

Mark 8:27—9:1

**Leader  
Session  
Guide**

**Focus Statement**

This story marks a turning point in the Gospel as Peter finally states what has been increasingly obvious: Jesus is the Christ. Yet even as he gets this right, Peter demonstrates how much more he has to learn about Jesus' identity.

**Key Verse**

[Jesus] asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." Mark 8:29

**Focus Image**



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# Who Do You Say Jesus Is?

## Session Preparation

### Before You Begin . . .

Think for a moment about the first time you learned who Jesus is. Perhaps this happened in Sunday school or vacation Bible school, in talking with someone, or as you read something from the Bible. How has your understanding of Jesus' identity grown and/or changed as you have grown in faith? What remains the same in your understanding of Jesus' identity? As you prepare for this session, pray for the Holy Spirit's guidance as you consider Jesus' identity and what impact it has on your daily life.

### Session Instructions

1. Read this Session Guide completely and highlight or underline any portions you wish to emphasize with the group. Note any Bonus Activities you wish to do.
2. If you plan to do any special activities, check to see what materials you'll need, if any.
3. Have extra Bibles on hand in case a member of the group forgets to bring one.

### Session Overview

The focus of this session is on Jesus' identity. You and the learners will consider what it means for Jesus to be the Messiah whose destiny is the cross. Understanding Jesus' identity and destiny also has direct implications for our lives as his disciples. Jesus calls all who would follow him to deny themselves, pick up their cross, and follow him as he goes the way of the cross.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Originally, the word *Christ* would have been understood as a title, rather than a name. "Christos" is the Greek word for *Messiah*, which in Hebrew originally meant "anointed one." In the Old Testament, the term "anointed one" refers to a person designated to fulfill a divinely appointed role. So, for example, the chief priest was sometimes described as the "anointed one" because of his special role (Leviticus 4:5, 16; 21:10, 12). The majority of the uses of this title in the Old Testament, however, refer to the king of Israel who was appointed by God to govern God's people (1 Samuel 2:35; 16:6; 24:6; 26:9; 2 Samuel 1:14, 16; 19:22; 2 Chronicles 6:42; Psalm 2:2; 18:50; 20:6). David stood as the model of the anointed king. At the time of Jesus, the people of Israel no longer had their own

king. They were under the rule of the Romans. Nevertheless, some Jews looked for the day when God would reestablish the kingdom of Israel with its own Davidic king who would throw off foreign domination. In Jewish literature this coming figure was sometimes given the title of Messiah (or Christ). Because the title of Messiah was linked with the anointed king, the promised Messiah was expected to have power, glory, victory, and majesty. This Messiah would overcome the enemies of God's people, not be overcome by them.

For people looking for this kind of Messiah, the fact that Jesus was crucified was shocking. Although the Romans did not invent crucifixion, their widespread use of the practice as capital punishment allowed them to perfect it. Regarded as the most severe form of punishment, crucifixion was not used with Roman citizens, but was reserved for others who threatened the social order, particularly disobedient or rebellious slaves, insurrectionists, pirates, and brigands. Thus crucifixion was an instrument through which imperial forces publicly punished and suppressed subversion. The most significant and telling example of this occurred at the end of the three-year slave rebellion ignited by Spartacus between 73–70 B.C.E. After Spartacus's slave army was defeated by the Roman forces, more than 6,600 of the captured slaves were crucified along a main road leading to Rome.

### LITERARY CONTEXT

As active readers of Mark's story, you and the learners have known from the first sentence of the story that Jesus is the Messiah (Mark 1:1). Up to this point, however, no human characters in the story have figured this out. Ironically, the demons regularly recognize Jesus as God's agent (Mark 1:24, 34; 5:7), while his own disciples appear rather clueless (Mark 4:41). So who is Jesus? From what his disciples report in Mark 8:28, the popular opinion seems to be that Jesus is some type of important religious figure (see similar opinions noted in Mark 6:14-16). Peter's exclamation, "You are the Messiah" (Mark 8:29), then, marks an important turning point in the story's plot.

