

## **PETER'S CONFESSION**

Mr. Smith was walking along the road with a lady when she asked him this question. "Mr. Smith," she asked "What do you think about cremation?"

Mr. Smith replied without hesitation by asking a question of the lady. "You know the scriptural principle don't you?"

"No," the lady replied.

"You bury treasure but you burn rubbish," Mr. Smith enlightened her, "But why do you ask?"

"We cremated my mother last year!" was her answer.

It always pays to find out why the question is being asked.

Here are some questions kids ask. Why is the sky blue? When on a long trip, Are we there yet? At home, Do you have to eat our vegetables? Why do we have to clean our room? At school: Why do we have to have homework? Why do we need to know math if we're going to be a disc jockey? And such personals as: Where do babies come from?

Teachers use questions as a learning tool in the classroom. It's true that they use questions on examinations to determine what's in the mind of the student and whether the information has been processed properly. Where a teacher asks questions determines to a great degree not only if the students will answer but also how they will answer. For example, the best place to ask a class full of aspiring marine biologists questions about the ocean is at the seashore. The best place to ask a class full of future astronomers questions about the universe is on a starry night with a big telescope close at hand.

Well, as the Master teacher, Jesus, of course, frequently used this powerful teaching tool, and a great example of this is found in Matthew 16. This particular teaching took place about two and a half years into Jesus' earthly ministry. That would mean that the cross was only six months away and knowing this Jesus realized that it was important for Him to have some quality time alone with His disciples to help prepare them for what was to come. Time was growing short and He had to make sure they understood who He was, why He had been born, and what was about to be done to Him.

Well, the setting Jesus chose for this crucial teaching time was the district of Caesarea Philippi, which lies about 25 miles north-east of the Sea of Galilee. I visited there back in 2000 and I remember it

being up in the hills about 4 or 5 thousand feet above sea level which made it a much cooler climate than the Galilean lowlands. Caesarea Philippi is where the Jordan River has its source as a babbling, spring-fed brook on the flanks of Mount Hermon.

With the cool, fresh mountain air and the stream and the spectacular views, even back in Jesus' day, I imagine this was sort of a weekend getaway kind of place. So perhaps the disciples themselves were in a holiday mood that day, anticipating a couple days in the mountains alone with Jesus.

And they would indeed have been alone because back then the population in Caesarea Philippi was mainly non-Jewish so there would have been no interruptions by multitudes clamoring for Jesus' attention nor would He have to worry about the Jewish religious leaders who by this time were looking for any opportunity to find and arrest Him. By hiking up to Caesarea Philippi, Jesus would indeed have had much-needed, quality time with His students.

In Jesus' day the hills of the Caesarea Philippi area were scattered with temples of ancient Syrian Baal worship. As many as fourteen such temples would have been scattered about the landscape. And, not only were Syrian gods worshiped there, but was also a cavern nearby that was said to have been the birthplace of the Greek god Pan—the god of nature. I remember seeing it myself and hearing our tour guide tell us that because of this, Caesarea Philippi was originally called Panias. And then, another huge temple would have stood there in Jesus' day built out of white marble by Herod the Great and dedicated to the worship of Augustus Caesar.

Matthew 16:13: "When Jesus came into the coasts of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, saying, Whom do men say that I the Son of man am?"

Jesus deliberately set Himself against the background of the world's religions in all their history and splendor and demanded to be compared with them and to have the verdict given in His favor. He forced His class to wrestle with vital questions like: Who is the real God? Who is worthy of adoration and worship? In essence Jesus said, Men, look around at the magnificence of all these temples to all these gods and then look at Me. Who is right? Who is the truth? Me or the gods of one of these temples?

This was the climax of Jesus' teaching ministry. All the lessons over the past two and a half years, all the miracles, everything that Jesus had done and said, had been in preparation for this moment. So you

could say that this classroom time in the mountains was in effect, the disciples' final examination that consisted of only one question worth 100 points. No pressure, but get it right you pass with an A+, get it wrong and you get a "0!"

Jesus eased them into this final exam with another question, sort of a practice test to get them warmed up for the real thing. In verse 13 He asked, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is? What are the crowds saying about Me?" Now, Jesus knew the answer to this question (no teacher worth his salt asks a question unless he does!) And Jesus did. He knew what people were saying about Him but He wanted the twelve to think carefully about those popular perceptions as a way of building a foundation for their own conclusions.

Jesus asked this first question He didn't do so as an insecure leader seeking to learn how He stood in the public opinion polls. No, it was a probing question designed to determine the extent to which His students had discovered the true nature of His ministry and message.

Matthew 16:14: "And they said, Some say that thou art John the Baptist: some, Elias; and others, Jeremias, or one of the prophets."

