

8.

Jesus Christ and the Return of the Covenant Lord

It is not insignificant that the first words spoken 600 years later, with the Lord's return to His people, would be "Repent, and believe the good news, the kingdom of God is at hand!" The first words spoken to Israel were very similar to those last words spoken by the prophets in the Old Covenant. John the Baptist and Jesus continued where Hosea, Joel, Amos, and others had left off hundreds of years earlier. The promises made about 2,000 years earlier in Genesis 12 were about to be kept. Hear the words of the prophet Micah, "You will be true to Jacob, and show mercy to Abraham, as you pledged on oath to our fathers in days long ago" (Mic. 7:20).

The Lord, Israel's husband, was returning to His pillaged and ravaged wife, and with His return He was expecting the appropriate response. He was expecting remorse, confession and lament from His unfaithful wife.

"For your Maker is your husband - the Lord Almighty is his name - the Holy One of Israel is your redeemer; he is called the God of all the earth. The Lord will call you back as if you were a wife deserted and distressed in spirit - a wife who married young, only to be rejected," says your God. "For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with deep compassion I will bring you back" (Is. 54:5-7).

He has come willing to restore, forgive and reconcile. But forgiveness and reconciliation will not happen without repentance and confession. The wife, who has gone chasing after her lovers, must come to him humbled, renouncing her behavior. This is why the call of the kingdom is first and foremost a call to repentance, and why this is so pronounced

in John the Baptist's and Jesus' ministry (Mt. 3:1,2; 4:17). The Lord and Israel have a long history marred by one-sided covenantal infidelity, and that history must be recognized and accounted for.

However, it becomes increasingly apparent that the Lord was drawing more than just the nation of Israel to Himself. His plan includes more than ethnic Israel, because the Lord and the whole world have a history of the same one-sided infidelity going back to Adam. Throughout this history, the prophets had spoken about this return of the covenant Lord, not just for unfaithful Israel, but to show mercy to the unfaithful world.

Jesus Christ frequently revealed his mercy not just to the Israelite, but also to the pagan, as He was receiving not just the repentant and humble among the Jews, but also the repentant and humble among the Gentiles (Jn. 4:39-42; Mt. 8:11; 15:21-28). This was not on a whim. Jesus was not expressing a mercy that exceeded the mercy of the Lord in the Old Covenant, but this was a purposeful and intentional keeping of an oath which was reflected in the Old Covenant itself. This was part of the merciful promise that God had made to Abraham: "...and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Gen. 12:3). Jesus was "the seed" of Abraham who was, at the very same time, the Lord of the covenant, who would be a blessing to all. Isaac, the son of Abraham, would produce in his line the one and only Son of God, as promised.

Jesus the covenant Lord, the Son of God, had returned to Israel in order to be a blessing to the whole world. The Presence of God had returned after departing from the temple in the vision of Ezekiel. The glory of the Lord had returned after having departed so many years ago and the apostle John would say, "We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father full of grace and truth" (Jn. 1:14). The glory of the Lord would re-enter the Temple and find things not as they should be, so His wrath would break out in the form of whips and scathing rebukes (Mt. 21:12,13).

Jesus was the same covenant Lord who banned Adam and Eve from His presence in the garden, which is why Jesus could say with complete seriousness in John 8:58, "I tell you the truth, before Abraham was born, I am!" Jesus was the same covenant Lord who delighted exceedingly at Abraham's faithfulness in being willing to sacrifice his one and only son. It was with this same delight that Jesus would celebrate the faith of a Roman soldier who trusted Jesus' power and provision two thousand years later, "I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith" (Mt. 8:10)! Jesus, the

covenant Lord had now returned to His people, not as a fire-pot floating between the halves of sacrificed animals, nor as a pillar of fire by night and cloud by day, but as living, breathing, sweating, hungering and thirsting human being. “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (Jn. 1:14).

Jesus as the covenant Lord returned in order to reconcile Himself to an estranged world, to forgive and to set aside the sins of the past (Jn. 3:17). The whole world had gone astray since Adam, with Israel standing as the intensified and global witness to human sin. She had all the privileges and advantages, yet those remarkable and blessed advantages only served to magnify the power of human sin causing them to despise God and His provision (Rom. 3:1-4). God had removed any possible excuse for rebellion through the example of Israel (Rom. 3:19, 20). Adam stands as mankind’s representative disobedient individual, while Israel stands as the representative disobedient nation. To gloat over Israel’s destruction is to gloat over what the whole world deserves.

But now Jesus had come to set things right, to bring peace between God and mankind. How this could be accomplished was a mystery of great proportions to the Israel of Jesus’ time (Mk. 4:11; Rom. 16:25). The Law and its sacrifice of animals could not take away the volitional, or willful guilt of human beings. In the Old Covenant, the Lord had promised forgiveness by these sacrifices and this was wonderfully true. Yet, it was ever-embedded in the consciousness of the Israelites that these animal deaths and sacrifices were not sufficient, that ultimately they could not justify a sinful man or woman. They knew the disparity between the guilt of human sins against a holy God, and the blood of animals as a rectifying remedy (Rom. 3:20; Heb. 10:1-3). When all the sacrifices had been performed, all the blood had been sprinkled, and all the fires had consumed their sacrificial victims, guilt remained in the soul of man. It remained as a nagging cloud for even the most faithful Jew. In fact, the more faithful the Jew, the more he hungered for the ultimate consolation to be found only in the ultimate solution (Lk. 2:21-38). Jesus confirmed this hunger, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled” (Mt. 5:6).

