

Lukes Answer 2

WHO IS JESUS?

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STUDY SIX: LUKE'S ANSWER (PART TWO)

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We have seen that the primary focus of the Gospel writers is on the **person** of Jesus Christ. The purpose of his teaching and miracles, the central issue of his debates with the Jews, and the demonstration of his great compassion, is to convince us of his true identity and point out to us our appropriate response to him. It is clear from these gospels that unless we see and understand who Jesus is, and acknowledge him to be who he claims to be, we can have no expectation of what the Bible calls 'life', no part in salvation, for 'life' and salvation are indissolubly linked with Jesus Christ.

How then did the apostles preach and teach about Jesus Christ? In what terms did they identify him? How did they phrase their messages and their challenges to respond to him? When we read the book of Acts, Luke's record of the first decades of the church, we find the answer to these questions.

The first sermon: Acts 2:14-41

Peter's sermon, after identifying the unusual phenomena associated with the coming of the Holy Spirit as the fulfilment of the prophecy of Joel, makes the following points about Jesus:

[1] He was 'accredited by God' by the miracles he did (22).

[2] His resurrection from the dead identifies him as the 'Holy One' of Psalm 16:8-11 (24- 32).

[When here in Acts 2:24-32 (like Paul in 13:35) Peter calls Jesus 'your Holy One' they both link this identification to Psalm 16:8-11, where the resurrection of God's 'Holy One' is predicted. The fact that Jesus was raised from death to everlasting life confirms the fact that he is indeed the Holy One of the Psalm. By the resurrection all of his claims to equality and identification with God are validated and vindicated. Had he made those claims, without having the right to make those claims - just a man assuming the role and rights of God - no resurrection would have taken place.]

[3] Jesus has been raised up by God and seated at God's right hand, the position of power and authority (33-36).

[4] From this position Jesus has 'poured out' the promised Holy Spirit (33).

[5] Psalm 110:1 is quoted, where David states 'The Lord said to my Lord' (34).

[6] The conclusion of all this is 'Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ' (36).

Let us be careful to notice that, while there is mention of the death of Jesus, it is not in terms of its substitutionary, sin-bearing purpose and effect, but in terms of the enormity of the Jew's error - that they have crucified the One who is their Lord. **Peter identifies Jesus as the Holy One, the Lord, the Christ; the One who now sits in the position of authority and power at the right hand of God the Father.**

In response to this presentation of the true identity of Jesus Christ, and with the evidence of it blazed before their eyes with the visible and audible manifestations of the Spirit of Joel's prophecy, Peter's hearers are 'cut to the heart'. These Jews now see what they could not see before. They now realise that Jesus was in fact the One he claimed to be. Gripped by this realisation they have only one question: brothers, what shall we do? (37)

If Jesus is who he claimed to be, and if we now understand it, if we now see it - that this man Jesus is the Holy One, the Lord, to whom all authority and power is given - if this is true, what can we do? - we who have denied and rejected him? Confronted by the Lord, **seeing** him whom no one can see and yet live, what can anyone do?

To this one question there is but one answer: repent (38). Change your mind, turn to God. Affirm that he is who he is, and that it is he, not you, who has the power and the authority to run your life. Reverse the rebellion of Genesis 3 and return to God. But this repenting, this turning to God is given a specific focus. It is evidenced by being baptised 'in the name of Jesus Christ'. Interestingly the original text here translates 'upon the name of Jesus Christ.' **The repentance and the baptism to which Peter calls his hearers rests on their confession of the name of Jesus Christ - that is on their acknowledgement, their real, practical belief, that he is who he claimed to be.** Their repentance and baptism is not simply towards 'God': it is towards and in the name of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Peter here commands that his hearers publicly confess and demonstrate that they now believe that Jesus Christ is God - in whose presence repentance is the only appropriate response, and whose name they now acknowledge by baptism. In the act of baptism spoken of here by Peter three thousand people demonstrated that they now believed that Jesus was both Lord and Christ. This was no easy step. Baptism was one thing, but baptism in the name of Jesus Christ was another. **By submitting to *this* baptism they signify that they have finished with their opinion that Jesus was a mere man claiming equality with God, for which claim they had crucified him. By submitting to *this* baptism they confess that his claim was legitimate, that he is indeed the Son of God in the fullest, ultimate sense.**

