

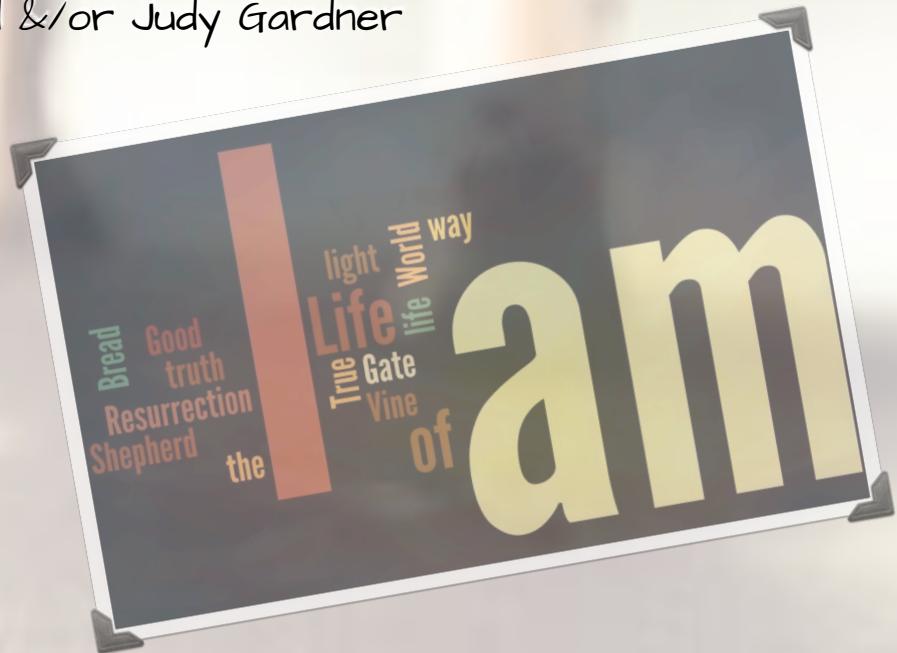
May 26-30, 2025 Edition

Following
The Year(s) Of Jesus Part 177

I AM The I AM

By: Ed &/or Judy Gardner

May 24/25, 2025



When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

*** These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well you knew the rest ;0) These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that.

**** Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

You can also get these devotionals on Riverside's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/EagleRiverside). You don't have to have a FB account to read them but if you do have an account if you "like" the Riverside page and click the box to get updates the devos will show up on your wall every weekday (along with other news and event updates).

Monday:

Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, before Abraham was even born, I am! John 8:58 (NLT)

Reflection: Ok... we're almost done with this part of the Year Of Jesus looking at Who He claimed to be so I figured now would be a good time to reset and look at where we've been up til now. John's gospel has one purpose- to instill faith in Jesus as the Son of God. He gives his purpose statement at the end of his gospel:

Jesus did many other miracles in the presence of his followers that are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. Then, by believing, you may have life through his name. John 20:30-31 (NLT)

How does John say that faith is instilled? By checking it out for myself. At the beginning of his gospel John tells about an interaction between a man named Philip who has met Jesus and a friend of his named Nathaniel. Philip tells Nathaniel that he's found The One. The One they've been waiting for. The One Whose coming has been prophesied for thousands of years. The One Who would redeem Israel. Nathaniel's response- where is this guy from? Here's what John says about that interaction:

Philip went to look for Nathanael and told him, "We have found the very person Moses and the prophets wrote about! His name is Jesus, the son of Joseph from Nazareth." "Nazareth!" exclaimed Nathanael. "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" "Come and see for yourself," Philip replied. John 1:45-46 (NLT)

We've spent 7 weeks looking at Who Jesus claimed to be. The Bread Of Life that will sustain us so much that we will never be hungry again. The Light Of The World that if we follow will mean that we will no longer stumble in darkness but have the Light that leads to Life. The Gate through which salvation is entered into. The Good Shepherd Who lays down His life for His sheep, and who, if we allow Him to set the pace and direction of our lives, will lead us into the life we were created to live. The Resurrection and the Life Who will provide us with resurrection when we need it and until then will give us the life that we were created to live. The Way, The Truth & The Life Who is the only way to the Father. And finally, The Vine from which all life, meaning, purpose and satisfaction flow from, that if we are connected to that Vine we will enjoy friendship with God Himself.

