

Perhaps you know the parable of the elephant and the blind men.

There were once six blind men who stood by the road-side every day, and begged from the people who passed. They had often heard of elephants, but they had never seen one; for, being blind, how could they?

It so happened one morning that an elephant was driven down the road where they stood. When they were told that the great beast was before them, they asked the driver to let him stop so that they might see him.

Of course they could not see him with their eyes; but they thought that by touching him they could learn just what kind of animal he was.

The first blind man put out his hand and touched the side of the elephant. "How smooth! An elephant is like a wall."

The second blind man put out his hand and touched the trunk of the elephant. "How round! An elephant is like a snake."

The third blind man put out his hand and touched the tusk of the elephant. "How sharp! An elephant is like a spear."

The fourth blind man put out his hand and touched the leg of the elephant. "How tall! An elephant is like a tree."

The fifth blind man reached out his hand and touched the ear of the elephant. "How wide! An elephant is like a fan."

The sixth blind man put out his hand and touched the tail of the elephant. "How thin! An elephant is like a rope."

Each of the blind men understood only a part of what the elephant was like.

It's a little bit like that in our Bible passage today. We're going to see that many people understood only a part of what Jesus was like, based on their experience of him, but somehow missing the bigger picture. Our task is to take all the separate impressions, and put them together to gain the full understanding of who Jesus is.

So why don't we pray and then we'll open the Bible?

*Our heavenly Father, we thank you for the chance to read your Word today. Please reveal hidden truth to us today, as we see the signs, as we listen to the disciples, and as we hear Jesus speak. Please open our eyes today, and reveal spiritual truth. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen*

Well, we are almost at the end of our sermon series from Matthew 13-16, a series we've been calling *Hidden Treasures*. These chapters have been all about looking deeper into Jesus' teaching, and his miracles, and seeking to understand the deeper meanings behind them.

Now if you think back across the last 8 weeks, each little story has been a bit like a puzzle piece. Each one contains part of the picture of **who Jesus is**. But today, we are putting all the pieces together. So why don't we get into the passage and see what the picture reveals.

## **Show us a Sign**

Our first puzzle piece today comes from Matthew 16:1-4. It's an interaction that Jesus has with some Jewish religious leaders – the Pharisees and the Sadducees. And they come to Jesus with a test:

The Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus and tested him by asking him to show them a sign from heaven. (Matthew 16:1)

Now if you've been with us through this series, or if you've read much of the gospels, you'll know that the Pharisees and Sadducees were often at odds with Jesus. His teaching amazed the people, and he spoke with an authority that outshone their rabbis (Matthew 7:28-29). More than once, Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for their legalistic approach to religion. And so there is a rising conflict between Jesus and the religious establishment.

And in this moment, they come to test him. Show us a sign from heaven, they say.

The Pharisees and the Sadducees want to know who Jesus is. They want to know if he is genuinely sent by God, genuinely empowered by God, connected to God, speaking on behalf of God. Because Jesus had spoken against them, and his teaching threatened their position of power. And so they want Jesus to prove himself, to prove his identity, to prove his credentials. They want to see a miracle.

If you are real, then do a miracle right now, and *then* we'll believe you.

I sometimes wonder what must have been going through Jesus' mind at that moment. I wonder if he was thinking back over all the signs from heaven that he had already performed. Just in the last three chapters we've been studying since summer, Jesus has:

- Healed crowds of sick people
- Fed the crowd of 5000 with just a few loaves and fishes

- Walked on water
- Cast the demon out from the daughter of the Canaanite woman, and healed her
- Fed another crowd of 4000 just like he fed the first;
- And he healed the mute, the lame, and the blind.

And that's without looking back at the earlier chapters, where Jesus healed hundreds or thousands more, cast out demons again and again. He even raised a girl from the dead. And not long after this, Jesus himself would be raised from the dead after 3 days in the belly of the earth...

But sometimes people see all the signs and it just isn't enough for them. The treasure remains hidden from their sight, because they refuse to look deeper...

Listen to how Jesus responds to their 'test':

<sup>2</sup>[Jesus] replied, "When evening comes, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red,' <sup>3</sup>and in the morning, 'Today it will be stormy, for the sky is red and overcast.' You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.

I grew up with that expression. *Red sky at night, sailor's delight. Red sky in the morning, sailor's warning...* It's handy for predicting the weather.

But just because we can predict the weather, it doesn't mean we understand everything that is going on in the world.

You see, as humans, we are good at understanding the 'seen' world. The 'seen' world is what we can see and touch and experience with our 5 senses. But the 'seen' world is not all there is.

