

LESSON ONE

I AM

KEY VERSE: *"I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "before Abraham was born, I am!"* – John 8:58

The fundamental question in Christianity is a personal one. The question is, *What do you believe about the Christ?* Since Jesus' earthly ministry began people have been asking, "Who is this Jesus?"

In Luke 5:20 we find Jesus making a startling statement to a paralytic, *"Friend, your sins are forgiven."* The Pharisees and the teachers of the law immediately react with a question, *"Who is this fellow who speaks blasphemy? Who can forgive sins but God alone?"* Jesus stilled a tempest on the Sea of Galilee and His astonished disciples asked, *"Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!"* (Mark 4:41). Those who sat at a table with Him one day were amazed to hear Him grant pardon to a prostitute and they remarked, *"Who is this who even forgives sins?"* (Luke 7:49). When Herod, the tetrarch of Galilee heard details of the ministry of Jesus he was puzzled and asked, *"I beheaded John. Who, then, is this I hear such things about?"* (Luke 9:9). When Jesus rode into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey, Matthew states that, *"the whole city was stirred and asked, "Who is this?""* (21:10).

This question, "Who is this?" in relation to Jesus is still being asked today. As we begin our journey through the great "I AM" statements of Jesus we hope to answer this question. Jesus is "The Way, the Truth, and the Life"; "The Resurrection", "The Light of the World", "The Door", and "The Good Shepherd". But in the text before us, Jesus simply identifies Himself as "I AM."

If we are to experience the Christ of the Bible then we must believe in the Christ the Bible presents. Look with me as we consider Jesus' claim to the title, "I AM."

The Jews answered him, "Aren't we right in saying that you are a Samaritan and demon-possessed?" "I am not possessed by a demon," said Jesus, "but I honor my Father and you dishonor me. I am not seeking glory for myself; but there is one who seeks it, and he is the judge. I tell you the truth, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death." At this the Jews exclaimed, "Now we know that you are demon-possessed! Abraham died and so did the prophets, yet you say that if anyone keeps your word, he will never taste death. Are you greater than our father Abraham? He died, and so did the prophets. Who do you think you are?" Jesus replied, "If I glorify myself, my glory means nothing. My Father, whom you claim as your God, is the one who glorifies me. Though you do not know him, I know him. If I said I did not, I would be a liar like you, but I do know him and keep his word. Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad." "You are not yet fifty years old," the Jews said to him, "and you have seen Abraham!" "I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "before Abraham was born, I am!" At this, they picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the temple grounds – John 8:48-59

1. "I AM" IS EQUAL WITH GOD

Jesus claims for Himself the title "I AM." The name "I AM" is the same name God the Father designated for Himself in Exodus 3:14. God had appeared to Moses in a burning bush that wouldn't burn up. God told Moses that he was the man to lead the Israelites out of their bondage in Egypt. When Moses requested that God give him a name to tell the Israelites who had sent him we learn that, *"God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.'" God went on to say, "This is my name forever, the name by which I AM to be remembered from generation to generation"* (v. 15). And here we find Jesus, who is God in the flesh, claiming His rightful name, "I AM."

This is the reason the Jews wanted to stone Jesus (v. 59). To the Jewish leaders it was unthinkable that a man would take upon himself the name of God. They knew that God had commanded that, *"anyone who blasphemes*

the name of the LORD must be put to death. The entire assembly must stone him. Whether an alien or native-born, when he blasphemes the Name, he must be put to death" (Lev. 24:16). This is why the Jews were picking up stones to take the Savior's life – because Jesus claimed the name "I AM," and to their understanding He had committed blasphemy.

To the non-Jewish mind what Jesus said would not be construed as anything to get that upset about. But the Jew knew that this name "I AM" was reserved for God alone and by using it Jesus was claiming to be equal with God the Father.

In John 5:18 we find another instance where the Jews seek to kill Jesus because they said He, *"was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God."* To the Jewish mind there was no doubt whom Jesus was claiming to be.

The Bible plainly teaches that Jesus is equal to God the Father because He is God in the flesh. Sometimes this doctrine gets confusing when other passages are considered.

Although Jesus is equal in every way to the Father and the Holy Spirit, Paul writes concerning Him, *"Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped"* (Phil. 2:6). The word translated "grasped" means to securely hold onto something that is already in your possession. What the passage is saying is this: Jesus is in every way equal to God Almighty, but He voluntarily chose to become the Son of God and did not hold onto all that He possessed before He came to earth. In other words, He chose to subordinate Himself to the Father so that He could redeem mankind from their sins.

