

**Jesus: I AM**  
**John 8:31-36, 48-59**

We've started a new series called Controversial Jesus, looking at the sayings of Jesus that got him into trouble. And today we're looking at the passage read to us from John 8.

And I want to begin by asking you a question. Who are you? That's a simple question, isn't it! At least at one level. You could tell me your name, how old you are, where you're from, what you do for a job.

But on another level - how are you supposed to answer it?! Because there are so many things that feed into your self-identity. Your past, your dreams for the future, your family and friends, your beliefs, values, habits and hobbies. The list is endless and synthesising that list into who you are is almost impossible.

Well, when Jesus was asked in today's passage, 'who do you think you are?' his answer gives us an insight into his self-identity. And when you understand his answer, the way you see him, and the way you see yourself, can never be the same again.

Now, this interaction we're going to look at is between Jesus and Jewish people who, John tells us, 'believed in him' (John 8:31). People who thought he was worth listening to. Who, if they could, would have followed him on Twitter, or downloaded his podcast.

And we're going to look at 4 things: Who does Jesus say *they* are? Who do *they* say he is? Who does *he* say he is? And what has that got to do with us?

**Who Does He Say They Are?**

The people Jesus is talking to are Jewish, they're highly religious, moral people. And look what Jesus says to them, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (v31-2).

But hang on a minute, if Jesus says they need to be freed, he's implying they're slaves. And they resent that, v33, "We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You will become free'?"

Now, of course, they knew perfectly well that the Jewish people had a long history of being slaves. They were slaves in Egypt and slaves in Babylon. They had been made to serve the Persians, then the Greeks, and now, only by using the narrowest definition of freedom could they claim to be free under the Romans. So, when they say they've never been enslaved, they're not talking about a political freedom are they? They're saying that as Abraham's descendants they've always enjoyed a personal, inner, spiritual freedom. That though foreigners might rule over them, no one could take *that* freedom of conscience from them.

And Jesus says to these highly religious, moral people, 'no, you're slaves.' Verse 34, "Truly, truly I say to you, everyone who practices sin is *a slave* to sin." Now, when you're a good, moral, upright, person, it's not hard to see how others are enslaved to sin, is it? Just take a look at society, and see the slavery to image, success, money, sex, or substances.

What the religious or moral person has a much harder time seeing is that they too are enslaved.

And to explain that, Jesus says, v35, “The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever.” Now on the outside, a slave and a son in a household look pretty similar don’t they. They both live under the same roof. They both have a relationship to the father of the house. They both depend on him for protection and provision. And yet, they’re fundamentally different. And Jesus is saying that the religious, moral person, relates to God like a slave to his master. He thinks he has to earn his favour and work to stay in his favour. And if he does something wrong he fears he’ll be punished for it and thrown out. And if you’ve grown up in a religious or morally conservative environment, you probably relate to that. Like the older brother in Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son, there’s a danger that you see your relationship with God as one of service, of slaving for him, trying to keep in his good books.

But a son is a son. And he knows a security that’s based, not on his performance but on his father’s love.

But the religious person can also be enslaved to pride. ‘We are offspring of Abraham’, they say to Jesus, and racial, nationalistic, religious pride can imprison you in ways that make it impossible to love others, just as much as the pursuit of image, success, money, or power can.

And Jesus calling them slaves elicits quite the response:

### **Who Do They Say He Is?**

And they say Jesus is four things. Firstly, in response to Jesus saying they’re not true children of Abraham, they reply in v41, “we were not born of sexual immorality.” Which is almost certainly a dig at the events surrounding Jesus’ birth. It’s like saying, ‘We’re not illegitimate, but you? We know what your mother did.’ So this is a social slur.

Then in v48 they call him ‘A Samaritan.’ And Jewish people hated Samaritans, as half-Jewish, half pagan outcasts. So this is them saying, ‘You’re a half breed.’ Which is an ethnic slur.

Then they say, v48, you ‘have a demon.’ You’re possessed. You’re evil. Which is a moral slur.

And then this interaction ends with them threatening to stone him. Why? Because they think he’s a blasphemer. A religious slur.

