

# I am He

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[ 0 : 00 ] May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

The question began to haunt me in university while studying physics and theoretical mathematics. I have freshly fallen in love with Jesus.

I say freshly fallen in love because there was a sense in which I have loved Jesus as long as I can remember. It's just that during my third year in university, something happened and there was a passion for Jesus that I had not known before.

It was an invigorating time of life filled with joy and newness of life. My fellow physics and math students could see that apparently it radiated from me.

So much so that many asked if they could meet with me after class to talk about why I was alive. In those afternoon and evening conversations, they pressed me.

[ 1 : 13 ] My fellow students pressed me very hard. Why Jesus? They asked. Why love Jesus? What's so special about Jesus?

What makes Jesus any more important than any other religious or philosophical figure? One day, our professor, who was teaching us thermodynamics, which is the study of heat and energy transfer, asked if he could meet with me after class.

I was one of three or four of students whom he had taken under wing. He had been trying to get me a summer internship at the Institute of Plasma Physics in Berlin, Germany.

I shared with him what was happening to me. And I shared that I was wrestling with the possibility of leaving physics to go to seminary and prepare for the preaching ministry.

He then asked me in all seriousness, he asked me, why would you throw away your brains? And your promising future to preach Jesus?

[ 2 : 17 ] Well, even then, I knew there were a number of significant things that set Jesus apart. But thanks to my Sunday school upbringing in the Baptist General Conference, I knew that there was one thing that put Jesus in a class all by himself.

Jesus of Nazareth, son of Mary, is the living God in human form. Jesus is the creator become a creature.

Or at least that's what the church claimed. For centuries, the church proclaimed that the God who made the world came down to live in the world as one of us.

That claim is what generated all the intense theological controversy of the first three or four centuries of church history. That claim and the attempt to unpack it lays at the heart of all the so-called ecumenical creeds.

For instance, the Nicene Creed, which Christians all over the world will recite in the Nicene Creed, it says of Jesus that he is God of God, light of light, very God of very God.

[ 3 : 33 ] The first assembly of the world. The first assembly of the World Council of Churches meeting in Amsterdam in 1948 found its unity in the affirmation. Jesus Christ is Savior and God.

But the question began to haunt me. Did Jesus of Nazareth himself ever make such a claim? Did he did he ever say that he is God?

So along with textbooks on quantum mechanics and differential equations, I decided to read the New Testament with greater vigor. As I read, it appeared to me that most of the writers of the New Testament did think that Jesus was divinity in some form.

The apostle John says so right up front in the beginning was the word. The word was with God. The word was God. The word became flesh and dwelt among us.

The apostle Paul seems as forthright. As a science student, I was particularly drawn to his epistle to the Colossians. In that letter, he says things like Jesus is the image of the invisible God.

[ 4 : 45 ] By him and for him, all things were created. He is before all things and in him, all things hold together. In him, all the fullness of deity dwells in bodily form.

I was further taken by the fact that the writers of the New Testament gave to Jesus names and titles which only the God of the Old Testament had.

For instance, they called Jesus the Holy One. They call him Lord. And as I read the New Testament, I saw that Jesus performs deeds and functions which only the God of the Old Testament performs.

Jesus forgives sins. Jesus raises the dead. Jesus still storms on the storm-tossed Sea of Galilee. And Jesus makes people's response to him the basis of their eternal destination.

Further, I noticed that Jesus was worshipped throughout the Gospels. He was given the kinds of praise and adoration which only the living God deserves.

[ 5 : 50 ] He gives sight to a blind man and the man worships him. I was especially taken by the fact that when doubting Thomas falls at the feet of Jesus and says, My Lord and my God, Jesus does not rebuke him.

Jesus does not accuse him of the sin of idolatry or blasphemy. Indeed, Jesus welcomes Thomas' worship. But the question still haunted me.

Did Jesus of Nazareth himself, the carpenter from Galilee, the flesh and blood human being whom other flesh and blood human beings touched, did he himself ever say anything remotely like, I am the living God?