Their replies would have been flattering to anyone—except the Son of God. One disciple pointed out that many believed Jesus was John the Baptist reincarnated, come back from the grave to continue his ministry of announcing the Messiah while criticizing the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees. Another disciple shared the fact that many people believed Jesus was Elijah, considered by some Jews to be the supreme Old Testament prophet. The people knew that Malachi had prophesied (Mal. 4:5) that Elijah would return before "the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord." In fact, to this day in modern Jewish Passover celebrations an empty chair is reserved at the table for Elijah in the hope of his one day coming to announce the Messiah's arrival. Another disciple shared that some people said Jesus was Jeremiah. And they held this opinion because according to 2 Maccabees legend had it that Jeremiah had taken the Ark of the covenant and the altar or incense out of the Temple and hidden them both somewhere on Mt. Nebo in order to preserve them from desecration and destruction by the Babylonians. Some Jews thought that before the Messiah returned to establish His kingdom, Jeremiah would return to earth and restore the Ark and the altar to their proper places in the temple.

So the people who said these things were paying Jesus wonderful compliments, they were comparing Him to the some of the greatest

prophets and teachers God had ever sent. They were indeed giving Jesus high praise, but not high enough because in their minds none of these three of prophets were the Messiah but rather just one of the Messiah's forerunners who had come back to life with God-given miraculous powers.

And this way of thinking is nothing new. Since Jesus' day much of the world has wanted to speak highly of Jesus without recognizing His deity and lordship.

Most people in our day and age will admit that Jesus was a great man—that He was a great teacher—they will admire His Sermon on the Mount. But they will not concede that He was the Christ, the Son of God, the only way to Heaven. A few years ago, Newsweek's cover story was, "The Other Jesus" and it listed the opinions that other faiths have when it comes to Jesus Christ. Here are some excerpts:

"Muslims recognize Him as a great prophet. They even revere Him as the Son of Mary, the only woman mentioned by name in the Koran.

"Many Jews see Christ as an "admirable Jew" but not as the Son of God.

"Buddhists depersonalize the Jesus who walked this earth and transform Him into a figure more like the Buddha. Some regard Him as a *bodhisattva*, a perfectly enlightened being who vows to help others.

"Many Hindus are drawn to Jesus because of His compassion and His devotion to nonviolence but they find the notion of a single god unnecessarily restrictive."

So, the opinion of the multitudes of Jesus' day is not that different than the opinion of many people today. They thought that Jesus was great, but not great enough. To many of them, He was just another great teacher come from God. But that day in Caesarea Philippi, Jesus wanted His "students" to realize that in Him God had done something different. He wanted them to see that He was not just another teacher come from God. He was God come to teach! He was God in the flesh—the long-awaited Messiah!

Human reaction to Jesus today is as varied as it was in the age when He first questioned the disciples. A twentieth-century wag, spoofing a modern theologian, has given the Gospel incident a new twist: "He said unto them, 'Whom do you say that I am?'

“And they replied, ‘You are the eschatological manifestation of the ground of our being, the kerygma in which we find the ultimate meaning of an interpersonal relationship.’

“And Jesus answered and said unto them, ‘What?’”

Today many, like the disciples, are not ready to give the simple, matter-of-fact reply.

Unsatisfied, Jesus proceeded to ask His disciples to crystallize their somewhat vague conceptions into a confession of deep conviction. He put them on the spot: “But whom say ye that I am?” Matthew 16:15.

Peter was the first to find words to express the bold faith that had gripped their souls. Not only was this Man a greater than all the prophets; not only was He the long-expected Messiah. “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,” (Matt. 16:16) he boldly confessed.

And when He said this, I imagine a glow of pride showed on Jesus’ face that said, “Yes! Correct! You got it right Peter! You get an A+!” Think of it, Peter, who usually opened his mouth only to change feet, moved to the head of the class and got it right! For once he said the right thing at the right time!

And it was indeed the right thing because in his well-worded reply Peter forcefully, confidently, expressed two foundational Christian truths. First he identified Jesus as the Messiah, the One who was to reign forever on the throne of His great ancestor David. Second, and even more important, Peter identified Jesus as divine, the Son the living God! This was no half-hearted reply. Peter obviously believed what He said that day! I mean it is only ten words but in those ten words Peter used the definite article four times. It would literally be translated like this: “You are *the* Christ, *the* Son of *the* God, *the* living One!”

As the annals of history record, Jesus was not alone in making this claim. Others have stated that they were the Messiah as well. For example there was a man named Sabatai Zebi, born in 1626, the son of a chicken farmer. Sabatai was manic-depressive with a mesmerizing speaking style and in 1648 he declared he was the Messiah, the one and only way to God. A few years later he married a Polish prostitute, and attracted thousands of followers with his teaching that sexual promiscuity and nudity were virtues. In 1666 however, he was arrested by Turkish authorities on charges of trying to overthrow the sultan. He was given a choice: be tortured to death or become a Muslim. Without batting an eye, he renounced Judaism

for the faith of Mohammed and took the name Mahmed Effendi. So much for his messianic ambitions.