Not bad is it? Jesus is an illegitimate, half-breed, evil, liar. Don’t you think it’s interesting that the people who heard Jesus were never lukewarm about him? Which means if you are, you probably haven’t yet heard the real Jesus.

Ok, but if what they say about *him* is shocking, it’s nothing in comparison to what *he* says about himself.

### **Who Does He say He Is?**

And in v53 they ask him, “Who do you make yourself out to be?” And Jesus replies, v58, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.”

At the opening of *A Christmas Carol*, Dickens says that you have to understand that Marley was dead as a doornail, or nothing wonderful can come of the tale. And unless you understand what Jesus is saying here, nothing wonderful can ever come from Christianity for you.

You see, if Jesus had simply wanted to claim that by some incredible feat he was ancient, that he was somehow a contemporary of Abraham, he would have said, 'before Abraham was, *I was*'. But he doesn't. And neither does he say something nice, and vaguely spiritual like, I have the spark of the divine, or I have an intimate connection with God; the sort of thing we could debate over what he means. No, he says, "before Abraham was, *I am*." And that's not a claim to a spark of the divine, he's saying he is Divine. That he's God himself. And if you doubt that, the people who heard him had no doubt, which is why they pick up stones to stone him.

You see, Exodus chapter 3 tells us how Moses met God at the burning bush. And God tells Moses to go back to Egypt and work for the deliverance of his people from slavery. But Moses argues there's no way he can do that, and besides, who would he say sent him? Verse 13, "If I come back to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' What shall I say to them?" In other words, sure God, but who do you say you are?

And in reply, v14, 'God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

Now, up until this point, every other religion, or system of belief had, or has, some story as to how God or the gods came to be. He's the offspring of other gods; he arose from the primordial gloop; he's the embodiment of the energy of the universe.

But what Exodus 3 says is unique. That God is the One who has no creator, no beginning, no cause. That he didn't come from anyone or anything, he simply *is*. That he is self-existent. That he needs no one, depends on no one for his being. That he is self-sufficient. We might say that some farmer somewhere is self-sufficient - grows his own food, generates his own power. But he's not, he produces stuff out of stuff that already exists. But not the I Am who I Am. He is the source of everything else. The fountain head, the cause of everything else. He depends on no one; everything else depends on him.

And he is unchanging and eternal. I AM. He's the same yesterday, today and forever. The one who rules over history; stands over time. The One whom time does not change. He is himself, and there are no standards by which he can be measured, no comparisons by which he can be defined. You can't pin him down or fully describe him. However well you know him, you have only just begun.

And when in the Bible you read, the LORD, in capital letters, that's our Bibles translating the tetragrammaton, YHWH: 'I am who I am' with the consonants removed. It's God's covenant name. The name in which he makes his promises.

You know, when you sign an IOU, or write a cheque, or provide a reference, your signature, you putting your name to it, who you are, gives it its value. So, when God says to Moses, tell them, 'I AM has sent you' - he means, I will not fail to do what I say, because there is no greater guarantee than my name. 'I AM WHO I AM' means I am faithful, when I put my name to a promise I will keep it.

And YHWH, I AM WHO I AM, does deliver them from slavery. And it's YHWH, I AM, the LORD, who sent the prophets and spoke through the prophets. And he's the focus of all the praise of the psalms, he's the source of all the wisdom of Proverbs. He's the One who's kingdom the kings rule in his place. The one before whom the angels in Isaiah 6 fall in awe-filled worship.

And his name was so holy, the Jewish people would never speak it. So holy they wouldn't even write it in full, just use those four letters YHWH.

And yet, when they ask Jesus 'who do you think you are?' Jesus says, 'Before Abraham was, I AM.' He doesn't just say the name, he claims it.

No wonder they picked up stones to stone him.

### **What has that got to do with us?**

#### ***1. Don't try and domesticate Jesus.***

You see, if that is who Jesus says he is, who do you say he is? Remember, this is a carpenter, a manual labourer, in the backwoods of the Roman Empire, and he's claiming to be the self-existent, uncreated, supreme cause, and prime mover, from whom, and for whom, and through whom all things exist. So... is he?