The question was intensified for me by the rock opera, Jesus Christ Superstar. Now the question sang in my soul.

Jesus Christ Superstar, who are you? What do you say you are? Jesus Christ Superstar, who are you?

[ 7 : 06 ] What do you say you are? Jesus Christ Superstar, who are you? What do you say you are?

This seemed to me to be so critical that I decided to reread the four Gospels with that one question in mind. Now, to my good fortune, I began with the Gospel according to John.

As I had learned in a Baptist Sunday school, that whereas Mark primarily focuses on Jesus' deeds, and whereas Matthew primarily focuses on Jesus' teaching, and especially about the kingdom of God, and that whereas Luke primarily focuses on the historicity of Jesus, and how Jesus did what he did and taught what he taught, and how Jesus did what he taught.

Through prayer and through the Holy Spirit, John primarily focused on who Jesus thinks he is. Now, as I read and reread the Gospel according to John, I found myself especially intrigued with chapters 7 and 8 of the Gospel.

When I made my way through those chapters, I felt as if I should take off my shoes, for I was on holy ground. In these chapters, Jesus makes enormously audacious claims about himself.

[ 8 : 31 ] Claims which make the religious authorities finally ask Jesus, John 8, 25, Who are you? And 8, 53, Whom do you make yourself out to be?

Jesus Christ, superstar, Who are you? I noticed John is careful to tell us that what Jesus says in John 7 and 8 all took place within the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles.

So, I decided I would get my hands on all the data I could about this Jewish Feast. And when I did, Jesus' words in John 7 and 8 came alive.

Or as I should say, they exploded. His words had new meaning, and I found an answer to my question. If I could preach just one sermon to the whole world, it would be the one I'm now going to preach.

There are three feasts to which male adults, living within 15 miles of Jerusalem, are obligated to attend. They are Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles.

[ 9 : 41 ] Tabernacles is by far the most joyous. It's held in the fall, usually mid-October. And Jerusalem fills with hundreds of thousands of very happy pilgrims.

Those who came to the feast would live in little huts or tents made of tree branches, which in Hebrew are called Sukkoth. Thus, this feast is known by that name, Sukkoth.

The worshippers did this way, as a way to recall, that when the ancestors crossed from Egypt, across the Sinai Desert, to the Promised Land, they lived in little huts or tents.

Now, the Feast of Tabernacles is extremely rich in symbolism, ritual, and theology. There are three major components to the feast. There is a water ceremony, a light ceremony, and a fundamental

theological affirmation that is recited in the festival liturgy.

A water ceremony, a light ceremony, and a fundamental theological affirmation affirmed in the liturgy. The water ceremony, very dramatic, recalls the fact that while traveling across the desert, the ancestors found themselves without water.

[11:00] Moses is told to go to a rock, strike the rock, and he's promised that when he does, water will flow like rivers. Water out of a rock. Moses does what he has commanded.

He strikes the rock, and lo and behold, rivers of water come out of the rock. The feast recalls that event, and then the feast recalls a promise that God made that one day he would pour out living water upon his people in the person of his spirit.

It is during that water ceremony that Jesus stands up and cries out above the crowd, John 7, 37, If you are thirsty, come to me and drink, and out of your innermost being will flow rivers of living water. The light ceremony, also very, very impressive, recalls the fact that while crossing the desert, the people did not get lost. God guided them with a pillar of fire at night and a cloud of smoke during the day.

The light ceremony celebrated the God who guides, the God who can guide because God is light. It is during that part of the ceremony that Jesus stands up and says, John 8, 12, I am the light of the cosmos.

[12:21] Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but have the light of life. Now I invite you to listen to Jesus speak about himself in the context of the fundamental theological affirmation celebrated in the festival liturgy.

As I said, those who came to the Feast of Tabernacles would live in little huts or tents made of tree branches. And as I said, the worshippers did this as a way to recall the days when their ancestors lived in little huts or tents.

