

UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

Part 9 - The Silence is Broken

Key Questions:

- How does the New Testament follow on from the Old Testament? Who is Jesus?

Summary of the Old Testament

The theme of the Bible is the Kingdom of God, which we have defined as:

God's people living in God's place under God's rule enjoying God's blessings

In the Old Testament we see this theme working through the events of human history:

1. God's Kingdom established – Creation

God created mankind to rule over the earth, but in obedience to God's command (under His rule).

2. God's kingdom rejected – Sin

Mankind disobeyed God (rejected His rule). The result was separation from God's presence and death.

3. God's kingdom pre-figured – Covenant

God made a covenant with Abraham and the people of Israel in three stages:

(i) Abraham was given the sign of circumcision and three promises:

- The land of Canaan would belong to his descendants
- He would have many descendants who would become a great nation
- All nations would be blessed through his descendants

(ii) Moses was given the Law of God

The Law showed the people how they should live, how they should worship God through sacrifice and, most importantly, that they needed God's forgiveness for their sin.

(iii) David was given an additional promise that his descendants would be kings forever.

However, the problem of sin meant that the people were not able to keep God's Laws or to be faithful to His covenant with them. The prophets looked forward to a coming Messiah who would restore God's Kingdom, and even to a New Covenant under which sin would finally be dealt with (see Jeremiah Chapter 31).

The silence is broken

Four books (called "Gospels") record the life and words of Jesus (see *Study Aids* for a comparison of these books). The openings of the four Gospels were intended to emphasise that God was speaking again after 400 years of silence, and that the Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah were about to be fulfilled:

Book and writer	Opening	Intention in writing
Matthew – one of Jesus' closest followers (an eyewitness to Jesus' life)	A list of Jesus' ancestors in three parts (Abraham to David, David to Exile, Exile to Jesus). Also tells about the visit of the Magi to see the new King (2:6).	To show that Jesus was the true King of Israel descended from King David
Mark – based his record on the account of Peter (an eyewitness to Jesus' life)	A quote from Isaiah about the "messenger" who would come before the Messiah, which Mark links to John the Baptist	To show that Jesus was the Suffering Servant
Luke – a physician who interviewed several eyewitnesses to Jesus' life	A series of four stories before Jesus' birth putting his birth in the context of history and the Old Testament (<i>see below</i>)	To show that Jesus was a perfect sinless man
John – one of Jesus' closest followers (an eyewitness to Jesus' life)	An explanation that Jesus is the "Word" who was God and was with God and who came into the world to reveal God to us	To show that Jesus was the Son of God come into the world as a human being

The Perfect Time for Jesus to be Born (Luke 2:1&2)

Luke records many historical details. He tells us that Jesus was born during the reign of Caesar Augustus (the Roman Emperor) when Quirinius was the governor of the Roman province of Syria. During Jesus' lifetime, Palestine was under Roman domination, although some parts had nominal rulers from the Herod family. The Jewish people were hoping that the Messiah, who was promised in the Old Testament, would soon come to drive out the Romans and set up a new kingdom based in Jerusalem. The Jewish leaders had particular expectations of what the Messiah should be like. They expected a Conquering King who would defeat the Romans, judge all the non-Jewish nations and set up His Kingdom in Jerusalem. They did not expect the Messiah to come as the Suffering Servant. This historical background meant that Jesus was born at the perfect time for the Christian message to spread across the world:

- **The Roman Empire** – since 31 BC there had been relative peace under Caesar Augustus after many decades of war
- **The Greek language** – the influence of the Greek world before the Roman Empire meant that one language, Greek, was spoken across the Roman Empire, including Europe and the Middle East. The New Testament was written in Greek.
- **The situation in Palestine** – the Jews were in Palestine and many expected the Messiah to come, although they had wrong ideas about what he would be like. Jesus could travel and teach freely, and the Temple still existed, providing a

place where He could speak to many people at the regular Jewish festivals (the Temple was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70 and the Jews were scattered across the world).

God prepares the way for Jesus' Birth - Luke Chapters 1&2

These four stories form a link between the Old Testament and the life of Jesus, preparing us to understand who He is:

Story 1 – The priest Zechariah meets an angel in the Temple (Luke 1:5-25)

Location: The Temple in Jerusalem. This was the centre of Jewish worship, where sacrifices were made.

Key character: Zechariah, a priest. The priests came from the tribe of Levi, and were the only people who could offer sacrifices to God on behalf of the people (under the Old Testament Law given to Moses).

Promise: That John will bring many people back to God, and will prepare the way for the Lord (vv14-17). This is a clear reference to Old Testament prophecies about a forerunner to the Messiah (see Malachi 4:5&6, Isaiah 40:3-8). John would be a very great prophet just like the Old Testament prophet Elijah.

