

Jesus the Messiah

From the moment that Adam and Eve sinned, God has been working a plan of redemption. Even through Israel's failures, God's plan remained intact. In our last session on the Old Testament, we noted that God gave Israel two important promises: (1) God would send His Messiah, who would be a King from the line of David, and (2) God would establish a new covenant to restore His relationship with His people. God's plan could not fail, but the Israelites must have had their doubts. At the close of the Old Testament, most of the Israelites were still in exile. They were separated from the things that gave them their identity. They had been removed from the Promised Land and pulled away from the temple, which was subsequently destroyed. These were major problems for Israel. How could they be the people of God if they could not worship in the temple and offer sacrifices to atone for their sin? Eventually, many Israelites made their way back to the Promised Land, but it was not the same. The Roman Empire now ruled the land. The Israelites did have some freedoms. Most significantly, Herod built a new temple and allowed them to worship and offer sacrifices there. Nonetheless, they were subject to Roman rule, and Israel looked nothing like a kingdom. Many Jews still believed that God would restore the kingdom, but they were deeply divided on how they thought this would happen. Various groups of Jews formed based on the way in which they expected the kingdom to be restored. The Pharisees believed that radical obedience to the Law would cause the Messiah to come and remove the Gentiles from power. The Sadducees forged an alliance with the Romans so they could gain status and control the temple. The Zealots hoped for a revolutionary Messiah who would come as a warrior and defeat the pagans. The Essenes believed that the situation in Jerusalem had become so corrupted by both Romans and faithless Israelites that they retreated into the desert so they could please God in isolation. Overall, the situation was confusing and at times seemed hopeless. It was into this mess of conflicting hopes and ideologies that Jesus was born in the little town of Bethlehem to humble Jewish parents, both from the little town of Nazareth and descended from the line of David. The connection between the two Testaments is clear. The last two verses of the Old Testament read: Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction. (Mal. 4:5-6). Then the New Testament narrative picks up with an old, God-fearing priest named Zechariah. He was in the temple burning incense when an angel appeared and told him that his wife was going to bear him a son who would turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared. (Luke 1:16-17)

Getting to the Point

This prophet who came "in the spirit and power of Elijah" was John the Baptist. His role was to point the way to Jesus. And in effect, this is what the entire New Testament does. It presents Jesus's life, teaching, ministry, death, and resurrection in such a way that we must come to terms with Him. From the moment Jesus came on the scene, it was clear that He was different. His actions, teaching, and ministry came as a surprise to virtually everyone who crossed His path. But before we go too far into the story, take a minute to experience the beginning of Jesus's ministry.

Q1 Read Mark 1 slowly and thoughtfully. As you read, consider what it must have been like to have seen Jesus say and do these things. What stands out to you from reading this description of Jesus?

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Jesus once asked His disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:15–16). We are so used to the term Christ that it probably doesn’t stand out to you. Yet it was significant to Peter, and it should be significant to us as well. Remember that Israel was waiting for the Messiah, the King who would come from the line of David. When Jesus was referred to as “the Christ,” He was being identified as that Messiah. “Christ” is simply the Greek translation of the Hebrew word Messiah. So to refer to Jesus as the Christ is huge because we are saying that He is the promised Messiah—the person through whom God would accomplish His plan of redemption. God’s ultimate solution to the problem of sin had arrived. Paul even referred to this moment as “the fullness of time,” the culmination of human history (Gal. 4:4)! So important is the New Testament claim that Jesus is the Messiah that John wrote his gospel to prove this one point: “These are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31).

Q2 What are some of the answers people in our culture give to Jesus’s question “Who do you say that I am?” Why are these answers inadequate?

A Man, but More Than a Man

When Jesus began traveling the land of Israel, He created quite a stir. Imagine how interested you would be if you heard about a man going around restoring sight to the blind, healing the sick, and even raising the dead! Think about this for a minute. People who had spent their entire lives in complete darkness had an encounter with Jesus, and suddenly they could see. People who were irreversibly maimed or diseased suddenly became whole again. People who were mourning the death of a family member sobbed in disbelief as they held their son or daughter in their arms again. He was doing the impossible! It’s no surprise that Jesus attracted crowds wherever He went. But before we focus on the supernatural elements in Jesus’s life, it is important to acknowledge one obvious point: Jesus was a real man. The New Testament shows that Jesus was fully human. Matthew and Luke do this by recording Jesus’s genealogy—Matthew traces Jesus’s family tree back to David and Abraham, while Luke traces it all the way back to the first man, Adam. We also know Jesus was truly human because He got hungry (Matt. 4:2), grew tired (John 4:6), and wept (John 11:35). The most graphic picture of Jesus’s humanity was His excruciatingly painful death on the cross. His agony was real, and He truly suffered. A crown of thorns drew real blood as it was shoved onto His scalp. The whippings He endured and the nails driven into His hands were as painful for Him as they would be for you. Jesus was just as human as you are. Having said that, however, the New Testament is equally clear that Jesus Christ was more than a mere man. In fact, this is one of the teachings that separate Christianity from the religions of the world. The New Testament writers emphasize that Jesus of Nazareth was fully God. While Matthew and Luke recount Jesus’s earthly genealogy, John’s gospel explains that Jesus did not