The 'unseen' world exists alongside what is 'seen'. And God's plans may not be something we can perceive from a human perspective. That was the Pharisees' problem. They couldn't read the signs about what God was doing right in front of them, in the person of Jesus. They couldn't understand 'the signs of the times.'

So that's the first vignette in our passage today. The first puzzle piece. The Pharisees and the Sadducees failing to read all the signs that pointed to who Jesus was.

## Identifying the Messiah

For the second puzzle piece about Jesus' identity, we're going to skip down a few verses.

The disciples have crossed the lake, and made their way 25 miles north to the region of Caesarea Philippi. This is about as far from Jerusalem as you can get, and still be inside Israel's borders. It was a town known for its pagan religion – it was said to be the birthplace of Pan, the

Greek god of nature and fertility. In fact, even today the town is still named after Pan. Around the hills were temples and shrines to the classic Greek gods. It also hosted temples dedicated to Baal, the Babylonian gods. And in Caesarea Philippi itself, Herod the Great had built a large, white, marble temple dedicated to the Roman Emperor – Caesar – where he was portrayed as a God.

This was a town that surrounded itself with every form of deity you could imagine.

And in the middle of all those other gods, in the middle of all those shrines and temples, in the middle of all those religious symbols, Jesus asks his disciples a question: (v13)

“Who do people say the Son of Man is?” (Matthew 16:13)

The Son of Man is one of the titles that Jesus uses for himself – this is the ninth time he has referred to himself as the Son of Man just in Matthew’s gospel. Sometimes in the OT, ‘son of man’ is just another way of referring to a human.

But there is also a significant OT prophecy about a ‘son of man’. It’s in Daniel 7, and it begins with a vision of God on a flaming throne, pictured as the powerful judge presiding over the final judgment. But listen to what comes next:

<sup>13</sup> “In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. <sup>14</sup> He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed. (Daniel 7:13-14)

The son of man in Daniel is this figure of immense importance, and influence. God – the Ancient of Days – hands power and dominion and authority to him, and this ‘son of man’ is presented as the eternal king over all nations and all people. He is worshiped. His kingdom will never be destroyed.

That must have been quite a promise after Israel’s disappointing history with kings, their years as a nation in exile, their occupation by the Persians and Greeks and Romans. This idea of a new king, a new kingdom, a new time of favor for God’s people, you can imagine it grew in prominence for the Jewish people. That’s the idea behind ‘son of man.’

“Who do people say the Son of Man is?” Jesus asks in Matthew 16:13.

The disciples reply (v14):

Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” (Matthew 16:14)

Back in chapter 14, the Herod, the governor who had John the Baptist beheaded, he thought Jesus was John the Baptist risen from the dead.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps this was one of the rumors going around about who Jesus was.

Others said he was Elijah. Elijah was perhaps the greatest OT prophet. His ministry was accompanied by many miracles, so you see the similarity to Jesus. But more than that, a prophecy from the book of Malachi said that God would send Elijah right before the '*great and dreadful day of the Lord comes*.'<sup>2</sup> That is, Elijah would signal the arrival of God's anointed king and judge.

Are you seeing the OT ideas lining up? Son of man, Elijah... Wait, because there's more.

Some said Jesus was Jeremiah, or one of the prophets. Jewish tradition had it that Jeremiah had taken the ark out of the Temple before it was ransacked in the time of the Exile, and that he had hidden it on Mount Nebo. But the tradition was that Jeremiah would come back again at the time of the arrival of God's promised king, and that the return of the ark would restore the glory of God to the people again. Can you feel the expectations growing about who Jesus was?

Now there's a word that I've avoided saying. A title that we're going to read in just a moment. Perhaps you know what it is. This was a word that had been whispered by God's people for centuries. The name of the one who would restore their fortunes, and once again make the nation of Israel great. Follow the conversation with me from v13:

"Who do people say the Son of Man is?"

They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

<sup>15</sup> "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"

<sup>16</sup> Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

The Messiah.

The anointed one, that's literally what the word means. Anointed. In the OT, the kings of Israel were anointed with oil as a symbol that God had chosen them. And so the word messiah came to stand for the king, even though the word messiah is not actually used anywhere in the OT.

One of the great expectations of the OT comes from a promise that God made to King David. God promised that there would always be a king on the throne from the line of David.<sup>3</sup> As I already mentioned, the line of kings after David was far from perfect. In fact, the kingdom split into two, many of the kings worshiped false gods, and eventually God brought judgment on his people, they were taken into exile and the kingdom lay in ruins.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 14:2

<sup>2</sup> Malachi 4:5

<sup>3</sup> 2 Samuel 7:13

But even at their lowest point, the people held onto the promise that a new king would come, a king anointed by God, a Messiah. That was the hope of Israel.

