

## An Overview of the New Testament in Eight Weeks

Arden C. Autry, PhD

### Introduction

An eight-week overview cannot cover everything in the New Testament. Instead we will focus on some of the **key events** and some of the most important **contributions** by individual NT writers. With that as our aim we hope to gain a sense of the New Testament's unity, diversity, and theological development.

The approach of this series will be **partly chronological**, but only in a general way. Obviously the events of the Gospels precede the events of Acts, and the events in Acts partially overlap with the historical contexts for some of Paul's Epistles. But the earliest Epistle of Paul was almost certainly written before the first Gospel was written, and the Book of James was probably written before Paul's earliest.

With a strict chronological order being out of the question for such a series, the approach taken will be **somewhat canonical** (taking the books in the order found in the Bible). So, for example, we will treat Matthew before Mark, even though most NT scholars (including the author of this series) believe Mark was written before Matthew.

When we get to the Epistles of Paul in Lessons 5-6, the canonical approach will not serve as well. The canonical order of Paul's Epistles goes generally from longest to shortest, not from earliest to latest (e.g., the Thessalonian letters were written years before Romans). To attempt a chronological approach, however, would involve too much repetition and historical arguments for the chosen order. And there are too many epistles to summarize each one. So we will not attempt to follow a strict biblical order or a strict chronological order. The most efficient approach to Paul's letters will be **topical**. We will group certain epistles together in a given lesson because of common themes or emphases.

Hebrews and the General Epistles (Lesson 7) will likewise be treated in a topical manner. In this case, a brief summary of each book is more practical. Note that John's Epistles will be dealt with in Lesson 3, alongside John's Gospel.

After the Epistles we finish, appropriately, with the Book of Revelation (Lesson 8). Revelation was relevant and timely for the first recipients, just as Galatians was. But at some level Revelation is definitely about the future (for the writer and for us). It is also almost certainly the latest book written for the New Testament. So at the end of the series we return to both a chronological and a canonical order. But getting there in eight weeks requires "changing trains" along the way—from chronological to canonical to topical, then back to chronological!

To fill historical gaps you may find in these lessons, I recommend *How to Read the Bible Book by Book*, by Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart (Zondervan). Some may have this book. There are also many good Bible dictionaries, handbooks, and more information than anyone can handle on the internet!

*Note to the teachers: More material is written in each lesson than can be covered in one session. I recommend reading through each lesson and then focusing your teaching on one, two, or three points you think would be most helpful in the class you're teaching. That choice could change from one class to another.*

**Lesson 1—Unfinished business**

- A. OT promises and prophecies yet to be fulfilled
  - Abraham—a descendant to bless all families
  - David—a kingdom and throne forever
  - Holy Spirit—for all God's people
- B. Matthew's Gospel: emphasis on fulfillment of Scripture
- C. Emphasis on Jesus' identity
  - Son of David—Messianic expectations going back to 2 Sam. 7
  - Son of God—Jesus' most important identity
  - Son of Man—Jesus' favorite self-designation says more than meets the eye.

**Lesson 2—Light refracted through the prism of Four Gospels**

- A. Mark's Gospel: action, action, action!
  - Jesus as sacrificial Servant of the Lord
- B. Luke's Gospel: Jesus as Savior of the world
  - Gentile perspective
  - Outsiders-insiders

**Lesson 3—John's Gospel and Epistles**

- A. The Word (God) has become flesh (human)
- B. Jesus' identity and reality as shared emphases in the Gospel and Epistles
- C. Focus on Jesus more than on "the kingdom"—Jesus is life!

**Lesson 4—The Book of Acts**

- A. Jesus' life and ministry continues in/through the early church.
- B. Jesus and the church work by the Holy Spirit's power and guidance.
- C. The Gospel is for all!
- D. From behind closed doors to the ends of the earth!

**Lesson 5—Paul's Epistles**

- A. The Gospel is for all!
- B. Galatians: Life is in Jesus, for Gentiles and Jews.
- C. Romans: Salvation is for all, received by faith from God's grace.
- D. Ephesians and Colossians: the fullness and finality of Christ

**Lesson 6—Paul's Epistles (cont.)**

- A. New ways of thinking: Jesus changes everything, including our culture!
- B. 1 & 2 Corinthians: Some Greek values are overturned by the Gospel of Jesus.
- C. Philippians: the humbled and exalted path of Jesus and his disciples
- D. Philemon: "The slave is your brother."
- E. Pastoral Epistles: Guidance for those who guide.

**Lesson 7—Hebrews and General Epistles**

- A. Hebrews: encouragement through knowing Christ's supremacy and all-sufficiency
- B. James: True wisdom and faith are practical.
- C. 1 & 2 Peter: Christian identity in the face of dangers outside and inside the church
- D. Jude: Hold on to the faith once-for-all delivered to the saints!

**Lesson 8—The Book of Revelation (and related texts elsewhere in the NT)**

- A. What did John see? Present? Future?
- B. How do we approach this puzzling book?
- C. Matthew 24-25: how to be ready for the end
- D. 1 and 2 Thessalonians: certainty and uncertainty
- E. Unfinished business

\*The English Standard Version (ESV) is quoted throughout this series, unless otherwise noted.

Appendix 1: timeline from the Gospels to Revelation

Appendix 2: order of books chronologically (when they were possibly written) This will be somewhat problematic. Fee and Stuart, *Book by Book*, pp. 443-44, have a handy list, but I disagree with it at a couple of points.

Appendix 3: Christianity's relationship to the Roman Empire in the first century

**Overview of the New Testament**  
**Lesson 1: Loose Ends Coming Together**  
Unfinished Business from the OT  
Matthew Emphasizes Fulfillment  
Matthew Emphasizes Jesus' Identity

**Introduction to the Lesson**

Matthew is a long book with many elements. For purposes of this series, I chose to concentrate most of the attention on Jesus' **identity** as shown by Matthew. An alternative would be to focus more on Jesus' teaching (Sermon on the Mount, parables, etc.) or perhaps on his miracles. These things will be touched on in passing, but always with a view toward what these things tell us about who Jesus is. Jesus' identity is why we have a Gospel of Matthew and the rest of the New Testament.

**An "introduction" to Matthew**

Before surveying some of Matthew's key emphases, a few words of "introduction" are in order. "Introduction" in Biblical studies is a semi-technical term for issues concerning authorship, sources, time and purpose of writing, first intended audience, etc. This will be kept brief, since this series is intended to be an overview of the entire NT.

When was Matthew written? No one can say for sure. The best conservative scholarship suggests it was written in the 50s or 60s AD. Historically Matthew was regarded as the oldest of the four Gospels, but most scholars today believe Mark came earlier, but within that same approximate time—50s or 60s. There are still good scholars who regard Matthew as written first.

Did Matthew have sources for his writing? Most NT scholars think Matthew used Mark as a basic outline for the chronology of Jesus' ministry. As one of the Twelve, he would not need to borrow an outline, but they did not have copyright laws in those days. And any reader quickly sees that, compared to Mark, Matthew has additional narratives (such as Jesus' birth) and large sections of teaching (e.g., the Sermon on the Mount) not found in Mark. What has often been noted, also, is that after Matthew inserts a block of material such as the Sermon on the Mount, he always returns to Mark's chronology. That is *prima facie* evidence for Matthew's use of Mark, which he expanded greatly.

For whom was it written? According to some indications, Matthew might have been written around Antioch, Syria, with a largely Jewish Christian audience in mind. Matthew shows great interest in fulfillment of OT prophecies, something of particular concern to Jewish people. But Matthew also writes with the Gentile mission in view (as in the "Great Commission," 28:18-20). From Acts we know the church in Antioch was a pioneer in mixing Jewish and Gentile Christians (Acts 11:19ff.); they were the mission-minded church that sent Paul and Barnabas on an extended tour, during which many Gentiles and Jews became followers of Jesus (Acts 13-14).

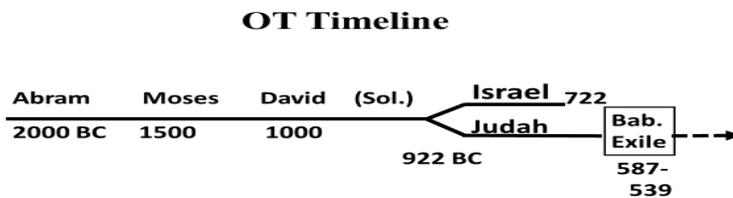
Who wrote this Gospel? According to strong and early tradition, this first book in the NT was written by Matthew (a.k.a. Levi, the former tax collector; see 9:9), one of the Twelve Disciples who became the apostolic foundation of the church (see Eph. 2:20). Jesus had more than twelve disciples with varying degrees of belief in him, but Jesus thought it was important to have *twelve* selected disciples. These could be apprenticed by him and sent out ("apostles" means "sent ones") to proclaim the Kingdom and heal the sick in his name, with his authority. Matthew 10:1-4 lists the Twelve, and Matthew is one of them, although the writer never refers to himself

directly as one of the Twelve. (The other Gospel writers likewise never name themselves as “authors”; their books are about Jesus, not about themselves).

### Unfinished business from the Old Testament

A novice reader of the Bible might pick up a Gospel and get some sense of the message, although perhaps more with John than with Matthew. Matthew makes so many references to the Old Testament that a new Bible reader (lacking OT knowledge) might find parts of Matthew difficult or mystifying. Such readers, if they press on, will find easier going in the Sermon on the Mount, the parables, and Jesus’ miracles. Still, Matthew’s overall perspective is so influenced by the OT that even the easier parts are better understood by those who can “pick up the thread” of the “unfinished business” of the OT.

In the overview of the OT we presented last year, we focused on the basics of a long timeline of OT history. The essential points were summarized with this diagram:



For purposes of this NT overview the most important points to remember from the OT timeline include the **unconditional promises** made to Abram/Abraham and to David. God promised Abram/Abraham that “all the families of the earth” would be blessed by him and his offspring (Gen. 12:3; 18:18; 22:18). God promised David that his offspring would reign forever, over a kingdom without end (2 Sam. 7:12-16; Isa. 9:6-7, etc.).

Yet no son of David reigned as king in Jerusalem after the Babylonians destroyed the city (including the city walls and the temple) in 587 BC. The Jews were permitted to return from exile (538) after the Medes and Persians crushed Babylon, but the king reigning over Jerusalem was not an heir of David! The reigning king was the Gentile ruler of the vast Persian Empire, which included Judah, with a Jewish governor appointed by the Persians. The Persians were later displaced by Alexander the Great and the four kingdoms that arose after his death (about 323 BC). For generations after that, Judah was ruled by either the Ptolemies (in Egypt) or the Seleucids (in Syria).

Under Seleucid control, the Jews suffered repressive disrespect for their unique faith in the one true God, who had made covenants with Abraham, Moses, and David. The Seleucid ruler Antiochus IV tried to force Greek customs on the Jews; he forbade circumcision and other Jewish observances; and then he desecrated the Jewish temple in Jerusalem (168 BC). This outrage triggered the Maccabean Rebellion, eventually leading to independence for the Judean state (142 BC). But Jewish rulers over this independent state were not royal descendants of David; rather the Maccabees (later called the Hasmonean dynasty) claimed leadership through the office of High Priest. Jewish independence lasted only until 63 BC, when the Roman general Pompey brought his legions into Judea and brought the entire area under Roman control.

Thus Rome is in control of the Holy Land during NT times. And thus no son of David ruled in Jerusalem after the Babylonian conquest of 587! What happened to God’s promise to David? Matthew and other NT writers claim Jesus fulfills that promise, held in suspense for 500 years.

And what about the promise to Abraham to bless all the families of the earth? With Jewish people struggling to survive under Babylonian, Persian, Greek, and then Roman domination, little thought might have been given to that promise, which seemed so distant and so unlikely. Who would have guessed that God would fulfill his promises to both Abraham and David through a son born into a carpenter's family? Yet, as the NT shows, and as we experience the growing reality today, God *is blessing families* all over the earth through Abraham's offspring, Jesus. And we are already part of God's everlasting kingdom by confessing Jesus, who is *both David's offspring and David's Lord* (to the puzzlement of Jesus' opponents in Matt. 22:41-46).

We should note another item of "unfinished business." God had promised to give his Holy Spirit to all his people, enabling them to follow his ways and to receive and share revelations from God (Ezek. 36:26-27; Joel 2:28-29). The context in Ezekiel might lead the reader to think this would happen when Jews returned from Exile. *It did not happen then* (just as David's son did not regain the throne for 500 years). No one guessed beforehand that the Son of David must die on a Roman cross, be raised from the dead, ascend to heaven's throne, and *then* pour out the Holy Spirit on all who repent and acknowledge Jesus as Lord (Acts 2:16-36, esp. 2:33; 2:38-39).

Matthew speaks clearly enough about the Holy Spirit's role in Jesus' birth and ministry, and the promise that Jesus would baptize in the Holy Spirit (1:18, 20; 3:11, 16; 4:1; 12:18, 28). He does not say as much about the Holy Spirit's role in the believer's life (compared with Luke and John). He reports, however, Jesus' promise that "the Spirit of your Father" will speak through the disciples when interrogated about their faith (10:20). Matthew also gives us Jesus' command to baptize "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (28:19).

### **Matthew's Gospel emphasizes fulfillment.**

With the "unfinished business" from the OT in mind, look at the first verse of Matthew: "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham" (Matt. 1:1). Matthew then begins a genealogy with Abraham that comes down to Joseph (2:2-16). Before giving all those names in between (each significant as "links in the chain") Matthew names the *two most important ancestors* of Jesus in light of God's historic promises—to provide worldwide blessing and beneficent leadership through an offspring of *Abraham and David*.

There are other items of interest in this genealogy. If Matthew was particularly interested in writing his Gospel for Jewish Christians (as often stated), Jesus' genealogy would be a matter of great importance to show that Jesus was a legitimate heir of David, and therefore an eligible Messiah (compare Rom. 1:3-4). Often overlooked, however, in the popular characterization of Matthew as "the most Jewish of the Gospels" is how much interest Matthew shows in Gentile participation in the story. This is seen right away in the genealogy.

Notice the few women named in the list of Jesus' ancestors. Sarah is not even mentioned as Isaac's mother. But Tamar is named as the mother of Perez; Rahab is the mother of Boaz; Ruth is the mother of Obed; and "the wife of Uriah" is the mother of Solomon. Of those four women two were certainly Gentiles—Rahab and Ruth—and the other two probably were. Possibly Matthew called Bathsheba "the wife of Uriah" to help make that point. Uriah was known as "the Hittite"; it's not unlikely his wife was a Hittite. If Matthew was willing to name Tamar and Rahab (1:3, 5), he would not blush to name Bathsheba. But if he wanted to emphasize Gentile inclusion in the genealogy of Jesus, naming Gentile women who were part of the line served his purpose. [If you're interested in the puzzles created by differences between Matthew's genealogy

of Jesus (2:2-16) and Luke's genealogy (3:23-38), I recommend R. T. France's commentary in the *Tyndale NT Commentaries* series.]

Matthew's interest in Gentile involvement shows again in his report of the "wise men" searching for the "king of the Jews," whose birth they discerned by observing the sky (2:1-12). We know only that they were "from the east" (2:1). Jewish scribes could tell them to look in Bethlehem, for the Messiah's birth there had been predicted by Micah 5:2 (Matt. 2:5-6).

Matthew so often overtly points out fulfillment of prophecies that we might miss the significance of these early Gentile seekers of Jesus. Isaiah 2:2-4 and Micah 4:1-3 predict that Gentiles will eagerly come to the mountain of the LORD to worship the God of Israel. We can book-end these Gentiles "from the east" with Jesus' "Great Commission" in Matthew 28:18-19, which pointedly tells us to go to "all nations" and "make disciples." Matthew's interest in Gentile inclusion is not as pervasive as in Luke's writings, but Matthew makes his interest clear at the beginning and at the end of his Gospel.

### Other fulfillments of Scripture

Matthew's interest in the fulfillment of prophecy is so evident and frequent that we will mention only a couple of further examples:

1) When Joseph and the family fled to Egypt to avoid the murderous Herod, it set the stage for Jesus to come from Egypt back to Galilee (2:13-15). Matthew notes this as a fulfillment of Hosea 11:1—"Out of Egypt I called my son." The original context in Hosea does not look like a prophecy as we usually think of it. It's helpful to consider this use of the OT to see how Matthew thinks (and, really, it's the perspective of the entire NT).

Matthew sees Jesus as the ultimate fulfillment of Israel's divinely-given purpose: to be a blessing to all the families of the earth (Gen. 12:1-3, etc.). When God delivered Israel from Egyptian slavery, he was keeping his promise to Abraham to bring his descendants back to the Promised Land after a time of suffering in bondage (Gen. 15:13-14). Commissioning Moses to confront the Pharaoh with God's demands, God described Israel as his "firstborn son" (Exod. 4:22-23). In a sense the child Jesus, with Mary and Joseph, "recapitulates" the salvation history of Israel by coming out of Egypt to re-enter the Holy Land.

Another way to explain this is to invoke the terminology and perspective of "typology." In "typology" a later event, person, or thing is **similar** to an earlier event, person, or thing. In this case the similarity is between Jesus' exit from Egypt and Israel's earlier exit. In typology the earlier point of comparison is called a "type" (in the sense of example); the later point of comparison is called an "antitype" (in the sense of filling the place of the type, **not** in the sense of being "against" the type). In biblical typology the antitype is **similar** to the type, but the antitype is **greater than** the type. Israel's Exodus from Egypt was achieved by many unprecedented miracles. How could Jesus' exit from Egypt be greater?

There is only one way to see Jesus' "exodus" as greater than Israel's: we have to see that **Jesus is greater than Israel**, and that his trip back to the Holy Land leads to **greater things** than Israel's escape from slavery and eventual settlement in the Promised Land. Jesus comes back to Israel to grow up in Nazareth (Matt. 2:19-23), then to preach, teach, and heal in God's authority, and then to die and rise from the dead as the vindicated Son of David, whose kingdom has no end! This will also bring the blessing promised to Abraham—all the families of the earth blessed through Abraham's offspring!

Of course this is visible only in hindsight, from this side of the cross, resurrection, ascension, and outpouring of the Holy Spirit. No one reading Hosea 11:1 before Jesus came would have

said, “Here is a prophecy about the Messiah” (unless the reader was a prophet!). But after Jesus accomplished the work of salvation and launched the Holy Spirit movement that continues today, we can look at Hosea 11:1 through the lens of Jesus the Messiah and see how Jesus’ “exodus” was **like** Israel’s but incomparably **greater**.

The NT has many examples of typology. Some are easier to see, as when Jesus says the Son of Man must be “lifted up” as the brass serpent was lifted up in the wilderness (John 3:14-15, referring to Numbers 21:9). Jesus understood what he was saying, but could anyone else understand his meaning until after his crucifixion and resurrection? (More than once we are told his disciples did not understand Jesus until after his resurrection. For examples, see John 2:22; 12:16; Luke 24:6-8, 27, 44-47.)

Typological interpretation of the OT by NT writers is made possible (and defensible) by the centrality of Jesus. The whole story of Scripture has come into focus in a way not possible before Jesus’ triumph. Even now the person who tries to read Scripture (OT or NT) without Jesus as the ultimate revelation of God—as the ultimate “lens” for seeing the Bible and the world—will stumble spiritually over things they do not understand. Only God understands everything. But any human who tries to understand the world or the Bible without Jesus as the unifying focus will be frustrated and maybe even afraid. With Jesus as our focus (knowing he died for our sins and rose victorious over death), we may still have frustrations, but our peace can remain intact, even when we do not understand important matters like loss, suffering, or simple uncertainty.

2) Another example of Jesus’ fulfillment of prophecy (this one easier to see) is Matthew 8:17. In a context where Jesus healed many persons (including the demonized), Matthew says Jesus’ fulfilled Isaiah 53:4—“He took our illnesses and bore our diseases.” In this context, the sense is obvious: Jesus “took” and “bore our diseases” *away*. It’s important also to notice that Jesus was healing people before he suffered the “wounds” (or “stripes,” KJV) by which Isaiah 53:5 says “we are healed.” Being wounded did not empower Jesus to heal people. It would be more accurate to say Jesus took the “wounds” or “stripes” *because he is the healer*.

### **Jesus as the Son of David**—Messianic expectations going back to 2 Samuel 7

Jesus’ descent from David is so important that Matthew mentions it in the first verse of his Gospel. The genealogy which follows goes from Abraham, through David, and down to Joseph, “the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ [Messiah]” (1:16). Matthew does not clarify whether Mary was descended from David, even though he emphasizes later that Joseph was not Jesus’ biological father (1:18-25). But Joseph would have been considered Jesus’ legal father by the community, and that’s all that matters for inheritance purposes. Notice that Joseph is addressed as “Joseph, son of David” by the angel who speaks to him in a dream (1:20).

Jesus does not go around calling himself “Son of David,” but remarkably often people asking Jesus for help addressed him that way. Jesus’ reputation as a healer encouraged many to believe (or hope) he was the promised Messiah, the long-awaited King in David’s line. The enthusiastic crowd greeted Jesus on “Palm Sunday” with that name. Note the following contexts in Matthew:

- 9:27—Two blind men followed Jesus, crying aloud, “Have mercy on us, Son of David.”
- 12:23—Observers of Jesus’ power to heal and cast out demons ask, “Can this be the Son of David?”
- 15:22—A Canaanite woman (a Gentile!) pleads for her demonized daughter, “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David.”

- 20:30-31—Two blind men near Jericho cry out, “Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!”
- 21:9, 15—“Hosanna to the Son of David!”