begin His existence at His human birth. He was eternal. He has always existed. John tells us that He existed with God in the beginning (before creation) and that He was God (John 1:1–3). This means that Jesus was integrally involved in the process of creation (John 1:3), and that before He came to earth, He lived in a perfect relationship with God the Father. The other gospels also testify that Jesus was divine. Both Matthew and Luke tell us that Jesus was conceived not by a human father but by the Holy Spirit. Matthew tells us that Jesus calmed a storm (Matt. 8:26), while Mark records that Jesus forgave sins (Mark 2:5). In Luke we read of Jesus’s knowledge of future events, including the end of history (Luke 21). We could go on and on with such examples, but the point is clear: Jesus is God in the flesh (John 1:14). Jesus Christ was much more than just a great teacher or a prophet of God. He was the only person ever to live in sinless obedience to the Father. He was the unique Son of God, both fully human and fully divine. These truths mean, among other things, that we cannot treat Jesus lightly. Nothing matters more than the way we respond to Jesus.

Q3 Why is it important to understand that Jesus was fully human? How should this reality shape the way you think and speak about Him?

Q4 Why is it important to understand that Jesus was more than a man—that He was, in fact, divine? How should this reality shape the way you think and speak about Him?

The Fulfillment of God’s Plan

Many people heard the teachings of Jesus, saw the unexplainable miracles, and understood that He was sent from God. However, many of Israel’s so-called religious experts opposed Him. The religious groups in Israel (the Sadducees, Pharisees, scribes, etc.) emphatically rejected Jesus as the Messiah. Much of this was because as Jesus’s popularity rose, theirs declined. The Jewish leaders who rejected Jesus did not have spiritual eyes to see Jesus for who He really was. But before we get overly critical of the first-century religious leaders, remember that our own sin and ignorance often keep us from recognizing Jesus for who He is. As you continue studying, pray that Jesus would open your mind so that you can see Him for who He truly is. Jesus was clear in identifying Himself as the One who would fulfill God’s Old Testament promises. In Luke 24:44, Jesus said, “Everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” Did you catch that? The Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms (these three categories combined were a common way of referring to the entire Old Testament) all speak about Jesus. Jesus was saying that when the Old Testament writers wrote about God’s plan of redemption and the hope that God was promising to His people, they were actually writing about Him! The Old Testament is filled with references to Jesus, though many of them are subtle. When Adam and Eve sinned, God told Eve that Satan (“the serpent”) would bruise the heel of her descendant, but that this descendant would crush Satan’s head. This promise from the first pages of the Bible finds its fulfillment in Jesus, who triumphed over Satan on the cross (Col. 2:15; see also Rom. 16:20). When God made His promise to Abraham, telling him that all the nations would be blessed through Abraham and his descendants, He was referring to Jesus and what He would accomplish (Gal. 3:8). When God made His covenant with Moses and Israel and gave them the Law, everything about that Law would ultimately be fulfilled in Jesus (Matt. 5:17). When God gave Israel the tabernacle and the temple as an earthly dwelling place for His presence, He was providing a picture of God’s dwelling with people that would become a literal reality in the person

of Jesus (John 1:14). When God promised David that his throne would be established forever, He was ultimately pointing ahead to the coming of Jesus (Phil. 2:9–11, Rev. 17:14). As you read through the New Testament, it's good to pay attention to all of the times that the New Testament writers cite Old Testament prophecies as a way of explaining the fullness of what was happening in the birth, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Q5 Why is it important to recognize that Jesus was fulfilling the promises and prophecies made in the Old Testament?

The Kingdom of God

There is one central message that both John the Baptist and Jesus preached: The kingdom of God had arrived. In the Old Testament, there was an expectation that God would establish His kingdom in the future. This purpose included salvation and blessing for His people and the defeat of Israel's enemies. This expectation must have added weight to Jesus's announcement at the outset of His ministry: "The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15). Many Jews expected God's kingdom to be established at some point, and Jesus claimed that the time was now. The Spirit's power in Jesus's life proved that God's rule was present. The authority of God's kingdom was clearly seen when Jesus cast out demons, healed the sick, ruled over nature, and even raised the dead (John 11:1–46)! Jesus's teaching was also unprecedented, and those who heard it were often astonished at His wisdom.

