

Blasphemous Jesus

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

3rd in a five-part series

March 13, 2011

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John 10:22–42 (NRSV)

²² At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, ²³ and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. ²⁴ So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.” ²⁵ Jesus answered, “I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name testify to me; ²⁶ but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. ²⁷ My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸ I give them

eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹ What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father’s hand. ³⁰ The Father and I are one.”

³¹ The Jews took up stones again to stone him. ³² Jesus replied, “I have shown you many good works from the Father. For which of these are you going to stone me?” ³³ The Jews answered, “It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you, but for blasphemy, because you, though only a human being, are making yourself God.” ³⁴ Jesus answered, “Is it not written in your law, ‘I said, you are gods’? ³⁵ If those to whom the word of God came were called ‘gods’—and the scripture cannot be annulled— ³⁶ can you say that the one whom the Father has sanctified and sent into the world is blaspheming because I said, ‘I am God’s Son’? ³⁷ If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me. ³⁸ But if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father.” ³⁹ Then they tried to arrest him again, but he escaped from their hands.

⁴⁰ He went away again across the Jordan to the place where John had been baptizing earlier, and he remained there. ⁴¹ Many came to him, and they were saying, “John performed no sign, but everything that John said about this man was true.” ⁴² And many believed in him there.

Blasphemous! Could Jesus have been really have been blasphemous? No. But a lot of those who heard him thought he was. The question for us is “why?”

Who is Jesus? Really . . . everything in John’s Gospel, in the Bible, and in our world depends on the answer to that question. It really isn’t very hard to see why some of those observing and hearing Jesus would have found him to be blasphemous. Today’s story is one of many examples.

But first, let’s talk about what we mean by blasphemy. The text box above gives you a pretty concise answer. And in Jesus’ case, it is that third meaning, “claiming for oneself divine attributes,” that is in view. In the eyes of many, Jesus’ words and actions constituted making himself out to be God, as the crowds put it (v. 33). To the fiercely monotheistic Jews, there could hardly be a more incendiary charge.

A winter day

You and I would probably call it Christmas time. But this is Jerusalem, 2,000 years ago, and it is the time for Hanukkah, the festival of Dedication, commemorating the

Blasphemy

A term derived from a Greek word meaning to injure the reputation of another. In the Bible it means showing contempt or a lack of reverence for God (Lev. 24:16; Mark 2:7) or something sacred (Matt. 26:65), including claiming for oneself divine attributes by word or deed (Mark 14:64; John 10:33). ¹

¹ Achtemeier, P. J., Harper & Row, P., & Society of Biblical Literature. (1985). *Harper’s Bible dictionary* (1st ed.) (135). San Francisco: Harper & Row.

rededication of the temple in 164BC following its desecration by Antiochus IV Epiphanes. (For more on this, see the textbox below).

Jesus is walking through a large building at the southern end of the immense temple courtyards when he is accosted by a threatening crowd. They know what he has been

Hanukkah

The following is from the commentary by C.G. Kruse in the Tyndale New Testament commentary series.

The setting for John 10:22–39 is the Feast of Dedication, or *Hanukkah* (celebrated in November–December), and thus differs from that of the preceding section, whose setting was the Feast of Tabernacles (celebrated in September–October).

The Feast of Dedication is not one of the feasts prescribed by the Mosaic law. It celebrates an event that took place in intertestamental times.

Following the victories of Alexander the Great in the fourth century BC, Greek culture and language were introduced to the subjugated nations, including Judea. After the death of Alexander this policy was continued by the rulers who held sway over Judea, first the Ptolemies of Egypt, up till about 200 BC, and thereafter the Seleucids of Syria. Hellenization, as the spread of Greek culture and language is called, flourished as many in the subjugated nations, including many Jews, were attracted to it.

However, when Antiochus IV became ruler of the Seleucid Empire he tried to force Greek culture upon the peoples he ruled. For the Jews this meant that practices such as sabbath observance and circumcision were prohibited, and the books of the Law were burnt. In 167 BC the temple in Jerusalem was desecrated by offering swine's flesh on the altar, and Jewish people were required to offer sacrifice to pagan deities.

This led pious Jews to revolt against Antiochus IV, a revolt led by Mattathias and his sons. They fled to the mountains, from whence they conducted guerilla warfare against the Seleucid armies. Their campaign was crowned with success, and in 164 BC the temple was rededicated to the worship of Yahweh.

doing and they know what he has been saying. They want to know whether or not he is the Messiah, God's long-awaited rescuer who would lead the campaign to get rid of the Romans and cleanse the temple. And they want to know it in clear and uncertain terms.

Jesus' reply is straightforward. His words and actions speak for themselves, he says. If they can't see the truth, it is because they are deaf and not among the sheep for whom Jesus is the good shepherd, the sheep given to Jesus by the Father. And then, Jesus makes what an unmistakable claim: "The Father and I are one" (v. 30).

In his commentary on John, Bruce Milne notes that:

In the course of his reply (25–30) Jesus refers to some of the supreme privileges of those who believe in him.

1. They are a *summoned* group. *My sheep listen to my voice* (27). The call of Christ has brought them into a new relationship with him (*I know them*); a relationship which in turn leads to a new lifestyle (*they follow me*). The proof of faith is obedience. 'Only he who truly obeys truly believes.'

2. They are a *gifted* group. The gift they receive is *eternal life* (28). All who believe will live; the new life of the kingdom is theirs. No longer a part of this passing 'world', under the power of the evil one, *they shall never perish* (28). They are part of the permanent.