Even when the term “Son of David” is not used, questions about Jesus as “king” imply questions about being the “Son of David.” Pilate asked, “Are you the King of the Jews?” (27:11). The Roman soldiers mocked Jesus with the words, “Hail, King of the Jews!” (27:29). The mocking charge against Jesus, attached to the cross over his head, stated, “This is Jesus, the King of the Jews” (27:37). And Jesus’ opponents, watching him die, called out in mockery, “He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him” (27:42).

The closest Jesus comes to calling himself “Son of David” is when he silences the Pharisees with a seemingly unanswerable question: If David prophetically calls the Messiah his “Lord,” how can the Messiah be David’s Son? (22:41-46, quoting Psa. 110). Jesus’ resurrection vindicates him as the true Son of David, the Messiah, and comes with the revelation that Jesus is “the Lord,” infinitely older than David, yet paradoxically “Son of David.” The conception in Mary’s womb, by the work of the Holy Spirit (1:20) was the beginning of Jesus’ human life as “Son of David,” but his life as the “Son of God” has no beginning. That’s how David could call his Son his Lord. The Son of David was also the Son of God, to which we now turn.

### **Jesus as the Son of God**—Jesus’ most important identity

Recognizing Jesus as the “Son of David” is important for seeing that God kept his promise to David. That promise is connected to the everlasting Kingdom which Jesus brings wherever he goes (because he is the King!). But **Jesus’ identity as the Son of God** is not only older than his identity as Son of David; it is actually more central to the Gospels, including Matthew. His identity as Son of God is **inseparable from his authority** for what he says and does. Note his identity and authority in the following contexts in Matthew:

- 3:13-17—Jesus’ baptism by John and the Holy Spirit’s descent are mentioned in all four Gospels. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all report the heavenly affirmation: “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (Matt. 3:17; Mark 1:11 and Luke 3:22 have “You are my beloved Son.”)
- 4:1-11—The temptation narrative is detailed in Matthew (and Luke 4:1-13). The divine sonship of the baptism scene becomes the focus of two temptations: “If you are the Son of God,” the tempter says, prove it and use it to your own advantage; use your power to manipulate things to your benefit (4:3, 6). In resisting these temptations, Jesus acts as a true and faithful Son. He is not about his own will but the will of the Father. Successfully defeating these temptations was necessary preparation for Jesus’ choice of the Father’s will throughout his ministry but especially in Gethsemane (26:29).
- 5-7—The Sermon on the Mount, the most famous collection of Jesus’ teachings, is filled with authority, which was discerned by his audience (7:28-29). However they understood Jesus’ manner of teaching, it was certainly different from what they were used to hearing! In Matthew 5, we repeatedly hear Jesus say words like, “You have heard . . . but I say . . .” (5:21-22, 27-28, 31-32, 33-34, 38-39, 43-44). Jesus is not contradicting the OT here; he is correcting the superficial understanding which many had of the Law’s requirements. He corrects the superficial by going to the heart of what it means to be children of God (see 5:45, 48).

Jesus' teaching does not raise the standards of righteousness, but neither does he lower the standards! In 5:17-20 he emphatically states, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. . . .<sup>20</sup> For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Legalistic conformity will not suffice for salvation; only God's transforming love suffices to place us in the Kingdom of Heaven (5:44-45, 48; "kingdom of heaven" is Matthew's Jewish habit of referring to the "kingdom of God," a term Matthew rarely uses (12:28) but which other Gospels regularly use. There is no difference in meaning). Jesus authoritatively disabuses us of the proud notion that we can win our way in by our works; we all must rely on God's work to save us. Jesus does not raise the standards; he does not lower the standards; he raises people to the standards!

In Matthew 6, notice throughout that the Father is our sufficient resource for righteousness and the reason we should do what is right. This is reflected in the model prayer we call "the Lord's Prayer" (6:9-13), where the honor, the Kingdom, and the will of the Father take priority over our needs. Just as important, however, notice how putting first things first *covers* our needs for provision, protection, and deliverance.

# His Kingdom

## Our needs

Jesus' advice on having our needs met is to "seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you" (Matt. 6:33). That's the same priority we see in "the Lord's Prayer."

In Matthew 7:7-11, we get further assurances that our Father in heaven hears our prayers and gives "good things to those who ask him" (7:11). But the context's encouragement to keep asking, seeking, and knocking indicates God wants us to *ask* for things *he already knows* we need (6:33). Why? The reason is because God wants us to be in conversation with him and to develop a relationship with him. God *knows* something *we have to learn*: **our greatest need is God and his Kingdom**. If that greatest need is sought, God will see to it that our other needs are met.

- In Matthew 8-9 we find many illustrations of Jesus' authority beyond what the audience perceived in the Sermon on the Mount (7:28-29).
  - 8:1-4—Jesus *touches* (!) a leper and *commands* him to "be clean" (leprosy was seen as a defiling, unclean condition). He is healed "immediately."
  - 8:5-13—Jesus heals a centurion's servant from a distance, simply by *speaking* with God's authority. The centurion (a Gentile) had watched Jesus at work, and the centurion knew authority comes from being under authority. We cannot *understand* authority until we *stand under* authority.
  - 8:14-17—Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law and "many who were oppressed by demons." Jesus "cast out the spirits with a word" (*logos*; the distinction often made between *logos* and *rhema* is an erroneous use of the words).
  - 8:23-27—Jesus rebukes a storm, bringing calm to the wind and waves. Jesus'

disciples had seen many miracles, but still they marveled at this: “What sort of man is this, that even winds and sea obey him?”

- 8:28-34—Jesus casts out many demons, who recognized him as “Son of God” (8:29). Jesus’ display of authority actually frightened the local residents, who “begged him to leave their region” (8:34).
- 9:1-8—Jesus heals a paralytic man brought by his friends. But first Jesus tells the man: “Your sins are forgiven.” Scribes of the law who were there thought this was blasphemy (9:3). Jesus demonstrated he had rightful authority to pronounce forgiveness by proceeding to command the paralytic to “rise, pick up your bed and go home” (9:6). Commanded by such authority as Jesus had, the man did what he could not do before: “he rose and went home” (9:7). Again we see bystanders being “afraid” of what they had just seen, but “they glorified God, who had given such authority to men” (9:8).
- 9:18-26—Jesus raises a young girl who had just died. (The parallel passages in Mark 5:22-43 and Luke 8:41-46 are interesting to compare.) On the way there, however, “a woman who had suffered from a discharge of blood for twelve years” (9:20) was “instantly” healed after touching the fringe of Jesus’ garment and then hearing Jesus say, “Take heart, daughter, your faith has made you well” (9:22). Please note: this was not faith in faith; it was faith in Jesus. Her faith was that she needed to get near Jesus, near enough to touch his garment. If all she needed was faith in faith, she did not need to fight her way through the crowd to get to Jesus!
- 9:27-31—Jesus heals two blind men. Interestingly, Jesus asks them, “Do you believe that I am able to do this?” They said, “Yes, Lord” (9:28). Jesus touched their eyes and said, “According to your faith be it done to you” (9:29). This passage and the previous one (and several others) show that faith in Jesus can be essential for receiving what he has the power to give. We should note, however, that not every miracle of Jesus was predicated on some person’s faith.

Did the disciples have faith that Jesus could calm the storm before he did? Not much, apparently (8:26). We cannot say whether the dead girl had faith that Jesus would raise her back to life, although Jesus encouraged her parents to “believe” (in the parallel accounts in Mark and Luke). Who, other than Jesus, believed he could feed a multitude with one boy’s lunch? (Matt. 14:13ff. and parallels in Mark 6:32-44, Luke 9:10b-17, and John 6:1-15). Who, other than Jesus, believed he could walk on water? (Matt. 14:22-32)

The point I want to make is this: Faith in Jesus can be key to *receiving* what God alone can do and wants to do, but faith never *gives* God power to work a miracle. Who was there to believe God for creation? No one! God does not need more power; he is all-powerful, omnipotent. Why then does he want us to believe for what he wants to do? Again, the answer is that God wants to develop a relationship with him, a relationship in which we trust him, listen to him, bring our requests to him, and obey him. It is a serious distortion of biblical faith to imagine we can somehow “release God” to do something. It is even worse to imagine we can, by our faith, coerce God in any way to do our will. The whole point of biblical faith is to **let God do his will**, not to **get God to do our will!**

- Matthew 10:1ff.—Jesus has *authority to authorize* his disciples to do the same things they had seen him do: cast out evil spirits and heal every kind of disease. They are, like

Jesus, to announce the Kingdom of heaven, to cleanse lepers, and even raise the dead (10:7-8). In other words, they are to replicate Jesus' three-fold ministry of preaching, teaching, and healing—proclaiming the Kingdom, explaining the Kingdom, and bringing manifestations of the Kingdom through healing and deliverance (as Jesus' ministry is summarized in 4:23-25 and 9:35-38, just before sending out the Twelve.)

They can expect opposition and persecution (10:16ff.), that is, to be treated as Jesus is treated (10:24-25). But they are commanded to “have no fear of” the opponents (10:26ff.), for the final, decisive issue is this: “Everyone who acknowledges me before men, I will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before me, I will also deny before my Father who is in heaven” (10:32-33). Thus, in commissioning The Twelve, Jesus claims to have final authority over everyone's eternal destiny based on their response to himself! Either this is extraordinary arrogance, or it is the declaration of one who truly has such authority. Jesus' resurrection will put that question to rest (28:18-20).

- We might ask “Why twelve disciples/apostles?” Apparently Jesus saw his ministry as a continuation and renewal of the Twelve Tribes of Israel (Jesus put a priority on ministry to Israel; Matt. 10:5-6). Recall that God continued to regard all Twelve Tribes as his covenanted people, even after the political split between (northern) Israel and Judah after Solomon's death. (See 1 Kings 12:16-20.) This number was important enough for Jesus to pray all night before selecting the Twelve (Luke 6:12ff.). And Peter thought it was important enough to lead the other disciples in a prayerful selection of a replacement for Judas (Acts 1:15-26).

Jesus' choice of twelve as a sign of Israel's renewal is matched in significance by the fact that Jesus did not make himself one of the Twelve. Indirectly but clearly this shows Jesus acting and speaking with God's authority to claim the remnant of Israel for himself. If Jesus had made himself one of the Twelve, he could have led a renewal movement, but it would have obscured his uniqueness as the “renewer.” Jesus was not the first in a renewal movement; perhaps John the Baptist could be called that. But Jesus was more than that: he was the Son of God. He was not part of a “messianic movement”; he was the Messiah, the Son of David. (It is inaccurate to say Jesus is the “first Christian.” No, he is the Christ.)

- 11:25-30—Again, in unmistakable language, Jesus declares his unique relationship with the Father. “All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (11:27).
- 14:33—After Jesus comes to them by walking on the surface of a wind-driven sea, the disciples “worshiped him, saying, ‘Truly you are the Son of God.’”
- 16:16—Peter's confession of Jesus' identity: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” This confession did not keep Peter from trying to correct Jesus' expectations of the suffering, dying, and rising that lay ahead (16:21-23). Peter needed more revelation than Jesus' **identity**; he needed a revelation of Jesus' **authority**. He got a taste of it in Jesus' rebuke, “Get behind me, Satan!” (16:23) The authority of Jesus as God's Son would be reinforced by the voice of God himself, about six days later.
- 17:5—On the Mount of Transfiguration, Peter's awestruck chattering was interrupted by the voice of God: “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.” That endorsement is comprehensive and relevant to all of us. In Matthew's context, the

special application to Peter would be something like, “Stop telling my Son what he should and should not do. Listen to him! I endorse everything he has said; stop arguing with him!”

- 26:36-46—In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus prays, “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will” (26:39). Jesus’ sense of relationship with God, his devotion to the Father’s will, and the reality of Jesus’ humanity are nowhere expressed more profoundly than here. We are told he prayed this three times (26:42, 44). (Mark 14:36 cites Jesus’ use of the Aramaic family term, “Abba,” which Mark immediately interprets for his audience as “Father.”)
- 26:63—Interrogating Jesus, the High Priest Caiaphas demands: “Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God,” combining the same terms Peter did in his confession (16:16). More often “Christ” or “Messiah” is combined with “Son of David.” But there is background for calling the Messiah “Son of God,” going all the way back to 2 Samuel 7:14 and Psalm 2:7.
- 27:40, 43—While Jesus was on the cross, “Son of God” was used mockingly by the chief priests and other bystanders. “If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross” (27:40) sounds eerily like Satan’s temptations in the wilderness: “If you are the Son of God” (4:3, 6).
- 27:54—“Truly this was the Son of God!” So the centurion and others cried out, when they witnessed the phenomena that accompanied Jesus’ death. Since these were Gentiles, it’s difficult to know how much they understood, but Matthew records their words because they are true!
- 28:18—Jesus declares, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” That would be nothing less than God’s own authority. And that is the basis for the Great Commission which follows in 28:19-20.

**Son of Man**—Jesus’ favorite self-designation says more than meets the eye.

Jesus did not frequently make public claims to being either “the Son of David” or “the Son of God.” Rather often, however, he referred to himself as “the Son of Man.” His preference for this term, some have said, is based on its ambiguity: “son of man” could mean simply “human being.” Ezekiel is addressed as “son of man” in Ezek. 2:1, 3, 6, 8, etc., and the term can be found with that sense in several OT books. It’s also been common among Christians to regard “Son of Man” as something of a contrast to “Son of God,” as though “Son of Man” was a title of humility while “Son of God” was a title of deity.

In one specific OT context, however, “one like a son of man” is a heavenly figure, who is “given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed” (Daniel 7:13-14). This exalted sense of “Son of Man” is not evident every time Jesus utters the words, but when we look at some crucial occasions where he employs the term, it becomes clear that Jesus claimed to be the exalted “Son of Man” of Daniel 7. In fact, calling Jesus the exalted “Son of Man” is not that different from calling him the “Son of God”! Note some contexts in Matthew where Jesus refers to himself as “the Son of Man”:

- 8:20—“The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head” could easily be seen as an expression of Jesus’ humanity and shortage of resources.

- 9:6—“The Son of Man” has authority to forgive sins and heal a paralyzed man. Did Jesus mean any human can forgive sins (against God)? More likely this is a veiled claim to be the authoritative figure of Daniel 7.
- 12:8—“The Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath”—an extraordinary claim to having authority for how the Sabbath command should be interpreted and observed.
- 12:32—Speaking against “the Son of Man” is forgivable, perhaps because, in that context, Jesus could be seen as a man and nothing more. Misunderstanding him could be forgiven, but speaking “against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.” This is Jesus’ reply to his critics, who tried to explain away Jesus’ power over demons: “It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons” (12:24). Jesus’ response is, at the very least, a stern warning not to slander the obviously good work of the Holy Spirit who worked through Jesus.
- 12:40—“The Son of Man” will have an experience like Jonah, who (figuratively speaking) was brought back from death. In this context, however, Jesus claims that “something greater than Jonah is here” (12:41).
- 16:13ff.—“Son of Man” is a self-reference when Jesus asks his disciples how people are describing him. But within a few verses, 16:27, Jesus says the “Son of Man” will come “with his angels in the glory of his Father” to repay everyone according to their works, i.e., as the judge of all people. More mysteriously (at the time) Jesus said some standing there with him would live to see “the Son of Man coming in his kingdom” (16:28). From the context, it’s apparent Jesus was referring to the revelation of his glory that three disciples would see during his Transfiguration (17:1-8)
- 17:9—Jesus commanded Peter, James, and John to tell no one what they had just seen “until the Son of Man is raised from the dead.” The disciples should be accustomed by now to hearing Jesus call himself “Son of Man,” although they prove later to be surprised by his resurrection.
- 17:12—Before the resurrection, however, “the Son of Man will certainly suffer” at the hands of the same people who opposed and ultimately killed John the Baptist.
- 17:22-23—Again Jesus warns his disciples that “the Son of Man” will suffer, die, and rise from the dead. They did not understand him and “were greatly distressed.”
- 19:28—Jesus speaks of the time “when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne,” and his disciples will also have thrones, to judge the twelve tribes of Israel.
- 20:18-19—For the third time Jesus predicts to his disciples that “the Son of Man” will be condemned to death, handed over to the Gentiles, to be flogged, mocked, and crucified, but he will rise on the third day. A few verses later Jesus gives one of the most succinct statements in the Gospels about his purpose for coming into the world.
- 20:28—“The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” This stands in contrast to the disciples’ competitive desires to have better positions in the coming Kingdom (20:20ff.). Jesus explains that Kingdom greatness does not consist of having “authority” over other people (20:25); what is great in God’s Kingdom is serving (20:26-27). As their leader, “the Son of Man” leads in this category of serving, even to the point of giving his life! We hear echoes of Isaiah 53, the most profound of the “Servant of the LORD” passages in Isaiah. The concept of being a “ransom for many” (if not the exact wording) comes directly from Isaiah 53:10-12.
- 24:30—Speaking of cataclysmic future judgment, Jesus says “the sign of the Son of Man” will “appear in heaven,” and “all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will

see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.” This is clearly not the humble—“only human”—idea of what it means to be “the Son of Man.” This is the figure revealed in Daniel 7:13-14, the person with authority from God Almighty to rule over a glorious, boundless, endless Kingdom.

- 24:39—The sudden judgment of “the coming of the Son of Man” is compared to the flood of Noah’s time, which caught most people unaware and unprepared.
- 24:44—As Jesus says a number of times in this chapter (especially 24:36), no can predict when “the Son of Man” will come in judgment. So, “be ready”; you can be sure “the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.” (Jesus goes on to say, in 24:45—25:46, that his coming may be sooner or later than you think, and the only way to be ready is to be faithful in your God-given responsibilities—to use what you have to bless and help those you can.)
- 25:31-32—Again Jesus speaks of “the Son of Man” coming “in his glory” to judge “all the nations.” Notice also that “the Son of Man” is clearly the same person as “the King” who pronounces judgment in 25:34-46, leading to either “eternal punishment” or “eternal life” for each one judged.
- 26:2—The Passover is near, and “the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified.”
- 26:24—After predicting his betrayal by one of the Twelve (26:21), Jesus interprets the events about to unfold: “The Son of Man goes as it is written of him,” i.e., as prophesied in the OT.
- 26:45—Just before Judas arrives, leading the crowd to arrest him (26:47), Jesus says, “The Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners.”
- 26:64—One last time Jesus refers to himself as “the Son of Man,” this time in his trial before the Sanhedrin. Pushed by the High Priest (26:63) to admit he claims to be “the Christ, the Son of God,” Jesus finally says (in effect), “Yes, I am.” Of course Jesus’ idea of what that means is quite different from the High Priest’s. But as the person in control of the trial (by God’s providence), the High Priest’s interpretation is what counts in the verdict. But then Jesus leaves the verdict in no doubt whatsoever by continuing to speak: “You [plural] will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.”

The invocation of Daniel 7:13-14 is so clear that the High Priest tears his robes in outrage (26:65) and declares that Jesus has uttered blasphemy: he has claimed the authority of Almighty God to be judge of all—while being judged!—and to be the king of an eternal Kingdom (which the High Priest cannot recognize in the person standing before him, the man he intends to condemn).

In one dramatic statement, Jesus admits to being the Christ, the Son of God, and he claims to be the exalted “Son of Man.” Jesus’ statement is breath-taking and compels the Sanhedrin to a decision: *Either* Jesus is “all of the above” (and “Son of Man” is equivalent to “Son of God” in power and authority), *or* Jesus is an unbearable blasphemer. The Sanhedrin decides Jesus is the latter and “deserves death” (26:66), but they have to send him to Pilate (27:11 ff.) to secure a legal, Roman verdict and execution (which the Empire reserved as its prerogative).

The Sanhedrin and the High Priest were supposed to speak for God. But God’s verdict on Jesus was to raise him from the dead! How’s that for a verdict reversal?

## Overview of the New Testament

### Lesson 2: Light Refracted Through the Prism of Four Gospels

#### Introduction to the Four Gospels

With such abundant information about Jesus in Matthew (of which we saw only part), why do we need another Gospel, never mind three more? The question is ancient. In the mid-second century a Christian named Tatian thought combining the four Gospels (already widely used throughout the Church) made economic sense. So he produced one continuous narrative, deleting only the repetitions. His work was called the *Diatessaron*, which means “through four” (a bit ironic for a document that was really *through one from four*).

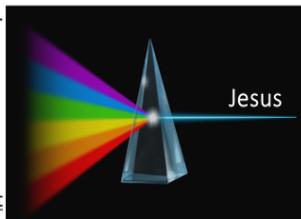
Tatian’s book enjoyed popularity among Syriac-speaking churches for a few centuries, but ultimately it did not survive. Our knowledge of the *Diatessaron* comes mostly from fragments and occasional quotations by early writers. The Church never responded to the idea of reducing the four accounts into one. No doubt Tatian was sincere, but he lacked a vantage point the four Gospels had: the writers were either eyewitnesses of what they reported or they knew people who were eyewitnesses. Matthew, Mark, and John knew Jesus personally. Luke did not, but he talked to people who knew Jesus and who witnessed the events Luke recorded. Coming from the first generation of Christians, the four Gospels’ temporal vantage point cannot be replicated.

Tatian’s streamlined account did not become the “go to” source to learn about Jesus. One important reason is the value of “witness” in the early Church (and still today). Throwing the four Gospels into a blender to produce a continuous, non-repetitive story muffles the **distinctive witness of each Gospel writer**. Jesus commands his disciples to be witnesses (Acts 1:8). We each have our personal testimony about Jesus, but the Four Gospels bear witness with an authority we cannot claim.