But, the worshippers also did this as a way to recall that during those days, the living God chose to dwell among them in a tent called the Tabernacle.

Hence, the Feast of Tabernacles. After the Exodus from Egypt, God commanded Moses to raise funds from the congregation saying, let them construct a sanctuary for me that I may dwell among them.

That I may dwell among them. That I may dwell among them. Exodus describes this tent Tabernacle to the minutest detail.

[13:38] It was to be the place where the living God would meet the redeemed people. God says to Moses, Exodus 29, 45, I will dwell among the children of Israel and be their God.

They will know that I am Yahweh their God who brought them out of the land of Egypt. I will dwell among them. I am Yahweh their God. Thus, as Israel makes its way across the desert, there is this glorious, abiding sense of the presence of God surrounding this tent Tabernacle.

Therefore, the central affirmation of the Feast of Tabernacles is the presence of the living God. The presence of the living God.

The feast celebrates God's gracious decision to dwell among His people and to manifest His glory to His people. Now, this fact is celebrated verbally throughout the festival liturgy.

A number of Old Testament texts play a significant part in the liturgy. These Jewish feasts all had their special liturgy, just like we do. If you come to Christmas Eve service, which I hope you do, you're going to read from either Matthew 1 and 2 or Luke 1 and 2.

[14:50] You're not going to get Deuteronomy or 1 Corinthians 15 on the resurrection. You're going to get a text prescribed for Christmas. Hopefully. Right? Well, Feast of Tabernacles also had prescribed texts.

So, let me read some of these texts. Now, as I do, listen carefully to how God is spoken of and of how God speaks of Himself. So, here are some of the texts.

Deuteronomy 6.4, the fundamental creed of Israel. Hear, O Israel, Yahweh is one God. Yahweh is one. Psalm 115, verses 9 to 11.

O Israel, trust in Yahweh. He is their help and their shield. O house of Aaron, trust in Yahweh. He is their help and their shield. You who fear Yahweh, trust in Yahweh.

He is their help and their shield. Did you hear the pronoun He? Three times. He, He, He. Now, Psalm 46, Psalm 50, and Psalm 81 were also sung during this feast.

[15:59] Note particularly Psalm 46. Listen, there is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy dwelling place of the Most High.

God is in the midst of her. She shall not be moved. And then God says, Be still and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations. I will be exalted.

Did you hear the pronoun I? Three times. I, I, I. Now, most significant importance is the fact that sections of Isaiah 40 to 55 were read throughout the service.

So listen. Isaiah 41, 4. I, Yahweh, am the first and the last. I am He. Isaiah 43, 10. You are my witnesses, my servant whom I have chosen in order that you may know and believe me and understand that I am He.

Isaiah 46, 4. Even to your old age, I am He. Even to your graying years, I shall bear you. Now, did you hear that time? The connection of the pronouns I and He in the phrase I am He.

[17:05] Three times. I am He. I am He. I am He. Now, let me give you a little language lesson. The Hebrew word for I is ani.

The Hebrew word for He is who. The Hebrew for I am He is ani who. Will you say the words with me? Ani who.

Again, please. Ani who. Now, when the Hebrew Old Testament was translated into Greek, the translators uniformly rendered ani who by the Greek words ego, a me.

Ordinarily, ego, a me simply means I, I am, or I am. But because of the ani who, ego, a me connection, most translators render ego, a me, as I am He.

I am He. Will you say those words with me? I am He. Again, please. I am He. Now, here's the point of all the data. This is the most important piece of data I can ever give you.

[18:14] And when we grasp it, we finally hear who Jesus thinks He is. On the Sabbath of the Feast of Tabernacles, the Levitical priests would sing the so-called Song of Moses recorded in Deuteronomy 32.

The high point of that song is verse 39 where we hear God speak. Listen, see now that I, I am He. There is no other God but me.

It is I who bring to death and I who give life. The Hebrew I, I am He is ani, ani who. The Greek is ego, ego, a me.