Lesson: The Old Covenant failed because of sin and a lack of faith in God's people

Zechariah kept the Old Testament Law (v6), but he did not have real faith in God (this was the reason why he was made dumb – v20). We are reminded that many of the Jewish leaders at the time when Jesus was born had kept the outward practices of the law (the Temple, sacrifices etc.), but did not have real faith in God. The Jews at the time of Jesus' birth tended to think that God would accept them and be happy with them just because they did the things the Law told them to do. They focussed on the external appearance of things and were happy to be seen to do the right things. God is teaching us that what He really cares about most is the person's heart, and whether or not they have faith in Him! John's message will call the people to come back to a real trust in God.

Story 2 – Mary is visited by the angel Gabriel in Nazareth (Luke 1:26-38)

Location: Nazareth, a town in the region of Galilee (in the north of Palestine).

Key character: Mary, a virgin engaged to Joseph a descendant of David.

Promise: Mary will call her son Jesus, and He will be called the Son of the Most High and will rule on David's throne forever (vv31-35). The term the "*Son of God*" (Most High is another word for God) was a unique title used for Jesus.

Lesson: Jesus will be sinless, born of a virgin to be a King and Saviour

Jesus will be the King who reigns on David's throne, born to a virgin (as prophesied by Isaiah – see Isaiah 7:14). The miracle of the virgin birth is important to Christians as it is another unique truth about Jesus. It emphasises that He was not simply a human being, but also God living in a human body. He had no human father, and therefore He did not inherit the sinful nature that all humans since Adam have inherited. Jesus was completely without sin.

Story 3 – Mary visits Elizabeth (1:39-56)

Location: Zechariah's home in a town in the hill country of Judea (in the south of Palestine).

Key characters: Mary & Elizabeth.

Promise: God will continue His work in Mary's day just as He did in the past (vv46-55).

Lesson: God uses an ordinary person to carry on His plan because of her faith in Him

John recognised Jesus even when they were both still in the womb. Mary recognised that God was at work in her life just as He had worked in Abraham's life – this baby will be the continuation of the Old Testament. Mary's attitude is quite different from Zechariah's. Although she is just an ordinary girl, she has greater faith than the priest! Elizabeth said that Mary would be blessed because she had believed what God said (v45). This is the best way to define **faith – to accept God's word as true and act in keeping with it**. Mary had faith that God was still as powerful in her day as He had been in the past, and that he had a plan for her life that He was willing and able to carry out.

Story 4 – The birth of John & Zechariah's prophecy (1:57-80)

Location: Zechariah's home in a town in the hill country of Judea.

Key characters: Zechariah & Elizabeth.

Promise: John will be a great prophet who will prepare the way for the Messiah (vv 68-79).

Lesson: Jesus will fulfil all the Old Testament prophecies like the sun rising in a dark world

John was given a name that broke with family tradition – his ancestry was not important. This is quite different from Jesus, whose ancestry as a descendant of David was vital to His ministry. Zechariah's prophecy recognised that God would fulfil the Old Testament prophecies and remember His covenant with the people of Israel. God was going to fulfil the promises of the Old Covenant in an amazing way through Jesus. Jesus would be like the light of the sun rising on a darkened world. He would reveal God to people who did not know Him.

Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament

The Old and New Testaments explain each other. The Old Testament provides the background to the New, helping us to understand what it means, whilst the New Testament fulfils the Old, making its meaning clear. At the centre of both Old and New Testaments is one person, Jesus. He fulfilled all that went before Him, and is the centre of all that comes after Him. The Old Covenant can be described as "pre-figuring" the Kingdom of God because it introduces us to important ideas that find their fulfilment in Jesus. Jesus came to fulfil all aspects of the Old Covenant because:

1. **He was the descendant of Abraham through whom all nations would be blessed**
2. **He lived a perfect life, never breaking the Law, and died to be the one sacrifice for sins forever**
3. **He was the descendant of David who came to be the true King of Israel and of all nations**

The "New Testament" opens with the birth of Jesus, and tells the story of how Jesus fulfilled the Old Covenant and brought in a new kind of relationship (the New Covenant) between God and people. The theme of the Kingdom of God continues in the teaching of Jesus. **Jesus claimed that He was the true King who had come to earth to declare that the Kingdom of God was present and to show people how to enter it** (see Part 12).

Key Lesson: The New Testament shows that Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament

The first four books of the New Testament tell the story of Jesus' life and teaching. They show that He fulfilled the promises of the Old Covenant and came to restore the Kingdom of God.