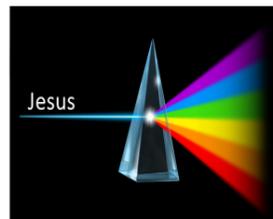
Matthew’s longer version of the story should not silence the witness of Mark’s shorter book. And Luke’s witness is uniquely valuable, as is John’s. When each writer is heard in his own voice, we are enriched. Likewise, at a different level of authority, the witness of each Christian is needed by someone. The message has spread down the centuries and around the globe as a message embodied in witnesses. The four canonical witnesses give us four perspectives on the same character to whom we bear witness: Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

Just as Jesus brings different strands of OT promises together in one person, the four Gospels bring out *distinctive emphases* in their witness to Jesus. Although there are four distinct accounts, it’s the *same Jesus* to whom they bear witness, as illustrated below (words to the right of the Gospel writers’ names suggest some contrasts; they are not meant to be exhaustive):

Abraham’s Blessing for all nations  
David’s Kingdom, without end  
Servant of the LORD, suffering to save/heal  
Giver of the Holy Spirit



Jesus is the prism for seeing OT promises.



Matthew: Israel’s Messiah-King, Teacher, Healer, Son of God  
Mark: Servant of the LORD, doing God’s will, healing  
Luke: Son of Man, Savior of the world  
John: Son of God, Eternal Word of the Father  
 (Creator and Savior)

The Four Gospels are the prism for seeing Jesus’ light.

## Introduction to the Lesson

In this lesson we look at the Gospels of Mark and Luke. Briefly characterized, Mark could be called an action narrative, with some teaching by Jesus but not nearly as much as in Matthew. Luke could be characterized as a narrative of expansion—in more than one sense. First, Luke includes a significant amount of information not found in any other Gospel. Second, Luke expands the scope of the Gospel to spotlight people not given as much attention in the other Gospels, especially Samaritans, women, and Gentiles. This second kind of expansion anticipates the spread of the Gospel into Gentile realms in the Book of Acts (also written by Luke).

## An introduction to Mark

As discussed in Lesson 1, Mark is regarded by most NT scholars as the first written Gospel. This cannot be proved beyond dispute, but it's difficult to believe Mark would shorten Matthew's work (if he had a copy) by leaving out so much good material! On the other hand, if Matthew had a copy of Mark, it's not hard to believe he would have added the kinds of things we find in Matthew but not in Mark—such as the birth narrative and the Sermon on the Mount.

The author we know as “Mark” is mentioned several times in the NT, sometimes as “Mark,” sometimes as “John Mark,” and sometimes simply as “John” (Acts 12:12; 13:5, 13; 15:37-39; Col. 4:10; 2 Tim. 4:11; Philemon 24; 1 Pet. 5:13; possibly unnamed in Mark 15:51-52). Written tradition from the second century claims Mark wrote his Gospel in Rome, as he accompanied the Apostle Peter. His purpose for writing was to preserve for others the message Peter preached. Given the traditional association and location, the date for Mark's Gospel is possibly in the 50s but more likely in the 60s. Peter was martyred in Rome during the Empire's persecution of Christians that began in 64 AD.

Mark wrote in a way his Gentile readers/hearers could understand. When he quoted Aramaic words spoken by Jesus (perhaps echoing Peter's vivid preaching), he always quickly supplied the Greek translation (e.g., 5:41; 7:34; 14:36; 15:34).

What is apparent to any reader is that Mark is more focused on actions than on words. His narrative seems to race from one miracle to the next until we arrive at the last days before Jesus' crucifixion. Mark uses the word “immediately” a lot, giving the narrative a sense of dramatic, even urgent movement. Then Mark slows down for the solemn events at the heart of the Gospel, the arrest, trial, torture, and crucifixion of Jesus, as “a sacrifice for many” (10:45).

Even Mark's beginning seems abrupt: “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (1:1). Without a genealogy, a birth narrative, an explanation of his motives (cf. Luke), or a cosmic context (cf. John) for what he's about to tell—Mark simply jumps into the story of the ministry of John the Baptist, his baptizing of Jesus, and (very briefly) Jesus' time of testing in the wilderness. By Mark 1:13 we have come as far in Jesus' story as Matthew 4:11.

Mark's account of Jesus' preaching and healing ministry begins in Mark 1:14-15: “Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, <sup>15</sup> and saying, ‘**The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.**’” [The Gospel of John shows there was a time when both John the Baptist and Jesus were preaching. See John 3:26-30. Mark has jumped past that time.] Just like John the Baptist (1:4-5), Jesus preached the necessity of repenting of sin as part of responding to the impending kingdom. With Jesus' declaration of the nearness of the kingdom, however, there is more of a note of “gospel,” the “good news” of the kingdom's arrival. So the response needed is to **repent** (turn away from sins and turn toward God) but also to **believe** the announcement of the kingdom “at hand.” From this Mark quickly moves on to the calling of the first disciples (1:16-20).

But let's not get so carried away with Mark's rapid pace that we miss what he says about Jesus in 1:1. Mark emphasizes Jesus' identity as "the Son of God" as much as Matthew did. Mark uses that term in his first verse; Matthew introduces Jesus' divine sonship in the context of his baptism by John (Matt. 3:13-17).

### **Mark emphasizes Jesus' authority.**

In Mark 1:22 we find the same commentary on Jesus' teaching authority that we saw in Matthew 7:28-29 (after the Sermon on the Mount): Jesus taught with authority, unlike the scribes. Mark's context for this statement is earlier than Matthew's. Mark says Jesus was teaching in a synagogue in Capernaum, and this was the people's awed response. Mark does not say what Jesus was teaching; he wants to get to the *action* that proves Jesus' authority: the confrontation with the demonized man.

If people were already "astonished" at Jesus' teaching authority (1:22), they were more "amazed" after Jesus commanded the "unclean spirit" to come out of the man, and it did (1:23-27). After this Jesus' fame spread throughout "the surrounding region of Galilee" (1:28).

From Mark we could cite many examples of Jesus' authority, but we would mostly be repeating examples cited in the lesson on Matthew, where we put Jesus' authority together with the emphasis on Jesus as the Son of God. Indeed, almost everything in Mark can be found in Matthew and/or Luke. So Mark has been easy to overlook. But there are some *unique aspects* in Mark's presentation that are worth noting.

First, in Jesus' naming of the Twelve Disciples/Apostles, Mark says Jesus "appointed twelve . . . so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach and have authority to cast out demons" (3:14-15). This is different wording from Matthew 10, particularly in the expression "**that they might be with him.**" Thus Mark (or Peter, if Mark follows the Apostle's wording) emphasizes that the training and authorizing of the Twelve was very personal. "Being *with* Jesus" is fundamental for being able to speak *for* him and to act in his name.

"Being with Jesus" is a priority in another passage if we consider it carefully. In Mark 4:10, after the parable of the sower (4:2-9), "when he was alone, those around him with the twelve asked about the parables." Jesus' response sounds enigmatic: "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables" (4:11). What is "the secret [mystery, *mysterion*] of the kingdom"? A good answer is "the identity of Jesus," but a better answer is "Jesus himself." The crowds hear the parables and may get something out of them, but those who stay with Jesus get more than explanations (like 4:13-20). Their lives are more fully impacted by exposure to more of Jesus' actions, words, and attitudes. By remaining in his presence they expose themselves to more change in their spirits, souls, and minds.

The "mystery of the kingdom" is the missing element in many church-goers who *know the stories but don't know the power* of Jesus' presence. The "mystery of the kingdom" is that **kingdom authority is located in Jesus**, who is the king of the kingdom. If we don't know the king, it does not matter how much we know about the kingdom. Without a personal relationship with the king, we miss "the secret of the kingdom."

C.E.B. Cranfield stated the best interpretation of Mark 4:11 succinctly: "The secret of the kingdom of God is the secret of the person of Jesus" (*The Gospel according to St. Mark*, in *The Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary*, p.153). Although the parallels in Matthew 13:11 and Luke 8:10 have the plural *mysteria* ("secrets" or "mysteries") while Mark has the singular *mysterion*, the point is the same. Whether singular or plural, the mystery/mysteries of what God is doing in his kingdom is/are revealed and ultimately perfected in Jesus.

The Apostle Paul's use of the word "mystery" is clearly in agreement with this interpretation of Mark 4:11. See Romans 16:25; Ephesians 1:9; 3:9; and 1 Timothy 3:16 for examples. Perhaps the best example is the combination of Colossians 1:27 and 2:2. Colossians 1:27 speaks of "the riches of the glory of this mystery [*mysterion*], which is Christ in you, the hope of glory." And Colossians 2:2 says simply, "God's mystery [*mysterion*] . . . is Christ." This use of "mystery" is reflected in our Eucharistic liturgy, when "we proclaim the mystery of faith": "Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again" (*United Methodist Hymnal*, p. 14). The "mystery" is not arcane knowledge available to only a few; the "mystery" is publically declared when preaching, teaching, witnessing, praising, praying, and celebrating communion keep our eyes on Jesus. He is the secret of the gospel of the kingdom; he is the secret of the kingdom; but the secret is "out" and available to anyone who turns to Jesus in repentance and faith.

### **Jesus as the sacrificial Servant of the Lord (10:35-45)**

In Mark 10:45, Jesus says, "For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." The setting is contention among the Twelve, sparked by the request of James and John to have favored places in the coming kingdom (10:35ff.). In the parallel passage in Matthew 20:20ff. (see Lesson 1 and the "Son of Man" passages), the mother of these disciples brings the request. On either telling, the issue is the same: they want to be great in the new order Jesus is bringing. He replies, "You do not know what you are asking" (Mark 10:38). They believe they can pay the price ("drink the cup," 10:38), but they have no clue. Jesus says they will indeed "drink the cup" (i.e., suffer for Christ and his kingdom), but honored places in the kingdom are the Father's prerogative (Matt. 20:23).

Jesus does not simply defer the request to his Father, however; he takes the opportunity to teach the Twelve (*again*) about greatness in God's kingdom. He taught this lesson in Mark 9:33-37, but apparently the lesson needs to be repeated. Greatness in God's kingdom is so different from greatness in the world's kingdoms that repetition is required for any of us to "get it."

Being great in the world means having influence or control over others, for one's own benefit and comfort—"to be served" by others. Being great in God's kingdom is **servicing others**—not as a way to become "great" but because service *is* great. This is counter-intuitive to our natural self-centeredness, but this evaluation of greatness comes from no less than the greatest in the kingdom (and the universe), the king himself! This is so upside-down compared to earthly, competitive kingdoms that we need to know the unassailable authority who endorsed this new perspective. From this side of Jesus' resurrection, we should (theoretically) be more ready to acknowledge the truth of everything Jesus says—including what he says about greatness.

This request for high positions for James and John—two of the "inner circle" along with Peter—shows that Jesus' closest disciples still do not "get it." They do not understand Jesus. They do not understand why he has been doing the miracles he has been doing. They have seen him multiply small amounts of food to feed multitudes (twice! Mark 6:37-46; 8:1-9). They have seen him walk on water (6:45-52). They have seen him heal many people and cast out many demons. They have interpreted all these demonstrations of power as **signs** that Jesus is going to **bring in God's kingdom, and that is true**. They think they know what "bringing in the kingdom means," but they **partially yet seriously misunderstand what that means**. Surely, they think, Jesus is going to reveal his overwhelming power very soon, and they want to be positioned advantageously as partners in exercising that overwhelming power.

The misunderstanding of the crowds and even Jesus' closest disciples is probably the main reason Jesus often tells people not to tell others what he has done: the leper (1:44-45); Jairus and

his wife, whose daughter was raised from death (5:43); the deaf man (7:32-36); and the blind man, who was told to go home and “not even enter the village” (8:26). Other times Jesus told the healed person to “tell how much the Lord has done for you” (5:19).

Jesus “would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him” (1:34; 2:11-12). Jesus did not need the demons’ endorsement, and the people already misunderstood what they thought they knew about Jesus—even if what they knew about Jesus was true, that he was the Messiah.

Jesus told Peter, James, and John not to tell anyone what they witnessed during his Transfiguration **until after his resurrection** (9:9-10). Yet here, in 10:35-45, two witnesses of the Transfiguration ask Jesus for something he could not grant! No matter how great the revelation to this point (including Peter’s confession in 8:29), his disciples cannot understand the nature of Jesus’ kingdom and messiahship until after the **crucifixion and resurrection**. Just as Jesus is the “mystery” or “secret” of the kingdom of God, the secret to understanding Jesus is his sacrificial death and resurrection.

The *disciples were partly right* about Jesus and his kingdom: God’s power is greater than any storm, any sickness, any demon, and even death. But those same disciples did not understand that the **full release of Jesus’ power** would come **through his suffering and death** “as a ransom for many” (10:45). Whenever Jesus tried to tell them about this necessity beforehand, “they did not understand . . . and were afraid to ask him” (9:32).

### Some curiosities about Mark’s Gospel

**Jesus prays twice for a healing!** Nearly everything in Mark is in Matthew and/or Luke. But Mark reports one event found only in his Gospel (probably a reflection of Peter’s preaching). In Mark 8:22-26 Jesus prays for a blind man twice! Jesus took the man aside, spat on his eyes, “and laid his hands on him” (8:23). Then Jesus asked him, “Do you see anything?” (8:23).

Remembering the times when a mere touch or one word from Jesus healed someone instantly, we are surprised to hear the man’s honest answer: “I see men, but they look like trees, walking” (8:24). Jesus “laid his hands on his eyes again” and “his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly” (8:25). What’s going on? Did the man need more faith for an instantaneous healing? The text does not say so. Was Jesus operating on “low voltage” that day? (I’m joking, of course.) So why did Jesus have to pray for him twice? The best explanation, I believe, is to see this story in its context. What happens next?

In 8:27-30, we see Mark’s account of Peter’s confession of Jesus as “the Christ” (8:29). There is less detail here than in the parallel accounts (Matt. 16; Luke 9). But in both Matthew and Mark we hear Peter’s response (8:32) to Jesus’ prediction that he “must suffer many things and be rejected . . . and be killed, and after three days rise again” (8:31). Peter’s inspired **confession of Christ** quickly becomes Peter’s attempted **correction of Christ!**

Jesus rebukes Peter with strong language: “Get behind me, Satan! [*Satan* means adversary.] For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man” (8:33). Peter was *right* about Jesus being the Christ, but he was *wrong* about how Jesus should fulfill that role, what kind of Messiah Jesus should be. This is like Satan’s temptation in the wilderness: “Okay, so you’re the Son of God. Here’s a way to fulfill your destiny” (Matt. 4:1-11).

Like the blind man for whom Jesus prayed twice before he saw clearly, Peter and all the disciples needed more than one touch of revelation. We all do. What we know about Jesus may be true, but (like Peter) our knowledge is tangled up with preconceptions, prejudices, and missing pieces. So it’s true that Jesus’ repeated prayer for the blind man (8:22-26) is unique in

one sense; in another sense it's an illustration of how all of Jesus' disciples were slow to see and needed another touch from Jesus to get clarity.

### **The last word in Mark is “afraid” (16:8).**

The beginning of Mark was abrupt, but so is the ending, if 16:8—“they were afraid”—is indeed the last verse. Verses 9-20 were almost certainly added later (although Irenaeus, about 200 AD, knew that ending). In fact there are a couple of other endings found in some old manuscripts, but all of them (including vss. 9-20) look like attempts to give Mark a more acceptable ending. Possibly the original ending to Mark was lost, accidentally broken off the end of the scroll. But it's also possible that Mark intended to conclude his Gospel with 16:8. Briefly, here's the argument for that: Mark was not afraid of the word “afraid.”

Describing people's reaction to Jesus with the words, “they were afraid,” could be called a theme of Mark's. See the following examples:

- 4:41—After Jesus rebuked the storm, his disciples were afraid of him!
- 5:15—After Jesus cast many demons out of a man who terrorized the neighborhood, the neighbors were afraid of Jesus and begged him to leave the neighborhood (5:17).
- 9:32—After another prediction of his death and resurrection, Jesus' disciples did not understand him, but they “were afraid to ask him.”
- 10:32—As Jesus led the way on the road to Jerusalem, “those who followed were afraid.” This was just before he told them, for the third time, that he would suffer, die and rise.
- 11:18—After Jesus cleansed the temple, the religious authorities wanted to “destroy” Jesus because “they feared him” and the influence he had over the crowds.
- 16:8—On the day of Jesus' resurrection, three of his disciples (Mary Magdalene, another Mary, and Salome) came to the tomb, only to find it open and “a young man” (an angel) who told them Jesus “has risen” (16:5-6). Told to relay this news to “his disciples and Peter” (16:7), “they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid” (16:8).

Of course we know from the other Gospels that the women soon recovered their courage and told the news to Peter and the others. But in 16:8 Mark describes their initial reaction, and it's very believable. Of all the things Jesus had done to frighten his disciples (and his enemies), nothing was more overwhelming than this. Whether Mark intended to end with 16:8 cannot be proved, but, in light of earlier reactions to Jesus, 16:8 cannot be called inconsistent with Mark's style! Jesus is hard to take, isn't he? If you have always been comfortable with him, perhaps he hasn't done anything to startle you.

### **An introduction to Luke's Gospel**

Each Gospel is unique in its witness to the person and ministry of Jesus. Although Luke runs parallel with Mark and Matthew on the chronological order as a whole, Luke tells us about events that the other Gospels do not mention. For example, the accounts of Gabriel visiting Zechariah and Mary with extraordinary announcements are found only in Luke. Also two of Jesus' most famous parables—“the Good Samaritan” and “the Prodigal Son”—are found only in Luke. How poorer we would be without this Gospel according to Luke!

Luke authored two of the longest books in the NT, his Gospel and the Book of Acts, another unique and invaluable source of knowledge of the beginning years of the church. So how did this Gentile come to be a Christian? We are never told, just like we can only speculate about where Luke was from originally. What we can know, by careful attention to Acts 16 and following chapters (all the way to 28:16), is that Luke became part of the Apostle Paul's team in Troas, in what is now western (Asiatic) Turkey. Acts 16:10 is where the narrator (Luke) first uses "we" and "us" in reference to Paul's missionary team. Although it's an inference rather than an outright statement of fact, it seems the Holy Spirit steered Paul, Silas, and Timothy to Troas just so they could meet Luke and from there be directed by the Spirit to go over into Macedonia (Europe, Acts 16:6-10). This is one of many places in Acts where the Spirit leads people into areas they had not apparently planned to go!

As for when and where Luke wrote, there's not a lot to say. Acts ends before Paul's (first) Roman imprisonment ends in the early-mid 60s (Acts 28:30). The Gospel of Luke was written before that (Acts 1:1), but we can only speculate about how much time elapsed between "volume 1" and "volume 2." Possibly both books were written in the 60s. Some scholars date Luke after the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD, but that does not fit the account Luke gives of Paul's time in Rome (in Luke's "volume 2"). Paul was in prison for two years in Caesarea and then two more years in Rome. Luke could have used those years for researching, reading other accounts like Mark, and then writing his own Gospel, possibly in Caesarea or Rome.

## **Luke's special emphases**

### **1. The socially marginalized (i.e., people not respected in general)**

If forced to choose just one word to characterize Luke's Gospel, "belonging" would be a good choice. Luke was a Gentile; he knew by experience what it meant to be "outside" the covenant people of God (Israel). Since becoming a follower of Christ, he was now "inside" the family of God (cf. Eph. 2:11-22). He seems to appreciate that personally but also for other Gentiles and otherwise "marginalized" persons, who could now be equal partners in God's work on earth as equal members of God's family through the grace of Jesus Christ.

Luke's inclusion of the excluded (or undervalued) shows up in the attention he gives to the **role of women** in Jesus' story. This inclusion begins even before Jesus is born. Observe the significant speaking roles of Mary and Elizabeth in Luke's version of Jesus' nativity. In fact Luke alone tells the story of Gabriel's annunciation to Mary that she would give birth to the Messiah (Luke 1:26ff.). Her final words to Gabriel are a model of willing surrender to God's will: "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word" (1:38).

When Mary quickly goes to see Elizabeth (1:39), Elizabeth is "filled with the Holy Spirit" on hearing Mary's greeting (1:41). Because she is filled with the Spirit, Elizabeth speaks prophetically (1:42-45). That is apparently the moment when John the Baptist was "filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb" (cf. 1:15 and 1:44).

Elizabeth's prophetic outburst is followed by Mary's beautiful "Magnificat" (Latin for "magnifies," the first word of her praise in 1:46-53). Notice the reference in 1:55 to the promises made "to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever" (recall Gen. 12:1-3; 17:19, etc.). The men are not left out of this outbreak of prophecy. When John the Baptist is born, his father, Zechariah, is enabled to speak again (cf. 1:20 and 1:67-79). Notice the references to "the house of his servant David" (1:69) and "the oath [God] swore to our father Abraham" (1:73).

All these allusions to the promises made to Abraham and David (note also 1:32-33) show that Luke wants to present the Gospel as fulfillment of promises made long before (about 2000

BC in the case of Abraham, about 1000 BC in David's case). Matthew emphasizes fulfillment, but Luke tells the story through the experience of the women, Elizabeth and Mary. Matthew's focus is on Joseph in the narrative of Jesus' birth and infancy.

So where did Luke get all this information about what Elizabeth and Mary said in this opening chapter? Well, he mentions "eyewitnesses" in 1:2, people whom Luke had apparently interviewed before writing the story down. Had he talked to Mary herself? It's impossible to prove, but he would plausibly have had the opportunity in his travels with Paul. And who better than Mary to recall not only what she said to the angel and to Elizabeth but also what others said to her? As 2:51 tells us, Mary "treasured up all these things in her heart" (see also 2:19). Sure, a mother would remember! And would she be willing to answer Luke's inquiries about the birth and childhood of her extraordinary son? (2:41-51 is unique in the Gospels, an insight into Jesus' thinking at age 12, something Mary would know.)