Jesus' warning in Mark 8:30 to not tell anyone else about him might seem a bit curious to us. Nevertheless, it is an important component of Mark's presentation of Jesus' identity and mission. In Mark, no one rightly understands Jesus as Messiah until after the crucifixion. Thus his identity as the Messiah, his mission to give his life as ransom for many (Mark 10:45), and his death on the cross cannot be separated. And so, beginning in Mark 8:31,

the disciples and the readers of Mark's story are told that Jesus' messianic destiny is one of suffering, rejection, and death. This is the first of a series of "passion prophecies," which will be reiterated in Mark 9:12, 30-32; 10:32-34; 14:27. It is important to note that in each of these instances not only do the disciples not understand what Jesus is saying, they also reject what Jesus foretells. Again this relates to the complete incongruity between expectations for a Messiah and the harsh realities of Roman crucifixion. It is no wonder, then, that Peter seeks to rebuke Jesus for what he has just revealed (Mark 8:32). Peter does not regard the Messiah as one who would suffer, be rejected by religious authorities, and be killed. Jesus, however, turns the tables and rebukes Peter. He goes so far as to describe Peter as Satan (Mark 8:33), because Peter is seeking to prevent him from carrying out his God-given mission of the cross.

In fact, now discipleship is also characterized in terms of the cross. To follow Jesus involves denying self, picking up one's own cross, and following Jesus on his way of suffering, rejection, and death (Mark 8:34). The normal ways of the world tell us to look out for ourselves and our own lives. Jesus, however, tells us that the ways of discipleship involve denying ourselves and losing our lives for his sake (Mark 8:35-37).

#### LUTHERAN CONTEXT

Martin Luther nailed 95 theses on the church castle door in Wittenburg, Germany, on October 31, 1517. Pope Leo X and other church leaders were very displeased with this, and wanted the **Augustinian Order**, the priestly order to which Luther belonged, to brand Luther as a heretic. The head of the Augustinian Order in Germany was named John von Staupitz. In addition to being Luther's superior, he was Luther's close friend and had been Luther's spiritual guide for a number of years. So Staupitz invited Luther to come to the German city of Heidelberg to present some of his basic theological views to his fellow Augustinians in April 1518. Luther did this in the Heidelberg Disputation. (A *disputation* was a form of intentional debate over a number of theological theses or propositions.) In two of his propositions, Luther stated:

- He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross.
- A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is.

Here we see Luther's profound insight and unrelenting theological insistence that we, as sinful human beings, are quite

#### ? Augustinian Order:

A monastic, religious community in Tuscany formed in the mid-13th century, modeled after the way of life exemplified by Augustine, a prominent theologian and bishop who lived in north Africa (354–430 c.e.). In particular, Augustine's writing, entitled "Rule," which he composed to guide his religious community, served to fashion the life of this monastic order. Over time, the Order of St. Augustine spread to other areas in Europe. Martin Luther joined such an order in Erfurt, Germany, in 1505.

incapable of understanding the invisible things of God through human wisdom and philosophical constructs. Luther called attempts to claim to know and understand God through human channels a *theology of glory*, a “bottom up” process by which we seek to know, understand, and explain God through our own efforts. In complete contrast to this, a *theology of the cross* is “top down” because it involves God’s revealing activity in the cross. So, Luther insisted, we are driven by faith to see and understand God where God has most fully revealed God’s own self, and that is in the cross of Jesus Christ.

A theology of the cross is grounded in the reality of justification by grace through faith. Christ brings us into a right relationship with God by graciously going the way of the cross for us. This is a pure gift that we receive by faith. We do not do anything to make this relationship come into being. God does. In fact, we do not even accept Jesus into our hearts, because faith itself is a pure gift worked by the Holy Spirit through the Word of the gospel whose center is the proclamation of the cross. Faith does not proceed out of us, but is worked in us through Word and Sacrament. To be marked by the cross of Christ at baptism means that just as the cross marks Jesus’ identity and mission, so now the cross marks our identity and mission as his disciples.

### DEVOTIONAL CONTEXT

By and large, most non-Christians have very positive views of Jesus. The Islamic faith views Jesus as an important prophet. Many Jews view him as a Jewish teacher who was unjustly killed by the Romans. Mahatma Gandhi took Jesus’ teachings (especially the Sermon on the Mount) very seriously. These positive views of Jesus are similar to the way people of his time viewed him, as noted in Mark 6:14-15; 8:28. For Christians, however, Jesus is not just a good teacher, a prophet, or a healer. Jesus is the Messiah who was crucified and raised. His identity and his mission as God’s Son are inseparable. This will be stressed again and again in the rest of Mark’s Gospel.