Does this make Him less than the Father? No, not in any way. It simply means that He was willing to give up heaven for a time, so that we might be able to enjoy it for eternity. When the whole of the Bible is considered, there can be no doubt that Jesus claimed full equality with the other members of the Godhead. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are all equally God. They have voluntarily chosen to take on specific

roles for the redemption of mankind. This Jesus who identifies Himself as "I AM" is equal with God because He is God.

2. "I AM" IS ETERNAL WITH GOD

Jesus claims to have eternally existed. He, like the Father and the Spirit, have always been. There has never been a time when they were not. In His controversy with the Jews, Jesus asserts, *"I tell you the truth, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death"* (v. 51). This is too much for Jesus' critics to handle so they protest, *"Abraham died and so did the prophets...Are you greater than our father Abraham?...Who do you think you are?"* Jesus replied, *"Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad"* (v. 56). The Jews become even more perplexed: *"You are not yet fifty years old," the Jews said to him, "and you have seen Abraham!"* (v. 57). Jesus then makes the boldest claim of all, *"I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "before Abraham was born, I am!"* (v. 58).

Here Jesus clearly claims to have lived before the great patriarch Abraham. Notice that He does not say, "Before Abraham was, I was," but, *"Before Abraham was, I am."* In other words, "I not only lived before Abraham, but I have always been." Jesus is without a doubt claiming to have existed eternally before Abraham.

This eternal nature of Jesus is taught throughout the New Testament. The apostle John emphasized the pre-existence of Jesus by declaring that, *"in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God"* (John 1:1). The apostle Paul refers to Jesus' pre-existence in heaven in Philippians 2:6. At that time, Paul declares, Jesus *"existed in the form of God."* The word translated "form" conveys the idea of possessing all the attributes of the subject being discussed. So in this phrase, found in Philippians 2:6, Jesus is said to have possessed all the attributes of God – and one of those attributes is pre-existence. In Colossians 2:9 Paul claims concerning Jesus, *"in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form."*

Jesus Himself claimed pre-existence with God with absolute clarity. In John 6:38 He said, *"For I have come down from heaven."* Jesus declares, *"You*

are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world" (John 8:23). In John 10:30 is the amazing statement, *"I and the Father are one."* During Jesus' high Priestly prayer He petitions the Father, *"Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began"* (John 17:5).

Now let me explain to you why I've stressed this so much. Jesus undeniably claimed to have existed eternally in the same way that God the Father has. If He did not exist as He has said then the rest of the Bible becomes meaningless. Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection are invalidated, as far as our redemption is concerned, if Christ is not an eternal being.

The whole point of the cross is that God became man and lived a sinless life and died in our place. If Jesus did not exist forever then it wasn't God who died in our place, it was simply a man like us. If Jesus was a created being like we are than He could not be God. Thank God He is not created, but has existed eternally, and has come to earth for our benefit.

3. "I AM" IS ESSENTIAL WITH GOD

We find that in this life some things are essential, while others are not. In this day and age I believe we could say a car is essential, but a Rolls Royce is not. Shelter is essential but none of us really need a mansion. We cannot survive without bread and water, but we can make it through without filet mignon. There are many things we can do without, but the great I AM, Jesus Christ, is essential for life, specifically for life eternal.

Jesus is essential to our salvation. In John 11:26 Jesus promises, *"He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die."* Even though all will at some point experience physical death, those who have placed their faith in Christ will never experience a moment of separation from Him. They have eternal life as a present possession. Concerning Jesus, Peter declares *"Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved"* (Acts 4:12). If a person is searching for salvation

through any means other than Jesus, their search will be in vain. Jesus is essential to our salvation. Without Him we are lost.

Jesus is essential to give us a way to God. In John 14:6 Jesus makes an all-inclusive claim: *"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."* Without Jesus we have no way to approach the Father. He is the only path we can walk down. He is the only way to heaven. There is no other way for Jew or Gentile, slave or free. Without Jesus we can never experience the eternal joy of the Father's presence.

Jesus is essential to our peace, hope, and assurance. A wonderful promise is given in John 10:28, *"I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand."* Jesus is our source of life both here and hereafter.

During Jesus' ministry many asked, "Who is this man?" Many today are asking the same question, "Who is Jesus – who did He claim to be?" And the answer from the Word of God is this: He is the Great I AM – He is fully God in every respect. Jesus is equal with God; He is eternal with God; He is essential with God; He is God! He is everything.

Discussion Questions

1. What is the fundamental question in Christianity?
2. Why is it so important to be able to answer the above question correctly?
3. If you were a Jew at the time Jesus claimed to be “I AM”, do you think you would have tried to stone Him? Why or why not?
4. How would you explain Jesus’ equality to God the Father to a non-Christian?
5. If Jesus was not fully God what would that say about the salvation of those who have placed their faith in Him?
6. Write out a short personal statement concerning what Jesus’ eternal nature means to you: