

BASIC NEW TESTAMENT

LESSON 7--A SUMMARY OF JESUS' TEACHINGS: PART I - MESSIAHSHIP

To understand the full significance of the terms Messiah and Messiahship, we need to recall the messianic expectation of the Hebrew people. Various writings, including Daniel (Old Testament) and I Enoch (Pseudepigrapha), had helped to keep this expectation alive. By Jesus' time it had become a steady flame, ready to burst into a conflagration when the right leader appeared.

The older prophetic writings also comforted them with its prophecies of restoration and fulfillment. For example:

He will raise a signal for the nations,
and will assemble the outcasts of Israel,
and gather the dispersed of Judah
from the four corners of the earth.

--Isaiah 11:12

Thus says the Lord God: I will take the people of Israel from the nations among which they have gone, and will gather them from every quarter, and bring them to their own land. I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel; and one king shall be king over them all.

--Ezekiel 37:21-22

Under these conditions, it is not strange that self-styled messiahs arose and flourished for a time. However, they disappeared when their lack of power became apparent, or when they met their fate at the hands of the Roman authorities. Anyone with a new message might expect to be greeted as Jesus was, with the question: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" (Luke 7:19)

The woman of Samaria said to Jesus, I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." (John 14:25)

THE MEANING OF MESSIAH IN EARLIER TIMES

The terms messiah and messianic are derived from the Hebrew word meaning "to anoint." The term was first used to describe the anointing or consecrating of weapons of war, altars, holy vessels, and even persons with the fat of an animal sacrifice. Later, olive oil was used. The sanctity and power of Deity were thus conferred upon the anointed person. He became a Messiah, one consecrated to a definite task.

The term messianic is also applied to the varied prophecies of the Old Testament and later Hebrew literature. These writings describe the noble destiny which the Hebrew people believed God had in store for them. Yet in its more inclusive sense, this type of prophecy or expectation was not limited to the Jews.

Such hopes and desires, including the craving for peace and the sense of harmony with God and man, are as old as humanity. These hopes and desires have often been centered in a given person, a leader who would have the insight to lead his people out of their difficulties and toward their higher aspirations. Moses, of course, is an outstanding example.

The victories and glories of the united monarchy, under David and Solomon, were remembered and idealized during later periods of distress. The Davidic motif, which recurred throughout later prophecies, presented pictures of the ideal ruler and state. (See Isaiah 9:1-7; 11:1-10) Still later prophecies transferred their hopes to Jahveh Himself. Many believed that by some great act of deliverance, God would fulfill the hopes of His people and establish the everlasting kingdom of the Most High.

THE MEANING OF THE MESSIAH IN JESUS' TIME

In Jesus' day, the Jewish people had no clear program toward fulfillment of the Messianic Expectation. The apocalyptic writings, which influenced them, declared that God would intervene supernaturally to make the Jewish nation supreme over its enemies. These writings pictured the Messiah as coming from God to deliver and preserve Israel, and to rule and judge the world.

During the post-exilic period, the Jews had spread over the whole Roman Empire. At the time of Jesus' ministry, they constituted about 10% of its population. This would have been seen as a potential threat by the Roman authorities.

The New Testament records some of Jesus' conversations with his disciples. Apparently many of his disciples, as well as other followers of Jesus, retained certain popular ideas regarding the Messiah. Yet they could not have been wholly oblivious to Jesus' spiritual idea of the Messiah and his mission.

THE MEANING OF THE MESSIAH IN DIVINE SCIENCE

Jesus revealed the true meaning of the word Messiah in his life and teachings. He showed that each individual is a Savior, a "light of the world," as he manifests the Christ, the Spiritual Self, in everyday life.

The Christ is the Divine Nature inherent within us, the Presence of God or the Creative Principle. The Christ is the Universal Nature of humanity. Jesus is the individualized expression of the Christ. Each one is an individualized expression of Christ, but each must awaken to his or her true nature and show it forth in daily living.

Jesus became conscious of his Christ nature which he sometimes called the Father Within. He recognized only One Mind, the God Mind, and only one Source of Power. He did not claim any exclusive rights to this wisdom and power; he said, "If you are able!--All things can be done for the one who believes" (Mark 9:23). "Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these." (John 14:12)

THE CHRIST LIFE AND THE GOSPELS

The life of Jesus, as presented in the Gospels in both its spiritual and historical dimensions, has universal symbolic meaning. There are several stages that we all experience at one time or another in our spiritual unfoldment. We will briefly discuss four of them here, while recognizing that certain other events (e.g., the baptism discussed in Lesson 14) may be equally significant to the cosmic drama which the gospels present. These steps should be considered not only in relation to the life of Jesus, but in light of our own inner awakening.