Beginning in Mark 8:34, discipleship is defined in terms of the cross. It is very important, however, that we understand what is and is not being said about discipleship in this verse. First, to deny self does not mean that self-esteem and self-respect are negative traits. Rather, to deny one’s self involves taking ourselves out of the center of our lives. We seek not our agenda, but God’s mission as enacted in the cross. Instead of seeing life from our perspective, we see things from God’s perspective as revealed in the cross. Second, picking up our cross does not mean

that each of us has a particular burden we need to bear in life. Rather, it means we carry the message of the cross into our daily lives. It is no coincidence in this text that when Jesus talks about following him (noted twice in Mark 8:34), he has just announced his passion prophecy in Mark 8:31. Thus we pick up our cross to follow Jesus on his path to the cross.

While we regularly confess core Christian beliefs about Jesus in the words of the Nicene or Apostles' Creed, sometimes we may find it difficult to articulate who we believe Jesus to be or what Jesus means in our lives. We are called, however, to bear witness to Jesus Christ. One of the goals of this session is to consider how we can more openly express who Jesus is and what Jesus means to our lives.

### Facilitator's Prayer

Before you begin leading the session, consider praying this prayer silently:

*Gracious God, I give you thanks for the greatest gift you have ever given me, your Son Jesus Christ. Send your Holy Spirit to be with us now and guide our hearts and minds as the Word made flesh in Jesus is opened to us. Speak to us that we may share the salvation through your Son with all the world. Amen.*

## Gather (10-15 minutes)

### Check-in

Invite learners to share completed homework or any new thoughts or insights about the last session. Be ready to give a brief recap of that session if necessary.

### Pray

*Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, we give you thanks for giving the gift of your Son. Send your Holy Spirit to guide us as we follow the way of the cross. Amen.*

### Focus Activity

Consider the Focus Image, an artist's image of Jesus. Draw a picture or create a painting of your own image of Jesus. What do you include? What colors do you use?



#### Tip:

Some learners will be more engaged in the process of homework and reflection than others. Continue to provide positive feedback and encouragement to all participants.



#### Tip:

Be prepared for a wide variety of responses here. Allow plenty of time (even some silence) for learners to draw or paint, then invite them to share their work in pairs or trios.

### Open Scripture (10-15 minutes)

Read the text aloud to the group, or have one person read as the narrator and the group read the responses of Jesus aloud together.

OR

Display a variety of crosses (or crucifixes) in the center of the table.

Read Mark 8:27—9:1.

- What words or actions catch your attention as you hear this text?
- How do you feel about Jesus' reactions to the different people in this story?
- What questions do you have about this text?

### Join the Conversation (25-55 minutes)

#### Historical Context

1. *Messiah* is a Jewish word that means “anointed one.” Its Greek equivalent is the word *Christ*. In the Old Testament, the term is applied to a number of figures who have been anointed or designated to be agents of God’s will. These especially included the kings of Israel (for example, see 2 Samuel 22:51; 23:1; Psalm 2:2; 18:50). At the time of Jesus, there was no single or standard view regarding the coming of God’s Messiah. In general, there was an expectation that God would send the ideal king who, as God’s anointed, royal agent, would reestablish the kingdom of Israel by vanquishing God’s principal enemy, the Romans.

- What images does the word *Messiah* bring to mind for you?
- List some principal traits you would expect in such a Messiah.

2. Crucifixion was a means of capital punishment carried out by the Romans against those who threatened the social order of the empire. This was an extremely gruesome method of execution reserved for non-Roman citizens such as rebellious slaves, bandits, and persons judged to have committed treason against Rome. At the same time, crucifixion was a type of social terrorism: the victim was humiliatingly crucified in a public location to send a message to the general populace that if anyone else threatened Roman social order, they too would end up on a cross.



#### Tip:

On a whiteboard or chart paper write the heading: Traits of Messiah. Write down the group’s responses.



#### Bonus Activity:

Search books or the Internet for several images depicting Jesus’ crucifixion. How realistic or idealistic are these portrayals? Discuss whether the images capture the pain and shame that crucifixion by the Romans actually entailed.

