

Who Are You?

John 8:21-30

²¹ So he said to them again, "I am going away, and you will seek me, and you will die in your sin. Where I am going, you cannot come."

²² So the Jews said, "Will he kill himself, since he says, 'Where I am going, you cannot come'?"

²³ He said to them, "You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world.

²⁴ I told you that you would die in your sins, for unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins."

²⁵ So they said to him, "Who are you?" Jesus said to them, "Just what I have been telling you from the beginning.

²⁶ I have much to say about you and much to judge, but he who sent me is true, and I declare to the world what I have heard from him."

²⁷ They did not understand that he had been speaking to them about the **Father**.

²⁸ So Jesus said to them, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me.

²⁹ And he who sent me is with me. He has not left me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to him."

³⁰ As he was saying these things, many believed in him.

Who Are You?

They formed in 1964, have sold over 100 million records, are in the Rock and Roll hall of fame, and continue to sing today. You and I have both heard their songs, whether we like them or not, know them or not. They are **The Who**. In their 1978 record titled *Who Are You*, The Who sang a song called “Who Are You.” As the lyric goes, “Who, who, who, who.” The first two stanzas seem to be a kind of self-questioning. “I really want to know, who are you” ... that is, **who am I?** What have I done to myself? Why have I been so stupid with my life? The last stanza seems to shift to someone else. The lyrics are interesting,

There's a place where I know you walked
The love falls from the trees
My heart is like a broken cup
I only feel right on my knees
I spill out like a sewer hole
Yet still receive your kiss
How can I measure up to anyone new
After such a love as this

Who are you
Who who who who
Who are you
Who who who who

No one knows what Pete Townshend is talking about here. Maybe a girl. Maybe his dabbling in Hinduism. Maybe some goddess he met on a drug trip. But the stanza and song is a perfect way to introduce the chief question of the Pharisees in our passage today, when they ask Jesus, “Who are you?” (John 8:25). Maybe they were even singing the song to him in a kind of mock?

Who are you, Jesus? That really is the question, isn't it? As we've said before in this series, there are many different ideas of who Jesus is. Some think he was a really groovy teacher, nothing more (yes, I just said groovy, because they also think he was this hippie walking around Boulder in Birkenstocks). Some think he was an enlightened new age guru from India. Some think he was a spiritual traveler from another planet (seriously). Some think he was the love-child of Elohim and Mary. Some think we will never know who he was because

power hungry bishops of the 4th century silenced the truth. Some think **he never existed**. Some think he is a **mythological recreation of Osiris**. Some think he **never died on a cross**, but actually went and married Mary Magdalene in secret and become a powerful king in France, having many children with his secret wife. Some think he was a **social justice politician** whose sole reason for being here was to free oppressed people from tyrannical governments. Basically, there is no shortage today of attempts to answer the question “Who are you, Jesus?” Of course, **none of these are correct**, and it is critical to understand in light of this that just because someone says they believe in “Jesus,” it doesn’t mean they actually believe in *Jesus*.

The Pharisees, of course, didn’t believe in Jesus, and are thus like many in our own day. So today, in response to their question, I want to show you how Jesus answers the question about who he is. We are going to stick with the Scripture, and not people’s personally motivated theories of who they *wish* he actually was. What we will see would surprise many people in

our day, not excluding many people sitting right now in Evangelical churches across the land.

Why Do You Ask?

Perhaps it will be most instructive to ask ourselves the question, “How did this question arise from the Pharisees?” What caused them to ask him who he was? Let us enter the discussion. He has just finished telling them that he is the light of the world. They have told him that he is being a false witness about who he is. He has responded by saying that his witness is true, and also that another witness testifies on his behalf. He is referring to the Heavenly Father, who he says they do not know.

Curiously, Jesus has rooted his self-testimony in this statement, “I know where I came from and where I am going, but you do not know where I come from or where I am going” (8:14). Now he picks this up in vs. 21 again. “So he said to them again, ‘I am going away, and you will seek me, and you will die in your sin. Where I am going, you cannot come.’” Now, back in John 7:35, when Jesus had introduced them to

this kind of strange language, they murmured to one another saying, “Where does this man intend to go that we will not find him? Does he intend to go to the Dispersion among the Greeks and teach the Greeks?” They obviously had absolutely no idea what he was talking about. Instead, they just scratched their heads and said, “No one ever spoke like this man” (7:46).