Luke 8:2-3 (along with Matt. 27:55 and Mark 15:41) mentions the **role of women** who supported Jesus' ministry. Some of them were the first to see Jesus' empty tomb. Of course the other Gospels agree that women were there first, but Luke uniquely notes that when the men went to check out the women's report, they "found it just as the women had said" (24:24).

Luke alone reports Jesus' famous parable in which a **Samaritan** is the "hero" for doing the right thing (10:25-37). And when Jesus heals 10 lepers but only one turns back to thank Jesus, again the right priority is demonstrated by a Samaritan (17:11-19). Of course this is something of an anticipation of how the Samaritans will receive the gospel in Acts 8:4-8.

When we romanticize the **shepherds** who heard the angelic announcement of Jesus' birth (backed by a heavenly choir, 2:8-20), we miss Luke's point: the good news came first to people very low in social standing. Shepherds were often scorned by others and suspected of crimes just because they were in the area (think "gypsies" and how they are often viewed with suspicion). But notice the angel's words to the shepherds: "I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people" (2:10). The news came to shepherds first, but it was not just for them.

**Gentiles** are included in Luke's version of Jesus' genealogy, which starts with Jesus and goes all the way back to Adam as "the son of God" (in the sense of being created in perfect fellowship with God, 3:23-38). That's a different approach from Matthew's, which started with Abraham, but Luke wants to emphasize that Jesus was sent to be the Savior of the human race, including Gentiles like Luke!

The Parable of the Prodigal Son, unique to Luke (15:11-32), is told in the context of Jesus being criticized for having fellowship with "**unworthy**" people (15:1-2). Jesus described the father's rejoicing in contrast to the older son's complaints (which echoed the complaints which prompted Jesus to tell three parables about rejoicing over finding what has been lost: one sheep out of 100, one coin out of 10, one son out of two (15:3-32). "Good people" (which the Pharisees and scribes thought they were) should be happy along with the angels when lost people are found by a loving Father who sent his Son to save them (see 19:10).

Jesus' story about the rich man and Lazarus (16:19-31) likewise overturns the common tendency to have higher regard for the rich than for the homeless beggar. If we knew the ultimate destiny of everyone we saw, we might change our evaluation of them. Poor, sick Lazarus was valued by God so much that he went to live with God when his body gave out. The enviable rich man's destiny, however, is not to be envied but avoided.

Jesus again overturns public opinion when he compares the prayers of a Pharisee and a tax collector (18:9-14). Jesus' declaration that the tax collector "went down to his house justified" would have shocked and scandalized his audience, who generally thought "tax collectors" (working for Rome) were "unworthy" of decent human company, never mind divine approval!

Jesus' story about a "justified" tax collector is followed soon by his scandalous willingness to go home with Zacchaeus, who was a "chief tax collector" and "rich" (19:1-10). Jesus' critics scoffed: "He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner" (19:7). Jesus did not argue the facts, but he had a different interpretation of the event: "Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost" (19:9-10). The gospel is good news for those who know they need it. For those who think they are good enough already, the gospel is scandalous and offensive to their sense of propriety.

One more example of Jesus' willingness to welcome the "unworthy" is his amazing response to an amazing request. One man crucified next to Jesus must have received a gift of faith: he looked at a dying Jesus and said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

<sup>43</sup> And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise" (23:42-43). A person who comes to Jesus for mercy, no matter how late, is never "unworthy" of Jesus' love.

## 2. Prayer, especially in the life of Jesus

Prayer is a favorite topic for Luke. He mentions it frequently in both his Gospel and in Acts. One of Luke's unique parables is about prayer. In 18:1, Luke discloses the motive for the parable before repeating it: Jesus "told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart." Then Jesus tells the parable of a persistent widow, who wore out the patience of "a judge who neither feared God nor respected man" (18:3). Jesus calls him an "unrighteous" or "unjust" judge (18:6). The point is that, if an unrighteous judge can be finally persuaded to do the right thing, surely we can expect our righteous God to "give justice" to his people "speedily" (18:7, 8). With a quick turn, however, Jesus says the question is not whether God will do the right thing (in his own time). The Judge of all the universe is not on trial! The real question is this: "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" (18:8). The real question is not about God's faithfulness; it's about ours! God will do the right thing (in his timing); will we do the right thing by continuing to pray and trust God?

Among all the things Luke says about prayer, perhaps the most striking are the times he mentions Jesus praying, especially in contexts where the other Gospels do not mention it. In some instances, the other writers probably assume we know Jesus was praying at that moment, but Luke makes sure we know about it. Consider the following examples, where Luke alone mentions the fact of Jesus praying:

- After his baptism by John (3:21). Luke also mentions that Jesus was about 30 years old at the time (3:23).
- Before asking his disciples what they believed about him, which elicited Peter's confession: You are "the Christ of God." (See 9:18-20.)
- At the time of his Transfiguration, witnessed by Peter, James, and John (9:28-29).
- Just before he taught the disciples "the Lord's Prayer" (Luke 11:1-4; putting this in a different context compared to Matthew 6:9-13).

Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane is reported by Matthew 26:36-46, Mark 14:32-42, and Luke 22:39-46. The substance of the prayer is the same in all three, as Jesus prays, "not my will, but yours, be done" (Luke 22:42). I mention it, not because Luke is unique here, but

because it is such an important prayer: our salvation was hanging in the balance. This victory of surrender was as important as Jesus' victory of resistance in the wilderness temptations.

The Gospels report a variety of words and prayers spoken by Jesus while on the cross. Luke alone reports Jesus' prayer for his tormentors: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (23:34). [Luke will later report a similar prayer by Stephen (Acts 7:60).] Jesus' final word from the cross, according to Luke, was a prayer of trust: "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" (23:46).

### 3. The Holy Spirit

All four Gospels mention the descent of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus after his baptism by John. As noted above, Luke is unique in stating that Jesus was praying at that moment. But Luke has a number of instances where the work of the Holy Spirit is highlighted in ways particular to Luke.

As noted earlier, John the Baptist was prophesied to be "filled with the Holy Spirit" before being born (1:15). So Luke introduces the work of the Holy Spirit in high profile early in his Gospel. This work is even higher in profile in Gabriel's message to Mary.

As Luke tells the story from Mary's point of view, we hear her asking a natural question: How can she, as a virgin, become a mother? (1:34). Gabriel answers Mary's "How?" question with "the Holy Spirit": "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God" (1:35). The answer to the "How?" question (in the kingdom of God) is always "the Holy Spirit." "How can I become a faithful disciple?" By the work of the Holy Spirit. "How can God accomplish his will through me?" By the power of the Holy Spirit. "How can I overcome this besetting sin or my fear of failure?" By the presence and omnipotent power of the Holy Spirit.

We mentioned the outbreak of prophecy in the first two chapters of Luke—Elizabeth, Mary, Zechariah, etc.. Simeon was guided by the Spirit to go to the Temple at just the right time to see the infant Jesus (2:25-36), and he spoke prophetically about Jesus and directly to his earthly parents. Luke, who wrote about Pentecost in the Book of Acts, does not seem constrained by that signal event to defer the Holy Spirit's prophetic activity until that time!

In Luke 4:18–19, Jesus reads from Isaiah 61:

<sup>18</sup> "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to proclaim good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives  
and recovering of sight to the blind,  
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,  
<sup>19</sup> to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

The people in the Nazareth had heard this passage from Isaiah 61 many times before. What came next, however, was startling and new: Jesus said, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (4:21). Jesus was claiming to be the prophesied, Spirit-empowered deliverer. He was also declaring his agenda, what he planned to do, the manifesto of his divinely-given mission. He was claiming he would serve God's purposes in the power of God himself. This declaration would have to be received with excited belief or outraged unbelief, or perhaps just confusion. After all, Jesus was a hometown boy, whose family was well known to everyone.

Jesus knew their questions and observed that prophets are always hard to accept in their hometown (4:24). People judge a person by what they already know of him/her; what they don't take into consideration is how the Holy Spirit can do extraordinary things through ordinary-looking and ordinary-sounding people. Judging any person without taking the Holy Spirit into account can lead to serious miscalculation. In Jesus' case, some wanted to kill him on the spot, but Jesus escaped from their hands (4:29-30).

The last important reference to the Holy Spirit in Luke is Jesus' command and promise to his disciples: "And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high." (24:49). "Power from on high" is made more explicit as "the Holy Spirit" in Acts 1:4-8.

#### **4. The journey to Jerusalem (9:51—19:41)**

This distinctive of Luke's Gospel is perhaps more of a structural writing strategy on Luke's part than a theological theme. Nonetheless it's worth noting that Luke makes a point of the start of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem in 9:51: "When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem." From this point on, even though many healings and conversations take place on the way, Jesus is on a deliberate and determined journey to Jerusalem, where he knows he will encounter rejection, torture, and death by crucifixion—all as prelude to the victory of resurrection. Knowing how it turns out does not diminish the horror of what he will suffer.

This deliberate journey to Jerusalem is unique in Luke in terms of its clear identification of the start and stop of the journey. Jesus travels from 9:51 to 19:41 with one aim in mind—to fulfill the Father's will for his sacrificial death. That's a significant portion of Luke's 24 chapters. Luke's focus on this journey seems to be intended to show the persistent intention of Jesus. He will not be the victim of a conspiracy of his enemies; he will be the orchestrator of the ultimate cause for which he came into the world—not simply to teach or heal, as wonderful as those things are—but to pay the price to "to proclaim good news to the poor. . . . to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, [and] to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (4:18-19). [Journeys will also figure significantly in the Book of Acts.]

## Overview of the New Testament

### Lesson 3: John's Gospel and Epistles

#### Who is John and why did he write his Gospel and Epistles?

Rather than spend time and space making an argument for the position, this lesson assumes that John the son of Zebedee (and brother of James) wrote the Gospel of John and the three Epistles attributed to him. John clearly states his motive for writing his Gospel, but not until near its end, in 20:31: these things “are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” What a great statement about Jesus’ identity and our benefit from trusting him!

The First Epistle of John is fascinating in rebutting the false claims of some who call themselves Christians and who seem to be misleading others (2:26) by their misunderstanding of the gospel. Thus, First John emphasizes the reality of Jesus as **God incarnate in humanity** (cf. John 1:14 and 1 John 1:1-3; 4:1-6; 5:6-8). That is the major doctrinal emphasis of the letter (4:15; 5:1). John also emphasizes being real in our **obedience** to God and our **love** for one another (1 John 1:5-10; 2:4, 9-11; 3:3-10; 3:11, 14, 16-18; 4:7-8, 20-21; 5:1-5). John reassures Christians that they **can know** they really are Christians and are really going to live forever with God (3:1-2; 5:13-15, 19-21). Along this line he speaks about the Holy Spirit’s presence in each believer (3:24; 4:13).

We mention 2 and 3 John only to say 2 John continues some themes of 1 John and addresses pastoral concerns about hospitality and avoidance of false teachers. Third John is thematically connected but more specifically calls out a certain “Diotrephes” for being proud and presumptuous in his leadership style.

#### The Gospel of John compared with the Synoptic Gospels

The first three Gospels are similar enough (especially in the order of events) to be called the “Synoptic Gospels” (“syn” as in “synchronize”; “optic” is self-explanatory). John’s telling of the story is so different that his has been called a “spiritual” Gospel from early Church history—not to deny its historical accuracy but to say John saw deeper; he saw more of the spiritual reality of the events and sayings. The wisdom of calling one Gospel “spiritual” might be challenged for implying others are less “spiritual.” I would prefer to say John is more reflectively “theological.”

One possible explanation for the striking difference in John is the timing for when he wrote. The Synoptic Gospels were probably written in the 60s (or soon after). John was written much later, in the mid-80s to the mid-90s. If, as early tradition supports, the Apostle John was the author, he wrote from an eye-witness perspective but with 55 or 60 years to reflect on the meaning of what he had experienced when Jesus was physically on earth. John emphasizes his first-hand knowledge in passages like John 19:35 and 1 John 1:1-3. But since Jesus is still alive and the Holy Spirit continues to teach disciples the meaning of Jesus (see John 14:26), John writes from his experience as a disciple with decades of fellowship with Jesus in the Holy Spirit.

Besides differences in writing style—John seems simple, but he’s also profound—there are other striking differences in content. For example, think how often the Synoptic Gospels describe exorcisms, where individuals are delivered from demonic bondage. John reports no exorcisms—unless we count John 12:31: “Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out.” The casting out or casting down of Satan’s rule by Jesus’ cross and resurrection could be called a big exorcism, with the many exorcisms in the Synoptic Gospels being

previews! Light is casting out darkness in those individual cases but doing it more definitively (we could say “cosmically”) in Jesus’ cross-resurrection victory. See John 1:5: “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” Compare Paul’s perspective in Col. 1:19-20; 2:13-15; the cross is not Jesus’ defeat (overcome by the resurrection); the cross is Jesus’ victory over sin and our alienation from God.

Another thing missing from John is parables. Even Mark, with his emphasis on action, reported some of Jesus’ teaching with parables. Certainly Matthew and Luke feature them prominently. So why no parables in John? Perhaps (although this cannot be proved) John had seen one or more of the other Gospels and chose not to repeat their descriptions of Jesus’ parables. Instead, John structures the public ministry of Jesus around several “signs” (miracles) that he performed. The significance of the “signs” is commented on by John or (often) discussed at length in a discourse between Jesus and others (both disciples and critics). John 6 is a good example. The multiplication of five loaves and two fish is recounted in all four gospels (John 6:1-15; Matt. 14:13-21; Mark 6:32-44; Luke 9:11-17), but John alone reports the lengthy discourse that occurs on the following day (John 6:22-71).

[The vine and the branches illustration in John 15 is an allegory, with many points of correspondence between the spiritual reality being described and the details of the illustration. Parables, in contrast, might have more than one point of correspondence with what is being illustrated, but they tend to have one central focus on some aspect of the kingdom of God. Another way to state the difference: parables are similes (“the kingdom of God is like . . .”). Allegories are collections of metaphors (My Father is the vinedresser. I’m the vine. You’re the branches. Much fruit. Pruning.)]

Not missing but emphasized in a different way in John is the concept of “the kingdom of God.” Obviously “the kingdom” is important in passages such as John 3:3-5. But the attention given to “the kingdom” in the Synoptic Gospels is displaced by a focus on the person of Jesus. The other Gospels focused on Jesus’ ministry bringing the kingdom, although it’s an “already-not yet” focus: The kingdom is present in Jesus’ miracles (Matt. 12:28), but we’re told to pray for the kingdom to come (Matt. 6:10). Some parables picture the kingdom as present and at work (Matt. 13:31-33); other parables picture the future judgment as part of the fuller realization of the kingdom (Matt. 13:47-50). So, the kingdom is “already” really present in Jesus’ ministry, but it’s “not-yet” fully present.

The emphasis in John tilts more toward the “already”: “Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God” (3:18). When Martha asserts that her brother, Lazarus, “will rise again in the resurrection on the last day” (11:24), Jesus replies, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live,<sup>26</sup> and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?” (11:25–26). See also John 5:24—“has eternal life . . . has passed from death to life.” The future resurrection and judgment are affirmed in that same context (5:25-29), but John (in comparison with the Synoptic writers) definitely has more “already” and less “not yet.”

### **Most important emphases in John's Gospel (and 1 John)**

The most important emphasis in John is clearly **the identity of Jesus** as the eternal Word of God, who took on our humanity in the Incarnation, who died for our sins, who rose from the dead, and who gives us the Holy Spirit and eternal life. Just for the sake of reference, without any attempt to be exhaustive, here are *some* key verses.

#### **Jesus as eternal Word and eternal Deity:**

- 1:1—In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
- 1:14—And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.
- 20:28—Thomas said to him, “My Lord and my God!” (NIV)
- 1 John 1:1-2—That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— <sup>2</sup> the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—

#### **Jesus gives his life for our forgiveness and our eternal life:**

- 1:29—“Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”
- 3:14-16—“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup> that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. <sup>16</sup> For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” [3:14-15 are separated from 3:16 in some versions for the sake of putting in a heading. An unfortunate side-effect is that people memorize John 3:16 without thinking about *how* God gave his Son— “lifted up” on the cross!]
- 10:11—“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”
- 10:18—“No one takes it [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father.”
- 11:25-26—“I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, <sup>26</sup> and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.”
- 14:19—“Because I live, you also will live.”
- 1 John 1:7—But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.
- 1 John 2:1-2—My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. <sup>2</sup> He is the propitiation [atoning sacrifice] for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

#### **Jesus gives believers the Holy Spirit (but not until after his resurrection).**

- 7:39—“If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. <sup>38</sup> Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’” <sup>39</sup> Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

- 16:13-14—“When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. <sup>14</sup> He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you.”
- 20:21–22—Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.” <sup>22</sup> And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”
- 1 John 4:2—By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God.
- 1 John 4:13—By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.

### Another way of showing Jesus’ identity and what he provides: the “I am” sayings.

Some of Jesus’ “I am” sayings illustrate what he provides. Taken together, especially in light of John 8:58, the “I am” sayings become “I AM” sayings, echoing Exodus 3:14: “I AM WHO I AM.” . . . “Say this to the people of Israel: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’”

In Hebrew, the word for “I AM” is verbally related to YHWH or “Yahweh,” the very name of God revealed to Moses and Israel. That background gives more resonance to the following statements by Jesus, who *is* “I AM” and who is all we need for life eternal:

- 6:35—“**I am the bread of life**; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.”
- 6:48–51—“**I am the bread of life.** <sup>49</sup> Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. <sup>50</sup> This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. <sup>51</sup> I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”
- 8:12—“**I am the light of the world.** Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”
- 8:28—“When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that **I am** he [literally, “know that **I am**”], and that I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me.”
- 8:58—“Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, **I am.**” [Jesus’ audience heard this as a blasphemous claim to being “I AM.” See their response in 8:59.]
- 10:7, 9—“Truly, truly, I say to you, **I am the door** of the sheep. . . . <sup>9</sup> **I am the door.** If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture.”
- 10:11—“**I am the good shepherd.** The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”
- 10:14—“**I am the good shepherd.** I know my own and my own know me.”
- 11:25-26—“**I am the resurrection and the life.** Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, <sup>26</sup> and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.”
- 14:6—“**I am the way, and the truth, and the life.** No one comes to the Father except through me.”
- 15:1—“**I am the true vine,** and my Father is the vinedresser.”
- 15:5—“**I am the vine;** you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.” [15:1 is the guarantee for 15:5, but 15:1 is not as readily remembered.]

- 17:16—“**I am not of the world.**” [Jesus’ point of origin is not earth but the Father, who becomes our Source of life also, when we are “born again” or “born from above” (John 3:3, 7). From that moment our life comes from heaven; eternal life does not and cannot come from the world.]

### **A striking and perhaps surprising emphasis in John’s Gospel: Jesus is dependent!**

In a Gospel that plainly declares the eternal deity of Jesus from its opening “prologue” (1:1-18; especially 1:1-5, 14-18) and which comes to a dramatic climax with the confession of Thomas that Jesus is “My Lord and my God!” (20:28), it might be a paradox that John emphasizes Jesus’ true humanity. We see a very human Jesus when John notes that Jesus got physically tired (4:6) and (on the cross) thirsty (19:28).

As a real human being, Jesus needed food, water, rest, and everything else that we need. But one need we have is not acknowledged by all people: our need to know and do the will of our heavenly Father. In this regard, Jesus shows us what true human life is supposed to look like. We should be depending on the Father’s will every step along our journey.

This is stated by Jesus himself in a number of ways. One of the clearest statements is John 5:19—“Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise.” Later, in the same chapter, Jesus says, “I can do nothing on my own” (5:30). Yet Jesus is so in tune with the Father’s will that he can also say, “I and the Father are one” (10:30). [A technical point worth knowing is that “one” in this verse is neuter, not masculine. If the masculine form of “one” had been used, it would indicate Jesus and the Father are the same person. The neuter form indicates that the Father and Jesus are “one” in will, nature, purpose, desire, etc., but the Father and the Son are distinct persons. This is part of the portrait of Jesus that leads the Church ultimately to define the doctrine of the Trinity—God in three persons, but just one God.]

Jesus’ dependence on the Father’s will and his unity with the Father are brought out still more in the “upper room discourse” (or “farewell discourse”) of chapters 13-17. In 14:9, Jesus says, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.” But remember the larger context of these chapters: Jesus tells his disciples that he is going away (13:33). That is why he tells them: “Let not your hearts be troubled” (14:1). As he continues to speak, it becomes clearer that he is going back to the Father (14:28—“I am going to the Father”; see 13:1—“to depart out of this world to the Father”).

Again, as something of a paradox unless we have the doctrine of the Trinity to help us, Jesus says he is going to the Father after he has stated that “the Father dwells in me” (14:10). Adding more paradox he says, “Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me” (14:11). Such an intimate, mutual indwelling of Father and Son is Jesus’ explanation for “the works” he does, which are really the works of the Father “who dwells in me” (14:10-11). Truly Jesus does nothing apart from the Father.