How can He possibly be all of those things? John's answer? Come see for yourself. Come check it out. Give it a try. It's the only way to be sure. Faith is instilled through belief (which is not 100% certainty, but a commitment in spite of doubts and confusion). Only as we walk with and follow this Jesus are we able to come to the kind of faith we all long for. This week we will be looking at Jesus' statement, "I AM". That's it... two small words but man... with those two words He said a MOUTHFUL! I can't wait to get to it. See you tomorrow ;o)

Tuesday:

Are you greater than our father Abraham? He died, and so did the prophets. Who do you think you are?" John 8:53 (NLT)

Reflection: In order to get to the bottom of this incredible statement that Jesus makes, I figured it would be good to ask 3 questions of this story... the first one is found in today's opening scripture: Who does Jesus think He is?

Who do you think You are?!?!? You ever get that question? Jesus got it a lot because as it turns out... He thought pretty highly of Himself. In fact... people had (and continue to have) a tough time believing Jesus is Who He claimed to be because while His teaching was incredibly egocentric His life was the total opposite. It had to be a severe case of cognitive dissonance.

Cognitive dissonance is when you see something that just shouldn't be. For instance, I (pastor Ed) may not look like a pastor to some people (ok... most people ;o). Everybody has a picture in their minds of what a pastor is supposed to look like and I generally don't fit in with any of those pictures. So when people meet me and then later find out I'm a pastor I generally see two things at work in their brains as they digest this new information. First I can see them backtracking trying to remember what they've said in front of me and what I've said to decide whether or not they should be embarrassed or offended and secondly I see their brain trying wrap itself around the fact that I don't fit their preconceived notion of what a pastor is supposed to look like.

Cognitive dissonance.

That's what happens to people when they look at Jesus' life. His claims are absolutely crazy talk. He claims things that just shouldn't be able to be true. Things that a crazy person or a megalomaniac would claim. And then there's His life. Complete humility. Always about others. The most generous servant that has ever lived. How can that person's life and His claims go hand in hand with one another?

Cognitive dissonance.

And this is maybe the most jaw dropping claim of all.

I AM.

When Jesus makes these outrageous claims about His connection with Abraham and God. They basically say to Him, "just who do you think you are, Mr.?" And when Jesus responds with the words, "I Am!" they lose their minds. Why? Well to understand that we need to go back to the second book in the Bible... the book of Exodus.

Up until the moment that Moses stood before the burning bush God had not (as far as we know) revealed His personal name to anyone... or if He did those people didn't share it. In the book of Genesis God is referred to by the generic word for God. The word in Hebrew is "Elohim" and it's used when someone is speaking about the God of Israel or when they're talking about the "gods" of the surrounding nations.

But as Moses stood before the burning bush, God gave him His personal Name. God comes to Moses in a burning bush and tells him, "it's time. I'm all set to rescue the people of Israel."

Now let's reset a little bit, shall we? Moses was born a Jew but was raised by Pharaoh's daughter in Pharaoh's palace. The Jews were slaves and once Moses got old enough it started to bother him how the Egyptians treated the Israelites. So what does He do?

He kills a guard. We don't know why. Was it a spur of the moment kind of thing? Was it a calculated plan to start a revolution? We don't know for sure but whatever the reason... it doesn't work out well for Moses. He has to leave Egypt... he has to run away and abandon his people. And for 40 years Moses works in the wilderness as a shepherd. The whole time I imagine he was wondering why God didn't do anything? Why didn't God intervene? When would God act?

And now here he is before the burning bush and God is telling Moses that it's time. God says He's seen the plight of the Israelites, He's heard their cries and He's come down to set things right. Moses is tracking 100% with God (I imagine). Finally... God is going to do something. And then God drops this little bomb:

*Now go, for I am sending you to Pharaoh. You must lead my people Israel out of Egypt.
Exodus 3:10 (NLT)*

And suddenly, Moses isn't tracking 100% with God anymore.

"W-w-w-what d-d-d-do Y-y-y-y-ou m-m-m-m-mean, m-m-m-m-me g-g-g-go?!?!?" (did I mention Moses had a stuttering problem?) Moses thinks God should do something but Moses does NOT think that Moses is the man for the job. He throws out every excuse He can think of... What do you mean me? I'm not the One Who saw, Who heard, Who came down... that was all You, Lord. What's this whole, "now you go Moses" business? I tried that once and if you remember it didn't work out so well. But God finally convinces Moses. He has a solution for every one of Moses' arguments:

I'm nobody (God doesn't argue with Moses... I'd expect Him to give Moses the pep talk of all pep talks... "what do you mean you're nobody?!?!? You're not nobody... You're Moses! You're the man! You're good enough, smart enough and doggone it, people like you!"). God doesn't argue with Moses', "I'm nobody" argument. He just says, I'll go with you. Then Moses says, I wouldn't know what to say and God just says, I'll tell you what to say. Then Moses says, "I-I-I-I d-d-d-don't t-t-t-talk g-g-g-g-good!" And God says, I'll send your brother Aaron to meet you and I'll tell you what to say and you'll tell Aaron and he can do the public speaking.