Now they seem to be catching on *to some degree*. They said, “Will he kill himself, since he says, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come?’” (8:22). They realize that he is talking about his death, but they have it all wrong. Jesus is not talking about killing himself. He is talking about **dying on the cross**, going back to his Father, and then returning to life in a resurrected body, and later ascending back into Heaven from whence he came. This was all hinted by in a comment made by John in 7:39 that “Jesus was not yet glorified.”

Jesus responds with this kind of language of opposites by contrasting who they are with who he is, “You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world” (8:23). Again, we have seen this language before and

so has at least one of them. **Nicodemus**, who is there among the Pharisees was told by Jesus, “He who comes from above is above all. He who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way. He who comes from heaven is above all” (**John 3:31**). Similarly, we have seen the same thing with “the world.” “The light has come/was coming into the world” (**John 1:9; 3:19**). Jesus is the “bread of God ... who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”

This language of opposites sets up the great tension between Jesus and the Pharisees, and indeed, anyone who will not trust in Jesus Christ. We must know two things. We must know who God is and we must know who we are. Who are we? Jesus shows us just how different He is from us. We see this opposite idea in **8:21**, “Where I am going, you cannot come” as well as later in the chapter where God is his Father, but their father is the devil (**vv. 26-27, 41-44, 54-55**). So, he is from above, he is not of this world, he is from the Father. But we are different. We are from below, where he is going we

cannot come, our father is the devil. This is a brutal assessment of the human condition.

What does it mean to be “[from below](#)?” If Jesus being “from above” means he is from heaven, it might be tempting to think it means they are from hell or something like that, especially since later on Jesus says that their father is the devil ([vs. 44](#)). It means the same thing as to be “of this world.” Of course, it makes little sense to read “world” here as the elect (something I’m not sure the term ever actually means; see the sermon on [John 3:16](#)). Rather, as D. A. Carson says, it means the “[fallen moral order in conscious rebellion against its creator](#).”¹ Again, the contrast is not between spirit and matter, as if John were some kind of neoplatonist. It is between the realm of God and the realm of his fallen, rebellious creation. Notice back in [John 7:7](#) for instance that Jesus testifies that “[the world’s deeds are evil](#).”²

This is exactly what Jesus says next. “[I told you that you would die in your sins](#)” ([John 8:24](#)). He mentions “sins”

¹ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 342.

² Ibid.

because that is what he has in mind when he speaks about being from below or being of the world. To be from below means that **you are a sinner**. Jesus is not of the world, and as such, is not a sinner. Rather, he testifies that *we* are sinners. This is part of his judgment upon us, part of his revealing the truth to us. And it is not something we want to hear. Christians often no more want to be reminded of their continuing sin than unbelievers do. But it is essential to hear him.

Part of being a sinner means that you are blinded to God and his works and ways. You don't want to see them. You can't see them. This is especially true when you are dead in your sins, prior to coming to faith in Christ. It is at this point that the impetus for the question of the Pharisees arises. It comes from what follows on the heels of this statement about sins. "... **for unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins.**" You will die in your sins. This again goes back to what we have seen before, as has Nicodemus. "**Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not**

believe is condemned already ... because their works were evil” (John 3:18-19). People die in their sins because people are condemned in their sins already. Again, this speaks to **total depravity**. You see, it isn’t just Paul in Romans who talks about this. It is the Lord Jesus himself. It is something you must be confronted with, perhaps for the first time today, and certainly every time we come together. Part of worshiping together means that we are confronted with our sin and with being sinners. Only when we see ourselves in the mirror will we have any reason to turn to God in repentance, before or after salvation. You are a sinner and I am a sinner. We are all, presently speaking, sinners. We all sin. We all break God’s law. We all do so on a daily basis. It isn’t everyone else around you, but you yourself, and you must internalize your present sinful condition to have any hope of salvation.

Must We Die?

But how can there be this hope? If you recognize yourself as a sinner, what then? We all know that for unbelievers, what they need to do is believe. But what about for Christians?

