

## 8

### *Life Through the Messiah*

The coming of the rule of God to earth, according to Jesus in Mark 1:15, calls people to repent. But this is only the first part of the required response. The second is that they must 'believe in the gospel'.

This must be understood in the context of Jesus' coming to His people Israel as their Messiah. The Son is both the preacher of the good news and the content of it. It is not only preached by Him, it is about Him. To believe the good news, then, means to trust God's chosen Person, the Son, and what God has done through Him.

#### **SALVATION IS 'FROM THE JEWS'**

If the good news is about Jesus as the Messiah, it is no wonder the gospel records heap up healing miracles and exorcisms—demonstrations of Jesus' control over the created world—and claims by Jesus to forgive sins, to be Lord of the Sabbath, to be the way to the Father. Jesus is God's only Son and Heir, the One who can open up the inheritance of God to others.

All this, accompanied by the fulfilment of the Old Testament in Jesus' life, compels us to ask: 'Who is this Man?' The

answer demanded by the evidence is this: 'He is the Christ, the Son of the Living God.' The immediate Jewish context of belief in the gospel is to trust the Messiah, who is God's Son.

The idea that Jesus is the 'Messiah' is fundamental. It enables us to understand how God has brought about a salvation which is for the whole world, but which comes 'from the Jews'.

The Gentile (non-Jewish) world must grapple with this fact: that if any man wants to meet the only true God, that God is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It is not possible to interpret Jesus in any terms other than as the culmination of the plans of the Hebrews' God. We need to be students of the Old Testament to fully understand the New. To comprehend what this God has been preparing for so long, we must read His preparations; only then will we understand the One who is the fulfilment of them. And only then will we understand the terms He sets for knowing Him: a firm trust in the Messiah promised only to Israel. In this way, our salvation is 'from the Jews'.

Because of this, it does not surprise us that Jesus saw His mission as primarily to the lost sheep of Israel (Mt 15:24). It also helps us understand something about Jesus' death: He died when the main body of Jews of His time rejected their Messiah. But it was through that death that God worked salvation for all mankind, including the Jews.

In Acts 2:14-39, Peter makes a speech to the devout Jews gathered in Jerusalem on the day the Holy Spirit fell on the apostles and those waiting with them. He tells them an extraordinary story.

First, he explains the coming of the Holy Spirit as the fulfilment of what the prophet Joel said would take place in the last days (Joel 2:28-32). He takes his listeners straight to the Old Testament Scriptures, a move which makes the point: 'This is happening within our heritage. Our God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, is at work.'

Next he introduces Jesus of Nazareth as God's Man,

through whom He worked miracles and for whose death the Jews are directly responsible (vv 22–23). God, however, knew this death would occur, and Peter uses the Old Testament to show that the resurrection of Jesus was really a fulfilment of God's plan for salvation through His Messiah (vv 24–32). What is now happening, he explains, is that the Holy Spirit is being sent by the risen and exalted Lord (vv 33–36). The house of Israel needs to know that God has made this Jesus, whom they crucified, both Lord and Christ.

Having told the Jews that their repudiation of the Messiah led to His death, Peter introduces the idea that God's forgiveness is available 'in the name of Jesus' (v 38). To receive it, they must repent of the rejection which killed Him and realize it is *that very death* which is the basis for their salvation. They must repent of their deed, and at the same time acknowledge and believe that, as a result of their deed, God has worked their rescue! This means they are to distinguish their deed from its results; they must repent of the deed and believe in the results. This is possible because the deed is theirs, but the results are God's work.

(It is often like this with our sins. God does not approve of them, yet He is not hamstrung by them. He can even work through them. How marvellous He is—a truly sovereign Lord!)

There was more happening in the death of Jesus than the killing of a Man by His people. History is not just the deeds of men; it is the working of God in and through those deeds (and often despite them). The Jews who heard Peter that day were asked to believe in a sovereign Lord who works all things together for good to those who love Him (Rom 8:28). If they will give Him that love, repent of their deeds, and take the forgiveness established on the grounds of Jesus' death, even their part in His killing stands forgiven and forgotten.

## ACTION

1 This is a powerful example of what the Lord does in the life of anyone who will accept it. He constantly takes the places where we offend Him and turns them into possibilities for receiving His forgiveness. Believe this for your own life. Never think there is some sin He cannot forgive. If you rely on the groundwork He has laid—the atoning death of Jesus—then you can be forgiven and the sin will be forgotten between you and the Lord.

2 However, notice that you cannot receive forgiveness from the Lord if you desire to do so on your own terms. You must use the grounds He has established. Those grounds are free to us, but they did not come cheaply to Him.