Then, as Jesus tells the disciples to expect “another Helper” (another *Paraclete*, 14:16), he starts including us in the mutual indwelling. “In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you” (14:20). What day is “that day”? In the context, we find the answer. “That day” is when Jesus has gone back to Father and has asked the Father to send us “another Helper” (14:16). Of course to get to that point Jesus must go through the cross and resurrection. And after the resurrection he is still going away, to the Father (20:17—“Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father”). Jesus encourages his disciples with the assurance that his physical absence will be more than compensated by the work of this “Helper,” “Advocate,”

“Comforter,” the “Spirit of truth” (16:13), who “will guide you into all the truth” (16:13), who “will glorify” Jesus by declaring to his disciples “all that the Father has,” which also belongs to the Son (16:14-15; see 1 John 2:24-27; also 1 John 3:24 and 4:13).

It must have been difficult for Jesus’ disciples to believe it would be to their “advantage” for Jesus to go away (John 16:7). Nevertheless, by going away **the way he went away** (by cross and resurrection) Jesus made it possible for those first disciples and all disciples since then to know Jesus better and more intimately than if he had stayed in his pre-cross presence. After the cross and resurrection, the Holy Spirit comes like the very breath of Jesus (20:22). The Holy Spirit brings us the peace Jesus purchased by his cross, and the assurance of our relationship with God. According to John 14:23, when the Holy Spirit comes into Jesus’ disciples, the Father and the Son move in too! Thus the Holy Spirit makes **Jesus present** to us even though he is **absent** (physically). And even though we don’t see the Father with our physical eyes yet, he lives within us. That’s an energizing, purifying realization and hope for the future (1 John 3:1-3).

## Overview of the New Testament

### Lesson 4: The Book of Acts

#### Introduction to the Book of Acts

The Book of Acts is the first book of church history—the first three and a half decades approximately. Calling Acts a history book is accurate but inadequate. It misses the theological/evangelistic reasons for Luke’s writing. Also, in evaluating Acts, we do it a disservice to judge it only for its history. Luke’s accuracy has been demonstrated repeatedly by scholars: Luke gets the names and titles of Roman officials correct; Luke’s naming of Roman governmental units is correct. On the other hand, we have to recognize the selectivity of what Luke tells us. He leaves a lot out! What happened to Thomas? Where did the Apostle John eventually go? Did Matthias make any difference after he was chosen by lots to replace Judas in the Twelve? For all these things we have to rely on traditions or later sources. Luke simply did not aim to be comprehensive as a history writer.

As he did in his first volume (the Gospel of Luke), the author addresses a certain Theophilus (1:1). Theophilus might have been Luke’s benefactor, funding the writing project. (Materials were expensive: about one day’s pay for manual labor would buy one page of papyrus, the least expensive material for a book. “Parchment,” treated leather, would cost much more.) Perhaps Theophilus was a government dignitary of Luke’s acquaintance. Or “Theophilus” could simply mean “friend or lover of God.” We do not know.

Reminding Theophilus about the first volume, Luke reveals part of his perspective on this second volume: “In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus **began to do and teach**,<sup>2</sup> until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen” (1:1–2). We should take the word “began” seriously: Luke believes Jesus **continues** “to do and teach”—through his apostles and other believers and “through the Holy Spirit,” through whom Jesus **gave and gives** commands and guidance.

So, we call it “The Acts of the Apostles,” but it’s also the acts of Jesus through the Holy Spirit. It could be called “the acts of the Holy Spirit.” And more than just apostles are involved in the action. There are people like Stephen and Philip—selected to manage the church’s food distribution—who had key roles in the spread of the gospel of Jesus.

Acts is a history book, but it’s also a profound theological book, revealing how God acts, what God’s will is, and how Christ’s Church (his body) continues God’s work by the power and direction of the Holy Spirit. Jesus’ life and ministry have not ended!

The Book of Acts takes us to Paul’s first imprisonment in Rome, and Luke mentions that Paul was there (in relative freedom, awaiting trial) for two years (28:30-31). So the writing of Acts can be dated with some confidence to about 62-64 AD. The narrative of Acts, however, begins with Jesus still on earth for forty days after his resurrection (1:3). So the time covered by Acts is from approximately 30-33 AD to 62-64 AD.

#### Organization of the Book of Acts

It has often been stated that chapters 1-12 are more focused on Peter and the Church in Jerusalem, which begins to spread outward after the death of Stephen. Chapters 13-28 are more focused on Paul, his missionary journeys, his arrest in Jerusalem, and his eventual voyage to Rome. As a generalization for the two leading characters the division is useful enough. It should be observed, however, that Saul/Paul is converted and begins to preach Jesus in chapter 9. And Peter has a key role in chapter 15. So the division between 1-12 and 13-28 is not neat or

complete and perhaps focuses on human characters too much and not enough on the unifying factor of the entire book: the spread of the message of Jesus.

Acts 1:8 is a better place to look for an outline or preview of the book's contents. Jesus says to his disciples, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in **Jerusalem** and in all **Judea** and **Samaria**, and to **the end of the earth**." The coming of the Holy Spirit in power (Pentecost, ch. 2) happens in Jerusalem. Jerusalem is the chief city of Judea, where the news of Jesus' resurrection would most naturally go next. Taking the message to Samaria would not come so naturally (ch. 8), although it's not completely unprecedented in Jesus' ministry (see John 4). At least it's geographically near. "The end of the earth" is an expansive description of the goal. Jesus meant for his Church to think beyond the frontiers of the known and comfortable. As we see in Acts 10-11 and 15, this was not an easy lesson for many in the Church. [Paul deals with this in Galatians, Romans, and Ephesians.]

Acts 28 takes us as far as Rome. Is that "the end of the earth"? No, but a trajectory has been established—a trajectory of expansion over geographical, ethnic, linguistic, and religious barriers. From Rome the gospel can spread throughout the vast Empire, and then beyond Roman boundaries in the centuries to come. Still today the trajectory established in Acts continues to areas where Christ's name is not known or understood as the name of the Savior of the world.

The central dynamic in this expansive trajectory is the activity of the Holy Spirit. Jesus himself had linked expansion of the witness to the coming of the Holy Spirit in power (1:8). That dynamic is obvious on the Day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came upon 120 disciples who had been praying together for ten days since Jesus' ascension (compare 1:4 and 2:1; also recall Luke 24:49). By the end of that day "about three thousand souls" had been added to the number of baptized believers in Jesus. You could call that an explosive "church plant"!

## Significant events in Acts

### Acts 1

- Promise of the Holy Spirit and worldwide evangelism (1:8)
- Ascension of Jesus bodily and visibly; angelic prediction of his return "in the same way" (1:9-11)—Luke is the only NT writer to describe this moment, although others refer to it indirectly. Luke mentions it at the end of his Gospel and at the beginning of Acts.
- Replacing Judas maintains the important symbolic number of Twelve Apostles (1:15-26). Notice the emphasis: the person chosen must be "a witness" of Jesus' ministry and especially of his resurrection (1:21-22).

### Acts 2

- Pentecost, a Jewish celebration since Moses' time, takes on new meaning with the coming of the Holy Spirit in evident power. Ordinary people who love Jesus begin to prophesy and speak in unlearned tongues (2:4-12). Peter uses the attention created by the phenomena to preach Jesus as the crucified and risen Messiah. Thousands are converted as the Church is launched by the Holy Spirit (2:1-40).

### Acts 3

- A man lame from birth is healed in Jesus' name. Again Peter takes advantage of the excitement to preach Jesus and the need to repent.

### Acts 4

- Peter and John are taken before the Sanhedrin for questioning and a warning: "Speak no more to anyone in this [Jesus'] name" (4:17).

- Peter, John, and other believers pray for boldness to keep preaching and for God to keep working miracles “through the name of your holy servant Jesus” (4:23-31).
- In their enthusiasm, believers share everything they have with one another (4:32-37).

#### Acts 5

- Ananias and Sapphira misrepresent their gift to the Church and die for lying to the Holy Spirit (5:3, 9).
- The apostles continue to work remarkable miracles among the people (5:12-16), but the high priest and other Sadducees (who deny resurrection altogether) arrest and imprison the apostles. Much to the surprise of everyone, an angel releases the apostles from prison and tells them to go back to public preaching (5:17-21).
- Peter boldly tells the Sanhedrin, “We must obey God rather than men” (5:29). He further says: You killed Jesus; God raised him to life as “Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him” (5:30-32). [You can hear the implied accusation: “You don’t have the Holy Spirit because you haven’t obeyed God; in fact you’ve taken the wrong side in condemning Jesus; you need to repent!”]
- Gamaliel (rabbi for Saul of Tarsus) advises the Sanhedrin not to kill the apostles: “Keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; <sup>39</sup>but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!” (5:38-39). The Sanhedrin takes his advice in not killing the apostles, but they beat them and warn them to stop using “the name of Jesus” (5:40).

#### Acts 6

- Seven men “of good repute” and “full of the Holy Spirit and of wisdom” are appointed to assure fairness in the daily distribution of food (6:1-3). The number includes Stephen, Philip, and “Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch” (6:5). [A proselyte was Gentile by birth but converted to Judaism.] The Church continues to grow, “and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith” (believers in Jesus as Messiah, 6:7).
- Stephen, one of the seven, is accused of speaking “blasphemous words against Moses and God” (6:11) and predicting the Temple’s destruction (6:14). He stands before the Sanhedrin.

#### Acts 7

- Stephen’s speech accuses the opponents of Jesus in the Sanhedrin of following the ways of their stubborn ancestors, who resisted God’s chosen deliverers—Joseph (7:9-16); Moses (7:17-42, esp. 27, 35, 37-39). He also points out that God does not depend on a physical building to be present (7:44-50). Boldly he tells the religious authorities that they are resisting the Holy Spirit (7:51) and that they killed “the Righteous One” (7:52). They boast in the law “as delivered by angels” (a Jewish tradition, not in Scripture, that angels helped Moses receive and write the law), but they do not keep the law (7:53).
- Enraged, Stephen’s audience recklessly stones him to death (only Roman authorities could execute someone legally). Stephen becomes the first Christian martyr, dying as Jesus did, with forgiveness in his heart for his killers (7:54-60; cf. Luke 23:34).

#### Acts 8

- Stephen’s martyrdom marked the beginning of “a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles” (8:1). Saul, who had been a consenting witness at Stephen’s death (minding the garments of the actual stoners, 7:58), began “ravaging the church” and

dragging Jesus' followers to prison (8:3). This is a turning point in early Church history, as (reasonable) fear of persecution scattered the large Church in Jerusalem into those very areas Jesus had mentioned in 1:8—Judea and Samaria.

- Philip, one of the “seven” selected in Acts 6, took the gospel of Jesus to “a city of Samaria” (the NIV is probably correct on this, rather than the ESV, which has “the city of Samaria”). Miracles of healing and deliverance happened (8:7), and many were baptized as new believers in Jesus (8:12).
- Apparently the Samaritans' conversions and baptisms were accompanied with “joy” (8:8) but not with outward demonstrations of the Holy Spirit's power. That's the most logical explanation for Luke's comment that the Holy Spirit “had not yet fallen on any of them” (8:16) before Peter and John laid hands on them and prayed “that they might receive the Holy Spirit” (8:15-17). Something visible or audible must have resulted from those prayers, something that prompted Simon to offer to buy “this power” (8:18-19).

This passage is foundational to Pentecostal tradition that Holy Spirit empowerment is subsequent to the salvation experience. That interpretation becomes problematic, however, when compared to Acts 10 and Acts 19 (see below). Especially problematic is how to reconcile the experience of Acts 8 with Paul's statement in Romans 8:9—“Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.”

So were the Samaritans real Christians before Peter and John prayed for them? I see no reason to think otherwise. I do think Peter and John saw that something was lacking—the power of the Holy Spirit released in their lives. **Their salvation was real, but their incorporation into the Spirit-filled life of Jesus was incomplete** until Peter and John prayed for them. They had been “baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus” (8:16), but they had not been baptized into the power of the Spirit who drew them to faith.

Perspective on this issue is improved by recognizing that Luke's interest in the activity of the Holy Spirit (the doctrinal term is “pneumatology”) is primarily focused on power to speak inspired words—either in one's own language or in unlearned languages. Power for such speech occurs in Acts 2:4 but also in Acts 4:8 (in Peter's learned language but inspired by the Holy Spirit). Power for such speaking occurs in Acts 10:46 (house of Cornelius) and 19:6 (Ephesus “disciples” who had not heard about the Holy Spirit before Paul talked to them). In both of these latter cases the inspired speaking was in unlearned tongues. But in Luke 1:40 Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit to speak prophetically in her own language.

That Luke sees a connection between the Holy Spirit and inspired speech is obvious enough to any observant reader. It takes greater attention to see **what Luke does not say but Paul and John do**. Luke does not connect the Holy Spirit to regeneration, being “born again” in the language of John 3:5-6. Luke does not make the connection Paul does when he says no one can confess Jesus as Lord without the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:3). This is not calling Luke's pneumatology deficient or incorrect; it's simply recognizing that Spirit-inspired speaking is what Luke regards as evidence of the Holy Spirit's presence in power. Fortunately we don't have to conclude that either Luke is wrong in Acts 8:16 or Paul is wrong in Romans 8:9. We are blessed to have Luke, Paul, John, and other biblical writers to teach us different aspects of the Holy Spirit's work.

- “An angel of the Lord” directed Philip to leave the revival in Samaria and go to “a desert place” to meet just one man (Acts 8:26). The Holy Spirit directed Philip to approach the man in the chariot. Philip could hear him reading Scripture because everyone read aloud

in those days. An Ethiopian eunuch, a court official in his home country (8:27), was reading Isaiah 53:7-8, which made a perfect opening for Philip to start the conversation and tell him about Jesus (8:35). How long was the conversation? Long enough for the man to request baptism (8:37).

- Philip was “carried” by the Spirit of the Lord to another place (8:39). This sounds fantastic, but there are OT examples of God’s Spirit physically moving persons when God chooses. First Kings 18:12 indicates Elijah had a reputation for such moves.

### Acts 9

- Saul, headed to Damascus to arrest Jewish followers of Jesus, is arrested by Jesus: “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” (9:4). So, **persecuting Christians is persecuting Christ!** Along with the revelation that Jesus is alive and reigning in heaven, Saul learns that Jesus closely identifies with his followers. What you do to them you do to him! This reality shaped Paul the Apostle’s view of Christ and the Church in his letters, when he calls the Church “the body” of Christ (e.g., 1 Cor. 12:12-27).
- Ananias, a Jewish Christian living in Damascus, was guided by the Lord to go pray for Saul’s sight to be restored and for Saul to see that he was “a chosen instrument” to carry Jesus’ name to Gentiles, kings, and the Jewish people, too (9:10-16).
- Ananias prayed for Saul’s eyesight but also that he “be filled with the Holy Spirit” (9:17).
- Just as Saul had been a leader of persecution, his conversion and preaching of Jesus as “the Son of God” (9:20) attracted opposition. He had to escape Damascus by stealth, with help from new friends, followers of Jesus who are called Saul’s “disciples” (9:25), perhaps people who had become disciples because of Saul and were now being taught from his storehouse of scriptural knowledge.
- Christian Jews in Jerusalem were understandably hesitant to trust Saul (9:26), but Barnabas “brought him to the apostles” and vouched for the reality of Saul’s conversion (9:27).
- Saul was so bold in his preaching that his life was threatened (9:29). For the second but not the last time, Saul/Paul had to leave town, this time returning to his hometown of Tarsus (9:30).
- Once Saul the fiery persecutor—now a fiery promoter of Christ—left Jerusalem, the Church enjoyed a season of peace and continued growth in Judea, Galilee, and Samaria (9:31).
- Peter is traveling about preaching and healing in Jesus’ name. Luke recounts the healing of Aeneas, bedridden for eight years and paralyzed (9:33). Note Peter’s wording: “Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you” (9:34). **Jesus is alive and reigning in heaven (2:33) but also alive and healing on earth!**
- Disciples in Joppa heard Peter was not far away, in Lydda; therefore, they sent for him when a beloved disciple named Tabitha or Dorcas died (9:36-38). When he prayed for her, Peter gave the command, “Tabitha, arise” (9:40). The resemblance to Jesus’ words in Mark 5:41 is unmistakable: “Talitha cumi,” which means, “Little girl, I say to you, arise.” The words are similar; the results are the same: a dead person is restored to life.

### Acts 10

- Cornelius, a Roman centurion, is described as “a devout man who feared God” (10:2). “God-fearer” was a description used for Gentiles who admired the Jewish faith, who perhaps worshiped at the synagogue, but who had not taken the steps of becoming a proselyte, with the rituals and regulations that would entail. (A proselyte has received

circumcision, observes the Sabbath, and eats kosher. A proselyte is a Gentile who has become Jewish. Someone who fears God, like Cornelius, might find full conversion practically impossible.)

- God sends an angel to speak to Cornelius (10:3), not to give him the gospel, but to give him the name and location of a human being who can give him the gospel—Simon Peter (10:4-8). On the other end, God gives Peter a vision of unclean animals, which God tells him to “kill and eat” (10:13). Peter says “No!” because the idea of eating unclean animals (non-kosher) is abhorrent to him (10:14). In reply God says, “What God has made clean, do not call common.” God persists, giving Peter the same vision and command three times (10:16). The repetition emphasizes God’s message and happens to match the number of people who were at the gate asking whether this was the place Simon Peter was staying (10:7, 17, 19). Coincidence? Probably not.
- While Peter was “pondering the vision,” the Spirit spoke to him directly (audibly or inwardly?): “Three men are looking for you. . . . accompany them without hesitation, for I have sent them” (10:19-20).
- At some point, perhaps on the way to the house of Cornelius, Peter realized that God had given him a lesson not so much about food as about people, for he tells the people assembled there, “God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean” (10:28). This is bigger than changing your diet; this is changing your ideas about whose company you can keep. As Peter is about to see in a vivid work of the Holy Spirit, God accepts the Gentile who fears him but does not keep kosher! Peter hears Cornelius tell about the angelic visit and his household’s readiness to hear Peter.
- “Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, <sup>35</sup> but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (10:34-35). But good-hearted people still need to hear about Jesus, and Peter proceeds to rehearse the story of Jesus (10:36ff.).
- **Acts 10:38** is an important verse, indicating **how Jesus did the mighty works** he did: “God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.” (We hear echoes of Luke 4:18, which quotes Isaiah 61.)
- Peter proceeds to tell about Jesus’ death and resurrection, how he and others were “witnesses” of what Jesus had done, and how God offers “forgiveness of sins through his [Jesus’] name” (10:39-43).
- Peter’s sermon is excellent, but he doesn’t get to finish. “While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word” (10:44). The Jewish Christian brothers who came with Peter “were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles” (10:45). How did they recognize it was the same gift? “For they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God” (10:46). And they had not even been baptized with water yet (10:47-48)!
- Peter had been there when the Holy Spirit came on 120 disciples like a rushing wind and with visible tongues of fire at Pentecost (Acts 2). Peter had been there when baptized believers did not experience the Holy Spirit in power until Peter and John laid hands on them (Acts 8). Now Peter has seen the Holy Spirit fall in power on unbaptized Gentiles! Is there a single, unchangeable ritual order which the Holy Spirit must respect? Apparently not!

## Acts 11

- Back in Jerusalem, the main criticism Peter gets is “You went to uncircumcised men and **ate with them**” (11:3). Peter’s rebuttal (11:4-17) was to recite how God had spoken to him in the vision of unclean animals, how God sent an angel to Cornelius to tell him where to find Peter, and how the Holy Spirit fell on the Gentile audience “just as on us at the beginning.” Then he added his recollection of Jesus’ words: “John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 1:5). What happened to Cornelius and his household was the work of God, and “who was I that I could stand in God’s way?” (11:17). At least for now, Peter’s critics “fell silent.” To their credit, they “glorified God” for giving to Gentiles “repentance that leads to life” (11:18). [“Table fellowship” continued to be an issue for some Jewish Christians even after this; see Acts 15 and Gal. 2:11-13.]
- 1:19-26—Luke picks up the thread of believers being scattered by persecution in Acts 8. Some traveled “as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews” (11:19). But some brave ones among the scattered Jewish Christians came to Antioch and preached the Lord Jesus to Greeks (i.e., Gentiles) with great effect (11:20-21). So many Gentiles were being converted that Barnabas was sent from Jerusalem to check out the activity (11:22). He liked what he found—a growing church with a mixture of Jewish and Gentile believers. Barnabas went to Tarsus to get Saul to come help him with the discipleship program (11:23-26). Luke adds the incidental note that Antioch was the first place followers of Jesus were called “Christians,” apparently called that by non-Christians at the beginning. But the name perhaps first used by mockers of “Christ-followers” stuck, and Christians embraced it.
- The attitude of Barnabas toward the movement he found in Antioch cannot be praised enough. Going against the prejudice of a lifetime (of generations!), Barnabas, “full of the Holy Spirit and of faith” wanted to work with God in what he saw God doing: building a Church that transcends ethnic distinctions without erasing them. The church in Antioch of Syria would become the first truly mission-minded congregation, sending Barnabas and Saul/Paul out on “Paul’s first missionary journey” (Acts 13). Before that, however, Barnabas and Saul spent the time needed to get this new kind of church grounded in God’s Word. Their firm foundation would become a launching pad for multiplying the Gentile believers in Jesus across (modern) Turkey and into Macedonia and Greece.

## Acts 12

- James, the brother of John, was executed by Herod Agrippa. Thus James is the first Apostle to be martyred. Luke does not give us information about why or how this transpired. He does tell us Herod “saw that it pleased the Jews,” that is non-Christian Jews (probably Sanhedrin leaders) who opposed the Jesus movement. Wanting to curry still more favor, Herod arrested Peter and was planning to execute him (12:1-5). It’s interesting how this chapter begins with Herod’s execution of James; near the end of the chapter Herod dies in misery (12:23), executed, we could say, by the Lord. [Of course the chapter divisions were put in centuries after Luke wrote Acts.]
- God does not allow Herod to kill Peter. In an extraordinary way that Peter found hard to believe at first (12:9, 11), and which surprised those praying for Peter’s deliverance (12:5, 12, 14-16), an angel wakened Peter from sleep (12:7) and led him out of the prison into the street. When Peter says, “Tell these things to James” (12:17), he refers to James the brother of Jesus, who emerges as leader of the Church in Jerusalem in Acts 15.