To the Jews participating in this baptism in the name of Jesus Christ, and to all the unnumbered onlookers, this was radical in the extreme. At this point the *symbolism* of baptism - that in this act we indicate our dying and rising again with Christ - has not been taught. That comes later in the ministry of the apostles. Here these three thousand Jews proclaim: we are repenting - we are changing our minds about Jesus of Nazareth, we hereby acknowledge and recognize him as our Lord and our God. Then on the basis of this repenting, this radical change in belief, expressed in the public confession of baptism, they are promised the forgiveness of sin and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (verse 38).

The second sermon: Acts 3:11-26

Again reminding the Jews of the crucifixion Peter identifies Jesus as

1. glorified (verse 13),
2. God's servant (verse 13),
3. the Holy and Righteous one (verse 14),
4. the author of life (verse 15),
5. raised from death by God (verse 15),
6. the Christ (verse 18),
7. in heaven (verse 21),
8. the prophet like Moses - failure to acknowledge him results in severance from God's people (22,23),
9. the promised descendant of Abraham through whom all peoples of the earth will be blessed (25), and
10. God's servant (NIV & GNB) or Son (KJV) (26) [The Greek *paida* means either].

What does it mean that God has glorified Jesus? Peter takes care to identify the God of whom he is speaking as the God of the Old Testament - 'the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers'. This is the God whose glory filled the temple (Isaiah 6) and who stated 'I will not give my glory to another' (Isaiah 42:8; also see 48:11). Yet here Peter says that this God has glorified his servant Jesus. We are reminded here of what we have understood from the Gospel of John (1:14; 17:1-5) and from Mark's account of the transfiguration (9:1-13). The glory of God was present and observable in Jesus Christ. Paul speaks of this (2 Corinthians 4:6); the letter to the Hebrews tells us of it (Hebrews 1:3). By the resurrection and ascension God has confirmed all that Jesus claimed about himself, and the healing miracle of Acts 3, done in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, confirms that this same Jesus has returned to his eternal glory and sits beside his Father in the position of all honour and glory.

In calling Jesus 'the Holy and Righteous One' Peter clearly identifies him with the God of the Old Testament. 'The Holy One of Israel' is one of the names of God favoured by the prophet Isaiah. He often uses it when rebuking his hearers for their rejection of God. (Isaiah 1:4; 5:24; 31:1; 45:11), but more significantly he uses this name in the context of salvation and rejoicing (Isaiah

12:6; 29:19; 41:14,16; 43:3,14; 47:4; 48:17; 49:7). In addition to this, God is identified as the 'Holy One' in that magnificent passage in Isaiah 40:21-31, where he challenges 'to whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?' (verse 25).

The listening Jews know without a doubt that the Holy One is God, and that he alone is the creator, the giver of life, and he alone is the Redeemer. When Peter here calls Jesus 'the Holy One' he is making the statement that in rejecting Jesus of Nazareth his hearers had rejected the Holy One; in rejecting Jesus they had followed in the footsteps of their fathers and rejected their God.

They had failed to listen to Jesus, they had refused to accept his claims. Peter here reminds them that Moses warned them of the seriousness of rejecting the teaching of the 'prophet like me'. Peter here tells them that if they do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as God - which was the primary impact of his teaching - then by that refusal they seal their own fate, they identify their own position - outside of the people of God.

To further confirm the true identity of Jesus Christ and to further convict his hearers of the enormity of their refusal to acknowledge him, Peter indicates that Jesus is the promised seed of Abraham through whom all peoples of the earth will be blessed. He points out that God sent Jesus *first* to the Jews. The clear inference is that in rejecting Jesus Christ the Jews are refusing the one and only God-given way of blessing.

Let us take note in passing that the concept of repentance - 'by turning each of you from your wicked ways' (26) - is again associated with a true recognition of Jesus Christ. Further, let us note that this repentance is considered by Peter as the promised blessing brought by the seed of Abraham.