All that to get to this moment in Exodus chapter 3:

But Moses protested, "If I go to the people of Israel and tell them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' they will ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what should I tell them?" God replied to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM. Say this to the people of Israel: I AM has sent me to you." Exodus 3:13-14 (NLT)

I AM has sent me to you. This was God's personal Name. Before this He was always referred to in the generic word for God. This is His personal Name. And what's strange about it is, it's not a noun. It's a verb. Turns out God's name is an action word.

Basically it means, I BE... I've always been, I always will be. I am reality personified. Not only do I define reality, I am reality. It always reminds me of a moment in the movie, The Big Lebowski, when Jeff Bridges (whose moniker in the movie is simply, The Dude) drops this amazing quote:

The Dude abides...

That's sort of what God is saying to Moses. I abide. I have always abidden (is that even a word? Maybe it should be, I have always abode??), I will always abide. I have never not abidden.

Confused? So am I. But that's what happened. "I AM" was God's personal name and for the Jews that word became so important to them that they would never even say it out loud. God never asked them to do that... somewhere along the way somebody decided that to make sure they never took the Name of the Lord in vain that they just wouldn't ever say it out loud. Which is fine if that's what somebody wants to do. The problem is, that's how man made traditions get started that eventually take on the same weight as God's own words. And that's exactly what happens here with God's Name.

Now Jesus makes this statement... before Abraham was, I AM.

Very strange grammar. You am what? I AM... nothing more and yet everything more. I AM. And everybody knew exactly what He was saying. He was claiming the very Name of God Himself. How do you know that, Pastor Ed? Because they picked up stones to kill Him after He said it. And no, I don't think it was because they were grammar nazis (seeing as this happened about 1900 years before Nazis existed I wonder what the first century Israel grammar police would have been called? Grammar Centurions? Grammar Philistines? Maybe you can think of some good ones but that's all I've got for now). No, they knew exactly Who Jesus was claiming to be and they lost their minds.

Wednesday:

The people retorted, "You Samaritan devil! Didn't we say all along that you were possessed by a demon?" John 8:48 (NLT)

Reflection: Ok... so we know Who Jesus thought He was. The next question is, who did the people He was talking to think He was?

Well... people fell into one of three categories when it came to Jesus. They either believed Him even though it didn't really make sense... (belief being defined not as 100% certainty but as commitment even in the presence of some [or a lot of] doubt and confusion), they thought He was evil or they thought He was crazy as a loon. You can see it here in this exchange Jesus has with these people. They claim He's possessed but He says, no, I'm not possessed... you just don't recognize Me. Very few believed Him.

The people said, "Now we know you are possessed by a demon. Even Abraham and the prophets died, but you say, 'Anyone who obeys my teaching will never die!' Are you greater than our father Abraham? He died, and so did the prophets. Who do you think you are?" John 8:52-53 (NLT)

Again with the possessed theme. They say they are children of Abraham and Jesus basically says, "no you're not... if you knew Abraham then you'd recognize Me. Then they say they're children of God and Jesus basically says, "no you're not. If you were God's children you'd recognize Me." He keeps pushing them and pushing them. Basically He's saying, "get off the fence! You can't stay neutral in this battle. You have to take a position on Who I am... one way or another."

He doesn't leave any room for doubt... He either is Who He claimed to be or He isn't. These days we like to diffuse Jesus' words. We like to say, well... we're all sons and daughters of God (which is true... we're just not all the One and Only Son of God like Jesus claimed to be), or we all have the spark of God within us. But that's not what Jesus is saying. In fact we pretty much have to do some olympic level mental gymnastics to admire Jesus but think of Him as anything other than Who He claimed to be.

Imagine it this way. Let's say you go to the University to listen to speaker on spirituality and religion. This person gets up on stage and says, "I have always been. I always will be. In fact, I created everything and I've been involved in every human being's life since the beginning of time and I'm not talking about an "I've been involved in every human life because we're all connected and made of the same stuff" kind of involvement but a literal hands on, watching every moment of every life kind of involvement. Not only that but I sustain everything on a moment by moment basis just by the power of My Word and My imagination. Not only that but I will never die (even though it might look like it at one point in the near future) and because I will defeat death and the grave, when you die it will be your relationship with me that will determine where you spend eternity.