What is the answer to failure after failure for them? Is it to work harder and harder to overcome your sin? No. The answer is actually the same for you as it is for them. This is why it baffles me that so many Christians want to move on past this answer to “good stuff” that lies beyond, stuff that always and forever happens to be some form of law-keeping. From good news back to bad news, because the good news is just to ordinary, to boring, to ... simple.

The answer is to trust and believe in Christ. “Unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins.” I do not see anything here that gets Christians off the hook. I see no fire insurance, no “I walked that aisle and said that prayer” to prove my belief. Rather, I see ongoing, persistent, persevering belief. This is what the Lord is speaking about. The verb is in the **aorist** tense in the **active** voice and the **subjunctive** mood and it is a plural. Translated, that means it is a **call of action** to believe (the subjunctive mood) **for all** of you (second person plural) at an **indefinite point in time** (different for all people—

the aorist tense), but which is **always an ongoing activity** (active voice).

That means, this idea of believing in Christ never ceases to be imperative for you as a Christian. This is not something you grow out of. It is not something that becomes secondary to Christianity. Each need to remember this, even as you see friends and family turn away from faith and belief in Christ after professing him for many years. If you have this idea in your mind that belief was somehow like going to high school but then graduate onto bigger and better things, then the seeds of unbelief are already planted in your brain, and you must dig them up before they start to grow. If you have this idea of fire-insurance, of some past event being good forever, no matter what happens from this day forward regarding your own faith, then you are deceived. You must believe and you must keep believing.

The corporate worship of God exists to foster this belief, to fuel it, to give you hope and encouragement week after week to continue in faith while you wander in the desert of this

world, looking forward to the Promise Land to come. God uses your praise of his name to do this. God uses his word to do this. God uses preaching to do this. God uses the fellowship of the believers to do this. God uses the Supper to do this? Do not spurn the means of grace and hear me while you are able in this, for too many are in the business of forsaking the fellowship to their own destruction.

In Whom Do We Believe? I AM.

But what must you believe? Here is where the story gets very interesting. This is the point at which the Pharisees pick up their guitars and drums and start singing The Who song. They ask Jesus, “**Who are you?**” (vs. 25). This is the second time in our book the Pharisees have challenged someone with this question.

Back in **John 1:19-24**, the Pharisees sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to **John the Baptist** and asked him, “Who are you?” He said, “**I am not the Christ.**” They asked, “**What then? Are you Elijah? Are you the Prophet?** He answered ‘**No.**’” To they said to him, “Who are you? We need

to give an answer to those who sent us.” His response was to quote Isaiah, “I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord.’” Keep in the back of your mind that John goes to Isaiah to answer them. It will become important shortly.

Now they ask the question again, this time to Jesus. This is in response to his statement at the end of vs. 24. “... unless you believe that I am he.” Who are you? I am he. Who? This is starting to sound like a Laurel and Hardy sketch. But it isn’t intended to be funny. I’m pointing you to Christ’s language, which is critical to ponder. Jesus gives a similar response to John in one way, but in another way, it couldn’t be more different.

“I am” he. Technically speaking, “he” is not in the Greek. Neither is “who I say I am” or “the one I claim to be” or any other additions you will have italicized (or maybe not!) in your English Bibles. Of all the English Bible’s I consulted, only the Common English Bible translation has it literally, “If you don't believe that I Am, you will die in your sins.” Well, the

Wycliff NT of 1388 also has this, “... if ye bileuen not that Y am ...” But starting in 1534’s Tyndale NT and moving onward (1535 Miles Coverdale Bible; 1566 Bishop’s Bible; 1599 Geneva Bible; 1611 KJV etc), they all supply the word “he.” Listen to the difference with your ears.

Unless you believe that I am *he*.

Unless you believe that I am *who I say I am*.

Unless you believe that I am *the one I claim to be*.

Unless you believe that I am.

What are we to make of this? Am I making too big of a deal about this? We saw this problem back in **John 4:26** with the woman at the well, “*egō eimi, o lalōn soi*” (lit: I am, the speaking one to you). We saw it again when Jesus walked on the water in **John 6:20**, “*egō eimi, me phobeisthe*” (lit: I am, do not fear). We saw it in **John 6:35**, “*egō eimi, o artos tēs zōēs*” (lit: I am the bread of life). And we saw it **John 8:12**, “*egō eimi, to phōs tou kosmou*” (lit: I am the light of the world).