I, I am He. According to the German scholar Ethelbert Stouffer, by the first century, those little pronouns, ani who, or I, he, had become the all-inclusive summary of God's self-revolatory declarations in the ritual of the Feast of Tabernacles.

I'll say that again. By the first century, those little pronouns, ani who, or I, he, had become the all-inclusive summary of God's self-revolatory declarations in the ritual of the Feast of Tabernacles.

[19:28] The great rabbi, Helal the Elder, used to say, in reference to this Feast, when ani is here, all is here. When ani is not here, then none is here.

At one point during the Feast, the choir of priests would sing at the altar, God is in His temple. Then a priest, singing God's Word, would respond, Be still, and know that I am God.

And then a choir priest would chant, ani, ani who, ani, ani who, ego, ego a me, ego, ego a me, I, I am He, I, I am He, ani, ani who, ani, ani who, on and on and on.

Thus, at the Feast of Tabernacles, along with the image of water and light, the words, ani, ani who, ego, ego a me, I, I am He, were reverberating in the minds and hearts of the Jewish worshippers, as they anticipated that any moment now the living God would show up.

Now we're ready to hear Jesus of Nazareth speak. John tells us that after Jesus made the claim, I am the light of the world, the religious authorities engage him in an intense debate.

[21:05] Jesus says that he will soon leave, that they will not be able to follow him, that they will die in their sins. They discuss what all of this means. So then Jesus says to them in John 8, 23, you are from below, I am from above, you are of this world, I am not of this world.

That's a startling thing in itself to say. Then Jesus says, listen, John 8, 24, I'm going to give you the literal translation, I told you that you would die in your sins for you will die in your sins unless you believe that I am He.

Did you hear Him? I, He. The authorities, the authorities hear loud and clear. The carpenter had just uttered those sacred pronouns of God's self-revelatory declaration during the feast and He had uttered them about Himself.

That's why they ask Him, who are you? They ask Him in white, hot anger, who are you, Jesus?

Come on, man, you've got to finish the sentence. You can't leave it at I, He. More debate ensues.

Then Jesus says, listen, John 8, 28, when you have lifted up the Son of Man, Son of Man is Jesus' favorite way of referring to Himself. Lifted up refers to His being lifted up on the cross.

[ 22 : 22 ] When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am He. Ego Emi, Anihu, their very words by which Yahweh, the Almighty, Yahweh, the one and only, chooses to be known to Israel.

And the man from Galilee, the Son of Mary, dares to say, unless you believe that I am He, you will die in your sins. When you have lifted me up on the cross, then you will know that I am He.

The debate understandably intensifies. Jesus is even being accused of having a demon. Towards the end of the argument, Jesus says, your ancestor Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day and saw it and was glad.

The religious authorities, I think chuckling, say to him, you're not even 50 years old and you've seen Abraham. And then Jesus drives home the weight of his tabernacle claim.

Listen, John 8, 58, Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am. Ego Emi, Anihu. And note, not before Abraham was, I was, but before Abraham was, I am.

[ 23 : 36 ] And John tells us that immediately the authorities picked up stones to throw at Jesus. Why? Why throw stones at Jesus?

Why throw stones at the gentle carpenter? Why throw stones at a man who heals you? Why throw stones at a man who loves the way no one ever had loved? They had to throw stones at him because right in the middle of the feast that celebrates the living God dwelling among his people, Jesus of Nazareth says, I am he.

A few months later in the feast of dedication or Hanukkah, the authorities again take up stones to throw at Jesus.

And we read in John 10, Jesus responds saying, I showed you many signs. For what sign are you throwing stones at me? And they respond, for a good work we do not stone you, but for blasphemy because you, a man, made yourself out to be God.

which is precisely what he had done at the feast of tabernacles. Now, when I saw this, my eyes and ears were opened to the multitude of places where Jesus says the same thing.

[ 24 : 48 ] And let me give you just a few illustrations also from the gospel of John. In the fourth chapter of John, for instance, Jesus is talking with a woman by the well. They're discussing worship.