Would you walk away from that speech saying, "what a great teacher. What a tremendous moral compass he gave me! Finally someone who knows what they believe!"? NO WAY! You'd say, "that person is either deranged or diabolical... but either way, they're dangerous and I wouldn't be surprised to see that person's name in the headlines sometime soon along with the tragic story of what happened to his devotees.

But we try to strip away all the egocentric statements Jesus made about Himself so we can have the blessing of His teaching without having to stomach the incredibly egocentric things He claimed about Himself. Go ahead, try it. Don't just do it in your own mind... go to the pages of the Bible and try to read it without all of His statements about His divinity. There's almost nothing left. Thomas Jefferson didn't believe in the divinity of Jesus but he did think Jesus was the most amazing ethical and moral teacher the world had ever seen. But when he read the actual Bible it upset him terribly because on every page there is some crazy, outrageous claim about Who Jesus Is and Jefferson didn't like that.

So Jefferson created his own Bible removing any reference to miracles or claims of divinity. It's just a collection of Jesus' ethical teachings and it's tiny. Because if you remove any reference to Jesus' divinity (miracles or claims) there's almost nothing left. Jefferson's Bible ends in John 19 with the stone being rolled across the entrance to the tomb. Jesus died... the end.

But read the Bible for yourself. Jesus does everything He can to get you to take a stand. Make a choice. That's what He's doing here. And when the people say over and over that He's possessed that's what they're doing. Everybody who encountered Jesus basically fell into one of three camps. They either believed He was Who He claimed to be or they thought He was possessed (I know- I said one of three camps and it looks like I only mentioned two but I didn't, there are three camps there). Now in the first century there were two classifications of possession. If you were possessed you were either deluded or deluding. In other words, the demon either convinced you that You were a something that you weren't (in other words

you were deluded and therefore a lunatic), or the demon enticed you to join it in spreading evil and darkness (in other words you were a partner in tricking people and therefore deluding).

When the Jews claimed that Jesus was possessed this is what they were getting at. That He was an evil deceiver. They knew exactly what He's claiming but they just can't bring themselves to believe it. Nobody would claim what this guy is claiming. So they keep trying to water down His claims so they can still deal with Him.

He claims to have been seen by Abraham. That means either that He's God or that His longevity is unbelievable. But they keep trying to let Him choose the more believable of those two outrageous concepts... the more believable one... that He's 2,000 years old or older. But Jesus isn't having any of it.

The people said, "You aren't even fifty years old. How can you say you have seen Abraham?" Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, before Abraham was even born, I am!" At that point they picked up stones to throw at him. But Jesus was hidden from them and left the Temple. John 8:57-59 (NLT)

Now there's no doubt. They know what He's claiming and they're not buying it. So they pick up stones to kill Him which is telling in itself. They don't pull out knives, they don't attack him with their fists... they pick up stones. Why?

Because that's the penalty for blasphemy in Israel. Death by stoning and that's what these guys were getting ready to do- dispense the penalty for claiming to be God. If you know the New Testament and the debates Jesus had with the religious leaders then you know that there's lots of stuff the Jews condemned that God didn't... but this isn't one of them. They knew exactly what He was saying and that REALLY made them mad. This was as clear cut a case of blasphemy as you could find. Somebody claiming to be God Himself. It's just too outrageous to be true, right? But if it's not true then really there were only two other possibilities- he was deluded or deluding.

In the pages of the Bible you see all three of these responses to Jesus. His followers tentatively believed, His enemies thought He was evil and trying to deliberately deceive, and the Romans thought He was just plain nuts.

Ok, so we know who Jesus thought He was. We know who the Jews thought He was. One last question that we'll get to tomorrow.

Thursday

Jesus... asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" "Well," they replied, "some say John the Baptist, some say Elijah, and others say Jeremiah or one of the other prophets." Then he asked them, "But who do you say I am?" Matthew 16:13-15 (NLT)

Reflection: Ok... so we know who Jesus thought He was (I AM), we know who the people thought that He was (either Who He claimed to be or that He was crazy or diabolically evil). So now there's really only one question that remains:

Who do I think He is (not me as in Ed, the guy writing this but you- who do YOU think He is?)? The question that Jesus asks His friends in the scripture above rings across the centuries to this place and tie right here. Who do you think that He is? Our culture loves to remove the outrageousness of Jesus' claims. We want a safe, tame Jesus that we can predict what He'll do and feel comfortable with the idea of "believing" in Him. But Jesus does everything in His power to dispel that picture of Himself.