If you have ever tried to deal with your sins in any way other than by confession, repentance and claiming the blood of Jesus to atone for them, then repent of this and bring them under His way of forgiveness. This particularly applies if you have allowed people to talk your sins away or to prescribe actions for you to take which supposedly make things right with God. Only the work of the Messiah on the cross can do this.

3 Remember, you are not forgiven because of your confession but because of the grace of God. This grace is always being offered to you; but it becomes your personal experience only when you give a proper response to the offer. It is right for the Lord to give the forgiveness He promises when someone repents, because with repentance the conditions He has set for a proper response have been met. He is always willing for people to be forgiven, but the receiving of that forgiveness must be consistent with His character. This is why we need to repent, renounce the sins, and trust (by claiming) the blood of Jesus to atone for them.

## THE GENTILES—GOD'S PLAN

The early Jewish Christians had difficulty believing the Gentiles had any part in the gospel. This was evident in their slowness to acknowledge the validity of Philip's mission to the Samaritans (Acts 8) and of God's call to preach the gospel to the Roman soldier Cornelius and his relatives (Acts 10). This bias also appeared in such vexed questions as how much of the Jewish Law a Gentile Christian should be asked to subscribe to, and whether it was possible to share a meal with a Gentile.

The Jewish believers' dilemma was this: how could a Gentile, one who was a stranger to the covenants of promise, separated from the Messiah and alienated from Israel's great privileges as God's people, share in the rescue brought by Israel's Messiah-champion?

The answer is found in the writings of Paul. In Romans 1 and 3:9–11, and Ephesians 2:11–22, the following ideas are explained.

- The gospel is about Jesus, who in terms of his fleshly coming into the world was descended from King David, but who was declared to be the Son of God in power by His resurrection from the dead. Paul preached the Jewish Messiah who was God's Son. He is alive, having risen victoriously out from among the dead, and has ascended into heaven with His task of rescue completed (Rom 1:1–5).
- When preached, the gospel message is an instrument of God's power to save those who believe in the One it is about (Rom 1:16–17).
- Historically, this gospel comes to the Jew first, but it is also for the Greek (that is, the Gentile). Salvation comes 'from the Jews', but it now goes to the Gentile world where it bears fruit and grows (Col 1:6).
- The gospel reveals the righteousness of God (Rom 1:17). It does this in two senses. First, it shows God's personal right-

eousness (we will return to this in a moment), and second, it shows how a man can have righteousness before God through faith in Jesus the Messiah. This involves *trusting* in the redemption God has worked in Jesus—it can be received only by faith. To be ‘justified’ is to be declared righteous in God’s sight because of the finished work of Jesus. God justifies the person who has faith in Jesus, and at the same time demonstrates that He Himself is righteous.

## ACTION

Make sure you clearly understand these three actions of God:

- God declares us ‘justified’ on the basis that Jesus has shed His blood for us. This concerns the way God looks on us as people for whom Christ died (Rom 3:21–30). It means God announces a *verdict* about us: He says that as far as He is concerned our sins are fully paid for, and His wrath has been removed because Jesus has borne it for us. We are ‘propitiated’—that is, a substitute for us has been found, He has stepped in on our behalf, and so we are fully paid up as far as this matter is concerned.
- God grants us righteousness as a gift. This ‘alien’ righteousness—‘alien’ because it is not ours by nature—is the righteousness of Jesus which God imputes to us. He sees us ‘in Christ’, that is, He looks on us as clothed in Christ. This is the idea of the ‘federal man’ we explored in Chapter 7.
- Having justified us and imputed Jesus’ righteousness to us, God is at present ‘sanctifying’ us, through the work of His Holy Spirit. He is changing us, empowering us to be obedient. He is moulding us to be more like Jesus.

The righteousness of God is seen in the serious way He treats man’s sin. It cannot just be swept aside and ignored. It must be dealt with, and dealt with in a way which removes its offence to God. Romans 3:21–30 makes it clear God is satisfied with the death of His only Son as a full propitiation for

the sins of the whole world. It is now made clear how God could pass over sins committed previously and still be consistent with Himself: He was not ignoring those sins but was waiting until Jesus had died and His blood had made a full propitiation (a full payment on our behalf) for our sins.

God is also seen to be righteous because this redemption, this rescue from His wrath (Rom 1:18), has not been done through law-keeping. If it had, it would have been our work, not God's—and in our sin we would have boasted about this. Redemption would not have been the gift it is. Instead, the condemnation of the Law on sinners is still heard, yet salvation is 'apart from law' (Rom 3:21). It is not achieved through the Law, but it is consistent with God's mind as expressed in the Law.