Peter's message to the Sanhedrin: Acts 4:8-12

In addition to referring to the resurrection of Jesus Christ, which is itself a declaration of his deity, Peter makes this significant statement:

'Salvation is found in no-one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.' (12).

These words clearly identify Jesus as the one and only source of salvation. But in doing this they in fact do far more, for to the Old Testament mind, God alone is the Saviour (2 Samuel 22:3; Psalm 106:21; Isaiah 43:3,11; 45:15,21; 49:26; 60:16; Jeremiah 14:8; Hosea 13:4), and in him alone is salvation found (Psalm 3:8; 25:5; 27:1,9; 35:9; 37:39; 42:5; 62:1,7; 67:19,20; 95:1; 118:14; Isaiah 12:2). Let us note particularly the exclusive statement made by God in Isaiah: 'I, even I, am the LORD, and apart from me there is no saviour' (43:11). Yet here in Acts 4:12 Peter, standing in a life threatening situation, where discretion would have been in order, does not hesitate to identify Jesus Christ as the one and only source of salvation. The inference of Peter's words is startlingly clear. By his statement Peter affirms the deity of Christ.

The "good news": Acts 5:42

Acts 5:42 makes a simple but instructive statement:

'Day after day ... they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.'

Modern evangelicalism has focused the good news, the "gospel", on the cross. But here, in the immediate post-natal period of the gospel, it focuses on Christ himself. The one significant thing that the apostles are intent on making known is that Jesus is the Christ. This reflects the focus of Mark in his opening verse: 'The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God' (Mark 1:1). In this verse Mark uses the two terms 'Christ' and 'the Son of God' synonymously. The 'Christ' is 'the Son of God.' This concept is also contained in Peter's answer to Jesus' question: 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God' (Matthew 16:16), and Martha's confession of faith in John 11:27: 'I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world.'

The primary fact of the good news is that God has come to us in the person of his Son. Why is this good news? Because before his coming mankind, including the Jews, lived in ignorance of God. In blind darkness we groped after God and didn't find him, couldn't know him. In the person of his Son he stands in our midst. When we see who this man Jesus really is, the darkness is dispersed, the blindness is ripped away. When we see him we see God. When we know him, we know God (John 14:7-9). This is the primary and central focus of the good news.

[This summarization of the gospel is also seen in Acts 8:5 and 12.]

Stephen's speech: Acts 7

Most of Stephen's speech is given to reminding the Jews of their consistent rejection of God's servants throughout their history. He then calls Jesus 'the Righteous One' (as Peter did in Acts 3), and accuses the Jews of his murder (52). Most Old Testament references to 'the righteous' concern God's faithful people. Two point to the expected Messiah. In Isaiah 53:11 God speaks of 'my righteous servant', and in Jeremiah 23:5 of 'a righteous branch' that he will raise up in the line of David. This righteous branch of David is further identified as 'a King' (Jeremiah 23:5); following this a very definite statement is made about him: 'This is the name by which he will be called: The LORD Our Righteousness' (23:6b).

As Peter reminds us in 1 Peter 1:10 the old prophets didn't understand the full significance of their messages. Jesus also mentioned this in Matthew 13:16,17. Although to our post-incarnation understanding this passage in Jeremiah clearly speaks of the incarnation, so unexpected was the concept of God coming to earth as a man that it would not have entered their minds to even think of it. When Stephen here identifies Jesus of Nazareth whom they crucified as 'the Righteous One' the Jews are completely stirred up, not with conviction and remorse at having killed the one who is actually their Lord, but with fury that Stephen should so identify Jesus as the Righteous One (7:54). This response to Stephen's statement about Jesus' identity parallels their response to the statements Jesus made about himself which we looked at in John's Gospel.

Rather than back off and save his life Stephen pushes the point further. Seeing a vision of the ascended Christ he states:

'Look, I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.' (Acts 7:56).

As Peter has done in Acts 2:33,34 and 5:31 Stephen states that Jesus is at the right hand of God. This is the position of power and authority. This is the position of exaltation. This is the position to which no mere man can ascend. This is the position of equality.

