



Gospel Portraits of Jesus: A Lenten Study

SESSION 4

Messiah or Christ is a title by which Jesus was identified by the writers of the Gospels and other writers of the New Testament.

Introduction

In the previous three sessions we have dealt almost exclusively with passages from the Gospels, with a few references to Old Testament passages. In this session we will begin with references from the Old Testament and then move our exploration into the four Gospels. We would need one or two additional sessions in order to deal with all the references to Jesus as Messiah or Christ in the whole New Testament. There are thirteen verses that include the word *Messiah* in Acts (12) and Paul's letters (1), whereas the word *Christ* appears twelve times in Acts and more than three hundred times in Paul's letters, sixty-four times in Romans alone. When you add to these references dozens more that include the phrase "Lord Jesus" or "Jesus our Lord" you will find an overwhelming number of references, more than we can deal with in one session.

One of the key points we will make is that the use of the title Messiah or Christ for Jesus in the Gospels makes the connection between the Jews' expectation of a deliverer and Jesus' fulfillment of that expectation. As we journey toward Holy Week, the names of Jesus as Messiah or Christ are especially appropriate.

Messiah in the Old Testament

The English word *Messiah* is a translation of the Hebrew *mashiah*, which means "anointed one" or "the Lord's anointed." The word *Messiah* does not appear anywhere in the Old Testament, whereas the words "anoint," "anointed," or "anointing" appear in 141 verses. The



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ritual of anointing involves rubbing oil on the body or some other object to consecrate it for holy purposes, or pouring oil over the anointed one's head. In the last chapter of Exodus the Lord spoke to Moses regarding anointing the tabernacle, all its furnishings, and the altar. Aaron and the sons of Aaron are anointed to be priests of Israel (Exod. 40:1–15). Later in Israel's history kings were anointed (the anointing of David, 1 Sam. 16:1–13) as well as prophets (Elisha was anointed as prophet, 1 Kgs. 19:16).

Even though the word *Messiah* does not appear in the Old Testament there are several passages that refer directly or allude to the hope for One (Messiah, Deliverer, or Savior) that God would send to restore Israel to its God-given mission; "I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations" (Isa. 42:6).

Other words of Isaiah are familiar to all who know the lyrics of Handel's *Messiah*, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a

land of deep darkness—on them light has shined” (Isa. 9:2) and “For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isa. 9:6). Isaiah writes of a time when God will intervene again in the course of history to restore God’s people to the stature they enjoyed in times past.

The prophet Jeremiah wrote words of hope for a time after the Israelites return from exile in Babylon, “The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety” (Jer. 23:5–6). In Jeremiah 33:15, 17 we read similar words that proclaim “a righteous Branch to spring up for David. . . . For thus says the LORD: David shall never lack a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel.” These references to “branch” are closely related to the image in Isaiah 11:1–2a, “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him.” Jesse was the father of David, king of Israel. The same Davidic messianic figure appears in Zechariah 3:8 and 6:12.

Ezekiel wrote of a similar hope that God would reestablish the throne of David to restore the kingdom of Israel to prominence and power. “I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them. . . . And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the LORD, have spoken” (Ezek. 34:23–24) and “My servant David shall be king over them” (Ezek. 37:24). The prophet Amos also spoke for the Lord, “On that day I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen, and repair its breaches, and raise up its ruins, and rebuild it as in the days of old” (Amos 9:11).

Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Amos believed God Almighty would reign in Jerusalem through the descendants of King David. “While Jerusalem and its king may suffer punishment for sin, God’s chosen city will never be utterly destroyed, nor will King David’s dynasty fall.”¹

Messiah and Christ in the Gospels

In the Greek of the New Testament the Hebrew word *mashiah* is translated as “christos” and in English,



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“Christ.” Although the word *Christ* appears only five times in the Gospels (Mark 1:1; 9:41; and John 1:17; 4:25; 17:3) the word *Messiah* appears forty-three times, most as references to Jesus. You will find in the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible that wherever the word *Messiah* appears there is a footnote with reference to the word *Christ*. We are accustomed to speaking of Jesus Christ, as if Jesus is the first name and Christ his last name. It is more appropriate to speak of Jesus the Christ, or Jesus the Messiah. There are several passages in the Gospels to focus our attention on Jesus the Messiah (or Christ).