How do we take hold of this redemption? Paul's answer is: 'by faith'. This is not a new idea; he shows in Romans 4 that God has led the Jews throughout their history to relate to Him this way. At any stage from Points 1 to 6 in our diagram, God's call is to *exercise trust* in what He says He is doing at that time. This is illustrated by Abraham (Rom 4) and many others in Jewish history (Heb 11). This relational faith, this trusting in God, is all that is required. But it can only be exercised when and where you are—that is, *now*. Different things happen at different times in God's dealings with His children, yet throughout the ages the way of relating to Him remains constant: to trust Him to do what He has promised in each age.

The meeting place for Jew and Gentile is the death of Jesus (Eph 2:11–22). The great dividing wall between the citizens of Israel and the aliens has been broken down by the blood of Christ. The Messiah is our peace. He is the point of contact. Both Jew and Gentile can now focus in faith on the one object at the one time in history. Once they were separated; now one 'new man' is created from two, because both are reconciled to God in the one body through the cross, and both have access by faith to the one Spirit. The Gentiles are fellow citizens with

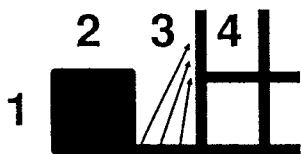
the chosen people of God; they are members of God's household.

This inclusion of the Gentiles is the 'mystery' Paul deals with in Ephesians 3. He uses another image to explain it in Romans 11: the Jew's rejection of the Messiah has led to the grafting of the Gentiles on to Israel, as wild branches might be grafted on to a lovely olive tree (11:13–24).

This does not mean God has rejected His people Israel. Although at present they are enemies of the gospel, this is for the Gentiles' sake, because it leads to their inclusion in God's family. The Jews are still God's beloved people (vv 28–29). A time is coming when the full number of Gentile branches will have been grafted on—and then all Israel will be saved.

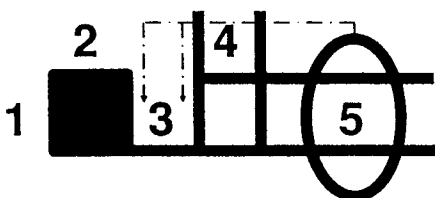
### READING THE OLD TESTAMENT AFTER THE MESSIAH HAS COME

The coming of the Messiah has some important implications for reading the Old Testament. Whether we are Hebrews by birth who have found our Messiah or Gentiles who have been grafted into the tree of God's chosen people, we will now read the Old Testament as people who have found the key to its meaning. It is like having the solution to a crossword puzzle: when you have the answers, you suddenly understand the clues with a new depth which enables you to understand how the writers thought. Subtle nuances which were previously unseen are displayed.





There were many pointers and promises in the Old Testament which drew the eyes of the Israelites forward to await the Messiah. But we do not stand waiting in the same way—for us, He has already come! That ‘time’ is fulfilled.



So we view the Old Testament now in the light of the Christ. We read back into that past material all the insights we have gained through the coming and the teaching of Jesus. Our pivotal point, not only for understanding the Old Testament but for entering into its history as ‘our’ history, is to know the mind of Christ.

This ‘reading back’ involves bringing a certain mind-set to the Old Testament text; it gives us a basis for interpretation. We might say we now read it *christologically*—that is, in the light of the fact that the Messiah has arrived and that we now stand at a point after His first coming.

There is a danger here, however: the danger of reading the Old Testament to find Christ only. We need to understand that the whole Trinity—Father, Son and Spirit—has been at work throughout the Bible. Each member of the Trinity was involved in the creation of the world (Gen 1:1, Jn 1:1–4) and in the subsequent unfolding of God’s plan in history.

So when we read the knowledge we have gained through the Messiah back into the Old Testament, we must be careful to read to find all the members of the Trinity, not just Jesus. We must not forget the Son came to reveal the Father and the Holy Spirit; indeed, each of the Three points to the others.

Reading christologically really means ‘reading in the light of the whole Christ event’—that is, expecting new light and understanding to be brought to former events because Christ has come. It does not mean everything in the Old Testament will speak of Christ Himself.

This is another example of the way a ‘change of scene’ affects our Bible reading. In Chapter 1 we saw that when we come on stage in history we are not simply to reproduce what previous actors have done, but to keep in step with what God is doing on centre stage. Now we see that the Messiah’s coming, too, impacts our Bible reading.

