

Other New Testament Answers

WHO IS JESUS?

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STUDY EIGHT: ANSWERS FROM PAUL, JAMES, PETER, JOHN AND JUDE.

The letter to the Hebrews

The writer of this letter, whom we will assume is Paul, spends nine and a half chapters affirming the superiority of Jesus Christ. He grounds this superiority in the fact that Jesus is the Son of God. His opening statement pulsates with the glory of Jesus Christ:

- In these last days God has spoken to us by his Son (1:2).
- God has appointed his Son heir of all things (1:2).
- God made the universe through his Son (1:2).
- The Son is the radiance of God's glory (1:3).
- The Son is the exact representation of God's being (1:3).
- The Son sustains all things by his powerful word (1:3).
- The Son provided purification for sins (1:3).
- The Son sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven (1:3).

This should have been enough to confirm the identity of Jesus Christ, but such is the foolishness and blindness of the human heart, so prone to reduce the person of Christ, and to make of him someone less than God, the writer then proceeds to show that, as the Son of God, Jesus Christ is superior to the angels. In this he makes the following affirmations:

- The Son became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs (1:4).
- God told the Son that he was his Father (1:5).
- God said of the Son 'Let all God's angels worship him.' (1:6).
- God said to the Son 'Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever ...' (1:8).
- God also said to the Son 'In the beginning, O Lord, you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands ...' (1:10).
- God said to the Son 'Sit at my right hand ...' (1:13).
- God has not subjected the world to come to the angels (1:13; 2:5).

In all of this the Son is superior to the angels, for God has never said these things to any of the angels. The writer points out that way back in the prophetic Psalms God moved the Psalm writer to address the Son as 'O God' and 'O Lord', and to ascribe to him eternal sovereignty and creative power.

Having thus established the superiority of the Son over the angels the Hebrews writer affirms in addition:

[1] Christ is superior to Moses because he is 'faithful as a son over God's house' (3:6);

[2] He is superior to the High Priests because,

- He 'has gone through the heavens' and is 'Jesus the son of God' (4:14).
- He is a priest *forever* (5:6; 6:20; 7:3,17,21,24,25).
- He has become a high priest on the basis of the power of an indestructible life (7:16).
- He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven (8:1).
- He offers a superior sacrifice, his own blood (9:11- 28).
- He entered into heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence (9:24).
- He has done this once and for all (9:25-28; 10:12).

The writer's purpose is to draw the Hebrews back to the gospel focus on Jesus Christ. That they stood in need of this is clear from chapters 2:1-4; 3:7-19; 4:1-16; 6:1-12; 10:19-39; 11:1-40; 12:1-28 & 13:7-15, where the writer gives solemn warnings against departing from faith in Christ, and strong encouragement to persevere. The superiority of Jesus Christ, the superiority of

the salvation he offers us, and the enormity of turning our backs on him once we have known him, rests, in the first instance, on *who he is*. The force of the entire argument of the letter to the Hebrews is stated in its opening sentence: ... God ... in these last days ... has spoken to us by his Son.

That word which was recorded by Jeremiah, here in the Son comes to fulfillment: 'No longer will a man teach his neighbour, or a man his brother, saying, "Know the Lord," because they will all know me, from the least to the greatest' (Hebrews 8:11; Jeremiah 31:34a). Here, in the Son, we know God.

The letter of James

James' letter is very practical. He does not address the *content* of faith, but the *evidence* of faith. To James the only valid faith is that faith which is accompanied by works of obedience. We will be looking at the role of obedience in another study series, so here it is sufficient to say: James makes it clear that those who claim to be 'believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ' (2:1) believe not only his promises but also his commands. In other words: my claim to believe in Jesus Christ is invalidated if I do not obey Jesus Christ. If I *really* believe in him, if I really believe that he is who he claimed to be, then I will demonstrate by the way I live that he has the right to tell me what to do. If, having supposedly believed in Jesus, I continue to live contrary to his commands, then it is quite evident that I neither understand nor believe, in the true sense of the word, who he is, and my claim to faith is not valid. (Read 2:14-26.)