And in the centuries before Jesus' birth, that messianic expectation grew. A King to restore God's people – that was what 'Messiah' meant to the Jews at the time.

So when Peter calls Jesus the Messiah, he rightly understands that Jesus is the anointed one, the promised king that God was sending. He wasn't one of the prophets. He wasn't a messenger. He was the one they had been waiting for...

## **The Other Side of the Messiah**

PAUSE

It must have been such an exciting moment for the disciples, with that word finally out there in public. Messiah. They had put the puzzle pieces together. They had felt all the way around the elephant. They understood, or so they thought.

So it must have been a surprise when moments later (in v20) Jesus:

ordered his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah. (Matthew 16:20)

You know when you have good news and you just have to share it? A few weeks ago I woke to the sound of my phone buzzing in the middle of the night. I thought my phone wasn't meant to buzz between 10pm and 7am, but there it was. We were in a hotel somewhere in Europe, so I was already confused when I woke up. It was my 19yo daughter asking if she could come to our room and share some news with us. News so important it couldn't wait. News we'd have to sit down for...

I might be a bad father, but I asked her to wait until morning. The news was that she got into nursing, she was really excited!

So I imagine the disciples were full of that same excitement, but Jesus orders them not to tell anyone.

Why?

We find out the answer in the next section of the passage. Because Jesus reveals something new about what it means for him to be the Messiah. (Reading from v21)

<sup>21</sup> From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

All the impressions of the Messiah so far have been images of triumph, and victory, and power. But Jesus reveals another side to the messianic expectation. Instead of ascending an earthly throne, instead of gaining political influence, instead of overthrowing the Roman occupiers, instead Jesus told his disciples that he 'must' go to Jerusalem where he would suffer and die.

You can imagine Peter's confusion. Peter takes Jesus aside and begins to rebuke him (v22)

"Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!"

Peter can't see how the path Jesus that describes matches the expectations that they all had of the Messiah. Peter is willing to fight for his Messiah, to protect him.

But Peter is like a blind man who has only felt one part of the elephant. He knows Jesus is the Messiah, but he doesn't understand the whole picture.

With this last piece of the puzzle, Jesus reveals the bigger picture to them now, a picture that combines the prophecies about the Son of Man, and the Messiah, but adds a new dimension with a prophecy from the book of Isaiah, a section we call the servant songs, or the suffering servant passages.

From Isaiah 40-60, the prophecy builds a picture of God's people being redeemed, rescued, and restored from all their troubles. But not through a political savior. Instead through one who would rescue them from their sins – and he would do so by suffering, and taking upon himself the punishment that the people deserved.

We see that 'suffering servant' presented most clearly in Isaiah 53. Listen to what the prophecy says:

he was pierced for our transgressions,  
he was crushed for our iniquities;  
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,  
and by his wounds we are healed. (Isaiah 53:4)

[...]

Isaiah 53:4 eloquently summarizes the message of the cross, the message at the heart of Christianity. On the cross, Jesus willingly suffered and died to deal with our 'transgressions' and our 'iniquities'. Two old fashioned words that mean Jesus deals with our sin. With all the things we do to hurt others, and ourselves. Jesus, the suffering servant, is pierced and crushed so that we never have to face the eternal consequences of our sin. Our punishment is placed upon him. And that great exchange – his life given for ours, our sin placed upon him – that is the reason why we can have peace with God, and forgiveness, and the hope of eternal life.

This is a promise far greater than a temporary miracle, or a temporary healing. It's far greater than the promise of a political savior. It's the promise of eternal hope. And it is all bound up in recognizing Jesus.

So come back to the question that Jesus asked to Peter in v15. Jesus asked Peter:

“But what about you? Who do you say I am?”

Jesus is asking us the same question today. “But what about you? Who do you say I am?”

We've been given multiple pictures of who Jesus is. The Son of Man. More than a prophet. More than a messenger. More than an earthly king. Someone who is willing to die for you. But someone who would rise again after 3 days, to take his position beside the Ancient of Days, enthroned forever with all power and dominion and authority given to him, with every tribe and nation and people bowing down before him in worship. That's the picture of Jesus that Matthew paints for us. All of those facets of Jesus, all coming together to fill out the picture of who Jesus is.

And in fact, they fill out the picture of who Jesus will be to all of us on the day he returns. We may not think much of Jesus right now, but one day he **will** be revealed in splendor. One day he **will** be revealed as all-powerful.

And so the question he asks each of us is – who do you say I am? Who is Jesus to you?

Will you pray with me?