The Jews are totally aware, as they were with Jesus' own claims, of the implications of this statement. Their religious fury overtakes them. Their zeal for their God motivates them. In seeking to protect his honour, which is to their minds undermined and placed in jeopardy by Stephen's words, they stone Stephen to death. **The radical violence of their reaction reflects the radical significance of Stephen's statement.**

The conversion of Saul: Acts 9, 22 & 26

Approving the radical action of these Jews is Saul. Zealous for the name of the Lord, thoroughly trained in the Jewish law, convinced of the blasphemy of statements and claims being made concerning the deity of Jesus of Nazareth, Saul undertook a systematic persecution of those who believed in Jesus Christ. It does not occur to him that those statements and claims could possibly be right.

What went through his mind when the light from heaven surrounded and blinded him on the Damascus road? His knowledge of the Old Testament scriptures would tell him that in this blazing brilliance he was in the presence of the Lord. Moses had seen the Lord's glory, and the brilliance of it remained reflected in his face (Exodus 34); the tabernacle was so filled with God's glory that no-one could enter it (Exodus 40:34,35); similarly the glory of the Lord filled the temple (1 Kings 8:10,11); Ezekiel saw a brilliant figure surrounded by radiant light, and stated 'this was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord' (Ezekiel 1:26-28).

Saul, the one so vehemently opposed to all who claim that Jesus is the Son of God, is here in this glorious, radiant brilliance, confronted by God. He knows this. When the voice speaks he knows it is the glorious Lord of the Old Testament speaking. And in those words spoken by that Lord '*why do you persecute me?*' is the first ominous indication of what is about to be revealed.

Fearfully, disbelieving the implication, he asks: **'Who are you, Lord?'**

The dreaded answer comes: *I am Jesus ...*

I am Jesus.

The glorious Lord of the Old Testament, the One who had revealed himself to Moses, to the temple priests, to Isaiah, to Ezekiel, in indescribable radiance, speaks from the brilliant heavenly light on the Damascus road, and says: I am Jesus.

I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.

There is nothing Saul can say. All of his convictions and arguments have been wiped out. All of his zeal has been proved misdirected. Nothing remains but for him to do a complete about face and submit to the one he now knows is his Lord. This change, this repentance, is the only viable course of action. 'What shall I do, Lord?' he asked (Acts 22:10). As Ananias explained to him later 'The God of your fathers has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth. You will be his witness to all men of what you have seen and heard' (22:14,15). Saul 'was not disobedient to the vision from heaven' (26:19); he immediately began 'to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God' (Acts 9:20), and 'baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ' (9:22).

[Here in this conversion of Saul we see the true significance of repentance. **Repentance has primarily to do with our belief about who God is. The Son of God, Jesus Christ, confronts us and commands us to believe in him. This command requires us to abandon our own concepts of who God is and see that he, Jesus Christ, is the Lord.** He tells us, as we saw in the Gospel of John, that unless we honour him as God we are actually not honouring God; that only in seeing him and knowing him do we actually see and know God. Here on the Damascus road Saul repented. He let go of his prior understanding of who God is and brought his mind into submission to Christ. The radical change that Saul experienced was not primarily concerned with turning from sins, but with coming to and acknowledging the true God, and in that acknowledgement turning from the one foundational sin of rejecting the one, true God. The essential focus of this change was the identity of Jesus Christ. It is only subsequent to this change, this conversion, that the forgiveness of Saul's sins is mentioned (Acts 22:16). It is evident that this forgiveness is not the *purpose or motivating cause* of Saul's repentance, but its automatic consequence and effect. He repented because Jesus Christ is the Son of God, the Lord. He is given forgiveness of sins only on the basis of this repentance. There can be no forgiveness unless the prior radical change of mind has occurred. (Note that this priority is one of necessity, not of time; the act of repentance/belief precedes forgiveness of theological necessity; in terms of *time* they are simultaneous).

This is demonstrated in Jesus' commission to Saul: 'I am sending you to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me' (Acts 26:18). This change of mind, this turning, this repentance, this replacing of our god-concept (termed 'darkness' and 'the power of Satan') with the knowledge that Jesus Christ is the Lord, must first occur 'so *that*' forgiveness of sins can be granted. It is only when Christ is honoured and received as God that God promises to forgive sins.]

