

1 Since we had a Greek alphabet lesson earlier, it's time to learn some Biblical Hebrew. Hebrew is read from right to left, so if that's a problem for you, you might consider standing on your head as you read it. Perhaps it's easier to simply take my word for it that the strange symbols you see on the screen are the Hebrew word that we translate as "Messiah." Just like the Greek word we saw earlier that we translate as "Christ," Messiah also means anointed, or anointed one. When we say Jesus is the Christ of God, it's really the same thing as saying that Jesus is God's Messiah. In fact, if you look up Mark 1:1 in a variety of Bible translations, you'll see that some translate Mark's description of Jesus as "Christ" and some as "Messiah." They both mean "anointed one of God," and in this particular context, they mean very specifically Jesus, who Mark believes was uniquely anointed and sent to save God's people and God's world. That's what Mark believes about who Jesus is. What do you believe?

If you call Jesus the Messiah, the Christ, or the anointed one of God, then presumably you agree with Mark that Jesus has come to bring salvation to the world. Incidentally, even the name "Jesus" means something like, "God saves." But what is salvation? How exactly is it that Jesus saves? What does Jesus save us from? What does Jesus save us to? And what does Jesus save us for? What is it that you believe?

2 I'm going to give you one of those quizzes¹ now that I absolutely hate to take. They're aggravating, because they force you to make a simple choice when you know all along that life is more complicated. For this quiz, I want you to make one, and only one, choice among four possible answers. The question is, what's the most important way that you understand Jesus is the Messiah. In other words, how does Jesus save? If you're like me, you'll want to pick "E) All of the above." But that's not an option I'm giving you. So, what do you believe is the most important way in which Jesus saves? Is it A), Jesus saves by being born, by God stepping into creation in the flesh? Is it B), Jesus saves us through the example of the way he lived his life and his teaching that's preserved for us in the Bible? Is it C), Jesus saves us because he allowed himself to be crucified, dying a criminal's death

¹ <http://hackingchristianity.net/2013/03/primer-on-atonement-theories.html>

after living a faultless life and taking the punishment for our crimes? Or is it D), Jesus saves us because he rose from the dead, proving his divinity and showing us that we too can rise from the dead?

3 Another way to describe this saving work of Jesus the Messiah is “atonement,” the way Jesus works to make us “at-one” with God. Depending on your church background, you might have had one or more of these understandings of atonement emphasized over others in sermons and Sunday School lessons.

Some see the birth of Jesus as the main event, with everything else that follows as secondary. By stepping into creation, God turned everything upside down and began the process of restoring creation. This was a popular emphasis in the early church, but I don’t know too many Christians who would choose it today.

Some churches seem to emphasize the life and teaching of Jesus above all else, looking primarily to the example of Jesus as a moral guide as our source of salvation. Unitarian and United Church of Christ churches tend to lean in this direction, as do some progressive United Methodist Churches.

In mainstream, historic United Methodism, a heavy emphasis has been placed on the crucifixion, which is part of the reason why we observe the season of Lent while some other Christian denominations don’t. We’re likely to say things like, “Jesus died for our sins.”

Finally, some church traditions emphasize the Easter resurrection of Jesus above all else. I’d guess this is increasingly common in the megachurch movement, although many United Methodists live here in their understanding of how Jesus saves.

Does Jesus save in all of these ways? Absolutely. But how we understand Jesus to save influences not only how we work out our faith in following Jesus, it also influences how talk to and relate to other people and the picture we paint of a hopeful future. In other words, how we understand Jesus saves influences what we believe Jesus save us to and for.

