesus' grandfather. I want to thank my old professor, Dr. J. Dwight Pentecost for much insight into the genealogies of Jesus Christ in his new book, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ*. He concludes his work on this section by saying,

...the Gospels prove Jesus' legal and physical right to sit as Messiah on David's throne to fulfill the covenant God made with Abraham...It is significant to note that, when Jesus offered himself to Israel as the Messiah, his claim to Davidic descent was never challenged...In spite of all the problems that the two genealogies present, we must not lose sight of the fact that they present incontrovertible proof that Jesus is the son of Abraham, the Son of David, the One through whom God will bring the great covenants he made with Israel to their conclusion. He is the One who has the right to redeem and reign.

As we look at the list of fathers, we realize that these folks are in need of a redeemer. It is filled with people who have struggled in their humanity and in their relationship to God. Abraham, for example, struggled with his circumstances.

Out of fear for his own life, Abraham twice told kings that Sarah was his sister. As a result she was taken to their harem until the lie was revealed. Abraham's son Isaac struggled in believing God, and was driven by fear of a famine to the land of Canaan. He went into Egypt in defiance of God's desires for him. Later, while dwelling in the land of the Philistines, Isaac repeated his father's sin and lied to King Abimelech about his relationship with his wife Rebekah. He called her his sister instead of his wife so that the people would not kill him. As a result, King Abimelech took her. Jacob, the "supplanter," bought his brother Esau's birthright and obtained his father's blessing through a deception. Here also is David, an adulterer, murderer, deceiver, a man of blood. Jesus, the second Adam, came through the lineage of the first Adam, to be the redeemer of all who were within his lineage, Israel.

Thanks be to God that he was willing to send his Son into the world through the virgin birth to seek and to save that which was lost (Luke 19:10). We who have placed our faith in him are included in his spiritual genealogy because of the love of God shown through Jesus Christ. John 1:13 tells us: "But as many as received Him to them he gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man but of God." Galatians 3:26-29 says, "For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus . . . and if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise."

From a historical perspective, if we had to answer the question "Who was Jesus?" then we would find a number of things: (1) he was a carpenter's son from a blue-collar family, (2) later known as a teacher, (3) a prophet, (4) a good man who meant well, and (5) a vessel of the Christ who came upon him at his baptism and left him at the cross. We would find nothing more than one master among masters, "a son of God" like any other man. If that is all that can be said about him, then we are in deep spiritual trouble. We are left with no

Savior to deal with our sin, shame, and guilt; no power for living in this corrupt world; and no hope for the future on earth or eternity.

But if the question is, "Who is Jesus?" we can answer that he is the Son of God, the Savior of the world, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. He is man's only hope for the forgiveness of sin, his only hope for living in this corrupt world without becoming corrupt, and man's only hope for the future. We have the witness of God the Father: "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased." And we have the witness of the fathers that God kept his promises to Abraham and David, and out of their loins has come "a Savior who is Christ the Lord."

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