

JESUS' RADICAL TEACHING

Teaching about himself

KEY TRUTH

Jesus taught his disciples to trust in him as the true focus of all their hope and devotion: he himself is the subject of his message.

JESUS IN JOHN'S GOSPEL

John's Gospel provides the clearest picture of Jesus' teaching about himself. From the very beginning of the Gospel, John is concerned to show his readers not just what Jesus did, but also who he is (eg John 1:14). Interestingly, unlike the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke), John's Gospel hardly ever uses the term "kingdom of God", because John wants to emphasise the significance of Jesus himself, who is of course the essential figure in the kingdom of God. John remembers and records statements Jesus made about himself, which bring into focus who he is and how his disciples should relate to him. Jesus' teaching about himself in John's Gospel is crystal clear: he is the one true hope of the world, who satisfies the deepest longings of his people.

SEVEN IMAGES OF JESUS

Early in John's Gospel, Jesus meets a Samaritan woman at a well (4:7). In conversation with her, Jesus tells her that the age-old controversy between Samaritans and Jews about where to worship God (4:20) is no longer necessary – all people everywhere can worship God "in spirit and in truth" (4:23-24). The Samaritan woman replies that she expects the Messiah will clear up all the confusion (4:25). Jesus' response is simple, "I am – the one who is speaking to you!" (4:26). In Greek, his statement begins *ego eimi*, "I am". On one hand, Jesus is simply saying, "It's me!" But these specific words recur throughout John's Gospel at key moments, hinting at their significance for Jesus in his teaching

about himself. In particular, John's Gospel contains seven "I am" statements through which Jesus explains who he is to his followers.

- **I am the bread of life** (6:35,48,51). The previous day, Jesus had fed the crowd with five loaves and two fish (6:1-13), and now they had returned to him wanting more miraculous food (6:26,34). They thought that Jesus was the promised prophet like Moses (Deuteronomy 18:18; John 6:14), so they asked him for a sign to prove himself (6:30), just as Moses had provided "bread from heaven" for the Israelites for forty years during their exodus journey from slavery in Egypt to the promised land (6:31; Exodus 16:4,35). Jesus corrected them: it was not Moses who had given the Israelites bread, but God (6:32). Now God was providing a much better bread for them – Jesus himself – which would feed them on a much more profound exodus: the journey from sin and death to eternal life (6:35). Jesus is not just a prophet like Moses who can ask God to send provision; Jesus himself is that provision! God sent bread from heaven during the first exodus because that was what was needed then. But Jesus has been sent "from heaven", because he is the essential provision for the new exodus: no one can come into the eternal life promised by God except by him (6:50-51). Jesus' teaching about himself as the bread of life is echoed in the Lord's Supper (6:52-57; Luke 22:19), and in the prayer he taught his disciples (Matthew 6:11).



Lighthouse at Portofino, Italy. As Jesus is the very source of light, we are to allow his light to reflect from us

- **I am the light of the world** (8:12; 9:5). Throughout Scripture, light is an image of God's activity of creation (see Genesis 1:3) and salvation (see Exodus 13:21; Psalm 27:1). The world has become a dark place because of sin, so God set his people in the middle of the world to reflect his own light, revealing the way to him (see Isaiah 42:6; 49:6; 60:1-3). Israel often failed to be the light of the world because they also were affected by the darkness of sin. Jesus declared that he is what Israel were always supposed to be (8:12). However, Jesus is not just a reflection of God's light; he is the source of light itself and so is able to give it to others, as he demonstrates by healing a blind man (9:1-7). As John comments at the beginning of the Gospel, Jesus is the true light, who was at work in both creation and salvation (1:3-5,9). Just as Israel were to reflect God's light, so Christians are to reflect Jesus' (see Matthew 5:14; 2 Corinthians 4:6; 1 John 1:7).
- **I am the door of the sheep** (10:7,9). Gates or doors in sheepfolds are important for the

safety and security of the sheep; they prevent the sheep from wandering away and predators from attacking the flock. A flock of sheep was a common image for God's people in the Old Testament (eg Psalm 100:3). The gate, for them, was God's Torah, entering through which they would experience salvation and blessing (note Deuteronomy 6:9). Jesus declares that he is the new Torah – he is the new gate of the flock of God's people, entering through which they will discover life in abundance (John 10:9-10). There is no other legitimate way into God's fold (10:1). Jesus will watch over the coming and going of the sheep (10:9), which echoes the constant watchful care of God himself in Psalm 121:8.

- **I am the good shepherd** (10:11,14). If Israel were seen as sheep in the Old Testament, then God was their shepherd (Psalm 23:1). However, God shared his care of the flock with Israel's leaders (eg Joshua

in Numbers 27:17; also 2 Samuel 7:7), and in particular the king (especially David, 1 Chronicles 11:2). Apart from David and a few other good leaders, these “shepherds” did not take care of Israel, but led her into idolatry and wickedness, and allowed her to become prey for other nations, all the while making themselves comfortable with warm clothing and rich food (see Ezekiel 34:1-6). So God promised through Ezekiel to take the flock back under his control and rescue his sheep (34:11-16). He would appoint a new David to care for his renewed flock (34:23-24). Jesus announces that he is this new good shepherd – he is the true ruler

“Jesus answered, ‘I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.’”