4 Let’s rewind the clock and get back to Jesus and the disciples, because none of what we’ve just been talking about was anywhere in the realm of experience or understanding for the first disciples. The dominant understanding of how the Messiah would save was by expelling the occupying Roman army. When the crowds shouted “save us” to Jesus as he entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, Roman occupation was the biggest problem they wanted

saving from. They expected Jesus to save in the way people had always been saved from armies- by marshaling their own army underneath the standard of a new king, Jesus. Jesus was God's Messiah, the deliverer anointed by God to lead Israel into a new age of political independence, just as Moses before him delivered God's people from slavery in Egypt. So when Jesus started talking about being crucified, can you begin to understand Peter's shock and why he reached out to Jesus in protest? What kind of crazy nightmare could envision nailing Jesus to a cross as the means by which God would deliver Israel? That's no way to raise an army, and it's certainly no way to crown a new king!

Remember, at this time there was no celebration of Christmas, no New Testament documenting the life and teachings of Jesus, no season of Lent and Holy Week, and no Easter Sunday. All the things we lean on as Christians to frame our understanding of Jesus the Messiah were absent for those first disciples. No wonder they were horrified and confused by what Jesus told them. Rising from the dead? Suffering? That's no way to muster a popular uprising!

5 But we today can't claim that ignorance. We know that Jesus the Messiah didn't come as a lion, but as a lamb. Is Jesus a powerful deliverer? Absolutely, but the power of Jesus the Messiah is made perfect in his humble service to us and all creation when he gave himself over as a sacrificial lamb, perfect in every way, yet willingly giving himself over in death as a substitute for us. By the way, that's a substitutionary theory of atonement, in classic Wesleyan style. It's not the only way to understand the way Jesus saves, but it's still pretty mainstream and it's a dramatic contrast to the 1st Century expectation of God's Messiah as a King and Commander In Chief.

Jesus doesn't save by savagely rending his enemies, but by serving the least, lost, and left out. We who have heard or read or even watched the Gospel accounts over and over again know exactly what Jesus meant when he said, "Don't run from suffering, embrace it."² Jesus didn't have just any suffering in mind- Jesus wasn't a masochist. The suffering Jesus called us to is suffering for the sake of building God's Kingdom, suffering for the sake of serving others, suffering that at least is the metaphorical equivalent of taking up our crosses

² Mark 8:34. The Message.

and following Jesus.

And as to the “saved to” and “saved for” of our salvation, can you see the implications? Jesus doesn’t save us to political independence so that we can lord it over rival nations and unsaved neighbors. Jesus saves us to peace with God and peace with our neighbors that comes through self-sacrificial love so that all of creation might enjoy the same. That’s the prize that Jesus the Messiah has to offer us, peace in the present life as well as in an eternal life to follow. But that’s who I say that Jesus the Messiah is. What do you say?

6 I love this picture of Jesus, because even though we can mostly agree on his name, there is a vast variety of understandings of who Jesus is. Some of what we think we know about Jesus is probably just flat out wrong, but I have a feeling that God is so complex, so much bigger than what our minds can comprehend, that some of the things we end up arguing about are simply different facets of who Jesus is.

Jesus the Messiah came to save us. Did Jesus come to save us from trouble, hardship, sacrifice, and suffering? Probably not. Did Jesus come to save us to prosperity without responsibility, strength without compassion, resurrection without death? Nope. Did Jesus serve us so that we would learn to serve ourselves? Most definitely not.

Jesus the Messiah came as a servant to us that we might learn to serve God and God’s world. Does that sound like good news to you? If you’ve lived your life by primarily serving yourself, as frankly many if not most of us have, it probably doesn’t. But don’t despair. As long as you still have breath in your lungs, it’s not too late to turn around and follow the Messiah. I invite you to do so now with me, as I lead us in prayer.

Dear Jesus, Messiah and Christ of God, your example and teaching of self-sacrifice is as counter-cultural today as it was two thousand years ago. I do want to follow you, but it’s so hard to lay down my life for the sake of someone else. I know that you are the way to life, and that only in surrendering my life can I find it. Please help me to do that, not only for my own sake, but for the sake of this world and the kingdom of God that you came to usher in. Amen.



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