

**HE IS GOD
JOHN 20:19-28**

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The Son of Mary

How could he be so different? He was from the little hamlet known as Nazareth, the son of a Jewish carpenter, a carpenter himself. Even the people of his own village took offense at his teaching, asking the question, “Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary?” (Mark 6:3). How can this man—with hands nicked and scarred from the splinters of the woodshop—have the holy hands of God, hands that heal, hands that multiply a few loaves and a couple of fish until thousands are fed? Not only his neighbors, but even his own family, at one point, thought he had “lost His senses” (Mark 3:21; cf. John 10:20). Some were amazed that even the demons obeyed his voice while others were quite certain that he, himself, was possessed by dark forces (Mark 1:27; 3:22).

This rabbi, teacher, picked the most unlikely people to be his students and went to parties thrown by sinners. His detractors labeled him a drunkard (Matthew 11:19), and his own disciples were shocked—men weren’t allowed to speak to women in public places in his day—when he carried on a prolonged, personal conversation at the well with a questionable woman, a woman who lived with her boyfriend (John 4).

Despite all of his unpredictability, this rabbi declared a hopeful message about the rule and the reign of God. What the crowds really wanted to know was what this kingdom of God could do for a lame child, a blind parent, or a demented soul screaming in his tortured isolation among the graves that mark the village fringes. People listened, for he taught with great authority (Matthew 7:29) and refused to be tamed by anyone. The crowds were hungry for hope, so they listened and discovered God in the most unlikely place, in the most unlikely person, Jesus. They found God’s voice in the voice of a carpenter.

The greatest questions ever posed by human lips were first asked by the first-century crowds that sat at this Jewish teacher’s feet and by the scribes and Pharisees who tried to tame his tongue: Is there some way in which this carpenter/rabbi is different than all the other teachers who talk about God? And when we learn about him, are we also learning about God? How can he be so human and yet speak as if God is his very Father? Is this man claiming to have the authority of God? Is he, in fact, divine?

Twins with Double Vision

This was a very big day for twin brothers in the third grade. They were coming to see me, their pastor, to talk about their pending baptism. The appointment was scheduled with great anticipation because each twin had made an individual commitment to Christ that was to be gently explored by me. The parents urged me to be careful, to make sure one twin wasn’t simply

following the other, because the boys did almost everything together. Promising the parents that I would not treat them as a pair, I questioned each boy alone, one-on-one.

In the midst of questions, I asked the first twin to share with me something that Jesus did during his lifetime, something that we might find him doing on any given day. The first twin replied with great confidence, “He would work in the woodshop with his dad.” I didn’t really remember a Bible story exactly like that from Jesus’ childhood, but I did know that it was a logical and careful choice which demonstrated that the first twin saw the humanity of Jesus, his earthliness. He saw Jesus building a table in the shop with Joseph.

As I posed the identical question to the second twin during his sharing time, his answer was completely different. He immediately replied, “He preached about the Holy Spirit.” While the first twin had seen the humanity of Jesus, the second son had seen the Jesus of the Trinity. He had seen the divinity of Jesus as expressed in his relationship to the Holy Spirit.

Which twin was right? They both were. And yet one had seen Jesus’ humanness and the other had seen his holiness. Together, the twins had double vision—they saw Jesus as both human and divine. We can never understand the God of heaven unless we come to know him through his earthly Son.

Finding God by Finding Jesus

When renowned biblical scholar N. T. Wright was chaplain at Worcester College, Oxford, he had an opportunity to visit with freshmen for a few minutes on a one-on-one basis to welcome them to the college. Most of the students were cordial, but more than a few commented with a hint of confession, “You won’t be seeing much of me; you see, I don’t believe in God.”

“Oh, that’s interesting.” Wright would reply, “Which god is it you don’t believe in?”

The students were often taken by surprise because they regarded the word “God” as having only one meaning. Invariably, they would mutter a few defensive phrases describing the god they didn’t believe in. Often, the god described was a caricature, a god who lived way up in the sky, looking down angrily at the world, randomly intervening with miracles, and sending bad people to hell while rewarding good people with heaven. Having patiently endured their distorted description of a whimsical old man, Wright would often reply, “Well, I’m not surprised you don’t believe in that god. I don’t believe in that god either.”

The students were often startled by the chaplain’s response until he continued, “I believe in the God I see revealed in Jesus of Nazareth.”

As believers in Christ, we know about God because we know about Jesus. We understand God because we discover him in the person of his son. To say “Jesus is Lord” is to say that Jesus is God. He is one in the same and yet not identical to the Lord, the Yahweh, of the Old Testament.