But Jesus was different and Peter knew that because Jesus not only contended that He was the way, the truth, and the life, He also had the credentials to back it all up.

Jesus commended Peter's faith, but quickly cautioned him against the sin of supposing he deserved credit for it: "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven." Verse 17. Peter must not be self-sufficient as though he were more clever than others.

As brilliant as fleshly brain cells may be, unless aided by the Holy Spirit the human mind is utterly incapable of recognizing God when He appears incognito. "No one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit." 1 Corinthians 12:3. The Son of God walked the dusty thoroughfares of life two thousand years ago quite unperceived and unrecognized by humanity, even as in all the years since then heavenly truth has been equally unperceived by "flesh and blood."

With the disciples' confession of faith, Jesus was now ready to lay the foundation and cornerstone of His church. "On this rock [that is, this confession of My identity] I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it." Matthew 16:18. We now see Him laboring, swiftly, skillfully, a wise Master Builder and divine Craftsman, erecting an edifice of faith against which "the gates of hell" shall not prevail.

The tower of Pisa in Pisa, Italy, was built as a bell tower for the Cathedral that is located there. Construction began in 1173 and 5 years later, at the time the builders reached the 3rd story, they noticed the building had a lean. It is now known as "The Leaning Tower of Pisa" and every year hundreds of thousands of tourists visit Pisa to see this wonder. It could be said that the tower lost its vertical perspective when it began to move horizontally. Churches do this too. The flaws we often see in the church are due it taking its eyes off the gospel of Jesus. Just like the leaning tower of Pisa it sometimes takes awhile before you notice the lean. The Tower of Pisa was closed to tourists in 1990 due to the advancement of its lean bringing it perilously close to toppling. Corrective measures made the tower safe once again and it reopened in 2000.

Now that the disciples were thoroughly convinced of His divinity, He was prepared to enlighten them about His death. Drawing aside all the mystic veils that had beclouded the previous brief references to

the cross, He plainly, even bluntly, told them that He must be rejected and slain: "From that time Jesus began to show to 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 again the third day." Matthew 16:21.

The disciples listened with more astonishment than terror. The idea of God having a Son was revolutionary enough to their Jewish minds; now the thought of that Son of God dying seemed incredulous. This cannot be! A crucified Messiah in place of a glorified, crowned, world-ruling one? This was an insult to their intelligence, a scandal and a reproach. The more convinced the disciples were that Jesus was the Son of God, the more confused and confounded they were to be told that He must be put to death. And by the best people in the world, their own nation!

Now the same "blessed" Simon Bar-Jonah who had been first to confess the Son of God was first to deny His cross. Solicitous apparently, even for Jesus' mental health at hearing the astounding announcement so repugnant to his colleagues, the well-meaning Peter rudely grasped the person of his Lord as if to give Him a kind of shock treatment to jar Him from such morbid imaginings. No ill treatment could be accorded Him by members of the human race, especially by the chosen people!

"Then Peter took Him aside, and began to rebuke Him, saying, 'Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to you.'" Matthew 16:22. Crosses are for felons, not for anyone good, and especially not for One who is the Son of God!

Thus was the cross both a "stumblingblock" and "foolishness" to the first disciples, and an "offense" as well. Thus is it even today to our human nature.

If "flesh and blood" could not comprehend the idea that Jesus was the Son of God, much less could Peter unaided comprehend the doctrine of the cross. The very idea was something so utterly beyond human invention as to be unfathomable to their minds without the revelation of the Holy Spirit.

It was good that Jesus had first drawn from the disciples their confession that He was the Son of God before springing this shocking news on them. Otherwise they would have bolted in unbelief and abandoned Him as did so many others of His interested followers had just done. Man-made religions could invent "messiahs," but none

could conceive of a suffering, dying Messiah giving Himself in unutterable love for the world.

Jemima Wilkenson was born in 1752 to a Quaker family in Rhode Island. She used to tell people she had died when she was twenty years old but God had resurrected her. She ended up with more than 200 fiercely loyal disciples who believed that she was their ticket to God. One day she was on the banks of a lake and announced that she was going to walk across the water just as Jesus did. She turned to her followers and asked, "Do you believe I can? They chanted, "Yes! Yes!" Then she said, "Well then in that case there's no need for me to actually do it" and she walked home on dry land. I'm not sure that bolstered the faith of her flock and it didn't help with she died in 1820 and they followed her instructions not to bury her because she was going to rise again. As her body slowly decomposed, the remainder of her sect drifted away.