Jesus in Paul's preaching, Acts 13-28

[1] In Antioch in Pisidia, Acts 13:16-41, Paul identifies Jesus as the promised son of David (22-23, 34), the long-expected Messiah (24-25), God's Son (33), who was crucified in fulfilment of prophecy (26-29), raised from death by God (30-37), and by that resurrection identified as the 'Holy One' (35-37). Paul told his hearers that everyone who believes in Jesus receives the forgiveness of sins, that is they are legally acquitted (justified) (38,39), and he urges them to make sure they believe (40-41).

[2] To the Philippian jailor, Acts 16: Having witnessed the prayerful joy of Paul and Silas, and confronted by the awesome, miraculous power of God in the earthquake, the Philippian jailor asked 'Men, what must I do to be saved?' The situation is that of threatened suicide, Paul's answer is precise and direct: 'Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.' Following this clear assurance Paul further spoke the word of the Lord. Summing up what happened to the jailor and his household Luke writes: 'the whole family was filled with joy, because they had come to believe in God.' Let us note: not because they had received salvation, not because they had received forgiveness of sins, but because, in believing in Jesus, they had come to believe in God. In knowing God through his Son Jesus they have fullness of joy.

[3] In Thessalonica, Acts 17, Paul explained and proved from the Scriptures that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead, and affirmed that the Jesus he proclaimed was the Christ.

[4] In Athens, Acts 17, Paul identified the Athenians' 'unknown god' as the Creator of all, on whom all men are dependent for life. Because of this - because we are all God's 'offspring' - Paul said that it is unthinkable that God can be represented by a man-made image. This sin of idolatry, of worshipping false gods, God 'overlooked' in the past, but now that he has appointed as judge a man whom he has raised from the dead, all men everywhere are commanded to repent.

[The significance of this statement is lost unless we remember that the resurrection of Jesus Christ affirms his deity. Here were the Athenians with all of their gods; Paul told them that the time when God overlooks such ignorance has come to an end because God has now appointed one man by whom he will judge the world. By this man and his claims, which were validated by the resurrection, the whole world, and its gods, stands judged and condemned. By his identification of the one true God all other gods and their worship are proved false.]

[5] In Corinth, Acts 18, Paul 'devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ.'

[Hidden away among Luke's reports of Paul's ministry is this comment about Apollos: 'he vigorously refuted the Jews in public debate, proving from the scriptures that Jesus was the Christ.' (18:28)]

[6] In Ephesus, Acts 19 & 20, Paul argued persuasively about the kingdom of God. As a result of his preaching and confrontation with evil in the name of the Lord Jesus, that name was held in high honour and people who believed in Jesus Christ abandoned their practice of sorcery and the worship of images. Paul 'declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.' (These are not two different actions, but two ways of expressing the same action.) He summarized his work as an apostle as 'testifying to the gospel of God's grace', 'preaching the kingdom' and proclaiming 'the whole will of God.'

[7] In explaining his ministry to Agrippa, Acts 26, Paul says 'I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds.' He maintained that he was saying only what Moses and the prophets had said 'that Christ would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would proclaim light to his own people and to the Gentiles.'

[8] In Rome, Acts 28, Paul 'explained and declared to them the kingdom of God and tried to convince them about Jesus from the Law of Moses and from the prophets.' For two years he 'preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ.'

Summing up the above evidence:

On the basis of the resurrection of Jesus, the law of Moses, and the prophets, Paul, like Peter, sought to convince his hearers about the true identity of Jesus Christ. In doing so he challenged them to repent: that is, change their allegiance and come under the authority of the kingdom of God. To those who so repented and acknowledged Christ as the Divine King forgiveness of sin was granted by the grace of God.

While the **effect** of the cross is not absent - the forgiveness of which Paul spoke can only come from the cross - it is not the focus of Paul's preaching. One can assume with reasonable certainty that Paul in his on-going teaching explained the significance of the cross, but such explanations are not recorded as the thrust of his evangelism. Focus on the cross comes later, in his letters to those who are already believers in Christ. To those letters we will now turn, asking the question 'What significance does the true identity of Jesus hold in Paul's letters to those who already believe in him?'