Maintaining Monotheism

Even though a first-century Jewish Christian would readily call both God the Father and God the Son “Lord,” there could ultimately be only one God in his belief system. Jews were monotheistic, meaning they only believed in the one God, Yahweh, “the God who is.” At its root, Jewish monotheism asserted that there was but one God who was the creator of heaven and earth. This God maintained an interest in and a dynamic relationship with his creation, especially humanity. Jews believed that God had called a special people, Israel (themselves), with whom to have a covenant relationship. God had rescued them, delivered them from the bondage of Egyptian slavery. Jesus was so much God that early Jewish Christians could both maintain their belief in Yahweh alone and yet also acknowledge Jesus as “Lord.” Calling Jesus “Lord” was in no way a denial of the oneness of God.

John, who was a Jewish follower of Christ, explained the relationship between the Father and the Son in the opening of his gospel. He said that Jesus (the Word) was from the very beginning. He was with God and “the Word” was God (1:1). Like God, Jesus was creator. In fact, “all things came into being by Him” (1:3). If there was any doubt that John was referring to Jesus as “the Word,” he made the connection clear, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (1:14).

Like John, Paul had no trouble being both a Jewish monotheist, believing in one God, and also calling Jesus “Lord.” In his first letter to the church at Corinth, Paul wrote, “...for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things, and we exist for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we exist through Him” (1 Corinthians 8:6). Paul was adapting the *Shema* (Deuteronomy 6:4ff.), a foundational Jewish prayer that asserts God’s oneness, to his belief that Jesus was equal with God.

Paul’s Christ-centered monotheism is also found in Colossians 1:15-20. This passage declares Jesus to be the creator of both the heavens and the earth. It declares that he was before all things, that he is “the image of the invisible God.”

Despite definitive passages (John 1, 1 Corinthians 8, and Colossians 1) that unequivocally declare Jesus as God, many readers of scripture have concluded that the New Testament writers never claimed divinity for Jesus. For example, missing the mark, Thomas Cahill concluded,

...neither Mark nor Matthew, neither Paul nor Luke, none of the apostles and none of the disciples who gathered around Jesus and then formed the early church—considered Jesus to be God. This would have seemed blasphemy to them. Their belief in Christ was, after all, a form of Judaism; and Judaism was the world’s only monotheism.

Other scholars, moreover, are adamant that Jesus, himself, never asserted his divinity. Marcus J. Borg, for example, wrote, “...we have no way of knowing whether Jesus thought of himself as the Messiah or as the Son of God in some special sense. According to the earliest layers of the developing gospel tradition, he said nothing about having such thoughts. They were not part of his own teaching.” Borg was so certain that the church has claimed more for Jesus than Jesus, himself, ever intended that he concluded, “I do not think that Jesus proclaimed himself with any of the exalted titles by which he is known in the Christian tradition.”

Much of modern scholarship has concluded that Jesus was not the Son of God. In fact, having surveyed a bundle of books, Philip Yancey concluded,

If you peruse the academic books available at a seminary bookstore you may encounter Jesus as a political revolutionary, as a magician who married Mary Magdalene, as a Galilean charismatic, a rabbi, a peasant Jewish Cynic, a Pharisee, an anti-Pharisee Essene, an eschatological prophet, a “hippy”... and as the hallucinogenic leader of a sacred mushroom cult. Serious scholars write these works, with little sign of embarrassment.

When we actually take a look at the gospels, however, we have clear indication that Jesus claimed to be divine, claimed to be God. We see these claims in both his words and his actions.

Ways the New Testament Writers Presented Jesus as Divine

Examining the New Testament reveals that there are many ways in which the writers present Jesus as a divine character. We see his divinity displayed by:

- His power to pardon
- His superiority over the Sabbath
- The truth in his trial
- Old Testament passages applied to the New Testament Christ
- Declarations from demons
- “Son of God” as a sign of sovereignty
- His keeping the Gate to God
- Teaching that re-interprets the Torah
- John’s portrait of a powerful Christ
- Tearing down the temple
- His worthiness to be worshipped

Power to Pardon

Jesus claimed to have the authority of God when he claimed to have the authority to forgive sins. Only the one wronged, God, has the authority to pardon a sin.

Jesus’ claim to have the power to pardon sin was so repulsive that the religious authorities charged him with nothing less than blasphemy.

I’ve imagined the dust and debris descending while Jesus was teaching. Suddenly, sunlight bursts through the roof like a cat shooting out of the front door at first chance. The crowd was so large that there was no other way to get their lame friend before the Lord. Persistence paid off as they slowly lowered his pallet through the roof until he rested right before the teacher, before Jesus. When Jesus saw their great faith, he said to the paralytic, “My son, *your sins are forgiven*” (Mark 2:5, emphasis added).

The scribes thought to themselves, “Why does this man speak this way? He is blaspheming; who can forgive sins but God alone?” (Mark 2:7). It was clear to the scribes that Jesus was claiming

the authority of God when he asserted the authority to forgive sins. To have God's authority is to be God. Jesus was claiming to be divine.