The woman wants to know where she should worship on the mountain in Samaria or in Jerusalem. Jesus says to her that the place doesn't matter. What matters is spirit. Jesus says, an hour is coming and now is when the true worshipers will worship the Father, worship the Father in spirit and truth.

The woman likes what she's hearing, but she's not too sure about Jesus. So she says, I'll tell you what I'm going to do. I'm going to wait until Messiah comes. He will tell us everything. Then Jesus says, listen, John 4, 26, I am he, the one who's speaking to you.

Now, is he just saying, I'm the Messiah? I don't think so. I think he's saying, I am he, the very God you were seeking to worship is right here.

You need not go anywhere. In the sixth chapter of John, we find Jesus after the feeding of the 5,000 walking on the water. When the disciples first see him, they're afraid. They think he's a ghost.

[ 25 : 57 ] Then Jesus says to them, John 6, 20, I am he. Ego eimi. Do not be afraid. Is he saying to his disciples, hey, dudes, it's just me.

Don't worry. I don't think so. John is careful to tell us that this event took place during the feast of Passover. And during Passover, a text from Isaiah, Isaiah 51, is read, where Isaiah recalls that God dried up the Red Sea so that the people could cross over.

And then the Isaiah text exalts Yahweh, the great I am, as the one who has control over the sea. You can see then that what Jesus is saying to his disciples is so much grander.

You need not be afraid. I am he. I control the sea. And then, in the 18th chapter of the Gospel of John, we find these little pronouns again, but this time in a very solemn, occasion, in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Judas, the betrayer, has come with the Roman battalion and the officers of the temple. John writes, 18-4, Jesus, therefore, knowing all things that were coming upon him, went forth and said to them, Whom do you seek?

[ 27 : 11 ] Jesus responds, they say to him, sorry, Jesus to Nazarene. Jesus responds, I am he. Ego e me. Again, is Jesus simply saying, you found him, I'm the Nazarene.

No. And John makes this clear in the next verse. Listen to this. John 18-6, listen. When therefore, Jesus said to them, I am he, they drew back and fell to the ground.

Why? Why? Why fall to the ground? Why fall to the ground before a man they'd come to arrest?

Were they taken by his courage?

Were they taken by the moral innocence of a man they were going to put into jail? Or were those Jews so used to hitting the ground when they heard the sacred pronouns, I am he, that they did not know what they were doing?

given the strict monotheism of the first disciples and all the writers of the New Testament, you can imagine that Jesus' tabernacles claim generated serious theological struggle.

[ 28 : 26 ] John, Peter, Paul, the author of Hebrews, they all strained the Greek language, they grasped for analogies, they searched for philosophical categories to express the totally unexpected and unprecedented.

The wrestling continued well past the New Testament. Council after council met to try to come to terms with this. And out of all the wrestling came the two mysteries at the heart of the Christian faith.

The mystery of the plurality of persons within the Godhead leading to the doctrine of the Trinity and the mystery of the unity of humanity and divinity in the one Savior leading to the doctrine of the two natures fully God, fully man.

Now, a person can dismiss that as mumble, theological mumble-jumble if you want, but what remains is this fact of what Jesus said at the Feast of Tabernacles. Here, I just have to read from C.S. Lewis, a British scholar from Oxford.

And what I'm going to read comes from his essay, What Are We to Make of Jesus Christ? Listen. If you had gone to Buddha and asked him, Are you the son of Brahma?

[ 29 : 37 ] He would have said, My son, you are still in the veil of illusion. If you had gone to Socrates and said, Are you Zeus? He would have laughed at you.

Had you gone to Mohammed and asked, Are you Allah? He would have first read his clothes and then cut your head off. If you'd gone to Confucius and said, Are you heaven?

I think he would have probably replied, Remarks which are not in accordance with nature are in bad taste. But when the temple authorities went to Jesus of Nazareth during the Feast of Tabernacles in A.D.

32 and asked him, who do you make yourself out to be? He said, Truly, truly, before Abraham was, I am.