JOHN 14:6

over God’s people (John 10:11-16). Unlike the wicked leaders of Israel, Jesus is prepared even to go to his death in order to rescue his sheep from destruction (10:11). Jesus teaches his disciples that his suffering and death are God’s means of gathering his people together. Far from being a failure, Jesus is the good shepherd who bring health and care to his wandering sheep (note also Luke 15:3-7; 1 Peter 2:25).

- **I am the resurrection and the life** (11:25). Israel knew that only God held the power of life (eg 2 Kings 5:7). Death, as the ultimate result of sin, disrupts God’s good creation and threatens to remove even God’s own people from their awareness of him (see Psalm 6:5; 88:10-11). In one of the greatest visions of the Old Testament, God promises to speak to the dead and dry bones of his people and raise them up to new life and fellowship with him (Ezekiel 37:1-14).

Israel’s resurrection hope was not just new spiritual life, but new physical life too, in God’s renewed world. In John 11:25, Jesus tells the grieving Martha that he is “the resurrection and the life”: he is the powerful Word of God who has come to breathe new life into the world. He raised Martha’s brother Lazarus to show the truth of his words (John 11:41-44). Jesus’ teaching pointed forward to his own death and resurrection, by which he defeated sin and death. He brings new spiritual life now, but will completely fulfil his promise in the future when he will return to bring “resurrection and life” to all his followers.

- **I am the way, the truth, and the life** (14:6). “Way”, “truth” and “life” are all images that spring directly from the Old Testament’s teaching about obedience to God’s Torah. If the Israelites were careful to walk in the way of God’s commands, then they would enjoy blessing and life as God intended (Deuteronomy 5:32-33). Since God’s law is the way to life, it was celebrated by the Israelites as truth (eg Psalm 25:5; 119:43). Jesus tells his disciples that they can follow him to God’s new creation, where they will live in perfect fellowship with the Father (John 14:2-3). The way to get there – the way of truth that leads to life – is no longer God’s Torah but Jesus himself (14:6). Jesus defines what it means to live in the kingdom of God, both now and forever. Jesus’ words still speak powerfully today of his uniqueness: there is no other way to true life than through him.
- **I am the true vine** (15:1,5). The vine, or vineyard, was a common image for the whole nation of Israel in the Old Testament (eg Psalm 80:8; Jeremiah 2:21). They were supposed to produce fruit of righteousness for God, the vine-keeper. But instead, they produced little fruit – and what fruit they did produce was bad. Jesus teaches his disciples that he is the true vine (John 15:1): he is all Israel were ever supposed to be. His

disciples are branches on the vine (15:5), which means that as long as they remain connected to him they will receive the pruning discipline of the Father (15:2-3), and bear good fruit from the resources of Jesus’ life that will flow into them (15:5). Remaining in Jesus is all his disciples need in order to be pleasing and productive for the Father.

“I AM”

Jesus’ use of the words “I am” has an even deeper significance. In John 8, Jesus stated, “you will die in your sins unless you believe that I am” (8:24), and then again, “when you have lifted up the Son of Man, you will realise that I am” (8:28). These sentences only make sense if Jesus is using “I am” as a title. At the end of the chapter, he claimed that “before Abraham was, I am” (8:58). At that, the Jews

were about to stone him (8:59), which was the usual punishment for blasphemy (see Leviticus 24:16), indicating how serious an offence Jesus had committed in their eyes. So how are his words blasphemy? The personal name for God in the Old Testament, YHWH, is translated “I am who I am”, or “I am” (see Exodus 3:14). Jesus applies this divine name to himself in order to explain his origin (8:58), his suffering (8:28; 13:19), and his saving significance (8:24; see also 6:20). The Jews rightly recognised that Jesus was making a claim to share in the being and identity of the one true God of Israel! The Christian faith affirms that Jesus’ teaching about himself was true: he is the great “I am”, he shares the being and identity of YHWH, and so he is able to give life and hope to the whole world.

TO THINK ABOUT

Choose one of Jesus’ seven “I am” statements and read the whole chapter or chapters in which it is found. Use the following questions to come to a deeper understanding of his teaching.

- Who is Jesus speaking with? Does the statement come as part of a conversation with his disciples or controversy with his opponents?
- Are there any miracles (“signs” in John’s Gospel) that illustrate Jesus’ statement about himself?
- What Old Testament imagery was Jesus using? How did he transform it?
- What was Jesus saying about himself in the statement you have chosen? How would you express this today?
- How do people in John’s Gospel respond to Jesus’ teaching about himself? How do you think people today respond to it? How do you?

Now choose one or more of the other statements and work through the same questions.

Read John 8:31-59 slowly, and try to follow the discussion between Jesus and the Jews.

- What is their problem with Jesus? What have they misunderstood?
- How does Jesus respond? Try to imagine what it would have been like as one of the Jews to hear Jesus say this to you.
- How does verse 58, and Jesus’ claim to be “I am”, draw the discussion to its climax?
- How do you respond (see verse 59)?

Jesus’ claims about himself were profoundly disturbing to many of his hearers, and some people still find them so today. He is the source of God’s new creation, and the unique way to life within it. Think about how Jesus’ claims make you feel. Now pray to God, expressing your trust in Jesus as the great “I am”, and asking for the boldness to share this knowledge with others.