Yet the faithful Jew knew the Lord to be merciful and he, or she, would trust in the pronouncement given through temple observances even though they did not know *how* those pronouncements could be made. This was God’s remedy as they had been taught. But they also knew well the promises of the prophets, that one day the Lord

would deal finally and totally with the problem of sin and its residual guilt (Is. 40:1,2; Jer. 31:33,34). This is why some were waiting expectantly for the day of “consolation” when sins would finally be dealt with in such a way that only peace of mind remains.

Jesus’ call for repentance and the announcement that the kingdom of God was at hand was continually confirmed by His performance of great miracles that would bring to mind the prophets Elijah and Elisha of long ago. He was healing and performing great signs among the unlikely as the prophets did in their day. He was making authoritative pronouncements that would sound very similar to Old Covenant Scriptures, yet would at times say more, causing Old Covenant teachers to blush and fume. Jesus did not make it His business to merely recite Old Covenant texts or to live strictly within their limits, but He made His own statements that were entirely new, yet bore a noticeable fragrance of the old.

His own claim was that He lived in absolute allegiance, not necessarily to the Law of Moses, but to His Father in heaven (Jn. 4:34; 17:8). He would say that He was “Lord of the Sabbath” (Mt. 12:8). He would claim freedom from the temple tax on the basis of His Son-ship to the Father (Mt. 17:24). He would stand as His own witness, claiming a unique right to do so (Jn. 8:17,18). He seemed to be a walking and talking authoritative Word unto Himself (Mt. 7:28, 29).

As with the Lord’s call to Abram generations before, the Lord would issue His call once again, now through Jesus Christ. Jesus would stop, fix His gaze on certain individuals and call them to “follow me.” They, in turn, immediately dropped what they were doing, and went with Him. Now, it is true that some preparation had been made for these calls to discipleship. We have no need to make them more than what they were, because what they were is enough. These were not moments of radical existential choice made in a vacuum of knowledge.⁶ Peter, Andrew, James and John very likely had heard Jesus and seen His power before His call to them (Jn. 1:35-42). The whole area was

6 Bonhoeffer seems concerned to negate any possibility of prior exposure to Jesus in order to promote an understanding of faith that derives from existentialist philosophy. For Bonhoeffer, to have faith is to act against reason by definition. The disciples to have true faith must be confronted by an existential moment of genuine choice that has had no outside influence, they can have no reasons outside of a “raw” existential moment with God. But as we see with Abraham in Genesis 22 and as explained by Hebrews 11, this is an unbiblical philosophical assumption. To act by faith is to do the most reasonable thing in light of the reality of God’s promises and prior exposure to God’s faithfulness. To have faith in the present is to act according to true reason.

alive with talk about Jesus and the significance of what He was saying and doing. So when Jesus turned to them individually and beckoned them to follow, it was their faith in whom Jesus was that enabled them to obey His call without question. They were able to follow because they had heard and seen, and because they had heard and seen, they believed, and because they believed, like Abraham before, they obeyed His command to follow Him, leaving family and livelihood behind and putting their lives squarely in His hands.

As Abraham's faith was tested, so would the disciple's faith be tested. They would be without food in desert places, they would be caught in violent storms, and they would be vilified and rejected as apostates and false teachers. However, the greatest test of all would be the shameful and humiliating crucifixion of their Lord, for whom they had left everything. Like the Israelites who cried out in fear at the edge of the Red Sea, they would not fare well; the "sheep would be scattered" at the capture and death of their shepherd.

But for them, the great test of Jesus' death was not to be the end of the story, but rather the beginning, just as it was for the Israelites. It was in the midst of Israelite infidelity at the Red Sea that God's righteous deliverance shone forth with special brightness. He vindicated His name and His people in one decisive moment, and stood justified as true to His promise to deliver, and His righteousness was revealed. It was an act that was to end all doubt and to seal, in the minds of the Israelites, God's invincible faithfulness to His Word.

Likewise, it was in the midst of the frightened and disillusioned disciples, that God's righteous deliverance and perfect faithfulness would shine; Christ, raised from the dead, would stand utterly victorious over sin and death. Men had thrown all they could at Him, had tormented and killed the Lord God in the most horrific way. But Jesus would stand in the midst of His disciples, justified as true to His promise to be raised victorious. He was vindicated as God's One and Only (1 Tim. 3:16). All that He had said was now to be understood as true. His appearance among them was to remove all doubt, silence all protest, and usher in unshakable faith (Jn. 20:26, 27; 1; Jn. 1:1-4). The "new exodus" was now underway. The lamb had been slain, the enemy had been defeated, and the way to life was now revealed (Is. 43:16-21; 51:9-11; Jn. 14:6,7).

But we must back up, and take a closer look at what Jesus said prior to His death by way of covenantal Words to His followers. We must return to Jesus' final Passover meal in which He ushered in the New Covenant. It was in the context of the Old Covenant Passover that

the New Covenant Passover commences. Just as the Old Covenant people lived in a relationship characterized by privileges and obligations, so do the Lord's New Covenant people.