What I want to point out to you now is two more verses. The first comes in our passage. It is **John 8:28**, “So Jesus said to them, ‘When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am [he in ESV etc], and that I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me.’” This is the same problem yet again, but this time the understanding of the phrase is tied directly to Jesus’ death on the cross. The second verse is **John 8:58**. “Jesus said to them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.’” In this case, the ESV and other translations do not supply a “he” because they finally realize what should be obvious back in **vv. 24 and 28**. They seemingly have no choice but to realize it, because the next verse shows us how the Pharisees interpreted Jesus words, “So they picked up stones to throw at him” (**John 8:59**). For what?

What is the big deal about calling himself “I am?” Let me go back to the origins of this again. It is found in Exodus 3. “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”’” (**Ex**

3:14). These are, obviously, the words of God to Moses. But who is this God? It says, “The angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush” (Ex 3:2). Most people do not take the time to bother figuring out who is speaking to Moses, and just assume it must be God the Father. But according to this verse, it is the Angel of the LORD who them identifies himself as I AM. This is curious, because here we have a second person, distinct from the Father, basically saying, “I and the Father are one.” They want to stone him for blasphemy, yet they didn’t even bother to read their own Scriptures that someone other than the Father in the OT calls himself “I AM.” That is how the blindness of sin works. It makes it so you cannot see what it plain.

Since I have focused on this passage in Exodus in the past (i.e. in our Exodus series and at least once in John’s Gospel), I wanted to go to another place where we find the same language. I want to go to Isaiah and his use of this term. Here is the connection with John’s answer. We first find the expression in Isaiah 41:4 LXX, “I God, the first and to all

futurity, I AM (*egō eimi*).” We see it in **43:25 LXX** repeated, “I AM, I AM (*egō eimi, egō eimi*), even he that blots out thy transgressions for mine own sake.” In chapter **45:18 LXX**, “Thus says that Lord that made the heaven, this God that created the earth, and made it; he marked it out, he made it not in vain, but formed it to be inhabited: I AM (*egō eimi*), and there is none beside me.”

These are repeated in many places in this part of Isaiah. But probably the most important is found in **Isaiah 43:10, 12 LXX**. “Be ye my witnesses, and I *too am* a witness, saith the Lord God, and my servant whom I have chosen: that ye may know, and believe, and understand that I am: before me there was no other God, and after me there shall be none ... I have declared, and have saved; I have reproached, and there was no strange *god* among you: ye are my witnesses, and I am the Lord God.” Why do I point out this passage?

Go back to **John 8:13, 14, and 18**. “You are bearing witness about yourself... Even if I do bear witness about myself, my testimony is true ... I am the one who bears

witness about myself, and the Father who sent me bears witness about me.” You see, Jesus’ language of I AM is closely tied to his language of the witnesses, for Jesus seems to have in mind Isaiah.

If he has in mind Isaiah, then he must have in mind the *Servant of Isaiah*. In these parts of Isaiah, we have Yahweh saying that he is “I AM” and that he will bear witness through his Servant. But as we have seen, there is another Yahweh, the Angel of Yahweh, the angel who bears Yahweh’s name, who also calls himself “I AM.” What Jesus is doing, then, is tying to the Servant of Yahweh to the Angel of Yahweh through this name of Yahweh: I AM and through the reference to where he is going: to the cross.

You see, both the divine name (I AM) and the destination of the Servant are in our passage; and they are tied together. What do I mean by “*the destination of the Servant?*” I’m referring to the famous passage in Isaiah 53, one of the greatest prophecies in the entire OT. **Isaiah 52:13** for example says, “Behold, my servant shall act wisely; he shall be high and lifted

up, and shall be exalted.” In **John 8:28** Jesus says, “When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am, and that I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me.” Do you see how the name and the destination come together in Jesus’ self-description to the Pharisees?