CS Lewis coined what is called the *Trilemma*. The man who says this sort of thing is either Lord, liar, or lunatic. The one thing you cannot say is, he's a great teacher. The one thing you can't say is, 'I'm going to build my life around his teaching, and try and emulate him.' Are you kidding? I mean imagine a car worker from Detroit saying he was George Washington or Abe Lincoln. Or a coal miner from the North of England claiming to be Churchill. Would you admire his teaching? No, you'd say he was crazy. And Jesus is saying something far worse.

So, if you're not yet a Christian, the one thing you can't do is try and domesticate Jesus and say, you'll just have him as a spiritual guide. Either he is who he says he is, or you should have nothing more to do with him.

But, before you dismiss him, look at his life, look at the fruit of his life, at his love, at his death, at his resurrection. This man is not a liar, and he's not a lunatic.

So what if he really is who he says he is?

Well, that should totally upend your life.

#### ***2. Don't live for your glory.***

Look what Jesus says in v54, "If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me." The secular world is all about putting yourself at the centre of life - glorifying yourself. And if one side of pride is that it looks down on others, the other is that it fails to look up to God. It fails to see just how insignificant we are in comparison to God.

And Jesus says self-glory is empty. It's like standing in front of a mirror and telling your reflection to tell you how wonderful you are. But the tragedy is that we can spend our lives doing that,

pursuing our small, tiny ambitions, or being eaten up with our petty grievances, caring too much for our glory. When, in comparison to the glory and majesty of I AM WHO I AM, we are nothing.

So, instead of living for your glory, see who Jesus is and spend your life to glorify him: with your time, your money, your gifts and your skills. Elsewhere John tells us that when Isaiah saw the LORD, YHWH, high and lifted up, he was really seeing Jesus. So join Isaiah in worship, and in saying with him, ‘send me Lord. I have seen you high and lifted up, and I want to give my life for your great purposes, not my tiny ones.’

### **3. Realise, he’s the One who brings true freedom.**

When God reveals himself to Moses as I AM, He’s promising to free Israel from slavery. And when Jesus says ‘Before Abraham was, I AM’, he’s just promised that ‘If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.’

In this week’s podcast on sport, David Niblack said that idols always make us slaves. Anything you look to as your ultimate, for your sense of self-worth, will end up enslaving you. The problem is, that just like these Jewish people, we too can be blind to the fact that we’re slaves. We’re American, from the Land of the Free. We’re British, from the Land of hope and glory, mother of the free. But in reality we can be enslaved to the gods of this world, or, just like these Jewish people, to thinking we have to earn favour with God, or by pride.

But it’s in Christ that you will find freedom. Freedom from slavery to pride, when you realise how infinitely greater he is than you. Freedom from that crushing sense of inadequacy when you realise that the One who is so high went so low and loved you so much he died for you. Freedom from the guilt of your past, when you know that at the cross he bore your shame. And freedom from the controlling power of sin, when his love for you so melts your heart that you begin to love what he commands and your duty becomes your delight.

And it’s in him that you’ll find a freedom to love and serve others. You see, when we think our self-image depends on us, we *use* others to bolster that self-image. So we have a hard time entering their world, or feeling their pain, or weeping with those who weep or rejoicing with those who rejoice. But Jesus doesn’t struggle to enter our world, because he doesn’t need to use us. And when you know you are loved by him, it defines your identity in ways that mean you can genuinely love and serve others.

### **4. Fear not.**

John, who wrote this, was banished to the island of Patmos and most likely put to forced labour. But it was there, when he was isolated and alone, when it must have felt like the whole world was against him, that Christ came to him, and said to him, “Fear not, I am the first and the last” (Rev 1:17). In other words, don’t fear John, I AM. I always was and I always will be. You’re safe in my hands.

So whatever you’re facing, whether that’s linked to coronavirus or not, Jesus says to you, I AM. I am at the beginning and end of all your troubles. I will never abandon you.

In the last book of *Chronicles of Narnia, The Last Battle*, the enemy has over-run Narnia, and everything seems lost. Even Tash, the dreaded demon god, has invaded the land and darkness has

descended. And Jill, one of the children from our world, is understandably scared. So Tirian, the true king, turns to her and says, ‘Courage child, we are all between the paws of the true Aslan.’

Church, take courage. Fear not. The First and the Last, the I AM, has you in his hands.