

R

eadings: John chapters 3, 4, 6, 10 and 11, Luke 12v1-12, 14v25-35, Matthew chapters 5-7.

As John the Baptist baptised he called on the people to repent of their sins. The whole concept of being baptised was one that indicated a new start. Normally only proselytes to Judaism from other nations were baptised. Jews were automatically assumed to be part of the chosen people of God. Yet here was John baptising Jews, and calling on them to repent. He was preparing the way for Jesus who he said would "baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire" (Luke 3v16).

Jesus came to a people who had misunderstood the nature of their relationship with God. They had never automatically been the children of God just because of their physical birth. The people of Israel had entered a covenant with the living God, and this was always far more than just a list of rules to be obeyed. It was always about a relationship between God and His people, as they obeyed Him and He dwelt among them and ruled over them. The intention of the Law had always been to expose the peoples' sin so that they would turn to God for forgiveness. They could do their best to obey the Law, but their constant inability to live up to the terms of the covenant would have meant they came back seeking God's forgiveness day after day after day.

The way of salvation and the nature of discipleship taught by Jesus in the gospels

"For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3v16)

In the short term God gave them the sacrificial system as a means of seeking His mercy, but as the book of Hebrews explains, the blood of bulls and goats could never really deal with sin and guilt. The people of Israel who believed and obeyed the word of God, and sought His forgiveness in sacrifices that He had ordained, were in reality saved by the blood of Jesus shed on the cross just as we are.

So in Matthew chapters 5-7 Jesus teaches the people in the message that has become known as the Sermon on the Mount, and shows them that God's standard is one they can never possibly even begin to live up to. He explains to them that obedience is not just a matter of outward observance of the Law, but it is a matter of inward purity and obedience. So a man who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery, and a man who hates his neighbour has already committed murder. As had always been the intention of the Law, this was to show them their need to turn to God for salvation (see Galatians 3v24).

The idea that obedience to the Law was about relationship should have

been familiar to the people as it was a constant refrain of the men of God in Israel's history. In 1 Samuel 15v22-23 Samuel says to Saul, "Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams".

So Jesus was explaining to the people of Israel in His time that they were sinners who could not possibly ever meet God's holy standards. He called them to repentance. "From that time on Jesus began to preach, 'Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near'" (Matthew 4v17).

But Jesus had come to the nation that had rejected God's covenant from the word go. This was the nation that had rejected and murdered the prophets sent to call them to repentance. This was the nation made up of people who considered themselves righteous because of their physical descent, and yet who did not seek after God.

Most of Jesus' public teaching was done using parables. In the parable of the wedding banquet He told Israel that because of their rejection of God's invitation,

the invitation was now to be made open to whoever would respond to it (Luke 14v15-24). In the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son He showed them God's desire for lost sinners to return to Him and be found by Him. He was clear that He had not come for those who are so self-righteous they think they don't need any help, but He had come for those who know they are sinners and long for God's forgiveness.

As Jesus explained to His disciples, "This is why I speak to them in parables, 'Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.' In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah, 'You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.'" (Matthew 13v13-15).

Jesus was preparing the way for His death and resurrection, when the New Covenant would replace the Old Covenant. No longer would membership of the nation of Israel be the way to know God. Now the way would be opened for all who would trust in Jesus as their Saviour to know God. As Jesus explained in Matthew chapters 5-7, He had fulfilled the Law and the Prophets.

Some of the clearest teaching regarding salvation in the gospels is found in the gospel of John. In John chapter 3 Jesus tells Nicodemus that in order to inherit the Kingdom of God a man must be born again of water and the spirit. He explains that He must be lifted up on the cross so that all who will look to Him and believe might be saved, as the Israelites looked to the bronze serpent in the wilderness and were healed. He explains that whoever will believe in Him will receive eternal life, and whoever will not believe is condemned.

In Matthew chapter 6 Jesus explains to the crowds after the feeding of the five thousand that His flesh and blood would be given for the life of the world. He tells them, "Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise Him up at the last day" (John 6v54). Again and again He calls on the people to believe on Him, the one God has sent.

Jesus also gave a lot of teaching on the nature of discipleship for those who did believe in His Name. In Matthew chapter 5 we find a description of what it is to be blessed – this defines the character of a true disciple.

In a number of places Jesus tells His disciples that following Him involves dying to ourselves: "If anyone would come after Me, He must deny Himself and take up His cross daily and follow Me. For whoever wants to save His life will lose it, but

whoever loses His life for Me will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self? If anyone is ashamed of Me and My words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when He comes in His glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels" (Luke 9v23-26).

After Jesus had died and risen again, He met with two of the disciples on the road to Emmaus and "beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, He explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning Himself" (Luke 24v27).

When the Holy Spirit came He carried out the ministry Jesus had promised He would: "But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all truth." (John 16v13).

Therefore the main preaching of the gospel, and teaching of the doctrines of salvation, was done by the apostles after Jesus ascended to heaven, and can be found in the New Testament books that follow Acts. Acts itself contains a record of some of the sermons that the apostles preached as they explained the way of salvation.

But the clearest verse in the Bible is from Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus: "God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3v16).