Peter's letters

[1] Peter identifies Jesus as God:

- He is 'our God and Saviour Jesus Christ' (2Peter 1:1).
- He is 'the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls' (1Peter 2:25) and 'the Chief Shepherd' (1Peter 5:4).
- ' ? through him you believe in God' (1Peter 1:21).
- We are to 'set apart Christ as Lord' in our hearts (1Peter 3:15).
- Peter speaks of Christ's 'divine power' and his 'glory and goodness' (2Peter 1:3).
- He speaks also of 'the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ' (2Peter 1:11) thus indicating that Jesus Christ is both eternal and king, properties belonging to God.
- He calls Jesus 'the sovereign Lord' (2Peter 2:1).
- He reminds his readers of the glory of Christ which he witnessed on the mount of Transfiguration, and the voice of God which identified Jesus as his Son (2Peter 1:16-18).
- Jesus Christ 'has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand - with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.' (1Peter 3:22).

In all of this Peter speaks with the firm understanding that Jesus Christ is the Son of God in whom resides the eternity, the sovereignty and the glory of God, and to whom is due that same praise and honour as is due to God the Father.

[2] Peter affirms the significance of the resurrection, which, as we have seen in Paul's letters, is proof of the deity of Christ, and an essential element in Christian belief:

- Our 'new birth into a living hope' is 'through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead' (1Peter 1:3).
- We are saved 'by the resurrection of Jesus Christ' (1Peter 3:21).

We must not overlook this great significance of the resurrection. If Jesus is not raised then he is not God; if he is not God, then not only are the claims he made of himself invalid, but his supposed substitutionary death for us on the cross is also invalid. The cross-work of Christ, by which we are saved, stands or falls on the accuracy of his claims to be God, and these in turn stand or fall on the resurrection. At a simple level we might rightly understand the significance of the resurrection to be the guarantee of our resurrection; but it is far deeper than this: the whole of the Gospel is at stake here, both its first statement wherein we are taught that Jesus is God, and its second statement which speaks of our salvation through the cross-work of Jesus.

John's letters

The first letter of John is one of the most powerful pieces of writing in the New Testament. It takes up the truth that sounded right through John's Gospel and hammers it home again and again: the truth that Jesus is the Son of God, equal in all respects to the Father, and that this understanding of Jesus is the central factor in our relationship with God.

[1] As in his Gospel, so here, John commences with an unequivocal identification of Jesus as God:

- He is 'from the beginning' (1:1).

- He is 'the Word of life' (1:1).
- He is 'the eternal life which was with the Father' (1:2).
- He is God's 'Son, Jesus Christ' (1:4).

This eternal, divine Son came to this earth as a visible, tangible person:

- ' ? which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched' (1:1), and who
- ' ? has appeared to us' (1:2).

[2] John affirms that Jesus brings the knowledge of God:

- 'This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light: in him there is no darkness at all' (1:5).

We are reminded here of Jesus' word: 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life' (John 8:12).

Of those who are believers in Christ John states:

- 'You have known him who is from the beginning' (2:13,14).
- 'You have known the Father' (2:13).
- 'The word of God lives in you' (2:14).
- 'You know the truth' (2:20).
- 'The Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true' (5:20).

By knowing Jesus Christ we know God.

[3] John spells out in no uncertain terms the significance of genuine belief in Jesus Christ, the Son of God:

- 2:22,23: The man who denies that Jesus is the Christ, (that is, the Son of God),
 - is a liar.
 - is the antichrist.
 - denies the Father and the Son
 - does not have the Father.
- 2:23: Whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also.
- 2:24,25: If we hold on to this genuine belief we 'remain in the Son and in the Father' and we have eternal life.
- 3:23: 'To believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ,' is the command of God.
- 4:2,3: 'every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God.' John then again identifies as 'the antichrist' those who refuse to acknowledge Jesus.
- 4:9: 'God sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.'
- 4:15: 'If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God.'
- 5:1: 'Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God'.
- 5:5: 'Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.'
- 5:10-13: We have here several points of belief:
 - believing in the Son of God (10)
 - believing God (10)
 - believing the testimony God has given about his Son (10).

We have then the content of God's testimony about his Son (11):

- God has given us eternal life.
- This life is in his Son.

Then we have a statement of the implications (12):

- He who has the Son has life.
- He who does not have the Son of God does not have life.

And a conclusion:

'I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life'(13).