3. They are a *secured* group: *no-one can snatch them out of my Father's hand* (29). Christ's people are his possession. He has committed himself to them even as they for their part have, however falteringly, committed themselves to him. In this too the Father and the Son are one (30). The 'flock' has been given to the Son by the Father and he stands behind the Son in his guardianship of the flock. Hence the forces of opposition and destruction have to confront the awesome and limitless power of the Father, who is 'greater than all'. No profounder security is conceivable for the follower of Jesus.¹

The crowd, of course, does not believe in Jesus. They think they know him and that he

¹ Milne, B. (1993). *The message of John : Here is your king! : With study guide*. The Bible speaks today (153). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press.

is only another rabble-raising, would-be Messiah,² with blasphemous notions of his own divinity. So they begin to pick up heavy, round stones to use to stone Jesus to death; this is the penalty for blasphemy.

Jesus' response is to offer the crowds Psalm 82:6, "I say, 'You are gods, children of the Most High, all of you,' " as a way of showing that the word "god" can be used to refer to someone else other than God. The problem is that it isn't at all clear who God is speaking of in Psalm 82, but it still makes Jesus' point . . . at least, somewhat.

The crowds don't buy it. They close in on Jesus . . . and he escapes from their grasp yet again.

A truth too big to be grasped

How could we really expect the crowds to grasp the immensity of Jesus' claims? Even for us, speaking of Jesus' identity and nature gets lost in a morass of little understood ten-dollar words and general confusion. Really, how could this man from Galilee be the Lord and Creator of the cosmos? How could anyone be expected to believe such a thing? Why are we surprised that so many, even today, reject the notion out of hand?

The apostle Paul understood this. Invariably, when he arrived in a city and began to speak to them of Jesus, he was scoffed at and ignored. How silly! How crazy! Yet he pressed on. Like Jesus, he didn't water down the claims or pretend away their consequences. When we offer Christ to others, there is only Jesus to present – the Jesus who is. The Jesus who was God incarnate, fully God and fully human. All other Jesuses are no more real than the Easter bunny, and who would place their faith in him (her?).

The Importance of Memorizing Scripture

Timothy Larsen, Carolyn and Fred McManis Chair of Christian Thought at Wheaton College, reflects on the importance—and difficulty in today's age—of Scripture memorization:

A few particularly rewarding, compact, and potent [biblical] texts are worthy of not only deep reading but even memorization. This is the most counterintuitive of practices for my students. Why memorize a text that you can access electronically any time you wish? This attitude indicates a failure to grasp the way in which a text can permanently inhabit one's inner life. Ask yourself: If you were stranded, what resources would you have by heart to sustain you? Who are you without Google?

When the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, Robert F. Kennedy was able to address a shocked nation promptly and off-the-cuff, quoting Aeschylus from memory: "In our sleep, pain which cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart until, in our despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God." I wonder which of today's public figures have such rich and resonant resources within them.

Increasingly, therefore, I am trying intentionally to practice two countercultural habits: first, reading long, substantive books; and second, memorizing short but weighty texts

Memory Verse of the Week

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Micah 6:8 NRSV

Too many Christians see the Old Testament as little more than a portrait of a vengeful God busy smiting all those who cross him. But the ethic of Jesus is woven throughout the Hebrew scriptures. You only have to look a little harder. What does it mean to love God and neighbor? How about doing justice and kindness and walking humbly with God. A great place to start!

² There were a variety of would-by Messiahs in the 100 years before and after Jesus. The last was Simeon Bar-Kochba who led a revolt against the Romans in 135AD. He even went so far as to mint coins marked year 1, year 2, and year 3 to connote the ushering of God's kingdom. As you might guess, the Romans put an end to all this.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

The crowds can't grasp that Jesus is not only Messiah, but also Lord; that in making himself "equal to God," Jesus was merely stating the deep truth that even he may have only partially grasped at the time. He was not being blasphemous; he was merely telling the truth. Indeed he was the only person in all human history who could say such things and not be blasphemous.

What do you find hardest to grasp about Jesus? If a friend asked you to tell them more about Jesus, what would you say? How could we get better at answering that question? It doesn't really do to just send them to someone else or hand them a book, even if it is the Bible. They want to hear the story from you.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Romans 1:1-7 How would you summarize what Paul says about Jesus in the opening verses of this letter?</p>	<p>Tuesday, Mark 11:1-19 Everything here is supposed to convey that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah/King.</p>
<p>Wednesday, John 1:1-18 Can we read this too often? This is John's unequivocal statement of Jesus' divinity.</p>	<p>Thursday, 1 Peter 1:1-2 Do you see the Trinitarian nature of Paul's salutation?</p>
<p>Friday, Philippians 2:5-8 What do you think is meant by "though he was in the form of God . . . emptied himself"?</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Scott's 11:00 Class in Festival Hall

The Rise of Christianity

How the obscure, marginal Jesus movement became the dominant religious force in the western world in a few centuries.

Mar 13 – The Third Generation of Christians: From Sect to Church

Mar 20 – The Fourth Generation: From Church to Christendom

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

In God's Time: The Bible and the Future

We meet at 11:45 in room 127 every Tuesday. This week, on Mar 15, we begin our discussion of Revelation. Join us whenever you can.

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Scott Engle is leading a trip to the Holy Land in the fall of 2011.

There are still a few places open.

In addition to Israel, we will visit the Pyramids, Ephesus, Athens, and Rome. It will be quite an experience. Dozens of St. Andrew members have already joined the trip. We hope you'll join us.

For more information, go to www.scottengle.org.

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