Birth Narratives

The Greek words “good news” derive from the same root as the word “gospel.” The four Gospels are accounts of the good news of the birth, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. In the birth narratives, both Matthew and Luke identify the one born of Mary in Bethlehem as the Messiah. Matthew begins, “An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah . . .” (Matt. 1:1) and later reports, “Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way . . .” (Matt. 1:18). In Luke, an angel of the Lord appeared before the shepherds and declared, “I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord” (Luke 2:10–11). Luke proclaimed that the good news is to bring “great joy for all the people,” even to the lowest in society’s hierarchy, the shepherds. Jesus the Messiah will be the Savior and Lord of all the people. Also in Luke, Simeon, a priest in the temple, recognized the child Jesus to be the “Lord’s Messiah” (2:26).

Peter’s Confession

In the Gospels of Matthew (16:13–20), Mark (8:27–30), and Luke (9:18–20), there is an account of Jesus with his disciples where he asked the question, “Who do people say that I am?” (Mark 8:27). They responded, “Some

say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets" (Matt. 16:14). Then Jesus asked, "But who do you say that I am?" This event occurred in the last year of Jesus' ministry. The twelve had been with him for many months and experienced many amazing events in their life together. They had listened to Jesus teaching the crowds as well as themselves, had observed him healing persons of many afflictions, and had experienced his authority over the elements of nature as well as the human condition. Whereas the crowds misunderstood Jesus' identity, the disciples had developed a special relationship with and knowledge of him. As a result of this relationship and knowledge, Peter spoke on behalf of the twelve what God had revealed to them, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:16), "You are the Messiah" (Mark 8:29), and "The Messiah of God" (Luke 9:20). Jesus the Messiah was the one who fulfilled the promise of the prophets and would establish a new, transforming reign of God in the midst of a people and a world that had lost their way. How does Jesus the Messiah bring hope to our church, our nation, and our world today?

Trial and Crucifixion

In each of the Gospel accounts of the trial and crucifixion there are references to Jesus as Messiah, but we will focus on four passages in Luke. The day after celebrating the Passover with his disciples, praying at the Mount of Olives, and being arrested, Jesus was brought before the assembly of the chief priests and scribes. "They said to him, 'If you are the Messiah, tell us.' He replied, 'If I tell you, you will not believe; and if I question you, you will not answer'" (22:67–68). The interrogation continued with Jesus referring to himself as Son of Man, which the members of the assembly twist into the phrase, "Son of God." (We will focus on these two titles in the next session.) Jesus refused to answer directly that he is the Messiah, the Son of Man, or the Son of God. He replied, "You say that I am" (22:70). That was enough of an admission for the assembly to declare, "What further testimony do we need? We have heard it ourselves from his own lips" (22:71), which was sufficient evidence to bring Jesus for trial before Pilate.

Though the Jewish authorities are mostly concerned about the religious nature of Jesus' identity and work, the charges they bring before Pilate against him are more political than religious, "We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the



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emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king" (23:2). Instead of asking Jesus if he was the Messiah, Pilate asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" (23:3a). Again, Jesus refused to give a direct answer but said, "You say so" (23:3b). Pilate found no fault in Jesus, but to satisfy the religious authorities he sent Jesus to Herod for further interrogation, after which Herod returned him to Pilate. At the insistence of the crowds, Jesus was condemned to death by crucifixion. As he hung on the cross, two times Jesus is identified as Messiah. One was by leaders in the crowd, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" (23:35). The second reference is from one of the criminals hanging beside him, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" (23:39).

We have seen in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke that Jesus is perceived as Messiah by a variety of entities: the angel of the Lord, Simeon the priest in the temple, Peter on behalf of the twelve, the religious authorities, Pilate, people in the crowd, and a criminal. Yet, Jesus never said of himself that he was the Messiah, but neither did he deny it when others identified him as such.

