

The truth is that I’ve always thought of Jesus’ question here as a kind of a game-show question: “and now for fifty points and a chance to go on to the bonus round: ‘Who do you say that I am?’ ” And Peter rings in with his response, “The Messiah. The one anointed by God—appointed by God—to free the people” and Jesus doesn’t deny it so we suspect Peter’s hit the nail on the head. Cheers and applause and as we go to the commercial break Jesus says, “That’s right, I’m the Messiah and now I’m going back to Jerusalem where I’ll be arrested and put to death. And Peter steps up and says, “Never! Don’t even think such things. How can you be the Messiah and set us free from the Romans if you surrender yourself and die.” And of course Jesus says, “Get behind me Satan. You’re thinking only on the most earthly level... but there’s something bigger at stake here—something universal, something timeless, something heavenly—if you could only imagine it.”

It’s like Peter only got the answer half-right... His words may have been technically correct, but he had no idea of the deeper truth beneath the title. It’s like he got the word “Messiah” and had an idea of what the word meant in his mind—or maybe what he wanted the word to mean—and then he assumed that that was who Jesus would be for him. He wanted Jesus to be what he wanted Jesus to be... the warrior king who would raise a vast army that would—maybe miraculously—drive the Romans out of Israel and then Jesus would take the throne and Peter and the disciples would serve as his ministers and cabinet members...

I think that’s kind of what Peter had in mind; but Jesus will have none of it. In his own mind he’s come with a far greater purpose: to free us from a far greater enemy. Jesus knows there will always be oppressors, there will always be political powers that try to hold the common people down long enough that they can squeeze the last nickel out of them. And there are other oppressors out there too. There are people and forces and events—and even theologies—that oppress us from all sides trying to squeeze the hope out of us, the joy out of us, the peace out of us... And it seems like when Jesus thinks of himself as the one anointed and set aside by God to free us—he’s thinking—not just of the Romans—but of this larger array of oppressor.

And he knows it’s not going to come down to who can raise the bigger army, the bigger gun, the bigger political following... It’s going to come to a showdown between him and the powers of all these oppressors in which they will pour out all their bile on him, empty their entire arsenal against him, and he must be physically crushed, but even in this apparent defeat God will vindicate him and show that life and love and hope are victorious, that they cannot be wiped away or suppressed forever... And when we see what God has done, we will all be released... all who have faith in God through him will be released forever from the power of all those oppressive forces.

That’s the difference! The Roman army may still control our country, but now they have no real power over us—not in the light of the resurrection. Our bosses may still pick on us and demean us, but they can’t take away our joy in the light of the resurrection. There may still be bullies on the school playgrounds and in the highest halls of our government, but they cannot put a dent in our hope—not in the light of the resurrection. Even death itself lost its sting when the crucified one rose again and exposed the lie of death through the light of the resurrection.

I have no doubt whatsoever that Jesus could have been the Messiah that Peter had envisioned. I have no doubt he could have marched into Jerusalem and with a word sent the Roman soldiers scrambling in terror... but what of that? I have no doubt that he could have taken the reigns of political power and been a great king and lived to a ripe old age... but again, what of that? What would that have done for us today?

There have been great warriors, there have been great kings and politicians, but the blessings of their powers have impacted only this handful of people and that in this moment of time or that... and then the forces of evil have risen again to drain the life and the hope from the

people and imprison them in new waves of oppression. And it's only Jesus who rose up to fight these oppressors, not by attacking them with the right hand of power but instead Jesus outwitted them and conquered them by surrendering to them and showing us grace in the face of torment, and life—new life, resurrected life—in the face of death.

That's what Jesus brings us as the Messiah... this topsy-turvy, counter-intuitive, approach to conquering all the powers that oppress us. Instead of overwhelming them with violence or sheer force, or vast numbers of supporters, Jesus gives them his body, his life... and as he does God lifts the veil and vindicates him through the resurrection—and shows us that no power in heaven or earth can come between us and the life and love God gives us.

And friends, in as much as we believe in Jesus the Messiah, we share in the rewards of his great paradoxical victory, today, here, in this life. Through his life, death, and resurrection we see behind the lies of Death, the lies of kings and princes and warriors, we see behind the lies of every power of humanity and nature that would have us kneel before them in fear and despair... In Christ we see that our God is more powerful than all the forces of nature, our God is greater than any dictator or tyrant, God is grander and more glorious than any cloud of doom or hopelessness that might try to overshadow us.

Jesus asks, "Who do you say I am?" Well that's who I say Jesus is: the one anointed to reveal God in every detail. The one set apart to reveal a God mighty beyond our words or imaginations; the one who reveals a God who may not remove every oppressor, or shield us from every pain, but who will walk through every distressing moment of this life with us whispering of God's love to us, turning even the worst moments of life into opportunities for something good, and reminding us that there will come a time when all oppression will cease and only God's power and purity and abundant love will remain and embrace us forever and ever.

For the victory is God's through Christ Jesus our Lord who undertook the path of shame and death on our behalf to overcome—not just one oppressor—but the ability of any oppressor past, present, or future to conquer our spirits ever again.

That's who I say Jesus is. And, yes, it's true that there are still oppressors in this world; there are far too many who still look to prey on others and take from them their rights and their dignity—let alone their money and their hopes for the future. And we ought to be crying out that our Lord would have mercy on us and convict us of the impulses we have to be among the oppressors for we know there are moments when we have colluded with the oppressors when it's suited us in the past. And we ought to be praying that God would strengthen us to challenge the oppressors among us today on behalf of those who are powerless before them.

For there are many—very many—who live even now beneath the heel of the oppressors of this world. They live in fear of hunger, of poverty, of violence; fear that their voices are systemically unheard, fear that there's no justice for them even in a land that proclaims equal justice for all. They live in fear of sickness, and unemployment, and a lack of opportunities to better themselves. They live in fear of storms and floods and fires; and wars and brutality. They live in fear of having nothing behind them but a meaningless life and nothing ahead of them but a meaningless death and an eternity of obscurity and decay into more nothingness...

But we are called to follow our Lord into this breach. We are called to raise the banners of Christ Jesus and carry the message of who he is among the oppressed. We are called to bring them real comfort in our words and in our presence and in our actions; we're called to not just claim Jesus as our Messiah, but to follow him into his mission of bringing hope to the hopeless and setting the captives free.... may we do this only through His power and always to His glory; today and tomorrow and forever and ever. Amen.