Jesus is predicting his death on the cross, as it was predicted in Isaiah. In just a few months from this Feast, he will return to Jerusalem, where he will be handed over the authorities to be persecuted and murdered by Jews and Gentiles. They will hang him on a cross where he will be **lifted up** (even as he told Nicodemus; **Jn 3:14**) to die for sin. He tells them, “**Then you will know that I AM.**” This recalls to my mind the words of the **centurion** who saw Jesus hanging on the cross, felt the earthquake, knew the darkness that came upon the land, and remarked, “**Truly, this was the Son of God**” (**Matt 27:54**).

Jesus is not saying that everyone will turn to him in faith, but simply that because of the cross, anyone who does turn to

him in faith will know the truth. His work on the cross makes this possible. His work on the cross reveals the **mighty power** of God. His work on the cross shows them the truth of the **prophecies**. His work on the cross shows them the **forgiveness** of sins. His work on the cross enables **God to open the eyes** of any whom he chooses, because justice has been satisfied in the death of Christ who died for sin, the punishment we all deserve.

As he says in **vs. 28**, his death on the cross will show them that **he was telling the truth**, that he did nothing of his own authority, that the Father had sent him to do this very thing he had predicted so many times. His death on the cross will show them **the love of the Father**, and the **judgment of God**—a judgment that has been carried out on his Only Begotten Son, and a judgment that awaits any who will not turn to Christ in faith.

As he says in **vs. 29**, his death on the cross shows them that the **Son always does the things that are pleasing to the Father**. He goes so far to do the Father's will, that he even

dies in the place of sinners who are his enemies. He goes so far to do the Father's will that he even sets aside an infinite fellowship that he has had with the Father, only to be forsaken as a curse.

Returning to **vs. 26**, He goes so far to do the Father's will that he **tells everyone ahead of time** so that they might believe upon the one sent by God from heaven. He goes so far to do the Father's will that he tells them about the Father and the Son, revealing all truth so that they will be without excuse. He goes so far to do the Father's will, that he judges sin in his body. He had much to judge, he says. And if they will not believe in the judgment of God upon sin in Christ, then he will return in judgment upon them, where they will pay for their disloyalty, their infidelity, their treachery, their disobedience, their obstinacy, their hatred, and their unbelief.

Of course, it says in **vs. 27** that **"they did not understand that he had been speaking to them about the Father."** They didn't know who he was, but they also didn't know themselves. They didn't know where he was from, nor did they know

where they were from, not really, because they didn't know their sin. Both must be known as what they are, only then can someone come to a right reaction towards the Lord. Unless you know, you will think that you can go where Jesus went all by yourself. So many people this very day are trying to get where he went, to heaven, via their own merit or whatever. But you cannot go where he went, for only the one from there can return to there on his own. There is only one way for someone from down here to go there.

In **vs. 30**, we see the right reaction, a different response from the crowds. **“Many believed in him.”** So again we come back to it. Again you are confronted with it. At every turn in the book of John, you are forced to deal with something that seems so basic, so fundamental, yet so easy to lose sight of, so easy to get lost in all that other more “important” stuff. We come back to belief.

Time and time again, Jesus shows that he is the One to be believed upon. He is the One to be believed in. He is the One to be believed. He testifies. He prophecies. He fulfills. He

obeys. He judges. He dies for sin. All because he is God in the flesh, I AM WHO I AM. He is that God of the OT who called himself I AM. He is the Angel of the LORD who told Moses I AM. He is the Suffering Servant who was lifted up so that you might be lifted up too.

Isn't hard to know who he is. [Do you really want to know?](#) Who are you, Jesus? I am God, he says. I am the only way to the Father. I am the truth and the life. I am the light of the world. I am the bread of life. I am the door and the gate. I am all that was predicted. I am the purpose of the story. I am the creator of heaven and earth. I am God in the flesh, God with you. Anyone who believes upon me shall never perish, but will have eternal life.

As far as I know, Pete Townshend still doesn't know. But he nevertheless sings of what he does not know, like the Greek poets of old who spoke of the Unknown God.

There's a place where I know you walked
The love falls from the trees
My heart is like a broken cup

I only feel right on my knees
I spill out like a sewer hole
Yet still receive your kiss
How can I measure up to anyone new
After such a love as this

Lord Jesus, make it so for us to know you and to receive you
and to believe you.