There were others. Henry James Price claimed to be God three years after being ordained as an Anglican minister in England but despite his claims of immortality, he died in 1899. And this was nothing new even in Jesus' day, because there had been numerous false messiahs then as well.

Are we better or wiser than Peter? Our unaided human thinking today is just as blind to the truth of the cross as was that of the first disciples. We are in even greater peril; we have what they did not have—a mental knowledge of the facts of the crucifixion and a nearly universal recognition that it really happened, but this "head knowledge" can confuse the avenues of approach to a heart understanding of the cross.

If we have the least idea that our fortunate birth in the Christian era now gives us any advantage over Peter, we may feel that we naturally are wiser than he was, living as we do in a more enlightened age. We have graduated out of spiritual ignorance like his! And then, we miss the whole point of the gospel.

We cannot even begin to comprehend what took place at Caesarea Philippi unless we realize that our human nature is the same as was Peter's. Failure to recognize this may expose us to the tragedy of repeating on a fatal plane Peter's spurning of the cross. He spurned it ignorantly; we may be in danger of rejecting it knowingly. Incidentally, that will be the final sin of lost people.

The reason why Peter reacted as he did is obvious. The idea of the cross was something so original, unworldly, that it could arise only in



the mind of God. The cross is both the “wisdom” and the “power” of God. 1 Corinthians 1:18, 24. It is a divine strategy of spiritual warfare of sublime skill. But Peter’s response to the Savior’s stunning announcement was the same as that which people of every place and age would experience. He was expressing the thoughts of our own hearts, even today, in treating as repugnant foolishness the very idea of being crucified.

Jesus revealed this insight in His rebuke to Peter for his disrespectful and irreverent interruption: “You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of man.” Matthew 16:23. Peter was simply a man, as any one of us is, who could comprehend only the things that are of men! Peter was no more “wicked” than any of us—he was just being himself. And being himself, he couldn’t fathom “the things of God” enough to discern the meaning of the cross. Those “things of men” which blinded his understanding blind ours as well.

But we have not yet considered the real source of Peter’s opposition to our Lord’s cross. Jesus was not rude or angry with the poor man, and His words were no passionate outburst of temper. The unmitigated severity of His stinging rebuke to His beloved disciple reveals a significant origin of Peter’s worldly sentiments. Jesus was merely putting His finger of recognition on the plague spot of mankind’s opposition to the cross: “He turned, and said to Peter, ‘Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me.’” Verse 23.

Poor Peter! He had unwittingly let himself be a tool in the hands of Satan by seeking to turn Jesus away from His sacrificial purpose. That temptation was real to Jesus! Christ saw that Peter’s ideas had their source in the enemy’s original rebellion in heaven. Evading His cross was an alluring temptation to Jesus that He had to resist with all the power of His will. Serving as Satan’s amanuensis, Peter had touched a raw nerve in Jesus’ soul.

We are not to understand that Peter was Satan himself, but Peter’s attitude toward the cross was more than a reflection of fallible, uninformed human nature. It perfectly reflected the attitude of Satan himself.

Dr. W. A. Criswell, Pastor of the First Baptist Church of Dallas Texas, said on one occasion on an airplane flight he found himself seated beside a well-known theologian. He desperately wanted to start a conversation and they did get to talk. The man told Dr. Criswell about how he had recently lost his little boy through death. Dr. Criswell

listened as he told his story: He said he had come home from school with a fever and we thought it was just one of those childhood things, but it was a very virulent form of meningitis. The doctor said we cannot save your little boy. He'll die.

And so this seminary professor, loving his son as he did, sat by the bedside to watch this death vigil. It was the middle of the day and the little boy whose strength was going from him and whose vision and brain was getting clouded said, "Daddy, it's getting dark isn't it?" The professor said to his son, "Yes son it is getting dark, very dark." Of course it was very dark for him. He said, "Daddy, I guess it's time for me to go to sleep isn't it?"

He said, "Yes, son, it's time for you to go to sleep."

The professor said the little fellow had a way of fixing his pillow just so, and putting his head on his hands when he slept and he fixed his pillow like that and laid his head on his hands and said, "Good night Daddy. I will see you in the morning." He then closed his eyes in death.

Dr. Criswell said the professor didn't say anymore after that. He just looked out the window of that airplane for a long time. Then he turned back and he looked at Dr Criswell with the scalding tears coming down his cheeks and he said, "Dr. Criswell, I can hardly wait till the morning."

But when Jesus died He did not have the luxury of dying in His Father's arms of comfort. He was made to be sin for us. Thus He bore the full indignation against sin. He died the second death that we might never have to die that death. By faith you have begun to comprehend the breadth and length and depth and height of the love that led the Son of God to His cross to die the world's second death.