

UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

Part 12 – The Mission of Jesus

Key Questions:

- Why did Jesus come into the world? What did He expect from His followers and what did He offer in return?

Jesus' three years of public ministry

Jesus' ministry began around 29 AD when John the Baptist baptised Him. He died around three and a half years later in 33 AD. The three years of Jesus' public ministry represent three different stages in the response of the people to Him:

1. **Year 1 (beginnings)** – Jesus was baptised by John and began His teaching and miracles. He began to become well known. His ministry opened with a dramatic statement: "*The Kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!*" (Mark 1:15). This was Jesus' mission, to call people to enter the Kingdom of God.
2. **Year 2 (popularity)** – Jesus became very popular because of His teaching and miracles. Thousands of people followed Him everywhere. Many of these people came from His home region of Galilee.
3. **Year 3 (rejection)** – the Jewish leaders began to oppose Jesus more openly, and many people left Him because they couldn't understand His teachings and because He didn't act in the way they expected the Messiah to act. Other disciples remained committed to following Him despite this growing opposition.

During each of these three years Jesus made a journey from Galilee to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover festival. On some occasions he passed through Samaria (a region between Galilee and Judea), which was unusual for a Jew since most Jews hated the Samaritans. On His final trip to Jerusalem Jesus was arrested and executed.

The Call to Discipleship – surrender everything to follow Jesus

Jesus called people to follow Him as disciples. A disciple is someone who learns from a master. Jesus called people to follow Him throughout His ministry, but made it clear that deciding to follow Him is a serious thing:

Rest for weary people (Matthew 11:28-30)

Jesus recognised that many people are weary and heavily burdened by anxiety, guilt and shame. Ultimately they are burdened because they are under slavery to sin, which weighs them down. However, if we want to come to Jesus He said that we must take His yoke on ourselves. A yoke is a wooden bar that holds two animals together when they are pulling a plough in a field, and in the Old Testament it was used to picture the rule of a King. The King's people were yoked to Him. Jesus was saying that if we want to know the rest He offers we must submit to His Kingship over our lives. If we do, we can learn from Him and find rest for our souls as His yoke is easy and His burden is light. Unfortunately many people expect God to forgive their sins and help them through life, but they do not want to submit to His rule over their lives. Jesus does not offer that choice. **To know His help and strength we must accept His rule.**

Take up the cross (Matthew 16:24-26)

In the later part of His ministry, after His disciples had already realised who He was, Jesus began to challenge people who wanted to follow Him to think about what it would cost them. He told them that they must take up their cross to follow Him. Crucifixion was a method of executing criminals, and Jesus was saying that if people wanted to follow Him they had to die to their own rights and will. To follow Jesus is to take a painful way of denying ourselves. We cannot follow Him and still do whatever we want – we must follow His will. Following Him may also mean suffering in this life, but if we only set our ambition on gaining things in this world (success, money, power, popularity etc.) we will not build anything that will last after this life is over and we will lose our life. On the other hand, if we surrender our own life to Jesus we will actually gain it. We do not have the power to keep our own lives, so we should entrust them to Him. Being a disciple means making a total commitment to Christ. What would you give in exchange for your soul? What matters more than knowing that you have eternal life? **To have real life we must surrender everything to Jesus.**

Jesus chooses His twelve apostles (Luke 6:12-16)

During His public ministry Jesus had many disciples, but He chose twelve to be His closest followers. He spent much of His time training these twelve men to become the leaders of the Christian Church after He left this world to return to His Father, and much of His teaching was directed towards them. He gave them the special designation "apostles", a word which means that they were sent into the world as His special representatives. By knowing who these twelve men were we can learn what kind of people Jesus cared about and accepted as His close friends:

1. **Simon Peter** – Simon was a fisherman for whom Jesus invented the new name "Peter". He was the leader of the twelve, and often spoke out as their representative. He wrote two books in the New Testament (I and II Peter), and Mark's gospel is a record of the things he remembered about Jesus. See *Part 17* for more about his story.
2. **Andrew** – the brother of Peter, and also a fisherman. Andrew is best remembered for bringing people to Jesus, including his brother Peter. See John 1:35-42 for the story of how Jesus called Andrew.
3. **James** – the brother of John, also a fisherman. James and John both worked in Peter's family business. Luke 5:10 and Matthew 4:21-22 tell us how Jesus called James and John.
4. **John** – wrote five books in the New Testament, John's gospel, I, II & III John and Revelation.
5. **Matthew** – the author of Matthew's Gospel. Matthew (also called Levi) was a tax collector working for the Romans, a much hated profession among the Jews. Luke 5:27-32 and Matthew 9:9-13 tell us about the calling of Matthew.