When you lift up the son of man, you will know that I am he. Unless you believe that I am he, you will die in your sins.

[ 30 : 49 ] Well, the implications of all of this are literally endless. So just for this morning, let me conclude by pointing to three implications.

First, in light of Jesus' tabernacle claim, we now understand why he can make the other claims he makes. if he is, I am he, the great I am, then of course he can say, I'm the bread of life.

I'm the resurrection and the life. I'm the way, the truth, and the life. Of course he can say, if anyone is thirsty, come to me and drink. Of course he can say, I'm the light of the world.

Of course he can say, I am the vine, you are the branches, abide in me, because apart from me you can do nothing else. Of course he can say to us that he's absolutely necessary for human life.

This man is the ground of all of our being. Second, in light of Jesus' tabernacle claims, we can now appreciate why the rest of the New Testament puts him at center stage.

[ 31 : 56 ] We can see why the New Testament puts Jesus at the center of everything. And now we can understand why Jesus can walk into our lives, interrupt our lives, and command us, follow me.

Get up, come after me, and lose your life for me. Of course he has the right to do that. And given who he thinks he is, we're crazy not to do it.

We're crazy not to get up and follow him and lose our lives for him. Given who he thinks he is, we see how irrational, I'm using this word irrational deliberately, we see how irrational it is for governments to try to operate without reference to Jesus.

I don't get it. How irrational it is for corporations to try to operate without reference to Jesus. How irrational it is for universities, studies of place of truth, to operate without reference to Jesus.

And in light of his tabernacle's claim, you can see why it's so miserable when we don't do it Jesus' way. Like he knows how to live life.

[ 33 : 12 ] And the only sensible, rational, logical thing to do is to surrender to the center of life.

In the C.S. Lewis essay, from which I read a few moments ago, Lewis observes that Jesus produces only three effects on those who met him.

Only three effects. They are hatred, terror, and adoration. Lewis says, there was no trace of people expressing mild approval.

Mild approval for the I am he. If Jesus is, in fact, who he thinks he is, he's worthy of impassioned worship. He's worthy of impassioned love.

He is worthy of impassioned allegiance in every sector of life. Third, in light of Jesus' tabernacle claim, we now understand how the gospel of Jesus Christ is the best news anyone can ever hear.

[ 34 : 18 ] for what event stands at the center of the gospel? Crucifixion. The cross, right? Jesus lifted up, arms outstretched, hands nailed to the wood.

But I ask you, who is this Jesus? Who is this man on the cross? Whose arms are outstretched? Whose hands are nailed to the wood?

Whose blood? Whose blood? Whose blood is dripping from that cross? In light of the Feast of Tabernacles, we know, those arms are the arms of God. Those hands are the hands of God.

Those bleeding wounds are the bleeding wounds of God. It is God who suffers there. It is the Creator who suffers there. It is I am He who becomes sin there.

It is the great I am who takes upon Himself the judge punishment for the sin of the world. It is I am He who cries out, it is finished. Everything that needs to be done about sin has been done.

[ 35 : 24 ] It is finished. God is satisfied. God is satisfied with the sacrifice of this man because this man is God. Now you know why.

My favorite hymn is And Can It Be by Charles Wesley. And can it be that I should gain an interest in the Savior's blood? Died He for me who caused His pain for me who Him to death pursued? Amazing love how can it be that Thou, my God, shouldst die for me? God dies for me? Yes, yes, yes.

A thousand times yes. At one of the most sacred moments in the religious life of Israel during the Feast of Tabernacles when people celebrated the presence of the living God who uses the pronouns Ani Hu I am He Jesus of Nazareth stands up and says unless you believe that I am He you will die in your sins.

When you have lifted up the Son of Man then you will know that I am He before Abraham was born. I am. That's why Thomas has not guilty of idolatry or blasphemy when he confesses Jesus as God.

[ 36 : 41 ] And that's why I have not thrown away my brains to preach Jesus. Bless you, Lord.