- The death of Herod Agrippa is sharply contrasted to the continuing spread of God’s word (12:23-24).

### Acts 13-14

- Focus shifts back to the church in Antioch, where Barnabas and Saul have been teaching the Word for more than a year (11:16), along with some other gifted leaders. During a time of worship and fasting, the Holy Spirit said (apparently through a prophet), “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them” (13:2). After more prayer and fasting, they laid hands on them and sent them out. This is called “Paul’s first missionary journey,” and it goes from here to 14:28, when they return to Antioch.
- It’s somewhat ironic to call it “Paul’s missionary journey,” for two reasons:
  - 1) Barnabas is named first in 13:1, 2, 7—he’s the leader as the journey begins.
  - 2) Saul is still called Saul at the beginning of the journey.
 Both of these change in the course of an encounter with a Roman proconsul on the island of Cyprus by the name of Sergius Paulus and a “magician, a Jewish false prophet named “Bar-Jesus” (13:6-12; Aramaic for “son of Joshua”).
- Luke says Saul was also called Paul (13:9). This is not explained as a result of his conversion to Christ (as people say, “Saul became Paul”). In this context it could be inferred that Saul was so impressed by Sergius Paulus that he began calling himself that in honor of the proconsul. More likely, however, is the explanation that Saul/Paul had more than one name throughout his life. “Saul” is a Jewish name, especially honored in the tribe of Benjamin, which was Saul/Paul’s heritage (Phil. 3:5). But now he’s in the Gentile realm, where his Greco-Roman name has always been “Paulus” or Paul. Luke chooses this moment in the narrative to change how he refers to the same character: Saul is also Paul, and Paul is still Saul.
- Luke introduces Saul’s other name, Paul, in his rebuke of Bar-Jesus (a.k.a. “Elymas”), who was trying to stop Sergius Paulus from believing the gospel (13:8ff.). Paul’s rebuke included the judgment that Elymas would be blind “for a time” (13:11). The strategy of Elymas completely backfired, as “the proconsul believed” (13:12).
- Apparently this is also when it became evident Paul was the true leader of this mission team. Before this they were referred to as “Barnabas and Saul”; going forward it is “Paul and his companions” (13:13). Barnabas seems comfortable with the change in prominence; his kinsman, John Mark, may not have found it comfortable. John Mark returned home to Jerusalem (13:13).
- From Cyprus, “Paul and his companions” sail back to the mainland, where they begin a series of missionary endeavors in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). In city after city, the general strategy is the same: Start at the Jewish synagogue, where people have heard the Word of God and should have some expectation that God would send the Messiah. Paul and Barnabas can proclaim to them that God **has sent the Messiah**, but the religious leaders in Jerusalem **rejected** him and persuaded Pilate to crucify him, but God has **raised him from the dead**, thus vindicating Jesus as the Savior through whom forgiveness can be received. That’s a short summary of Luke’s longer summary of Paul’s sermon in Antioch in Pisidia (not to be confused with Antioch in Syria, where the mission trip started). Paul’s sermon goes from 13:16 to 13:41, and it contains all the points made above and is similar in content to Peter’s sermon at Pentecost (Acts 2).
- Paul’s Sabbath-day sermon in the synagogue attracted “almost the whole city” to show up the following Sabbath (13:44), which did not please the leaders of the synagogue.

They began to argue with Paul and Barnabas (13:45), who responded by saying, “Since you thrust it aside . . . we are turning to the Gentiles” (13:46). This made the Gentiles rejoice, and many became believers (13:48). Eventually, however, opposition arose from prominent citizens, and Paul and Barnabas moved on to the next city, not defeated but leaving in their wake a new local church where “the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit” (13:50-52).

- Similar but different things happened in the other cities evangelized by Paul and Barnabas on this missionary journey. They went to Iconium and repeated the strategy employed at Antioch in Pisidia: Start at the synagogue but preach to Jews and Gentiles. When the threat-level gets too high, move on to the next city (14:1-7).
- The experience in Lystra (14:8-20) was similar but different, even exceptional. Early on, Paul brought healing to a man lame from birth (14:8-10). The excited (pagan) townspeople wanted to worship Paul and Barnabas, as Hermes and Zeus respectively. Because they were shouting in their local language (instead of Greek), their intentions were not immediately clear to Paul and Barnabas. Once they understood what was going on, the apostles frantically begged them not to make sacrifices to them! Luke says they succeeded in their pleas but not easily (14:18).
- Lystra illustrates how a pagan audience could misunderstand a miracle. They also illustrate how quickly public opinion can change. Some adversaries from Antioch in Pisidia and Iconium followed Paul and Barnabas to Lystra and persuaded the citizens to believe the apostles deserved to die. “They stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead” (14:19). But when the disciples gathered around his body, Paul “rose up and entered” Lystra. The next day they moved on to Derbe (14:20).
- They made “many disciples” in Derbe, then re-traced their steps to visit the young churches in Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch in Pisidia. In each city they encouraged them to continue believing in Jesus and to endure tribulation for the sake of the coming kingdom (14:21-22). They appointed elders in every church and “with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed” (14:23).
- Paul and Barnabas made their way back to “the sending church” in Antioch of Syria, where they gave a good report on the many Gentiles who had responded to the gospel with faith (14:27). Thus ended “Paul’s first missionary journey.”

## Acts 15

- After the ordeals of that first missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas are comfortably back in Antioch. But they cannot be comfortable for long, because trouble comes to Antioch through Jewish Christians from Judea. These individuals can be called “Judaizers,” because they tell the Gentile believers that “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved” (15:1). Of course Paul and Barnabas have a completely different view; they have seen how God has given uncircumcised Gentiles the Holy Spirit and made them new creations in Christ. The debate is so serious, with so much at stake, that Paul, Barnabas, and some others decide to go to Jerusalem to talk this out with the Apostles (15:2).
- In Jerusalem, they find a group of “believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees,” who were saying, “It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses” (15:5). This would mean all the food laws, the Sabbath, and other parts of Jewish piety. In effect, they were saying these Gentiles must become Jews in order to be saved, even though they believe in Jesus as the Messiah.

- The gathering called to settle this issue could be called a “conference,” but it’s usually called “the Jerusalem Council.” The Council met in 49 AD, and by this time many Gentiles had become believers, especially during the missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas but in other places as well. Would it even be possible to “re-disciple” them to be observant Jews? More important, Paul would say, is the question: “Would that be right, or would that be **a rejection of God’s grace?**” (See Gal. 5:4.)
- After “much debate” (15:7), Peter reminded everyone of his experience with the household of Cornelius (ch. 10). At that time, Peter’s critics were silenced by his testimony of how God had given Gentiles the Holy Spirit, even before they were baptized! (ch. 11). But traditions die hard, and the Jerusalem Council of 49 AD was having to argue an issue that many thought had been settled years before. Peter’s concluding statement is powerful: God had cleansed the Gentiles’ hearts by faith in the gospel (15:9). “Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? <sup>11</sup> But we believe that **we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will**” (15:10–11). As someone said, the ground is level at the foot of the cross, and everyone stands in need of the same grace. If that’s the case, we cannot tell anyone to climb up to our level and then maybe they will be good enough to be saved. The circumcised, kosher-eating, Sabbath-observing Jew needs grace as much as the Gentile. And none of us should count our religious observances as badges that proclaim our merit in the eyes of God or our superiority over **other people who need grace—just like we do.**
- Paul and Barnabas gave their report of the “signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles” (15:12). Then James, the brother of Jesus, presiding over the Council, gave his statement, which seems to be a declaration of the sense of the assembly (as a whole, if not everyone). He affirms the validity of Peter’s experience (he calls him “Simeon”) in that first outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Gentiles at the household of Cornelius (ch. 10). That really should have ended the argument about Gentiles needing to become Jews in order to be acceptable to God. And if Gentiles are acceptable to God, we have to accept them, too, as part of God’s people. This view, James says, agrees with the words of Amos 9:11-12, which James quotes in Acts 15:16-17: When God rebuilds the tent of David (i.e., the messianic kingdom), Gentiles are included and will be called by the name of the Lord.
- Perhaps James could have picked a less obscure passage from the OT, but it really does support his conclusion for this Council:
 

<sup>19</sup> Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, <sup>20</sup> but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood. <sup>21</sup> For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues.” [15:19–21]
- The view of James is adopted by the Council and incorporated into the letter sent out to all the churches as their decision in this matter:
 

For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: <sup>29</sup> that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell. [15:28-29]

- Not a word about Sabbath-keeping, nothing about circumcision—they ask nothing of the Gentile believers beyond basic morality. This was important because sexual immorality was rampant in Gentile lands, often connected with idolatrous worship. Abstinence from “blood, and from what has been strangled” could be heard as an appeal to respect the conscience of their Jewish Christian brothers and sisters and also their non-Christian Jewish neighbors (that seems to be the reason for what James says in 15:21). Leviticus 17:11 gives the broad principle—“the life is in the blood”—as a reason not to consume blood. That may have been in mind here in Acts 15, but it’s not as clearly spelled out as one could wish.
- So that big dispute has been settled (officially, “on record”), but that does not mean there won’t be future disputes. In Acts 15:36-41, we see a dispute arise between Paul and Barnabas. They agree it would be good to revisit the churches they planted, but they disagree about whether John Mark should go along. So these two “spiritual giants” (in our eyes) cannot agree on who should be on the team. They are human after all. They disagree so strongly, that they go their separate ways, while still doing the same work—evangelism and discipleship.
- Paul begins his “second missionary journey” in 15:40 with a new partner, Silas, who was mentioned earlier in 15:27 and 32.

#### Acts 16

- They go to Derbe and Lystra (where Paul had been before), and they meet Timothy, whose mother is a Jewish believer, but whose father is Greek (or Gentile). Although Timothy has a good reputation among the Christians of the area, Paul circumcises him so that he can join the mission team and not be a scandal to Jewish people they hope to evangelize (16:1-3).
- In **16:6-10**, we find an interesting example of **the Holy Spirit’s guidance in missions**. First they are “forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia” (16:6; “Asia” is the Roman province around Ephesus; it’s not a reference to the continent!). So they tried to go in another direction, northeast, “but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them” (16:7). This could be guidance by ‘closed doors’ or just the Lord saying “No, not that way.” There were people in need of the gospel in every direction. Why would the Holy Spirit (who makes Jesus real to us, and can be called “the Spirit of Jesus”) forbid any direction they humanly choose? Sometimes you know; sometimes you find out later why God allows or forbids some choice. In this case, Paul, Silas, and Timothy are being guided, somewhat by default, to go to Troas (16:8). Here two really important things happen, one obvious but the other not so obvious.
- In Troas Paul has a vision of a man from Macedonia saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us” (16:9). Apparently Paul had not been planning to go to Europe, at least not yet, but now he has heard the call. This second missionary trip will take them to Europe. That’s the obvious part.
- What is evident but not glaringly obvious is that Troas is where Luke joins Paul’s team. God wanted Paul and the team to go to Europe, but he also wanted Luke on that team. That’s why the Spirit kept saying ‘no’ to other directions. What is the evidence for Luke’s joining the team here? Pronouns. First person plural pronouns. This is where, for the first time in Acts, the narrator says “we” and “us” (16:10). From this point forward, the pronouns will be a clue whether Luke is with the team for certain events, or whether he is elsewhere temporarily.

- “We sought to go on into Macedonia” (16:10). Luke begins a brief travelogue; later he will have lengthy ones—from A to B and then to C and finally to D. This pattern is seen often. The first place in Macedonia where they attempt evangelism is Philippi, “a leading city of the district” (16:12). It’s also a “Roman colony,” which means a city that enjoys “Roman citizenship.” Colonies were often populated by retired officers of the Roman legions or people otherwise rewarded for their service to the Empire. They typically felt great pride in their status as Roman colonies. Philippi certainly did (thus when Paul wrote them later he reminded them that our citizenship is in heaven, Phil. 3:20).
- There was no synagogue in Philippi (to have one required ten Jewish males). But Paul and his team looked for “a place of prayer” and began speaking to the women gathered there (16:13). Lydia, a businesswoman who had moved there from Thyatira, “was a worshiper of God” and responsive to the gospel message (16:14). She and her household were baptized into the Christian faith, after which she “prevailed upon us” to stay at her home (16:15). Evidently she was doing well in business. “Purple goods” (16:14) were garments dyed with an expensive color. Thyatira was famous for such things.
- On the way to the place of prayer, “a slave girl who had a spirit of divination” annoyed Paul, even though what she said about Paul and his friends was true: “These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation” (16:17). Apparently the spirit in this woman vexed Paul’s spirit. He commanded the spirit of divination in her to come out “in the name of Jesus Christ” (16:18). When the spirit left her, she was free but no longer profitable for her owners. In retaliation they dragged Paul and Silas to the marketplace where, typically, there were magistrates to appeal to. The charge against Paul and Silas? “These men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city. They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice” (16:20-21). It wasn’t a trial, and the charge was not substantiated. But the anger and prejudice of the crowd easily provoked them to beat the apostles and throw them into jail. To make sure they wouldn’t get away, the jailer put them in “the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks” (16:24).
- Paul and Silas sing hymns to God about midnight, with other prisoners listening (16:25).
- An earthquake frightens the jailer into thinking he has lost his prisoners, which would mean losing his job or even his life (16:27).
- Assured by Paul that no prisoner has escaped, the jailer falls down before Paul and Silas. He brings them out and asks, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” They reply, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household” (16:28-31). After further instruction about the Lord, and after washing their wounds, the jailer was baptized with all his family. Then he fed the apostles and rejoiced in his new faith (16:32-34).
- In the morning the magistrates send word to let Paul and Silas go free. Paul refuses because they have violated his rights as a Roman citizen (which they had not bothered to learn before beating Silas and him). The Philippians know they have committed a serious error, which could cause trouble, especially for the magistrates. They apologize to the apostles but still ask them to leave. Paul is in no hurry. He visits Lydia and the brothers (other converts) and then leaves town when he is ready (16:35-40).

### Acts 17

- Notice “they” in 16:40 and 17:1. Luke is not with the team. Apparently he stayed in Philippi. Paul and Silas go to Thessalonica and for three Sabbaths teach about Jesus from

the Scriptures (OT). Some believe, but others start a riot. The apostles have to leave earlier than they wished. (This is reflected in 1 & 2 Thessalonians.)

- 17:10-15—more reasonable response from Jews in Berea, but Jews from Thessalonica came and stirred up trouble again. Paul set sail for Athens, but Silas and Timothy stayed in Berea.
- 17:16-34—Paul in Athens. Paul shows versatility in addressing the philosophically minded Athenians at the Areopagus, a public place for debates and discussions. In Paul’s address to them (17:22ff.) he appeals to common sense, logic, and even quotes Greek poets (17:28, Epimenides and Aratus). Still, without using Hebrew Scriptures, he is able to present the resurrection of Jesus as assurance that Jesus is the judge of the world (17:31). Resurrection of the body is a ridiculous notion to Plato-influenced Greeks of that time. Some mocked at that point, but others expressed interest in hearing more. Dionysius, Damaris, and others “believed” (17:34).

### Acts 18

- “After this” does not tell us how long Paul stayed in Athens. But when he went to Corinth, he found people he could work with, Aquila and Priscilla. By “work” I mean labor to make a living, but they also became fellow-workers in the gospel. They were Jews forced to leave Rome along with all other Jews. This expulsion by Emperor Claudius is known to have occurred in 49 AD, the same year as the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15. The events are not connected to one another (18:1-3).
- Paul worked daily with Aquila and Priscilla and tried to evangelize in the synagogue on the Sabbath. That was his routine until “Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia” (18:5). Now Paul was free to be “occupied with the word, testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus” (18:5). What brought freedom from having to work every day? An offering from the church in Philippi, not mentioned here, but see Philippians 4:15-16.
- More frequent conversations and exhortations from Paul produced two kinds of fruit everywhere he went, including Corinth: believers and adversaries. In 18:6, Paul says to his opponents in the synagogue, “From now on I will go to the Gentiles.” Many Jews and Gentiles became believers, and God encouraged Paul to “go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people” (18:9-10). Thus encouraged, Paul stayed eighteen months in Corinth (18:11).
- After the ‘dustup’ in 18:12-17, where God proved that no one was able to harm Paul in Corinth, Paul eventually left Corinth with Priscilla and Aquila traveling with him as far as Ephesus. Paul’s stop in Ephesus was brief, but he said he would return “if God wills” (18:22). Paul was eager to get back to his ‘sending church’ at Antioch in Syria (18:22). Thus, “Paul’s second missionary” journey finally ends.
- “After spending some time there” he left on his “third missionary journey” (18:23), which will not end with a return to Antioch but with his arrest in Jerusalem (21:27ff.).
- 18:24-28 introduces a Jew from Alexandria named Apollos. He came to Ephesus where he made a great impression by his skilled teaching and fervent spirit. He knew, however, only the baptism of John. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him in the synagogue, they took him aside and “explained to him the way of God more accurately” (18:26), which apparently means more information about Jesus and the Holy Spirit’s baptism, but Luke gives no details. The fellowship of Jesus-believers in Ephesus were happy to give Apollos a good recommendation to take to Achaia (where Athens and Corinth are). [This

sets up a division of loyalties in the Corinthian church, as some decide they prefer Apollos over Paul. See 1 Cor. 1:10-17; 3:4-6, 20-21; 4:6.]

### Acts 19

- “While Apollos was at Corinth,” Paul came to Ephesus. There he met some “disciples” (19:1). It’s difficult to know the exact meaning of “disciple” in this context. Something prompted Paul to ask, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” They said, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” Well, “into what then were you baptized?” “Into John’s baptism” (19:2-3). Paul has nothing bad to say about John’s baptism, which was for repentance and to prepare for the one coming after John, specifically Jesus. The conversation was probably much longer than what Luke wrote down, but once these disciples understood about Jesus and what he had to offer, “they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus” (19:5). This is the only recorded second water baptism in the New Testament. Then Paul laid his hands on them and the Holy Spirit came upon them, “and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying” (19:6). Again, an anomalous situation defies our wishes to predict the work of the Holy Spirit.
- The Holy Spirit can come on people a significant time **after their baptism in water** to identify with Jesus (Acts 8). The Spirit can come on people **before they get baptized with water** (Acts 10). The Spirit can come on people who just received a **second water baptism** (Acts 19). It’s hard to make this systematically restricted to just one pattern. Rather than try to do that, perhaps what we all need to do is ask ourselves the question, “Did I receive the Holy Spirit when I believed?” If so, what is the evidence for his presence and power in my life? Although I grew up Pentecostal, I don’t insist the evidence has to be speaking in tongues. But there should be some evidence, some sign, that we are different and operating differently from people who don’t have the Spirit.
- In Ephesus, Paul spent three months trying to convince people in the synagogue (19:8). “Some became stubborn and continued in unbelief, speaking evil of the Way [of Jesus] before the congregation.” Paul withdrew and took disciples with him to a hall devoted to teaching (19:9). Paul kept this up for two years in Ephesus, “so that all the residents of Asia [the Roman province] heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks” (19:10).
- Some “extraordinary miracles” happened “by the hands of Paul” while in Ephesus. People received healings and deliverance from evil spirits through materials Paul had touched (19:11-12). Such things get talked about, and seven sons of Sceva tried invoking the name of “Jesus, whom Paul proclaims” (19:13). It did not work as they intended (19:15-17). Another extraordinary event was the bonfire of magic books—not for sleight-of-hand tricks, but for trafficking with spirits (19:18-20).
- 19:21-41 reports a near riot in Ephesus. So many were being converted to Jesus as Lord that there was a serious decline in the market for small replicas of “Artemis” (or “Diana”), the goddess who attracted a lot of tourism and trinket sales. Paul was blamed for the large numbers of people turning away from hand-crafted gods (19:26). “Artemis” herself might be under threat if this trend continued! That’s when the chanting started: “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” (19:28, 34). It was loud and long, two hours of angry chanting, which the town clerk finally quieted by warning that the more immediate danger was caused by the chanters—the danger of a riot breaking out, and riots are unpredictable in their consequences.