6. **Philip** – see John 1:43-51 for the calling of Philip, who was also from Peter's home town.
7. **Thomas** – also called Didymus. Thomas is most famous for doubting that Jesus had been raised from the dead until he actually saw Him (see John 20:26-29).
8. **Simon the Zealot** – the Zealots were a radical Jewish group who strongly opposed Roman rule
9. **Judas Iscariot** – this disciple betrayed Jesus for thirty pieces of silver when He was arrested. He had the responsibility of looking after the money bag for the disciples, but he was a thief and used to steal from it (John 12:4-6). It seems that he was never really a genuine follower of Jesus.
10. **Bartholomew** 11. **James the son of Alphaeus** 12. **Judas the son of James**

This group included political radicals, hated tax collectors, unknown people, at least four fishermen, and even one traitor. They are hardly the kind of people most people would choose to lead a new religious movement! In choosing these men Jesus showed that He had a unique knowledge of the hearts of people and that He had come to call all kinds of people to follow Him and to transform the lives of those people who would become His disciples. As we read the Gospels it is clear that this was Jesus' mission, and that everyone who responded to His call was changed.

Jesus' Mission – why did He come into the World?

Why did Jesus come into the world? He gave at least five answers to this question, all of them recorded in John's gospel:

1. **"To do the will of God who sent me"** (John 6:38) – Jesus taught that He was the special messenger of God who always obeyed what the Father said.
2. **"I came to bring truth to the world"** (John 18:37) – Jesus claimed that He was speaking God's truth, and that those who love truth would recognise it
3. **"I have come to judge the world ... to give sight to the blind and to show those who think they can see that they are blind"** (John 9:39) – Jesus challenged people to realise that they were spiritually blind, meaning that they did not know God. He showed people who realised that they were spiritually blind that God loved them and they could have sight, and challenged those people who thought that they were already accepted by God to realise their sin and repent of it.
4. **"I have come as a light to shine in this dark world so that all who put their trust in me will no longer remain in the darkness"** (John 12:46) – Jesus claimed that this world is in darkness because of sin, and that He had come to shine His light (knowledge about God) into the world. He claimed that people who trust in Him will never be in darkness again, in other words that by trusting in Him they could really know God personally.
5. **"My purpose is to give life in all its fullness"** (John 10:10) – Jesus claimed that His followers could have a different quality of life from the normal. He said that they could have the fullest life possible. The Bible claims that a life without God is incomplete, but that when we come to know God through Jesus we can have a life that is full of peace, joy and contentment.

Eternal Life – God's gift given through Jesus

One story in John's Gospel chapter 3 provides a very clear summary of Jesus' mission and helps us to understand what this *"life in all its fullness"* that Jesus offered really is. This chapter records a meeting between Jesus and a religious leader of the Jews called **Nicodemus**. Nicodemus was a respected teacher of the people – one of the top professors in the country (verse 10). He came to Jesus at night, perhaps because he was too proud to come during the day, or because he wanted to keep his visit a secret, or possibly because it was the best time to meet Jesus, who was very busy during the daytime. Nicodemus recognised that Jesus came from God because of the miracles He performed (see *Part 14*).

Jesus told Nicodemus that if he wanted to see God's Kingdom he must have a new birth – not a physical birth, but a spiritual one (verse 5). In other words, Jesus told this leading Jewish teacher that he was not even alive spiritually! We all begin life far from God (not in His Kingdom) and so spiritually dead. We enter into a relationship with God (enter into His Kingdom) by being born again with a new kind of life which is:

1. **Spiritual, not physical (verse 5)**
2. **Given to people by the Holy Spirit (verse 6)**
3. **Eternal (verse 15)** ("eternal" means it can never end). This life carries on after the body has died.
4. **Received through faith in Jesus (verse 15)** – by trusting in Him to save and lead you
5. **Available because of Jesus' death (verse 14)** – when Jesus spoke of being lifted up He was speaking about His death on the cross (see Numbers 21:4-9 for the story of Moses and the snake)

In verses 16-21, John comments on these words of Jesus, and shows us that there are two groups of people:

- a) **People who trust in Jesus** – These people have eternal life and will not be condemned. They will be saved because they have trusted in Jesus. God wants all people to be in this group, because He loves them. That is why He sent Jesus into the world (verse 17).
- b) **People who have not trusted Him** – These people have already been judged (verse 18) because they preferred to sin in the darkness than to come to the light of God (verse 20).

John's summary of Jesus' mission in verses 16-17 are possibly the most famous words in the Bible:

For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life. God did not send His Son into the world to condemn it, but to save it.

Key Lesson: Jesus called people to surrender everything to receive eternal life from Him

Jesus called people to follow Him, and to do this they had to surrender everything else and accept His rule over their lives. In exchange He offered them eternal life, life in all its fullness, which is received through faith in Him.