

UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

Part 14 – Responses to Jesus

Key Questions:

- What evidence is there to support Jesus' claims about Himself? How did people respond to Jesus' teaching?

Who did Jesus claim that He was?

John records seven sayings of Jesus about who He is that all start with the words "I am ...":

1. **I am the bread of life.** *No one who comes to me will ever be hungry again.* (John 6:35)
2. **I am the light of the world.** *If you follow me, you won't be stumbling through the darkness, because you will have the light that leads to life* (John 8:12)
3. **I am the gate for the sheep ...** *Those who come in through me will be saved. Wherever they go they will find green pastures... My purpose is to give life in all its fullness.* (John 10:7-10)
4. **I am the good shepherd.** *The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep* (John 10:11)
5. **I am the resurrection and the life.** *Those who believe in me, even though they die like everyone else, will live again. They are given eternal life for believing in me* (John 11:25-26)
6. **I am the way, the truth and the life.** *No one can come to the Father except through me* (John 14:6)
7. **I am the vine; you are the branches.** *Those who remain in me ... produce much fruit* (John 15:5)

In summary, these seven sayings show us that Jesus claimed to:

- **Show us God's truth (the light) and make it possible for us to know God personally**
- **Give eternal life to people who believe in Him and sustain their life**
- **Satisfy the deepest needs of those who trust in Him, save them and keep them safe**

It is also important to notice that Jesus claimed to be the **ONLY** person who could do these things. In John 8:31-58 Jesus said to some Jewish people, "*Before Abraham was born I am*" (verse 58). These Jews believed that they would be accepted by God because they were descendants of Abraham, but Jesus shocked them by saying that their father was not Abraham, or God (verse 41), but Satan (verse 44), since they had not recognised who Jesus really was. The people accused Jesus of being possessed by an evil spirit, but He replied that anyone who obeys His teaching will never die (verse 51). The people asked if He thought that He was greater than Abraham (verse 53). They recognised that His claims about His teaching were unique! But Jesus went further in verse 58. The grammar is unusual because it mixes the past tense (*was*) with the present tense (*am*). The people were so shocked that they wanted to kill Jesus (verse 59). Why? What did Jesus' saying mean? The phrase "I am" was the name that God told Moses to use to describe Him (see Exodus 3:14-15). The Jews recognised that by using these words Jesus was claiming to be God, and that is why they wanted to kill Him! Later people tried to stone Jesus a second time. That time it was because He said "*The Father and I are one*" (John 10:30). These people objected to Jesus' claim because, in their words, "*you, a mere man, have made yourself God*" (John 10:33). **Jesus claimed to be no less than God, the true King!**

The Miracles of Jesus

There are many amazing miracles in the life of Jesus. The most amazing are His virgin birth and His resurrection from the dead. However, during His life he also performed many amazing miracles. These are significant because in the Bible they are called "signs". In other words, the miracles were not just to help other people (although that was important), but also to show that Jesus was someone very special. The miracles show that **Jesus had authority over:**

1. **The laws of nature** – Jesus was able to over-rule the normal laws of science by, for example:
 - (i) *Creating new matter* – He fed over 5000 people using five loaves and two fish (John 6:1-15)
 - (ii) *Transforming matter* – He changed water into wine (John 2:1-11)
 - (iii) *Controlling the weather* – He calmed storms on more than one occasion (Mark 4:35-41)
 - (iv) *Walking on water* – He could control the basic forces of physics (Matthew 14:22-36, John 6:16-21)
2. **Diseases** – Jesus was able to heal people of many diseases, including:
 - (i) *Infectious diseases* – including the skin disease leprosy (Luke 5:12-16) and fevers (Mark 1:29-34)
 - (ii) *Diseases including muscle wasting* – for example, lame people could walk again (Luke 5:17-26, John 5:1-15)
 - (iii) *Congenital diseases* (present from birth) – for example, a man who was born blind could see (John 9:1-41)
3. **Evil spirits** – Several times we read of Jesus casting evil spirits out of people. These demons recognised Him as the Son of God (see, for example, Mark 5:1-20; Luke 8:26-39).
4. **Death** – Jesus raised at least three dead people back to life (see Luke 7:11-17; Luke 8:40-56; John 11:1-44).
5. **Sin** – Several times when Jesus healed people's illnesses He talked about their sin as well, and claimed that He was able to forgive their sins. One example is a paralysed man in Luke 5:17-26. Jesus told this man that his sins were forgiven because of his faith (verse 20). The religious teachers were shocked. They said "*Who but God can forgive sins!*" Jesus then healed the man to prove that He had the authority to forgive sins.

Who could have authority over nature, illness, evil spirits, life and death, and even authority to forgive sins?

Jesus miracles were intended to help people realise exactly who He was: the true King over all creation, God Himself! They also show us what God's Kingdom is like: a place free from sin, disease and death. If we are part of God's Kingdom, we can look forward to the future day when this Kingdom will finally be perfectly revealed (see *Part 23*).

How people responded to Jesus

During the second year of Jesus' ministry, thousands of people followed Him. However, the following year many of these people began to turn away from Him. The people who followed Jesus had different reasons for following Him. Some thought He would heal them from all their illnesses or that He would become King and make them very powerful in His Kingdom. Whenever they realised that Jesus would not become King of Israel at that time, many of these people rejected Him. This was just as Jesus had predicted in His parable about the soils (see *Part 13*).

