

Question: What is the main or primary message of the Bible?

In last week's column, I started a brief but sketchy overview of the storyline of the Bible that reveals the message that God wants to share full fellowship with each one of us in his presence for eternity. We explored how God was at work in every phase of the story preparing for the coming of the one who would re-establish God's reign and presence with his people. The Old Testament story ended in anticipation of this one who would deal with sin, create a new covenant and reign among God's people forever.

The hopes created by the prophets reached a climax with the opening words of the New Testament: "This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham." Thus, the first four books of the New Testament narrate the birth, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. From these books, we learn of a young virgin named Mary who gave birth to a son conceived by the Holy Spirit. He was to be called Jesus because he would "save his people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21). Mary was told: "He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end" (Luke 1:32-33).

Another prophecy was fulfilled when John the Baptist came to prepare the way for Jesus by announcing: "The time has come . . . The Kingdom of God is near" (Mark 1:1). Shortly thereafter, he baptized Jesus "to fulfill all righteousness" (Matt. 3:16). At the baptism, the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus like a dove and a voice from heaven said: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:10-11). Later, John pointed to Jesus and said: "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29).

As Jesus began preaching, he selected twelve men to follow and learn from him. Going about the countryside and cities of Judea, Galilee and Samaria, Jesus drove out demons from those under their power to demonstrate God's power over Satan. As master of all creation, he calmed the storm at sea and walked on water. The compassion of God was seen in his healing miracles. He also raised the dead to show his power to give eternal life. People were amazed by his deeds and his teaching (Matt. 7:28-29).

However, many of the Jews (especially those among the religious leaders) rejected him as the Son of God, the promised Savior and King. They criticized him for eating with sinners. He was accused of breaking

God's law by healing on a Sabbath day and of blasphemy because he said to a paralytic, "Your sins are forgiven." They also accused him of working in league with the devil because he was casting out demons.

After months of plotting, the religious leaders were able to arrest Jesus and bring him to trial before the Roman authorities. Using false witnesses and charges of treason, they finally gained permission to crucify an innocent Jesus on a cross between two thieves. But in doing this, they were playing into the hands of God who had planned for him to die for the sins of the world.

However, as he had promised, he arose from the grave on the third day and appeared to his followers over a period of forty days. Just before ascending back into heaven, he commanded the twelve to go tell the good news of what he had done to all nations. They were so convinced that he was the promised Son of God who had risen from the dead that they were ready to die before they would deny him.

The book of Acts tells how the Holy Spirit was sent upon the first disciples and how they went into all the world with the message of salvation. Beginning in Jerusalem and Judea, they went into Samaria and to the ends of the earth with the message of reconciliation with God through faith in Jesus Christ. The more the early Christians were persecuted, the more they increased in number, spread out into the world and formed churches that sought to live by the teachings of Jesus. The twenty-one letters of the New Testament were written by Holy Spirit-guided men to churches and individuals to teach them how to deal with problems that arose and to encourage them as Christians.

Revelation, the last book of the Bible, is a highly figurative presentation of warfare between God and evil. It teaches that no matter how powerful and awful evil may be God's power is greater. At the end, all evil will be destroyed forever. Near the end of Revelation, the author tells us that he saw "a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away." He also heard a loud voice from the throne of God saying: "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (Rev 21:1-5). Although the conclusion to God's story in the Bible is complete, the final scenes are yet to come when Jesus returns. The Bible ends with the prayer, "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus" (Rev. 22:20).

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