- In our day, how are criminals condemned to death generally viewed?
- In Jesus' **culture**, how do you think criminals condemned to death would have been viewed? Discuss what it would have meant to be linked to someone condemned to be crucified by the Romans.

### Literary Context

1. In Mark's Gospel, readers are initially introduced to Jesus' messianic identity in the very first sentence (Mark 1:1). For the characters within Mark's story, however, Mark 8:29 is the first time that any human correctly identifies Jesus as the Messiah.

- What seems to be the general public opinion of Jesus held by people in the story?
- How do you think Peter understood Jesus to be the Messiah? What might that have meant to him?

2. The session Scripture text comes right in the very middle of Mark's story. It includes the first time that readers (as well as the characters in the story) are told about Jesus' impending passion—his suffering and death. Up to this point in the story, Jesus has triumphed over all opposition, whether it be human, demonic, or from nature.

- Read Mark 8:31. Discuss how Jesus' revelation changes the whole nature and direction of the story. How does your understanding of Mark's story change once you know how the story will end?
- Peter takes Jesus to the side and scolds him (Mark 8:32). How would you explain this? What does it show about his perspective regarding Jesus? Regarding being a follower of Jesus?
- Describe your reaction to Jesus addressing Peter as "Satan" (Mark 8:33). How would you explain Jesus' words? Make a list of items that might be included in "human things" and another list of some "divine things." What might Jesus mean when he tells Peter that he is setting his mind on human things rather than divine things?

3. It is one thing to believe in a crucified Messiah, and another thing to follow a crucified Messiah. Using blunt terms, the way of discipleship is presented in Mark 8:34-38.

- Identify some of the marks of discipleship presented here.
- Why is the way of the cross presented as the way of discipleship?



#### Tip:

On a whiteboard or chart paper write the heading: Traits of a condemned criminal. Write down the group's responses. Compare and contrast the traits in the two lists.



#### Bonus Activity:

Have participants briefly scan Mark 1:1—8:26 and list examples of Jesus' power or authority. Discuss how Jesus' character has been established up to this point in Mark's Gospel.

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### Tip:

At the close of the conversation on the Literary Context, discuss how the session Scripture text changes the focus and direction of the rest of Mark's Gospel.



### Bonus Activity:

On a whiteboard or chart paper write the contrasting headings: "Theology of the Cross" and "Theology of Glory." Have a volunteer read Mark 10:32-45. Ask learners to list examples of a theology of the cross and a theology of glory, as demonstrated in this text. If there is time, invite participants to extend these lists with present-day examples.



### Bonus Activity:

Lead the group through the service for Holy Baptism (*ELW*, pp. 227-231). Note the number of times the cross or Jesus' death is highlighted in the service. In the Profession of Faith section, invite participants to discuss what it means to renounce the devil and all the forces that defy God, the powers of this world that rebel against God, and the ways of sin that draw us away from God.

- The way of discipleship depicted here is countercultural. Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?

### Lutheran Context

1. In the Heidelberg Disputation of 1518, Martin Luther developed what came to be regarded as his *theology of the cross*. For Luther this meant that human beings are incapable of understanding the invisible things of God through human wisdom or philosophy. Instead, we come to understand God most fully and most visibly in Jesus' crucifixion. The cross, then, is a paradox in that God's power, wisdom, and glory are revealed in what appears to be human weakness, foolishness, and shame.

- What comes to mind when you hear the term "theology of the cross"?
- What are some facets of a theology of the cross that you see at work in Mark 8:27—9:1?

2. At baptism, the person being baptized is told, "Child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever" (*ELW*, p. 231).

- What does it mean to you that you have been marked with the cross of Christ forever? Answer this question in a poem, prayer, or journal entry.

### Devotional Context

1. Jesus is one of the most known (if not *the* most known) figure in history. Non-Christians as well as Christians not only have some basic knowledge about Jesus, but also hold some basic views about who he was and what he did.

- In general, how do you think non-Christians view Jesus? How does that compare to how Christians view Jesus?
- If someone asked you, "Who do you say that Jesus is?" how would you respond?
- Discuss why it can be hard for us to share our beliefs about Jesus with other people.



2. Jesus called on would-be followers to deny themselves, pick up their cross, and follow him. Picking up our cross does not mean we have a particular burden to bear in life, but that we seek to follow the way of the cross in our own lives.

- What does it mean for you to deny yourself?
- What does it mean for you to pick up your cross and follow Jesus?