To understand this we must understand what the Jewish people expected the Messiah to do. In *Part 7* we learned that there are two aspects to the Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah:

- a) **The Suffering Servant** – who would die as a sacrifice for the sins of the people
- b) **The Conquering King** – who would defeat the enemies of God and rule on David's throne

By the time when Jesus lived, most religious teachers taught that the Messiah would be a *Conquering King*, but they believed that the prophecies about the *Suffering Servant* could not refer to the same person. They didn't believe that the Messiah could possibly die, as they thought that a good person who was faithful to God should not suffer, so they decided that those Old Testament passages must actually refer to the suffering of the nation of Israel rather than to the Messiah. At the time when Jesus lived, the Jews were ruled by the Roman Empire, but they were very unhappy with this situation. They hoped that the *Conquering King* would come soon and defeat the Romans, setting up a new Jewish Kingdom where he would rule on David's throne. When Jesus began teaching about the Kingdom of God and performing miracles these people believed that He might be the Messiah.

However, Jesus refused to allow the people to make Him King (see John 6:14&15), and later He began to teach that He must die. In John 12:20-36 Jesus predicted His death on a cross (verses 23-24, 32-33), saying that this was the reason why He had come into the world (verse 27). This did not fit the crowd's idea about what the Messiah should be like. In verse 34 they say, "*We understand from Scripture that the Messiah would live forever*". They were right, as the Old Testament had said that the Conquering King would reign on David's throne forever, but they didn't realise that the Messiah must first be the Suffering Servant who would die as a sacrifice for their sins. **Only after His death, when people could have their sins forgiven, could God's Kingdom really be restored.** Verse 37 is very sad: "*But despite of all the miraculous signs He had done, most of the people did not believe in Him*". The miracles and teaching of Jesus should have shown people that He was the Messiah, but many people were so fixed in their own ideas of what the Messiah should be and so spiritually blind that they could not recognise Him. They did not realise their own sin and need of God's forgiveness.

The responses of some specific groups to Jesus are particularly important to understand:

- **Demons** (evil spirits) – On a number of occasions when Jesus cast out evil spirits from people the spirits recognised Him as the Son of God who had power to punish them (see Mark 5:7; Luke 8:28).
- **Jesus' brothers** – Jesus had at least four half-brothers, named James, Joseph, Simon and Judas (see Matthew 13:55). During His ministry they didn't believe in Him (see John 7:1-9). However, after His death and resurrection, at least two of these brothers (James and Judas) became Christians.
- **Jesus' twelve disciples** – The twelve disciples were the closest people to Jesus during His life on earth. They took some time to realise who Jesus really was, largely because they had the same expectations about what the Messiah should be like as most other people. Simon Peter is the member of this group about whom we read most in the Gospels. We will learn about His life and journey to faith in *Part 17*. The only one of the twelve who did not remain a follower of Jesus was Judas Iscariot. He betrayed Jesus for a payment of money (he was actually a thief all along and never a true disciple), although he regretted this decision afterwards and committed suicide.
- **The religious leaders** – The Jewish religious leaders belonged to several groups including the Pharisees and Sadducees (see *Part 9*). Although some religious leaders, like Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea (see *Part 12*), became disciples of Jesus, He was unpopular with many of them for several reasons:
 - (i) He showed love to people the Pharisees considered "sinners" (for example prostitutes and tax collectors)
 - (ii) He told the religious leaders that they were also sinners who needed God's forgiveness
 - (iii) He did not obey certain rules that the Pharisees had added to the Old Testament Law
 - (iv) He claimed to be God, which the religious leaders saw as blasphemous and punishable by death
 - (v) He threatened the power and income of the Sadducees as He wanted to purify the Temple (see *Part 15*)
 - (vi) The Sadducees were afraid that if too many people followed Him the Romans might punish them

Because of these different reasons, members of both of the Pharisees and Sadducees, who were not usually allies with each other, joined together to oppose Jesus and began to plot to have Him executed. Much of Jesus' teaching was actually in response to questions from members of the various religious groups.

How should we respond to Jesus?

When we study the teaching and life of Jesus we should be clear about what He claimed about Himself and His mission. He claimed that He was the unique Son of God who had come to establish God's Kingdom among us, and the only Way to really know the creator God. He did not offer us the option of following some of His teachings and some teachings of another religion or philosophy or of accepting Him as a good teacher but not God. It is either Jesus **OR** something else, but you can't have Jesus **AND** something else. According to Belfast-born Christian writer and Oxford professor (author of the *Narnia* stories), CS Lewis, there are only three possible ways to respond to Jesus' claim to be God:

- a) **He was mad** – perhaps He was insane (John 10:20). But could a mad man speak and think so clearly?
- b) **He was bad** – others said He was demon possessed. But could an evil person do such good things?
- c) **He was God** – if this is true, we must consider what difference it should make to our lives

Key Lesson: Jesus' miracles support His claim to be God – we must respond to this claim

The miracles of Jesus prove His authority over nature, disease, evil spirits, death and even sin, supporting His claim to be God living as a human being. We must decide if we think He was mad, bad or God.