M. Scott Peck who wrote the Road Less Travelled books said that's the Jesus that he envisioned- the tamed Jesus we love to create in western Christianity. But as he read the gospels for himself, he started to see a completely different Jesus. He saw a Jesus Who was a public relations nightmare. A Jesus who was unpredictable, wild and dangerous. He said that if the writers of the New Testament were smart about public relations they would have painted a very different picture of Jesus. They would have described a Jesus that most western Christians are still trying to create to this very day. A "Mr. Rogers" like Jesus who patted little children on the head and showed up whenever His people needed help or wanted something. But what M. Scott Peck found instead is a Jesus that he said was, "the best kept secret of modern Christianity."

In the book, "The Lion, The Witch & The Wardrobe" C.S. Lewis describes a conversation in which the Beaver family is trying to explain Aslan, the King of Narnia, to the children who have never met him. Here's how that conversation went:

"Aslan is a lion- the Lion, the great Lion." "Ooh" said Susan. "I'd thought he was a man. Is he- quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion"..."Safe?" said Mr Beaver ..."Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."

That's the Jesus of the gospels. The Jesus of the New Testament. Is He safe? No! Who said anything about safe?!?! But Jesus is good. You never know what He'll do. You will find Him in the most unexpected places. He will sometimes take you places where you feel like you are in WAY over your head. But He's good. He's so good.

Is that your Jesus? Who do you think He is?

Tim Keller says that in one of his first Bible classes that he ever took after becoming a Christian he heard something that he never forgot. The lady teaching the class took a piece of paper and held it up showing them the flat side. She then said this:

"This piece of paper is .1 mm thick. If the distance between earth and the sun is 93 million miles, and if you say that 93 million miles is represented by this one piece of paper... .1 mm thick... then if you were to represent the width of the Milky Way galaxy in terms of a stack of paper you would have a stack of paper 310 miles tall. And the Milky Way is just a speck in the universe of galaxies that our little earth resides within."

Now consider that Jesus is the One Who made it all. Not only did He make it but He says that He sustains it, holds everything together with simply the power of His Word & His Imagination.

Now tell me, is that kind of person you hire to be your assistant? Is that the kind of person you relegate to the role of errand boy? Is that the kind of person to whom you say, 'don't call me, I'll call You?' Is this the kind of person you bargain with?"

Who is Jesus to you? Who do you think He is? What role does He play in your life? Have you relegated Him to the role of errand boy? Have you asked for His power in your life only when you're in trouble or when you really want something? Have you in effect said to Him, "I need your help over here in this area of my life with my job (or relationship or finances or health or...), but don't touch these other areas. I have those under control and I'm afraid if You start messing around there you'll change everything and that scares me so keep your hands off those areas"?

Who is Jesus to You? Is He The "I AM" or is He your "I AM"? Is He your Bread of Life? Your Light of the World? Your Gate & Good Shepherd? Your Resurrection & Life? Your Way, Truth & Life? Your Vine? That's the question He expects each of us to answer. So what do you say?

Friday:

Then Jesus said, "Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy to bear, and the burden I give you is light." Matthew 11:29-30 (NLT)

Reflection: Jesus is the ultimate under cover boss. He doesn't just send us memos and assign us to performance improvement classes. He is willing to apprentice each of us as individuals. We are all eligible for His mentorship program, His one-on-one attention in our on the job training. We may still find ourselves thinking that life is a school of hard knocks, but we never have to be in it alone. Jesus wants us to spend our days in partnership with Him. Life is still messy. We still make mistakes; but Jesus is right there to help us learn from them...and to do something else that only Jesus can do... He can actually redeem our mistakes and make something beautiful even out of our biggest mistakes. And to grow from the practice of cleaning them up.

Life is a process. Each season in our development builds on the last in the same way that first grade builds on kindergarten. It's not that we get all the answers as much as we practice the most important skill sets. Life is about muscle memory. We build our access to wisdom the same way we build our access to strength, by increasing the tension of the weights we lift when we work out, little by little. This process requires a gentle pace. We need rest and recovery because progress comes from fatiguing our current level of ability sometimes. Two steps forward and one step back is the way things move forward in this classroom of life. But don't worry... Jesus knows when to push forward and when to take it easy. He knows us better than we know ourselves & Jesus has the patience to teach us one day at a time. It's our patience that needs to grow.

The hard reality of free will is that Jesus won't barge in and take over. He must be invited... but even when invited it doesn't mean we lose control. Jesus invites us to follow Him. He leads, He guides. He never drives us. This means that we must actively pursue Jesus' path. His teachings come to make more and more sense as we practice them. When push comes to

shove we often still find ourselves doing what comes naturally. That's okay – Jesus isn't shocked and appalled. He expects us to flunk a few quizzes and botch a few assignments. But we will make little progress if we forget that we are students and run headlong after our own preferences.