Believing in the Son of God, believing in his name, is, stated in a different way: 'having the Son', and 'having eternal life'. There is no eternal life apart from a genuine belief that Jesus is the Son of God. We cannot *have* him if our understanding of him is contrary to God's testimony about him. If we think we have Jesus, but it is a lesser Jesus than the Jesus of the Gospel revelation, then we do not have him at all, and we do not have eternal life. Receiving a Jesus who is less than the Son of God, is of no use at all. This is the teaching of 1 John 5:10-13.

It is clear from the above ten references that John gives ultimate significance to genuine belief in Jesus Christ as the Son of God. All that is dear to us as Christians hangs on it. True recognition of Christ's identity determines *our* identity. Apart from the genuine confession that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, we are not saved, we do not have eternal life, we are not 'in God', we are the antichrist, we make God a liar, we are not 'from God', we are liars, we do not 'have the Father', neither God nor Jesus lives in us, we are not born of God, and we don't overcome the world (nor have we overcome the evil one - see 2:13,14 & 5:18).

When we understand how significant John makes the genuine belief in Jesus, the Son of God, it is all the more surprising that the church has let this central belief fall out of focus. How can the church promise regeneration, eternal life and union with God on the basis of accepting the cross-work of Jesus, when the Scripture so clearly focuses saving faith on his *name* and his *person*? Let us take good note that denial of the divine sonship of Jesus Christ identifies one as 'antichrist'. May the church take care that its slackness in affirming the deity of Christ and the significance of this deity does not involve it corporately, or its members individually, in blasphemy by default.

[4] John's second letter is brief. Its sole purpose seems to be to encourage its readers to hold firmly to their belief that Jesus Christ is both man and God.

John identifies Jesus as 'Jesus Christ, the Father's Son' (3). He describes as 'deceivers' and 'the antichrist' those who deny that Jesus Christ came in the flesh (7), and states that those who do not continue in the teaching of Christ do not 'have God' (9).

[5] In 1 John 5:20, as we have seen above, John stated that 'the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true.'

He then goes on to say 'and we are in him who is true - even in his Son Jesus Christ.' But, in case we let it slip from our minds, John sees it necessary to remind us one last time just *who* Jesus is. He did not stop with those words 'his Son Jesus Christ', though that should have been sufficient after all he has written; he makes a significant, powerful addition: ' ... **his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life** .' Could he make it any clearer? No.

[6] John then adds his final exhortation. The pathos of it lies in its necessity, then and now. He states:

'Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.' (5:21)

To those who have seen God in the face of his Son, John says 'keep yourselves from idols.' Because God has thus made himself known in the man Jesus who lived and walked among us, **to have a lesser concept of God, and to see and know God as anything different from what we see and know in Jesus Christ is, as far as John is concerned, idolatry** . Jesus Christ is 'the true God'.

Two questions here confront me:

1. Is Jesus Christ my God?
2. And, Is my God Jesus Christ?

If I cannot answer "yes" to both of these John's opinion is that I do not know the true God. I am an idolater, worshipping a god of my own fabrication, in which there is no truth, in which there is no life.

Jude's letter

In this letter, written because of false teachers who were denying 'Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord' (4), Jude encourages his readers to 'contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints' (3), and to 'build yourselves up in your most holy faith ... ' (20), warning them of the terrible end awaiting those who do not believe.

The book of Revelation

On the book of Revelation many have made shipwreck, and not without cause. Even here in this present study difficulties confront us, for we often find that descriptions of God, the Father, are also used as descriptions of the Son; that it is sometimes hard to determine whether it is Father or Son who is being honoured and praised; that both Father and Son are rendered the same or similar praise. But perhaps this is not a difficulty at all, but a confirmation of the basic teaching of these studies.

It is also a temptation as we look at Revelation to deviate into material not relevant to our topic, for there is much here that is deeply interesting and challenging; but only those verses immediately focused on our topic will be discussed.

[1] In John's Gospel Jesus Christ claimed to be 'the truth' (John 14:6) and 'the light' (John 8:12), and is described by John as 'the Word' in whom is light, and in whom the glory of the Father is revealed (John 1:1-18); Jesus also claimed that whoever has seen him has seen the Father (John 14:6-9). This accurate revelation of the Father by the Son is confirmed in Revelation:

- He is 'the faithful witness' (1:5).
- He is 'holy and true' (3:7).
- He is 'the Amen, the faithful and true witness' (3:14).
- His name is 'Faithful and True' (19:11).
- His name is 'the Word of God' (19:13).
- He, together with the Father, are the light in the eternal city (21:23; 22:4,5).