In the Gospel of John

The writer of the Gospel of John employs the term *Messiah* seventeen times, of which three are in reference to John the Baptist. Twelve references are to Jesus as the Messiah; two by the Samaritan woman at the well, five by the people in the crowd, two by the Jewish leaders, one by Martha, one by the disciple Andrew, and one by the writer of the Gospel at the conclusion. Two times the references are to the Hebrew Scriptures.

The narrative of the Samaritan woman who met Jesus at a well is a very revealing passage (John 4:1–42). At first glance this is a scandalous encounter. No respectable

Jewish man would ever be found alone with a woman, let alone a Samaritan woman. The dynamics of this encounter must be left for another in-depth Bible study. The focus of this study is on Jesus the Messiah. After an exchange regarding a drink from the well, living water, past husbands, and worshiping God in spirit and truth, the woman said to Jesus, "I know that Messiah is coming. When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us" (4:25). What follows is one of two instances in the Gospels where Jesus revealed that he was the Messiah when he said, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you" (4:26). In her notes on this passage Gail R. O'Day writes, "When Jesus speaks this way, he is making a direct connection with the divine name (as in Ex. 3:14, 'I AM WHO I AM'), in order to identify himself as the one in whom God is visible and made known (1:18)."²

Another passage of interest is John 7:40–44, in which we find three of the twelve references to Jesus as the Messiah. There was discussion among the crowd regarding the identity of Jesus. Some thought he was a prophet but others saw him as the Messiah. Then a question was asked, "Surely the Messiah does not come from Galilee, does he? Has not the scripture said that the Messiah is descended from David and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David lived?" (7:41b–42). We see again the connection between the expected Messiah to David and Bethlehem. The people believed their Scriptures that a Messiah would come as the prophet Micah prophesied, "But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days" (Micah 5:2). Judith E. Sanderson writes, "Bethlehem, a small town several miles south

of Jerusalem, (is) famous only because it was David's birthplace. When the time comes and the new David is born, his rule will guarantee a restored Israel in prosperity and security. As centuries passed and no Davidic dynasty was reinstated, this text became an excellent candidate for reinterpretation by applying it to Jesus."³

Conclusion

There is so much more in the rest of the New Testament related to the topic of this session. Jesus is proclaimed as "Savior" twenty-one times and as "Lord" more than five hundred times. Perhaps the concluding words of the Second Epistle of Peter capture the essence of what we have been exploring, "But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen" (3:18).

About the Writer

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Endnotes

1. Susan Ackerman, "Isaiah's Introduction," in *The New Interpreter's Study Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 955.
2. Gail R. O'Day, *The New Interpreter's Study Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 1915.
3. Judith E. Sanderson, *The New Interpreter's Study Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 1309.

DAILY BIBLE READINGS

Sunday: Isaiah 9:1–7 and 11:1–9

In both passages the prophet writes of a “new day” when God’s *shalom* shall reign. Think of the needs for *shalom* in our day and pray for the peace of God to become real in your life and world.

Monday: Jeremiah 23:5–8 and 33:14–18

In a time of despair God promised to raise up a Deliverer, one who would restore Israel to a place of honor. Pray for those who despair today that they may experience hope from God.

Tuesday: Luke 2:1–38

God’s messenger brought good news to the least of the people, the shepherds. Think of the least in our communities. Pray that they may receive good news from God’s modern messengers, us.

Wednesday: Matthew 16:13–20

Jesus asks us today, “Who do you say that I am?” There are many answers to the question. Who do you say Jesus is to you? Pray that God may reveal to you the true nature of Jesus.

Thursday: John 4:1–42

The Samaritan woman knew a Messiah would come and Jesus affirmed that he was the Messiah. Pray that Jesus’ presence in your life may transform and empower you.

Friday: John 10:22–39

What would it take for you to be convinced that Jesus is the Messiah? Pray that God may reveal to you more of the truth about Jesus.

Saturday: Luke 23:26–43

Jesus knew clearly his mission would lead him to the cross. Think of ways Jesus is crucified today. Pray for wisdom, faith, and courage in your walk with Jesus to the cross.