THE ANNUNCIATION

The Annunciation refers to the angel Gabriel's appearance to Mary in Luke 1:26-35. Symbolically, Mary is the soul open and receptive to receive the Christ Consciousness. The Annunciation comes to us when we recognize that the Christ can develop in our own consciousness, and that hitherto unknown potentials can thereby open in our lives. Gabriel declares: "You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High..." (Luke 1:31-32)

THE NATIVITY

The Nativity is the first Christmas, and its central event is the birth of the baby Jesus. (Matthew 1:18-25; Luke 2:1-7) Symbolically, it refers to the actual rebirth of the Christ Consciousness within us, as a new "child" coming into our inner world. The Christ is reborn in our own hearts, and we awaken to our true being and identity in the Omnipresence of God. Thus, during the Christmas season we often affirm: "Christ is born in me today."

This rebirth can be a continuing experience and process. Recognizing our true nature, and then expressing it in daily living, we begin to realize that we are born of God, truly God's children and heirs to the riches of His kingdom.

THE CRUCIFIXION

Unlike believers in traditional theology, we do not give primary importance to the crucifixion of Jesus. We do, however, give symbolic importance to its meaning for us today.

The crucifixion refers to the crossing-out of the limited sense of human nature as being subject to sin, sickness, limitation, and death. We lose the illusory sense of separation from God, and find ourselves one with the Unity of Being. In a literal, historical sense, Jesus had to be crucified before he could be resurrected. By analogy, we need to let go of our old, negative, worn out beliefs before we can receive the realization of eternal life and being.

THE RESURRECTION

We recognize the Resurrection as a literal event, in which Jesus overcame death. We also recognize that the same Presence, Power, Life Principle that raised Jesus from the dead is also within us, resurrecting us into Christ Consciousness and quickening us into newness of life. The Christ is our inner Messiah, through which we are consciously unified with the One Mind and its innate wholeness and integrity.

Resurrection is an ongoing process of spiritual discovery and expanding consciousness. Our work is one of overcoming. As we realize the truth of ourselves on a continuing basis, and express it in our daily living, we also find our part in lifting up the consciousness of humanity. "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." (John 12:32)

THE CHRIST WAY--THE I AM WAY

The early followers of Jesus were known as People of the Way. He had taught them a way of life that differed substantially from the Jewish religion of the day which, for the most part, stressed doctrines and ceremonies.

"The Way," as taught by Jesus, is not a religion in the sense in which the term is generally used. It is a life, a way of living that emphasizes consciousness, character, and action. The central idea of the Way is: God is the spirit that is back of all, working in and through all; Spirit is the origin of all manifested being; conscious identity with Spirit is the Source of all power. We are one with the Father, and the Father is one with us. Jesus declared in prayer: "The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me." (John 17:22-23)

The I AM (JHVH) was believed to be the Divine Name revealed to Moses. I AM THAT I AM is the full name, and has been variously defined or interpreted as The God Reality, The Universal Creative Activity, The Fulfiller of Promises. It is a declaration of Reality which includes, within its meaning, all of the inherencies that comprise the Infinite Being.

As Thomas Troward wrote: "Moses views this truth from the standpoint of Universal being, and sees Man evolving from the Infinite Mind and subject to it as the Great Law-giver. Jesus views it from the standpoint of the individual and sees Man comprehending the Infinite by limitless expansion of his own mind, and thus returning to the Universal Mind as a son coming back to his natural place in the house of his Father."

Jesus did not invent the I AM statement. Devotees of Isis used such statements as a way of identifying with the qualities of Isis, the Egyptian goddess of motherhood and fertility.¹ The practice then spread as a kind of magical formula, in which people identified with various gods and goddesses.

Jesus' innovation was to use the method to identify not with a mythical god, but with the Allness of God, the one Presence, Mind, and Power. He identified with the All, rather than with a limited aspect of being, however visualized. In this way, he went beyond magic and superstition, replacing it with a divine, metaphysical science. Some of Jesus' I AM statements are as follows:

"BEFORE ABRAHAM WAS, I AM." (John 8:58) - Jesus must have thrown a verbal bombshell into the midst of a group of listeners, when he made this astounding statement. From their remarks, it is evident that they had no conception of its meaning. Jesus proclaimed his recognition of the eternal Christ in him and in every individual. He declared the eternal reality of I AM, the essence of our being.