Understanding this kingdom context should prevent us from seeing Jesus's life and teaching as merely a good source for moral instruction. He didn't come just to establish a vague sense of peace in the world, but to reestablish the rule of God over His creation. While God's kingdom was certainly present in the ministry of Jesus, Jesus also spoke of a fuller expression of the kingdom in the future. In the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9–13) Jesus taught us to pray for God's kingdom to come and for His will to be done on earth. One day, at a time known only to God, Jesus Christ will return to save His people and bring judgment on those who have rejected Him. This is a painful reality as we think of those who have not yet submitted to Jesus. But the kingdom of God is open to all who will enter, and Jesus sends us out as His ambassadors to call the lost to be reconciled to God (2 Cor. 5:20). And for followers of Christ, God's coming kingdom is everything we have been waiting for! The powers over which Jesus ruled during His ministry in the Gospels—Satan, sickness, death, and the curse that haunts creation—will finally be overcome forever. Believers will enjoy their salvation in its fullness with Christ their King.

Q6 Based on what you studied in the session on the kingdom of God in the Old Testament, why is Jesus's proclamation of the kingdom of God important?

Q7 How should the concept of the kingdom of God and the reality of Jesus as the King affect your daily life now?

Life through Death

Jesus is significant on so many levels. As we read through the Gospels, we are amazed at Jesus's power, His compassion, His wisdom, etc. But ultimately, it was very difficult for the Jews to believe that this man was their promised Messiah for one very important reason: He was

executed as a criminal. Israel's history was filled with kings and judges who conquered their enemies, and the prophecies about the Messiah pointed to a victorious king. So it must have been confusing when Jesus began to speak about His death. And they didn't know what to do about this would-be Messiah once He died. In Mark 8:31–33, Jesus told His disciples that He was going to “suffer many things” and be put to death. (He also foretold His resurrection.) Peter, unable to see how such a course of events could fit with Jesus's mission, replied by rebuking his Master and suggesting another path. A triumphant king who dies on a cross? Who ever heard of that? Yet all of the Gospels describe Jesus's death as central to His mission, and Luke spent almost ten chapters dealing with Jesus's journey to Jerusalem to die (Luke 9:51–19:27). Before Jesus was born, an angel declared that He would “save his people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21). John the Baptist referred to Jesus as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). The problem of sin had threatened humanity's relationship with God ever since Adam and Eve's disobedience in the garden. In order for God's people to be in a right relationship with Him, sin had to be atoned for. All of the sacrifices that God's people made in the Old Testament pointed forward to the sacrifice that Jesus would offer on the cross (Heb. 9–10). Jesus was the true Passover Lamb (1 Cor. 5:7)—He sacrificed Himself so that we can live. In the last Old Testament session, we talked about the promise of a new covenant, and the reality that the death of Jesus established this covenant. As we discuss Jesus's death here, we cannot forget this connection with the new covenant. As Jesus celebrated the Passover with His disciples, He held the cup and said, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood” (Luke 22:20). Thus Jesus fulfilled both of the major promises that carry over from the Old Testament: (1) He was the coming King from the line of David (the Messiah), and (2) through His death He established the new covenant that would heal and recreate His people. Of course, the ultimate proof of the power of the cross is the resurrection. Many had claimed to be the Messiah, but only Jesus rose from the dead to prove it. After all, a conquering King cannot remain buried in a tomb. The resurrection is crucial to our faith and to the fulfillment of God's saving purposes. Without it, we have no hope. The Gospels testify that Jesus rose from the grave and appeared to His disciples.

Q8 Carefully read Ephesians 2:1–10 and Colossians 2:13–15. If you are familiar with these passages, force yourself to read them slowly, as though you've never read them before. What do these passages say about the significance of Jesus's death and resurrection?

Q9 According to these passages, how should we relate to Jesus?

“Follow Me”

It is critical that you understand the story of Jesus, but understanding the story is not enough. It is not enough to merely absorb the information—you must respond to it. The message of Jesus's death and resurrection demands something of us. Jesus continues to call people—He calls you and me—to follow Him and live, even if it costs us everything. Christ's death and resurrection should give us confidence in the salvation He offers. Listen carefully to the message proclaimed by Jesus's earliest followers: What God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ would suffer, he thus fulfilled. Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the

Christ appointed for you, Jesus, whom heaven must receive until the time for restoring all the things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago. (Acts 3:18–21)

Q10 Spend some time in prayer. Pray that God would take the truths you have been thinking through and use them to affect your heart. Ask God to help you respond to Jesus appropriately—whether you have never considered Jesus’s call to follow Him or you have been walking with Jesus for many years.

1There has only ever been one God, yet the Bible teaches that He exists as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The concept of the Trinity is a profound mystery, but it is essential to the way the Bible describes God.