[2] In John's Gospel Jesus stated 'before Abraham was born, I am' (John 8:58). This eternity of Christ is confirmed in Revelation:

- 'I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One' (1:17,18).
- 'I am the First and the Last' (2:8).
- 'I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End' (22:13).

We could read here also 1:8 'the Lord God' says 'I am the Alpha and the Omega, who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty'. It would appear that these are the words of God the Father, although the red-letter issues of the Bible infer they are spoken by the Son. Either way they affirm the eternity of the Son, as these same titles are given to the Son in the above verses.

[3] In John's Gospel Jesus claimed to be 'the resurrection' (John 11:25), and we have seen in Paul's letters how significant the resurrection is. Repeatedly Revelation affirms the resurrection of Jesus Christ:

- He is 'the firstborn from the dead' (1:5).
- He states 'I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades' (1:18).
- He is 'the First and the Last, who died and came to life again' (2:8).

A further significance of Christ's resurrection is that in and through his resurrection we see his triumph over sin and death and Satan:

- He says 'I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne' (3:21).
- 5:5 states: 'the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed.'

[4] In John's Gospel Jesus stated that the 'Father ... has entrusted all judgment to the Son' and 'has given him authority to judge ... ' (John 5:22,27). The authority of Christ is strongly taught in Revelation:

- He is 'the ruler of the kings of the earth' (1:5).
- He says 'I have received authority from my Father' (2:27).
- 'What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open' (3:7).
- He is 'the ruler of God's creation' (3:14).
- Those who have rejected him are fearful of 'the wrath of the Lamb' (6:16).
- 12:10 refers to 'the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ'.

This authority is further described in Revelation to describe Christ as Lord, as King, and as seated on the throne:

- In 3:21 Christ refers to 'my throne'.
- He is 'the Lamb at the centre of the throne' (7:17).
- 'The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever' (11:15).
- He is 'Lord of lords and King of kings' (17:14).
- 'On his head are many crowns' (19:12).
- He will rule the nations with an iron sceptre (19:15).

- His name is 'King of kings Lord of lords' (19:16).
- He reigns (20:4,6).
- He, the Lamb, shares God's throne (22:1,3).

[5] In John's Gospel Jesus stated that it is the Father's will that all should honour the Son in the same way as they honour the Father, and that those who do not honour the Son do not honour the Father (John 5:23). As we read Revelation the honour given to Jesus is the same as the honour given to the Father:

- 'To him (Jesus) be glory and power for ever' (1:6)
- 'Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise.' (5:12, compare the praise given the Father, in 4:11)
- 'To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honour and glory and power, for ever and ever! And the four living creatures said, "Amen," and the elders fell down and worshipped ' (5:13,14)
- 'Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.' (7:10)
- 'Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honour and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever.' (7:12)

In this book of Revelation the faithful believer is termed 'he who overcomes' (2:7,11,17,26; 3:5,12,21; 21:7). To those who 'overcome' Jesus Christ here makes similar promises to those elsewhere promised to believers. So why here in Revelation are believers called those who 'overcome'? Why this inference of struggle? Why this suggestion that there might be those who don't 'overcome', those who give up?

Could it be that the primary focus of the Gospel, that the man Jesus of Nazareth is God incarnate, is so different, so radical, so exclusive and isolating, that the cost of holding to *this* Jesus is too great? Could it be that the confession that Jesus Christ is Lord is too demanding? Could it be that the human heart prefers a god of its own fabrication, rather than the God identified in Jesus Christ?

Could it be that *our* modern day churches also stand in need of this promise that is at the same time a warning 'to him who overcomes I will'? Could it be that we have stumbled over the true identity of Jesus Christ, and, instead of being the 'chief cornerstone' on which our church is built, he has become for us a 'rock of offence' (see 1 Peter 2:6-8), because we have not dared to proclaim him as he really is?

The book of Revelation puts before us the conquering Jesus, Lord of lords, King of kings; it challenges us to join with the living creatures round the throne, to join with the four and twenty elders, to join with the thousands upon thousands of angels, and with every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and with them to give to the Lamb, the Son of God, Jesus Christ, the same praise and honour and glory as we give to God the Father.

Even so may it be, Lord Jesus.