"I AM THE BREAD OF LIFE." (John 6:35) - The miracle of feeding the 5000 although performed on the previous day, was really a prelude to this I AM statement. As a result of the miracle, his Galilean followers were eager to make him king. When they went looking for him and finally found him, Jesus declared: "You are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves." (John 6:26) In other words, Jesus recognized a human tendency to be concerned with the benefits which result, rather than the principle which acted in producing the demonstration.

When they asked for a sign, such as was given their ancestors in the wilderness under Moses Jesus instead affirmed the true bread of life, the spiritual food which the Father is ready to give to all of His children. In essence, he said that "Pure Spirit is the bread of life." He who is conscious of his spiritual nature, the Christ, cannot know lack, for there is neither hunger nor thirst in the Spirit.

"I AM THE WAY. AND THE TRUTH. AND THE LIFE. NO ONE COMES TO THE FATHER EXCEPT THROUGH ME." (John 14:6) - Jesus was not speaking from the plane of personality. It was, as always, the eternal Christ of him speaking of the way of Spirit, the way of the I AM Consciousness. He was saying, in substance: "Let yourself become aware of the Christ within you, your conscious identity with the great I AM, and you will become conscious of the truth of yourself and of your world. In that consciousness, you will be aware of the divine life within you and in all people."

"No one comes to the Father" except through the consciousness of our own Christ nature. In that realization, Divine Wisdom shows the way, Divine Truth illumines it, and Divine Life sustains us.

"I AM THE TRUE VINE AND MY FATHER IS THE VINEGROWER...I AM THE VINE YOU ARE THE BRANCHES. - - IF YOU ABIDE IN ME AND MY WORDS ABIDE IN YOU, ASK FOR WHATEVER YOU WISH. AND IT WILL BE DONE FOR YOU" (John 15:1,5,7) - When Jesus said, "I am the vine, you are the branches," he referred to the One Life, God Life, the activity of Spirit which is the principle of life active in every individual being.

To abide means to stay, to be steadfast in our faith and in our realization of Truth. To the degree that we abide consciously in the Indwelling Christ, Jesus tells us that we shall ask what we will and it shall be done for us. This is the action of Spiritual Law when we have done our part.

"I AM THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE. WHOSE WHO BELIEVE IN ME, EVEN THOUGH THEY DIE, WILL LIVE." (John 11:25) - In one sense, this declaration climaxed Jesus' teaching. It represents his highest consciousness of the God Presence. In this consciousness he could stand at the tomb of his friend and, after giving thanks, give the command, "Lazarus, come out!" with a calm confidence that the demonstration would be complete.

"I AM" was his recognition of his identity with the Infinite Spirit of Life. One could almost hear him say, "He who believes in me, the eternal Christ of me, and of himself, thought he were to suffer what the world calls death, yet will he live again."

"I am the resurrection and the life." These words, and the demonstration which followed, were a fitting introduction to the closing scenes of Jesus' earthly career, to the crucifixion, the resurrection, and the ascension.

Because we, too, are learning to look through what the world calls death to life eternal, the Easter season brings no sadness. For we no longer see the crucified Jesus, but look beyond to the Triumphant Christ.

Resurrection was possible for Jesus because he knew that there was only life. It was the daily lifting of his thoughts and acts that made the final demonstration possible. And down through the ages, the uplifted consciousness of this man, whom we call Jesus, has inspired uncounted millions to turn from unworthy pursuits and careless living, and to seek the Christ way which alone brings peace and satisfaction.

NOTES

1. Meyer, Marvin W., Editor; The Ancient Mysteries: A Sourcebook; San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1987, pp. 172-174

REQUIRED BIBLE READINGS

Read the Gospel of John as background for Lessons 7-9.

QUESTIONS

1. Explain Messiahship as it was understood in Jesus' time.
2. What does the word Christ mean to a Truth student?
3. Why does the Christ Life, with its several stages as narrated in the Gospels, interest us as Truth students? Briefly discuss the Annunciation, the Nativity, the Crucifixion, and the Resurrection.
4. Give your own interpretation of one of the "I AM" statements of Jesus.