## ACTION

1 You may have read the Old Testament in such a way that you have taken it as a ‘rule book’, in the sense that you have attempted to practise what you have found there without thinking about where it fits into God’s overall plan. This is particularly serious if your practice has meant you have acted as if Christ had not come—in other words, if you have been *doing* something mentioned in the Old Testament when you ought to have been *counting it as fulfilled* in the work of Christ. Listen to the Lord about this—you may have to change your mind and ask His forgiveness about something.

2 Conversely, you may be a person who has thought the Old Testament not worth reading. Repent of this and ask the Lord’s forgiveness. We really do need to read the whole counsel of God. We cannot understand Jesus if we do not read all the advance clues God has given about His Person and work.

## AN OLD TESTAMENT EXAMPLE: SACRIFICE

Jesus has brought many of the promises of the Old Testament to fulfilment. Some of those promises were expressed in words, as we normally express a promise; but others were expressed in actions required by God. These actions were

promises in the sense that they were patterns (or 'types') which pointed forward to what the Messiah would do. Now that He has come, we who live after Him should not continue doing them.

This is particularly true of the sacrifices God provided with the Law. In Chapter 5 we saw how those who had learned of their sin and uncleanness through the Law could approach the holy God only by way of mediation—through the offering of sacrifice.

What do these sacrifices mean for us who live after the Messiah? Should we practise them? Our answer must surely be 'no'—and on very basic grounds. We now do business with God through His Messiah. We have understood that when He died and offered Himself to God as a perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world, all previous sacrifices were brought to their fulfilment. In doing this, He brought the Law to the goal God intended.

So we now look back on those early sacrifices to find they were actually 'types' of this once-offered sacrificial Victim—that is, they had within them the principle of operation on which the great final sacrifice would be based. They all pointed forward to Christ.

When we read about them today, these Old Testament forerunners of the Messiah instruct us about His Person and work. But we would never do them. That would be to live as if the Messiah had never come.

What we do need, as thoughtful Bible readers, is to understand which aspects of the Old Testament have come to completion in Jesus' first coming and which are still to come, for some promises look forward to His second coming.

## ACTION

1 Make a study of the letter to the Hebrews. It deals with this very issue. The Hebrew Christians (or 'Messianic Jews', as they call themselves today) needed to be very careful about how they carried out their Jewish culture in the light of the

first coming of the Messiah. See particularly Hebrews 1:1–4; 4:14–5:10; 7:1–28; and chapters 8 to 10.

2 The questions listed at the end of this chapter will help you see how to read the Old Testament. Before you attempt to live anything you find there, think about the work of the Messiah and where it places you now in relation to the Lord.

Our diagram has now introduced us to an important idea: we do not read the Bible to do everything in it. That would be to treat it as a directory of instructions which we mechanically consulted to see what to do next. No; we read the Bible as a history of what God has done already, so we can grasp His plan and purpose, understand His mind and character, and consequently understand what to do now. We stand in our own historical place, and we need to discern what God's work is for our generation. This does not mean we do not take the Bible seriously—we do. But when we read it, we ask two questions: not only, 'Is it written?' but also, 'What did it mean *then*, and what does it mean *now*?' They are not necessarily the same thing.

So we can summarize our approach to the Old Testament in this way: having paid careful attention to its context, we read it to instruct us about the Person and work of God Himself, all in the light of Christ. We then bring what we learn forward to Point 5—the place in God's plan where we live now—and apply it to our life here. Our application, like our reading, is always Christ-centred. He is both the apex of the plan and the point of entry that gives us a heritage in it. He is our central place for relating to the Trinity.

In practice, this means we have to be careful that we are not searching the Bible (either Old or New Testament) for a set of instructions which immediately 'answers' our life problem. Our quest is primarily for the presence of the Guide, not for guidance in the form of instructions we can simply perform. We are always asking the Holy Spirit to be our Guide for our situation *now*. We live by faith in His presence and direction,

which we expect because the Bible teaches us He is within us and leads us into all truth. We then read the Bible to check that the things we think are from the Holy Spirit, really are. In other words, we constantly 'test' everything we become aware of in the light of our knowledge of the Bible. But we do not trust the Bible to guide us day by day; that is the dynamic work of the Spirit.

The diagram helps us see what the Bible is really for: it teaches us about the Person we are called to obey. When we understand His character, we are better able to follow Him in life.

## ACTION

In your Bible reading, ask questions such as these:

- When was this said, to whom was it said, and under what conditions?
- What did it mean then? Why was it recorded?
- Does it point forward to Christ in any way?
- What does it teach me about God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit? What does it teach me about the character of God?
- Can I perform it now, for the reasons it was to be performed then, and still be faithful to the work of Christ and to where God calls me to live now?

*Before the next chapter:* Read Matthew 7:13–23; John 14:15–17 and 17:15–18.