## Acts 20

- 20:1-6—Paul left Ephesus to go to Macedonia and then Corinth for three months (20:3), during which time he wrote Romans (about 57 AD). Paul wanted to go to Rome after taking an offering from Gentile churches to the church in Jerusalem. The offering would be an act of solidarity between Gentile and Jewish Christians. That’s why so many names are mentioned in 20:4-6; these are emissaries of the churches sending the offering. Notice also the re-appearance of “us” in 20:5. Luke is again part of the group.
- 20:7-12—Paul is intent on getting to Jerusalem, but he also wants to make the most of brief visits with other believers along the way. His intensity is illustrated in this account of Paul talking until sunrise.
- 20:13-16—Luke’s travelogue continues, with brief mention of Paul’s determination.
- 20:17-36—Paul speaks to the church elders from Ephesus, but at Miletus. Paul knew he could not take time to visit Ephesus and still get to Jerusalem before Pentecost (20:16).
- Paul reminds the elders of his example of faithfully preaching and teaching about repentance and faith in Jesus. Paul feels “constrained by the Spirit” to go to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen “except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me” (20:18-23). Paul feels sure these elders will not see his face again (20:25). So he solemnly charges them to be conscientious in taking care of the church, “all the flock” (20:28) for which they have responsibilities from the Holy Spirit to act as overseers (bishops). Continuing the metaphor, he warns against the invasion of “fierce wolves” (20:29); even some of the elders he is speaking to will “draw away the disciples after them” (20:30). The warnings are so stark and sad that the words of 20:32 come as a great comfort—“And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.” If they keep trusting God they need not fear the future, for themselves or for “the flock.”
- 20:35 is interesting as it quotes Jesus’ saying, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” This saying is not recorded in the four Gospels, but Paul tells them to **remember** it; they have previously heard it as part of the oral tradition of Jesus’ teaching.
- 20:36-38—a tearful farewell

## Acts 21

- 21:1-15 contains a lot of travelogue about ports and ships, etc. But also we hear prophetic warnings for Paul not to go to Jerusalem (20:4). The words and actions of Agabus (21:10-11), a well-known prophet in the early Church (see 11:28), are especially vivid. He uses Paul’s belt to bind his own hands and feet, and to proclaim, “Thus says the Holy Spirit, ‘This is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles’” (21:11). Luke is present (note the “we” in 21:12ff.), and he joins the chorus of friends trying to persuade Paul not to go to Jerusalem. It’s all to no avail. Paul is “bound” already to deliver this Gentile Christian offering to the church in Jerusalem. He “would not be persuaded” otherwise (21:14).
- 21:17-26—To show he is still a faithful Jew, Paul takes James’ suggestion to sponsor a ritual for “four men who are under a vow” (21:23-24), an act that will be witnessed by Christian Jews and non-Christian Jews. Paul shows no hesitation.
- 21:27-40—Paul is spotted in the Temple complex by anti-Christian Jews from Asia (the Roman province around Ephesus, where Paul spent a long time and was well known). They seize Paul and loudly accuse him of “teaching everyone everywhere against the

people [Israel] and the law and this place [the Temple].” They also accuse him of defiling the Temple by bringing Greeks into the Temple. It’s true that Greeks are in town as part of Paul’s group of leaders who brought the offering, but it’s not true that they entered the Temple (21:28-29). But reason does not count for much in such situations, and people do not want to ask questions sometimes. They just act on their strong feelings of hatred toward Paul and believe the worst about him. Paul seems to have been that kind of person: you love him for his passion or you hate him for his passion.

- The agitated Jews would have killed Paul with their bare hands once they got him out of the Temple (21:30). But Paul is rescued from the mob by the Roman army! This is a point Luke would want to include in helping make Paul’s case before Roman authorities. Paul and the Empire are not at war with one another (that enmity will come later, after the years covered by Acts). The Roman soldiers carry Paul to keep him alive (21:35-36).
- Just before being carried into the barracks, which the Romans placed strategically near the Temple, Paul speaks to the tribune in Greek (21:37). He tells him he is a Jew from Tarsus and “a citizen of no obscure city” (21:39). Now that’s an obscure reference to us, but for Paul it was a clear reference to his Roman citizenship. Paul asks permission from the tribune to speak to the mob. Paul begins to speak to his fellow Jews in Hebrew (21:40, literally in Greek “the Hebrew dialect,” which could mean Aramaic; Paul would have been fluent in both).

**Acts 22** (one of the worst chapter divisions in the Bible, put in centuries after Luke)

- 22:1-29—Paul tells the mob who he is, what he has done in his zeal for Judaism (study with Gamaliel, persecution of “this Way,” 22:4), and his Damascus Road encounter with Jesus. The mob listens quietly for all of this, until he says the Lord told him to flee Jerusalem and go to the Gentiles (22:21). That’s when the crowd became a mob again, and Paul was saved by the Roman soldiers taking him into the barracks. He was about to be beaten by the soldiers when Paul revealed his Roman citizenship.
- 22:30—This verse should be in the next chapter.

**Acts 23**

- 23:1-5—Paul’s hearing before the Sanhedrin (under Roman supervision) gets off to rough start when he claims to have a clear conscience. The High Priest is offended and orders Paul to be struck. Paul gets testy with him until informed he is supposed to respect the High Priest. [This passage leads some to think Paul’s thorn in the flesh might have been very bad eyesight. With good eyesight he should have recognized Ananias.]
- 23:6-10—Paul can see well enough to know (or he just remembers) that Sadducees and Pharisees are in the same room judging him. Paul plays them off against one another by claiming his own Pharisee heritage and belief in the resurrection of the dead. That gets the two sides angry at one another. A Pharisee asks, “What if a spirit or an angel spoke to him?” (23:9), knowing it would further anger the Sadducees. Dissension in the room is getting out of hand. The tribune takes responsibility for his prisoner’s safety and orders his soldiers to remove Paul back to the barracks.
- 23:11—The Lord speaks an encouraging word to Paul: “You must testify also in Rome.”
- 23:12-35—A plot to kill Paul is revealed to the tribune. Again taking responsibility for his prisoner, the tribune quickly acts to move Paul to the more secure city of Caesarea on the coast of the Mediterranean.

### Acts 24

- 24:1-21—Ananias and others travel to Caesarea to make their case against Paul before the Roman governor, Felix. Paul states his case also.
- 24:22-27—Felix puts everyone on hold and keeps Paul imprisoned for two years! But Paul's friends are free to visit him and attend to his needs. Paul takes advantage of opportunities to tell Felix and his Jewish wife about Jesus.

### Acts 25

- 25:1-12—The new governor, Festus, visits Jerusalem and hears the complaints about Paul from Jewish leaders. They want Paul brought back to Jerusalem, but Festus says they should come to Caesarea first and make their case. It looks like a replay of the hearing before Felix in Acts 24, but Festus leans toward taking Paul back to Jerusalem as a favor to the people he rules over (25:9). Paul knows there would be an ambush; no matter how many people died at Roman hands, it would be worth it to the High Priest if Paul could be killed. Paul exercises his right as a Roman citizen: he appeals his case to Caesar. Festus agrees to send Paul to Rome for Caesar to judge his case.
- 25:13-27—The rest of this chapter is the setup for Acts 26.

### Acts 26

- Paul gets to make his case and give his testimony about Jesus to Agrippa, the nominal “King” who is really the Emperor's puppet. Still it's an opportunity to preach the gospel to someone who needs to hear it.
- Agrippa is willing to set Paul free after he hears him speak. But he cannot because Paul has appealed to Caesar; Agrippa cannot interfere with Roman rules.

### Acts 27

- A vivid imagination will make you seasick if you read this chapter slowly. Luke recounts the misery of the voyage in detail because he experienced it. Notice the “we” in 27:1.

### Acts 28

- 28:1-10—Shipwreck off the coast of Malta; everyone makes it to land safely. Paul survives a snake bite, which impresses the natives. The leader on the island, Publius, treats Paul and his companion Luke with generosity (“us” in 28:7). Paul prays for the sick father of Publius, and he is healed. That prompts other sick people on the island to come for prayer, and they are healed.
- 28:11-16—From Malta to Rome. Travel in winter is treacherous; so Paul remains with everyone else on Malta for three months. Luke does one last travelogue of the places they stop along the way. Finally in 28:14, “we came to Rome,” met outside the city by brothers who heard Paul was on the way. Paul's situation in this Roman imprisonment gives him freedom to stay by himself with a soldier constantly guarding him.
- 28:17-22—Paul arranges to meet Jewish leaders living in Rome. Paul wants them to know he has no accusation against his people or Judaism. He appealed to Rome out of imposed necessity.
- 28:23-28—Paul spends all day with Jews from Rome, trying to convince them from Scripture of the truth about the kingdom of God and about Jesus. As in other places, “some were convinced” but “others disbelieved” (28:24). As they left they were arguing with one another. But Paul gave them one last word of warning before they left: the words of Isaiah 6:9-10. The warning applies to anyone with lots of exposure to Scripture. We can hear and see but never “get it” if our hearts have grown dull. God's will is still to heal hearts, eyes, and ears, but we have to be willing to let him. Paul's application to his

Jewish kinsmen is 28:28: If you don't believe in the salvation of God, God will save others but not you.

- 28:30-31—Luke concludes his book with Paul still a prisoner, after two years in Caesarea and now two years in Rome. Paul wrote some epistles during this time: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. He also could receive visitors and share his testimony or encourage them in the Lord. Paul couldn't leave, but he could minister.

What happened at Paul's hearing before Caesar? Luke does not tell us. Tradition says Paul was freed, only to be imprisoned and executed a few years later.

## Overview of the New Testament

### Lesson 5: Paul's Epistles, Part 1—Jesus is for Everyone, the All-Sufficient Savior

#### Introduction to the lesson

**The Four Gospels** testify to Jesus' identity as Son of God and his activity as Savior and Lord. His ministry activities included preaching, teaching, and healing, but his greatest ministry was dying for us on the cross and rising as victorious Lord over sin and death.

**The Book of Acts** describes the effects of the gospel by the power of the Holy Spirit and the willingness of Jesus' disciples to take his message wherever he sent them. So Acts describes the spread of the effects—the spread of the kingdom of God even in the midst of a pagan Empire and against opposition from religious zealots. Luke also shows the Church grappling with the implications of Gentiles being included in God's people without becoming Jews.

**The Epistles** (from Paul and others) explain the implications of the gospel and how to apply its truth by the power of the Holy Spirit to various challenges faced in the early Church. Unlike the **canonical** (and somewhat **chronological**) approach taken in the first four lessons (i.e., the first five books of the NT in the order we have them), the approach taken in the next three lessons will be **topical**. Two lessons will cover some of the most important topics in Paul's letters, without much attention to the canonical or chronological order. Lesson 7 will summarize the main topics of the General Epistles (except for John's, already dealt with in Lesson 3).

To keep Lessons 5-7 to more reasonable size, no lengthy "introduction" will be provided for each epistle. For more historical background, I recommend *How to Read the Bible Book by Book*, by Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, or any good Bible dictionary.

#### Salvation through Jesus is for everyone: Galatians

Whether Galatians was Paul's first epistle is debated. Fee & Stuart list it later than Second Corinthians, about the same time as the writing of Romans (57 AD). Scholars who give Galatians that late date usually point to its similarity to Romans. On the other hand, many scholars (I among them) think Paul wrote Galatians before the Council of Jerusalem in 49 AD. Why would he not cite the Council's decision and letter in writing his own letter addressing the same issues? The Council's position and letter would have supported Paul's point powerfully.

The point Paul makes with fervor in Galatians is that **Jews and Gentiles are equally saved by the grace revealed in Jesus Christ**. Some Galatian Gentile Christians have fallen under the sway of "Judaizers," teachers who tell Gentile believers in Jesus that they must accept circumcision and adhere to Jewish food laws in order to be saved (recall Acts 15:1, 5).

Whether Galatians is dated 48-49 or 55-56 (as some hold), Galatians is a good place to start on a topical discussion of Paul's theology. Paul's view is clear: you don't have to become Jewish to be saved. He would also say a Jew doesn't have to stop being Jewish to be saved. Whether you're a Jew or a Gentile: "Neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation" is what matters (Gal. 6:15).

Some other statements in Galatians are among Paul's strongest on this issue:

- Those starting to rely on "law-keeping" instead of the grace Paul preached "are turning to a different gospel," which isn't good news at all (1:6-9)!

- Jews like Peter and Paul, who have put their faith in Jesus, “know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified” (2:16).
- Paul’s argument is based partly on his own testimony in Gal. 2:20-21: “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. <sup>21</sup> I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.”
- Paul asks the Galatian Christians about their own experience: “Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? <sup>3</sup> Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?” (3:2–3)
- Christ has borne the curse of the Law’s condemnation by being crucified for us all, whether Jew or Gentile: “Christ redeemed us from the **curse** of the law by becoming a **curse** for us—for it is written, ‘**Cursed** is everyone who is hanged on a tree’— <sup>14</sup> so that in Christ Jesus the **blessing of Abraham** might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive **the promised Spirit through faith**” (3:13–14). The blessing of Abraham refers back to Gen. 12:1-3 and 15:6. Abraham had a righteous standing with God because he trusted God’s Word. That blessing is now available to people of every ethnic background, by faith in God’s Word and the work of God’s Spirit.
- The place of blessing is “**in Christ**” (a favorite expression for Paul). Galatians 3:27-29 brings this argument to a glorious conclusion: “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have **put on Christ**. <sup>28</sup> There is **neither Jew nor Greek** [Gentile], there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for **you are all one in Christ Jesus**. <sup>29</sup> And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.”
- Ethnic distinctions are not erased any more than gender distinctions, but whoever comes to Jesus Christ in faith has equal standing before God with every other person who comes to Christ, regardless of where they come from and regardless of race, economic status, or gender.
- We know we are God’s children because “God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, prompting us to call out, ‘Abba, Father.’ <sup>7</sup> Now you are no longer a slave but God’s own child. And since you are his child, God has made you his heir” (4:6-7, *New Living Translation*).
- In Christ, we are free to be “led by the Spirit” and not be “under the law” (5:18). With our lives surrendered to Christ, his Spirit will produce in us the “fruit of the Spirit”: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup> gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law” (5:22–23).
- We can “live by the Spirit” and “keep in step with the Spirit” (5:25, NIV).

Galatians does not say Jews are wrong to practice circumcision, eat kosher, and observe the Sabbath. But Galatians says such practices cannot be used as boundary markers for who belongs to God and who doesn’t. Salvation is by the grace of God, and it’s received by faith. New life is **in Christ**, and it’s equally available to all.

## The righteousness of God: Romans

Galatians is polemical, sternly rebuking Judaizers and Gentile believers persuaded by them. While covering many of the same issues, Romans is more serene. Paul wants to introduce himself to the Christians in Rome (where he has not been) before his planned visit and possible long-term ministry there. He introduces himself by laying out his message in the most comprehensive presentation found in any of his epistles. Here are some high points:

- Romans 1:16-17—“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek [Gentile].<sup>17</sup> For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’” The gospel is God’s power to save anyone who believes **what God has done for them in Christ and what God will do in them by his Holy Spirit**. Paul says this good news reveals “the righteousness of God”—not only how righteous God is but especially how God makes us righteous by grace through faith. That’s why the NIV translates it as “righteous *from* God” (1:16). God’s righteousness is the kind that wants to make human beings righteous. His righteousness and his love are not at odds, or even in balance: God’s love is righteous, and his righteousness is loving.
- “The righteous [just] shall live by faith” (1:17) is how we’re used to seeing and hearing Paul’s quotation of Habakkuk 2:4. The Greek word order in 1:17, however, suggests the reading, “**The righteous by faith shall live**” (an alternative in an ESV note). C. E. B. Cranfield (*Romans, A Shorter Commentary*, p. 24) suggests “**the righteous by faith shall live**” is Paul’s outline for Romans 1-8.
- **Romans 1-4 make the case that the only way to be righteous with God is by faith**—faith in God’s Word, faith in what God has done and what he is doing. The words “righteous,” “righteousness,” and “faith” occur frequently in chapters 1-4 (less so in later chapters). Paul argues that everyone needs God’s righteousness, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (3:23). No one can **achieve** righteousness “by works of the law” (3:20), but everyone (Jew or Gentile) can **receive** it as a gift of God’s grace through Christ, “whom God put forward as a propitiation [sacrifice of atonement, NIV] by his blood, to be received by faith” (3:25). Jesus’ death was for everyone—Jew and Gentile—and the benefits of salvation are available to all who say yes to God’s gift in Jesus.

Paul concludes his argument that righteousness is received by faith by citing the example of Abraham, whose **faith** (*before* he was circumcised) “**was counted to Abraham as righteousness**” (4:9). Abraham lived almost 2000 years before Christ, but the basis for right relationship with God has never changed. Faith in the grace and goodness of God, as revealed in his Word, puts you in right relationship with God, and your sins are not counted against you (4:7-9). If you follow Abraham’s example of faith in God, you have Abraham as your earthly spiritual father (4:16).

- Notice the transition in 5:1—“Therefore, since **we have been justified** [made righteous] by **faith**, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” Paul has made his case for “justification” or “righteousness” being received by faith. From this point he moves to the second part of his outline from Habakkuk 2:4—“**shall live**.”
- **Romans 5-8 describe the life the righteous have**. It’s a life of “**peace** with God” (5:1), “**hope** of the glory of God” (5:3), “hope” that will not disappoint us “because God’s **love** has been poured into our hearts through the **Holy Spirit**” (5:5). Our ongoing experience of God’s love provides confidence (hope) that God will bring his work to completion, and we will be “**conformed to the image of his Son**” (8:29). Now our life comes not

from Adam, who succumbed to sin and death, but from Christ, who conquered sin and death (5:12-21).

- **The kind of life we have is spelled out in detail in chapters 6-8.** These chapters are best seen together. Here's the flow:
  - **Rom. 6**—Since we are united with Christ's death and life by faith and baptism, we should live for God's glory "in newness of life" (6:4). We have "been set free from sin" (6:7). "So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus" (6:11). We should not and need not let sin "reign in [our] mortal bodies" (6:12).
  - **Rom. 7**—If Paul wrote truly in chapter 6, why do we still sometimes struggle as Paul describes in 7:7-25? Why do we sometimes say, "I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing" (7:19)? The source of this frustration is disclosed in the very next verse: "Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but **sin that dwells within me**" (7:20).
  - **Rom. 8**—Romans 7 describes the frustration; Romans 8 describes the solution. "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are **in Christ Jesus**.<sup>2</sup> For the law of **the Spirit of life** has set you free **in Christ Jesus** from the law of sin and death.<sup>3</sup> For **God has done** what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By **sending his own Son** in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he **condemned sin in the flesh**,<sup>4</sup> in order that the **righteous requirement** of the law **might be fulfilled in us**, who walk **not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit**" (8:1-4).

The problem described in Romans 7 is "**in me**." The solution identified in Romans 8 is "**in Christ**." Notice the frequent occurrences in 7:7-25 of "me," "I," "my," and related words. Notice in comparison the frequent occurrences in 8:1-39 of "in Christ," "the Spirit," and related words.

The reality of our salvation by Jesus' death and resurrection cannot be lived out by our strength. We need the power of God's Spirit to live as God's children. We were never intended to live the way God wants without his indwelling presence. "You, however, are not **in the flesh but in the Spirit**, if in fact **the Spirit of God dwells in you**. Anyone who does not have **the Spirit of Christ** does not belong to him.<sup>10</sup> But **if Christ is in you**, although **the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness**" (8:9-10). "For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live" (8:13).

*What Jesus died to provide comes to life in us only by the Holy Spirit's presence and power.* Thus our need for ongoing reliance on the indwelling Christ and Holy Spirit. If we rely on our strength and wisdom, something will die. When we turn in openness and trust to God, the dead comes to life. We know we belong to God ("Abba, Father!" 8:15). We know our destiny is glorious, being "conformed to the image of his Son" (8:29). We know that nothing "will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (8:39).

**Romans 9-11** might be seen as a digression, as Paul addresses the heart-wrenching question (for him, a Jew) of why so many Jews were not followers of Jesus. Or this section could be read as a further explanation (or defense) of "the righteousness of God" revealed as history unfolds

and as Paul expects it to end: “all Israel will be saved” (11:26). The three chapters have to be read together to avoid imbalance in matters of predestination, how God views Israel now, and how we should view non-Christian Jews. As Paul wrestles with the question of “**What about Israel?**” the main points briefly put are these:

- 9:1-29—As **God sovereignly** hardened Pharaoh’s heart in order to display his glory in delivering Israel from slavery, so now God has **hardened the hearts of most Israelites** so that Gentiles can receive the gospel and become part of God’s family. [It is bad practice to take this section out of context and conclude that God predestines everyone to salvation or damnation. That is not Paul’s point here.]
- 9:30-10:21—Those in Israel who resist the truth of Jesus still bear **responsibility** for pursuing righteousness in a human-centered rather than a God-centered way. By trying to **achieve** it, “they did not **submit** to God’s righteousness” as revealed in Christ (10:3). “For Christ is the end [*telos* = “end” or “goal”] of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes” (10:4; cf. Matt. 5:17). **Divine sovereignty** and **human responsibility** are both taught here, as throughout Scripture. We cannot focus on just one side or the other; both must be believed and taught, regardless of our preferences. God is sovereign, and we are responsible for our actions; God sovereignly ordained it to be so.
- 11:1-36—The **hardening of Israel** is *partial, purposeful, and temporary*. It’s **partial** because there is a remnant (11:1-6) who believe and receive the gift (like Paul, Peter, and thousands of Jewish believers who were the first Christians). It’s **purposeful** because “through their [Israel’s] trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles” (11:11ff.). It’s **temporary** because Paul knows they can be “grafted back into” the “olive tree” (i.e., God’s people) which has Abraham and other patriarchs as its root system (11:17-24). Notice that remaining ‘in the tree’ depends on faith, and newly in-grafted Gentiles can be “cut off” if they don’t continue in faith (11:20-22). The Jewish ‘limbs’ who were “broken off” (11:17) for the benefit of Gentiles can be “grafted back into their own olive tree” (11:24) “if they do not continue in their unbelief” (11:23).
- Paul’s summary: “a **partial** hardening has come upon Israel, **until** the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. <sup>26</sup> And in this way all Israel will be saved” (11:25-26). Does Paul expect every single Israelite to be saved? Probably not; that would seem to contradict his own language in 9:6—“not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel.” Does “all Israel” in 11:26 mean the Church (including Gentiles and Jews)? Probably not, since the topic for chapters 9-11 has not been the Church but Israel. Why would “Israel” mean a distinct people-group (into which Jesus and Paul were born) throughout chapters 9-11 until suddenly “Israel” means the Church in 11:26?  
No, Paul seems to expect something like a national revival, Jews in large numbers turning to Jesus as Messiah. He doesn’t say when this might happen, but he hopes his evangelism of Gentiles provokes “some” of his fellow-Jews to repent and come to Jesus in the meantime (11:13-14).
- Paul ends these three chapters with a celebration of the “unsearchable” and “inscrutable” ways of God (11:33)! Amen, brother Paul! Whatever you meant by some of this, it all sounds good, and I’m sure “we’ll understand it better by and by.”