Jesus, of course, could have corrected the scribes and made it clear that he was in no way presenting himself as God or as having God's authority. But instead, he asserted his position even more strongly, "In order that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—He said to the paralytic—"I say to you, 'Rise, take up your pallet and go home'" (Mark 2:10).

Superiority over the Sabbath

Like exercising the power to pardon, Jesus demonstrated his divinity when he described himself as "Lord of the Sabbath." God himself had established the sacredness of the Sabbath and, therefore, only God could modify Sabbath observance. At the core of ancient Israel's commandments, we read, "For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and made it holy" (Exodus 20:11).

Picture Jesus' disciples out picking the heads of grain on the sacred day of rest, the Sabbath. The Pharisees loudly object because such harvesting amounted to work, at least according to them. Thus, the Sabbath regulations were being broken. Jesus wastes no time in asserting his authority, "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. Consequently, the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27b-28). Claiming to have the authority to redefine the status of the Sabbath was tantamount to claiming equality with God.

Truth in the Trial

In the trial sagas of Jesus, we find the clearest claim of divinity found in the gospels. The charge against him was clear: "He made Himself out to be the Son of God" (John 19:7). Similar divine assertions are discovered in Matthew's account where the high priest said to him, "I adjure You by the living God, that You tell us whether You are the Christ, the Son of God" (Matthew 26:63). Jesus replied, "You have said it yourself; nevertheless I tell you, hereafter you shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of power, and coming on the clouds of heaven" (26:64). This declaration of victorious power is as clear a claim to deity as one can find in the gospels.

During the trial events, Jesus made no attempt to redefine himself in acceptable terms. He let the divine claim stand. Again, the Jews found blasphemy in his divine description of himself (Matthew 26:65-66). To them, Jesus was worthy of death because he had claimed what only God had the right to claim.

Old Testament Applied to a New Testament Christ

As we learned in the first chapter, the Greek Old Testament, the Septuagint, called the God of the Old Testament (Yahweh), "Lord" (*kurios*). "Lord" was also used to denote a name (*Adoni*) that was often substituted for "Yahweh" out of reverence to his divine name. Often, New Testament passages referring to Jesus as Lord are quotations or applications of an Old Testament text

containing one of the Hebrew names for God (Acts 2:20-21; Romans 10:13; 1 Peter 3:15). Applying the Old Testament “Lord” to Jesus by using Old Testament passages to refer to him transferred the divine claims of God to Jesus. The very fact that *kurios* was used in the New Testament to designate both God the Father (Matthew 1:20; 11:25; Acts 17:24; Revelation 4:11) and Jesus (Luke 2:11; John 20:28; Acts 10:36; 1 Corinthians 2:8; Philippians 2:11; James 2:1; Revelation 19:16) makes clear that Jesus was considered equal with God and identified with him. For the Jew, in particular, applying the term *kurios* to Jesus suggested that Christ was equal with the Father.

For example, John employed Isaiah’s foundational vision of the Lord (Isaiah 6:1-13) to imply that Isaiah was seeing the glory of Jesus. According to John’s interpretation (John 12:40-41), the Lord whom Isaiah saw on that occasion was Jesus. To see the glory of the Lord (Isaiah 6:1) is to see the glory of Jesus: “These things Isaiah said because he saw His [Jesus’] glory and he spoke of Him” (John 12:41). Moreover, when writing his Revelation, John declared Jesus as “Lord of lords and King of kings” (Revelation 17:14) or “King of kings and Lord of lords” (Revelation 19:16). Here we find an echo from both Deuteronomy 10:17, “The Lord your God is...Lord of lords” and from Daniel, as Nebuchadnezzar acknowledges that Daniel’s God is “God of gods and Lord of kings” (Daniel 2:47).

What could possibly allow the monotheistic Jews writing the New Testament to transfer to Jesus of Nazareth the Old Testament titles and activities which belonged to God alone? They believed that God, himself, had exalted Jesus so highly that God had declared the divinity of the Son. God had found his good pleasure in all those who honor the Son, “even as they honor the Father” (John 5:23). In fact, if they refused to honor Jesus, they had refused to honor God. For in refusing to give glory to the Son, one has not given glory to the Father. The Father has sent the Son.

Conclusion

Was he so different? If this Jewish rabbi named Jesus was a uniquely spiritual man who revealed new things about God, then he is important but safe, unique but not irresistible.

But if he both claimed to be and was the Son of God, then he shares in the authority of God as God and is both dangerous and undeniable.

He has the power to pardon sin.

The right to rule over the Sabbath.

And he is even worthy of sharing the title “Lord” with God the Father.

If, indeed, he is God, as the New Testament writers present him to be, he both demands and deserves our total allegiance. To say Jesus is Lord is to say he is God.