

**SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS**  
**Commentary by Michael Sigler**  
**February 14, 2010**

***Testimonies to Jesus as Messiah...***  
**Declared By Peter**

**Matthew 16:13-27**

**Key verse: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16)**

There are times when clearly knowing the *identity* of someone is of crucial importance. I love the story of a bungled introduction of evangelist Leighton Ford to a gathering of college students. (Leighton Ford is the brother-in-law of Dr. Billy Graham, the famous evangelist.)

The professor making the introduction began by saying, “We are happy to have Leighton Ford as our guest speaker this morning.... And perhaps some of you don’t know that Leighton Ford is married to Billy Graham’s brother.” The students snickered, but the professor was unaware of his mistake.

“That makes Leighton Billy Graham’s son-in-law.” At this point, the crowd of students can’t hold back their laughter.

The embarrassed professor tried to fix his gaffe, only to fall headlong with these unfortunate words: “So...I present to you, Leighton Ford’s brother-in-law, Billy Graham!”

Sometimes, knowing clearly the identity of someone can be of crucial importance. Matthew’s gospel reaches its turning point in chapter 16, which tells the story of Peter’s confession of Jesus’ true identity. At Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” (v.15). Peter answers, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God” (v. 16).

Jesus responds by saying: “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven” (v.17). Jesus then tells Peter: “On this rock I will build my church” (v. 18). I believe the best interpretation of Jesus’ words here would be: *The church will be built on such a confession as Peter has just made.*

It would be hard to overstate the significance of this Bible passage. Jesus’ question, “Who do you say that I am?” is a defining question for every single person. Also significant is the geographical setting of this story. We sometimes have a tendency to skip over unfamiliar names and places in Scripture. But here we should take note of them.

Matthew tells us that this great confession of faith took place at Caesarea Philippi. This place was located 25 miles northeast of the Sea of Galilee. It was the location of some 14 temples of ancient Syrian Baal worship. Also, this location was the supposed birthplace of Pan, the Greek god of nature. In addition, at Caesarea Philippi was a great white temple dedicated to the worship of Caesar.

In this location, then, were visible symbols of the ancient gods of the Holy Land, represented by Baal; the pantheistic gods of Greek culture, represented by Pan; and the secular power represented by worship of the Roman emperor. It is significant that Jesus chose this location, representing *polytheism* (worship of many gods), *pantheism* (worship of nature and the material world), and *secular power*. Here in the face of the world's competing claims about God, Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?"

In his book, *The Case for Christ*, Lee Stroebel retraces his own spiritual journey from atheism to faith. He asks the question: Is there credible evidence that Jesus of Nazareth really is the Son of God? Stroebel cross-examines a dozen experts who are recognized as authorities in their fields. He asks each of them questions such as: Did Jesus and Jesus alone match the identity of the Messiah promised by the Old Testament prophets? Stroebel concludes...

Hundreds of years before Jesus was born, Old Testament prophets foretold the coming of the Messiah, who would redeem God's people. Dozens of Old Testament prophecies created a fingerprint that only the true Messiah could fit. For example:

*The prophet Micah pinpointed the place of His birth—Bethlehem.*

*Isaiah revealed the manner of His birth—born of a virgin.*

*Genesis and Jeremiah specified the coming Messiah's ancestry—a descendant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, from the tribe of Judah, and the house of David.*

Other Old Testament prophecies are even more specific, for example Isaiah 53. This remarkable passage speaks of God's "suffering servant" who would be "wounded for our transgressions," "bruised for our iniquities," and "by His stripes we are healed."

In his spiritual journey, Stroebel concluded: "The Old Testament prophecies created a fingerprint that foretold the identity of the promised Messiah—a fingerprint that only Jesus of Nazareth fits!"

The evidence of Old Testament prophecy is only one piece of the evidence for Jesus' true identity. For today's seeker, books like Stroebel's *The Case for Christ* can be helpful guides, and there are others. C.S. Lewis' classic, *Mere Christianity*, is still relevant today. A more recent book of this kind is the best-seller by Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God*.

That day at Caesarea Philippi, against the backdrop of the world's competing claims about God and gods, the disciples were called upon to answer the question of questions: Who is Jesus?

And that is how it is for each of us. The living Christ, by His Spirit, meets us along the path of life and asks, “Who do you say that I am?” Our individual response to that question will matter for time and eternity.

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