3. Jesus scolded Peter because he was setting his mind on human things rather than divine things (Mark 8:33).

- What are some of the human things you set your mind on? How does that impact your following Jesus?
- What are some of the divine things you set your mind on? How does that impact your following Jesus?

### Wrap-up

1. If there are any questions to explore further, write them on a whiteboard or chart paper. Ask for volunteers to do further research to share with the group at the next session.

2. On a whiteboard or chart paper write the heading: “Who is Jesus?” Invite learners to list several titles or descriptors that have been given to Jesus. Ask learners to share which titles or descriptors for Jesus are most meaningful to them.

### Pray

*Behold, Lord, an empty vessel that needs to be filled. My Lord, fill it. I am weak in the faith; strengthen me. I am cold in love; warm me and make me fervent, that my love may go out to my neighbor. I do not have a strong and firm faith; at times I doubt and am unable to trust you altogether. O Lord, help me. Strengthen my faith and trust in you. In you I have sealed the treasure of all I have. I am poor; you are rich and came to be merciful to the poor. I am a sinner; you are upright. With me, there is an abundance of sin; in you is the fullness of righteousness. Therefore I will remain with you, of whom I can receive, but to whom I may not give. Amen. (A prayer of Martin Luther, ELW, p. 87).*

### + Bonus Activity:

Invite a member of the congregation’s evangelism team or committee to share with learners the vision and work of this group. Have learners brainstorm ways to help advance this vision and work in their own daily walk of discipleship.

### Tip:

Allow for some silence between the Wrap-up and the start of the prayer to allow participants to transition. Remain seated and assume a posture of eyes closed, head down, and hands folded, then lead the group in praying the closing prayer aloud.

## Extending the Conversation (5 minutes)

### Homework

1. Read the next session's Bible text: Mark 9:2-13. Try to imagine what the glory of God looks like.
2. Each day this week, pray the prayer of Martin Luther (the closing prayer for this session). Be aware of your focus on human things and divine things during the week. If you keep a journal, record your observations. Note what caused you to focus on human things and purposeful steps you took to focus on divine things.
3. Search in books, magazines, or on the Internet for different images of crosses. Choose one that speaks to you and put it in your journal or near your workspace. As you go about your day, think about what it means to be baptized and marked with the cross of Christ. Additionally, you can reflect on baptism each morning when you wash your face. (Martin Luther suggested this exercise in his writings.)

### Enrichment

1. If you want to read through the entire book of Mark during this unit, read the following sections this week.
  - Day 1: Mark 5:1-20
  - Day 2: Mark 5:21-43
  - Day 3: Mark 6:1-13
  - Day 4: Mark 6:14-29
  - Day 5: Mark 6:30-44
  - Day 6: Mark 6:45-56
  - Day 7: Mark 7:1-8
2. Remembering the historical context in this session relating to crucifixion, read the ELCA Social Statement on the Death Penalty (<http://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Social-Statements/Death-Penalty.aspx>). Another option would be watching the movie *Dead Man Walking* (Havoc, 1995). What

similarities and differences do you see between the historical practice of crucifixion and the practice of the death penalty today?

3. The movie *Romero* (Paulist Pictures, 1989) is the story of a Salvadoran priest who gave up his life for the sake of the gospel. Watch the movie and reflect on Romero's transformation from a timid, scholarly priest to a leader who took up the cross of the poor and disenfranchised.

#### For Further Reading

*Jesus' Many Faces* (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/jesus/>). This PBS site presents scholarly considerations about what we do and do not always know regarding who Jesus was and how he lived.

Available from [www.augsburgfortress.org/store](http://www.augsburgfortress.org/store):

*Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross* by Martin Hengel (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977). A presentation on how crucifixion was regarded in the ancient world and its implications for the proclamation of a crucified Messiah.

*Discipleship* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003). A recent edition of Bonhoeffer's classic work on the cost of discipleship, which opens with the profound statement, "Cheap grace is the mortal enemy of our church. Our struggle today is for costly grace."

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### Looking Ahead

1. Read the next session's Bible text: Mark 9:2-13.
2. Read through the Leader Guide for the next session and mark portions you wish to highlight for the group.
3. Make a checklist of any materials you'll need to do the Bonus Activities.
4. Pray for members of your group during the week.