**Romans 12-13** is filled with a variety of exhortations to live right and treat others with grace and generosity. When Paul says, “I appeal to you therefore” (12:1), he probably bases his appeal on the entirety of Romans 1-11, where “the mercies of God” have been on display in countless

ways. The alternative—understanding “therefore” to point back only to the end of chapter 11—is possible but not persuasive. Presenting our “bodies as a living sacrifice” (12:1) means a comprehensive response to the gospel so profoundly proclaimed in the whole epistle. As examples of this “living sacrifice” and “the renewal” of our minds (12:2), Paul speaks of how we regard ourselves, how we employ God’s gifts, how we love one another, and how we respond to tribulation, the needs of others, and even persecution (12:3-21).

Romans 13 exhorts Christians to respect lawful authority (even pagans!), to love one another, and to be watchful, “for salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed” (13:11). This section of exhortations concludes with a potent image: “But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires” (13:14). In other words, don’t live for self-satisfaction; live for Christ’s satisfaction.

**Romans 14** and the first part of **15** focus on not judging other believers on differences of opinion or practice in things that **don’t really matter**. Yet we should respect the conscience of persons who think those things **do matter**! He may have in mind things Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians would see differently, for he gives this example in 14:5—“One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.” That’s the liberty of the gospel, but Paul cautions us to use our liberty in ways that don’t weaken another person’s faith.

In 15:22-32, Paul speaks of his expectation of coming to Rome on his way to Spain (15:24). We know from Acts that Paul made it to Rome—as a prisoner. Whether he ever made it to Spain is unknown.

**Romans 16** is remarkable for the number of people Paul knows in Rome, a city he has not visited. This shows something of people’s mobility in the Roman Empire at the time (57 AD).

### **Jesus Christ is enough: Ephesians and Colossians**

These two epistles have much in common but significant differences. Ephesians seems to be meant for many (house) churches in and around Ephesus. Otherwise it’s difficult to explain why Paul greets no one by name. (Galatians was written to many churches in an area; it likewise contains no personal greetings.) On the other hand, Colossians is addressed to one church in one city (Colossae), a church not started by Paul but by Epaphras, who looked to Paul for guidance in addressing problems within that particular church. Both Ephesians and Colossians were written while Paul was in prison, either in Caesarea or Rome (more likely). Thus the dates for both would be about 60-62 AD.

One theme closely links these two letters: the **complete adequacy** of what God has revealed and accomplished in Jesus Christ. For purposes of this lesson, we’ll cite only a few key passages, first **from Ephesians**.

- Many of us can quote Eph. 2:8-9, which is worthy of memorization for its concise statement of how we are saved by grace through faith, not as a result of works. Some know that 2:10 goes on to say “good works” are meant to be the **result** of our salvation, not the **means**. The surrounding context, however, is our interest here. Paul is not just telling us how to get saved; he is telling us how great God is and how great are the works of God accomplished in Christ and for his Church.

- Eph. 1:9-10 praise God for “making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ <sup>10</sup> as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.” It’s no exaggeration to call this a claim of cosmic proportions! But the true goodness of this stupendous claim is that we are included! “In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, <sup>12</sup> so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory” (Eph. 1:11–12). God’s comprehensive purpose for the universe is focused on Christ, and we are “in him”!
- Christ is accorded this central role (for the universe and us) because God has “raised him from the dead and seated him at his [God’s] right hand in the heavenly places [spiritual realms], <sup>21</sup> far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. <sup>22</sup> And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, <sup>23</sup> which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all” (Eph. 1:20–23).

The universe belongs to Christ, by the Father’s decree, and (in a different way) we belong to Christ as “his body,” where his life comes to fullest expression. The galaxies display his immeasurable power; we display “the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus” (2:7). Just as much as the universe (but for different purposes), “**we are [God’s] workmanship**, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk [live] in them” (2:10).

- Eph. 2:11-22 speaks eloquently of how Christ has broken down the barriers formerly separating Gentiles from the promises and blessings given to the earthly descendants of Abraham. Paul wrote about this in the polemical context of Gal. 3:13-14, 27-29. The purpose in Ephesians is not polemic but praise! Paul contemplates with awe the fact that he has been given “the stewardship of God’s grace” to bring Gentiles the good news that they “are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (Eph. 3:2-6). This was unknown before; now it is a “mystery” revealed.
- In Eph. 3:14-19 Paul writes a prayer, not for us to be able to deal with great adversity (there’s a time for that) but for us to be “strengthened” to “comprehend” the “love of Christ that surpasses knowledge” and to “be filled with all the fullness of God.” Paul prays for an increase in our capacity to know God and receive his love, which will always exceed our capacity. But who wouldn’t want more capacity in order to know and show more of God’s love?
- Chapters 4-6 contain exhortations and instructions based on the theology of chapters 1-3. Even the famous “armor of God” passage (6:10-18) needs to be read in the light of what God has done, what God provides in Christ, and what God intends to do in Christ and in us, his body, according to chapters 1-3. The fight against “cosmic powers over this present darkness” (6:12) is a fight Christ has won and we are destined to win “in him.”

**Colossians** addresses a single church, started by Epaphras, who now faces internal threats to the life and health of the congregation. Paul writes a letter which identifies the Solution before he names the problem. The problem (we know from the rest of the book) is that some are saying you need **Christ plus something** (some ritual, some esoteric knowledge, or some special person to guide you into deeper spiritual realities). Before Paul warns them against adding anything to Christ, he extolls the grandeur of Christ in such fashion that the reader/hearer should know you

need **Christ plus nothing**. [Caution on this seemingly innocuous statement: Paul never says you don't need the church. The church is Christ's body; you can't love Jesus and despise his body. We should not praise Jesus and ridicule his body. Paul has known from the day of his conversion (Acts 9:4-6) that what you do to Christians is what you do to Jesus. If you need Jesus, you need his people. To follow Jesus you'll walk with those who follow him, like it or not.]

As customary, Paul begins his letter with positive words of gratitude, in this case specifically for the faith, hope, and love of the Colossians (1:3-5). He commends Epaphras, their father in the faith, as "a faithful minister of Christ" (1:7). But Christ is the topic Paul wants to address. The Colossians need to know what they already have in Christ so they won't be gullible buyers of what the "Christ plus" people are peddling.

What do the Colossians already have in Christ? Paul begins to tell them: "He [God the Father] has **delivered** us from the domain of darkness and **transferred** us to the kingdom of his beloved Son,<sup>14</sup> in whom we **have redemption, the forgiveness** of sins" (Col. 1:13-14). Already the Colossian believers have salvation from sin but also deliverance from the spiritual powers of darkness (recall Eph. 6:12). Knowing just this much about what you already have in Christ makes you less vulnerable to the siren calls of religious hucksters. But Paul is just getting started.

**Colossians 1:15-20** is one of the greatest statements about Christ in the NT and is worth quoting here in full:

<sup>15</sup> He [Jesus Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. <sup>16</sup> For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. <sup>17</sup> And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. <sup>18</sup> And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. <sup>19</sup> For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, <sup>20</sup> and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

One hurdle of possible misunderstanding should be cleared first: "Firstborn of all creation" (1:15) in this context denotes **status** as preeminent; it is **not** saying Christ is **first among** all who have been created or born. Verse 16 explicitly says Christ created all things that were created. So he is **not among** all the created; he is the **Source** of all the created; he is **over** all the created. The NLT handles this by avoiding the word "firstborn" and replacing it with "He existed before anything was created and is supreme over all creation." That is precisely Paul's meaning, as can be shown in the context from verse 16.

So on to the other claims made here for Christ: Do you want to know what "the invisible God" is like? Look at Jesus, "the image of the invisible God" (1:15; compare John 14:9).

Is anyone interested in "invisible" spiritual entities named "thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities"? Christ is more interesting; he created all of them. Even the ones who rebelled against him (like Satan) owe their existence to him, just like rebellious humans do. By definition, created entities cannot be greater than their Creator. Nothing can be greater than its Source.

"All things were created **through him and for him** (1:16) means everything owes its existence to his creative power, and everything (even the rebellious) must eventually serve his purpose ("for him"). The Greek word order puts the emphasis on the **created** status of everything that is not God: "All things through him and for him were **created**."

As eternal deity (recall John 1:1) he is “before all things” (Col. 1:17): “all things” are part of the space-time continuum (as we say now). That means he transcends time and space, the boundaries of our existence and of every created thing (from quarks to galaxies). Furthermore, “in him all things hold together” (1:17), which means he sustains the universe (cf. Heb. 1:3).

Imagine you have a double-handful of marbles. What happens if you suddenly pull your hands apart? The marbles fall to the ground. In the larger case of the universe, what would happen if Christ stopped sustaining it? We cannot imagine that because we cannot imagine the nothingness before he created everything. He made it and he sustains it. If he stopped sustaining it, it would not exist.

From Christ’s preeminence over creation (1:15-17) Paul moves to Christ’s preeminence over the new creation (1:18-20). This incomparable Christ who is Creator and Sustainer—along with the Father and the Spirit, but that’s not Paul’s point here—this incomparable Christ is our head, for we are his body as the church (1:18). How could you want a higher privilege than being part of Christ’s body? If you know this truth about Christ and who you are in Christ, you’re less likely to fall for a phony offer of spiritual superiority. You can’t want more than what Christ provides (unless you want to follow the examples of Satan and Adam and Eve, and we know how that turned out).

Christ is “the beginning” (1:18) not only of the original creation as its Source but also of the new creation as its **Source** and **Leading Participant** as “the firstborn from the dead.” Others had been brought back to life (like Lazarus in John 11), but Jesus’ resurrection is more than a resuscitation; it’s a transformation of his body, so that it can never die again. “Firstborn” still has its major connotation of preeminence (as in 1:15), but there’s also a temporal connotation in this occurrence because Jesus’ resurrection happened within the space-time continuum. One minute it had not happened, then it did, and a new creation began. [One might suggest the Incarnation, when the eternal Word took on human flesh (John 1:14), was the beginning of the new creation. But the flesh taken on in the Incarnation was capable of dying, as well as getting tired and thirsty. Jesus’ body now cannot die. Our bodies can and will, unless we live to see the Second Coming. But even if we do, these bodies must be changed to live forever. See 1 Cor. 15:50-53.]

Christ is the Source of the old creation and the Source and Leader in the new creation (cf. 2 Cor. 5:17). That makes him “preeminent” in every way, in everything. Then Paul tells us how Christ could occupy such an exalted position. **He cannot, if he is human only.** He is human, truly and fully, but he is **also divine**, truly and fully. As Paul puts it in Col. 1:19, “For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.”

The words “of God” are added (appropriately) by the English translators (not only ESV but other modern translations). Literally Paul said, “In him all the fullness was pleased to dwell.” English readers need the words “of God” to make sense of this. Paul’s Greek readers and hearers in Colossae would not. “Fullness” or *plērōma* had currency in religious thinking in that day. It was often used to refer to all the invisible, supernatural beings said to be ranked in a hierarchy between the “unknowable God” and humans. In other words, if you wanted to get to the “top God” you had to go through the *plērōma*. Many believed, however, that you could never get to the “top God.” But you could try to get as high as possible, perhaps by ascetic practices or by honoring members of the hierarchy in the *plērōma*. That’s what Paul warns against in Col. 2:18. Before he even gets to that stage in his epistle, he has pulled the rug out from under such foolish, unprovable speculation by claiming the word *plērōma* to describe Christ.

“All the *plērōma*/fullness” is **in Christ**. Connection between us and the “top God” is secured by Christ, who **is** “all the *plērōma*.” No need to shop elsewhere for a better connection. With “all

the *plērōma*” in Christ, everything can be put right again. As the *plērōma*, he can “reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross” (Col. 1:20). In other words, full and lasting justice, peace, and right order have been secured by Christ, the *plērōma* who makes all other invented *plērōmas* unnecessary.

Now that Paul has described Christ to the Colossian Christians, he can effectively warn them and us to be on guard so that “no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.<sup>9</sup> For in him the whole **fullness** of deity [all the *plērōma* of deity] dwells bodily,<sup>10</sup> and you have been **filled** in him, who is the head of all rule and authority” (Col. 2:8–10). In Christ we have all we need for connecting with God, and we are filled by him to be all we need to be.

Knowing who Jesus is, and knowing who we are in Jesus—that’s the best defense against merely human judgment about “questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath” (Col. 2:16). If someone says you need “Christ plus our rules,” or “Christ plus our rituals,” perhaps they don’t know that Christ is the *plērōma*, to which nothing need be added. Paul says they are “not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God” (Col. 2:19).

But what if I feel something is missing in my spiritual life? Be careful whose advice you take! They may or may not be “holding fast to the Head.” But here’s advice for the hungry heart, straight from God’s Word in Col. 3:1-4—“If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.<sup>2</sup> Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.<sup>3</sup> For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.<sup>4</sup> When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.” What you feel you’re missing or needing spiritually (and in every way ultimately) is found **in Christ**, the *plērōma*/fullness of God, who alone can fill up the holes in our souls and give us lasting satisfaction. [Recall Matt. 5:6.]

## Overview of the New Testament

### Lesson 6: Paul's Epistles, Part 2—Jesus Will Change You

In the first lesson on Paul's Epistles, we saw the emphasis on Jesus' salvation being available to everyone, regardless of background. We also saw the emphasis on Jesus' full sufficiency—nothing needs to be added to the salvation he supplies. In this lesson we focus on how Jesus changes us—not to get us saved—but because he has saved us. As his redeemed people we should expect to change, and we should do the things we can do to allow the Holy Spirit to do what God alone can do. We can change our minds; we can even change our habits; but only God can change our hearts to be like his (Matt. 5:48).

#### **New ways of thinking that go against culture—1 & 2 Corinthians**

Paul wrote two long letters to the church in Corinth that are part of the New Testament. He also wrote at least two other letters to them, one before 1 Corinthians (see 1 Cor.5:9) and another in between 1 and 2 Corinthians (2 Cor. 2:4; 7:8). With the exception of Romans, no other letter of Paul comes close to the length of the Corinthian letters. Why such long letters, and why so many? Because the church in Corinth had a lot of “issues.”

Some of the issues included **behaviors** that needed to change (1 Cor. 5:1; 11:17-22), but even the behavioral issues were rooted in ways of **thinking** that needed to change. Those ways of thinking were deeply rooted in the **culture** into which the Corinthian believers were born and in which they lived every day. Of course we also have deep roots in our culture which may or may not be aligned with God's design for humanity. [1 Corinthians was written from Ephesus, in early 55 A.D.; 2 Corinthians was written from Macedonia, as Paul was traveling toward Corinth, in 55 or 56.]

#### **Thinking about the resurrection**

We start with a big change for the Greek-thinking Corinthians. This may seem foreign to us, but Paul devoted a long chapter (1 Cor. 15) to showing the Corinthian Christians that they should **expect to have a real body** in the “after-life.” Apparently they had accepted the message that forgiveness was available through Jesus, and that God had vindicated Jesus' divine sonship and message by raising him from the dead (1 Cor. 15:1-15). For cultural reasons, however, Corinthians were slow to believe that Jesus' resurrection meant his followers would also be raised **bodily** from the dead (1 Cor. 15:11-19; recall Acts 17:32.)

The Greek culture was saturated with the philosophy of Plato (ca. 427-347 BC). Not everyone was a philosopher, of course, but Plato's thinking had spread far, wide, and deep. Plato believed things of this world, including our bodies, were changeable and, therefore, less important than unchangeable spiritual realities. The Greeks even had a saying, “sōma sēma” (“SO-ma SAY-ma”), which translates as “the body is a tomb.” If the Greeks expected a positive experience in the after-life, they expected it to be **disembodied**—living as free spirits, unfettered by the limitations of their earthly bodies.

Paul had earlier stated that a Christian's body is a “temple” (not a tomb!) in 1 Cor. 6:19-20. In that context he was arguing that a Christian's body should not be used for sexual immorality, since the Holy Spirit indwells us. That same perspective—the human body is important to God and not a matter of indifference—is applied to the resurrection of believers in 1 Cor. 15.

Paul's argument for the resurrection of the believer's body is long and multi-layered (15:11-58). Some key points are these:

- “Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust [Adam], we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven [Christ]” (1 Cor. 15:49). To be made fully like Christ, we must receive a body like his (see also Phil. 3:21 and Rom. 8:29).
- “For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. <sup>54</sup> When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written:  
     ‘Death is swallowed up in victory.’  
     <sup>55</sup> ‘O death, where is your victory?  
     O death, where is your sting?’” [1 Cor. 15:53–55]

God's good creation of humanity, redeemed by Christ, must be brought to completion by “redemption of the body” (Rom. 8:23), not just redemption of the soul or spirit. Redemption of the body was contrary to the Platonic worldview, but the gospel speaks with more truth about God's will for the planet and for human beings. Clinging to Plato on this point means refusing part of God's good news. Accepting this part of the gospel meant adjusting your worldview.

### **Re-thinking cultural values**

After warm greetings and encouragements in his opening paragraphs, Paul moved quickly to the problem of divisions in the church (1 Cor. 1:10ff.), knowing that underneath the divisions were faulty ways of evaluating people and presentations of ideas.

One Greek value overturned by the gospel of Jesus was the value of the human body. Greek culture did not teach people to expect a body in the after-life. This attitude toward the body also made it seem unimportant what they did with their bodies on earth. Their culture taught them to under-value what the gospel regards as very valuable—the human body, its use and its destiny.

On the other hand, Greek culture over-valued some things that the gospel counts as unimportant. Greeks valued cleverness and rhetorical skill (as we do!). Correcting their divisions in the church gave Paul an opening to correct their worldly values:

- “For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power” (1 Cor. 1:17). Relying on the persuasiveness of “eloquent wisdom” is contrasted with relying on “the cross of Christ” and “its power” to save. Clever speech can entertain, but it cannot save.
- “For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Cor. 1:18).
- “But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; <sup>28</sup> God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, <sup>29</sup> so that no human being might boast in the presence of God” (1 Cor. 1:27–29).
- “For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. <sup>3</sup>And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, <sup>4</sup> and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, <sup>5</sup> so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God” (1 Cor. 2:2–5).

Teaching the Corinthian Christians new ways to evaluate people and ideas seems to have been Paul's most difficult and enduring challenge. Second Corinthians makes reference to a "painful" visit (2:1) and a follow-up letter written "with many tears" (2:4) between 1 and 2 Corinthians. There were not only divisions in the church; there were some who challenged Paul's apostolic credentials and authority, even though he founded their church! (2 Cor. 10-13 deal with these challenges at length and with occasional sarcasm—"Forgive me this wrong!" 2 Cor. 12:13). We see Paul's vulnerable humanity in 2 Corinthians, as he fends off the competition of "false apostles" (2 Cor. 11:13). He feels compelled to defend himself, but he would prefer to use "the authority that the Lord has given me for building up and not for tearing down" (13:10).

The key verse of 2 Corinthians is surely 4:7—"But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us." The "treasure" is the gospel, the knowledge of Christ. The "jars of clay" are people, including apostles like Paul, Peter, and John. Paul desperately wants the Corinthian Christians (and us) to recognize that "jars of clay"—common, ordinary, vulnerable people—should not be despised, nor should we be judging one as better than the other. The most impressive ones (superficially) always turn out to be "jars of clay." What makes any of us have lasting value is the "treasure," which anyone can carry. And the "jars of clay" should want others to be impressed by the "treasure" and not by clay jars.

### Thinking about cultural observances

"Everybody does it," we say. The Greeks may not have said it, but they did it. "Everybody" went to the pagan temples and for more reasons than worship. To celebrate a marriage, a birth, or some other happy occasion, "everybody" went to the temple to celebrate with family, friends, and neighbors. And what's a celebration without food? And where would you get the food if the celebration is held in a temple? From the animals sacrificed in the temple. This is what the Acts 15 Council referred to in the letter sent to the predominantly Gentile churches (in 49 AD): "abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols" (Acts 15:29).

Paul says a lot about food offered to idols in 1 Corinthians 8-10. Yes, three whole chapters are devoted to the topic. Paul's instructions to the Corinthian Christians are nuanced for different situations.

If invited to a **temple celebration**, don't go ("flee idolatry," 1 Cor. 10:14, also 10:20-21).

If invited to a **pagan's home**, 1 Cor. 10:27 provides this guidance: "If one of the unbelievers invites you to dinner and you are disposed to go, **eat whatever** is set before you without raising any question on the ground of conscience." But if the host volunteers information that "this has been offered in sacrifice," **don't eat it** (10:28). Why not? Is the meat contaminated because it was used in a pagan ritual? No, the meat is still just meat, but you shouldn't contaminate your conscience or the conscience of another person by eating it and giving the impression that you approve and participate in honoring the "god" to whom the offering was made.

If shopping for **meat for your family to eat**, "Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience."<sup>26</sup> For "the earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof" (1 Cor. 10:25-26). **Meat sold in the market** (only yards from a pagan temple in Corinth) was still God's property, not the domain of the demon (idol) to whom someone had offered it. The meat is not infected by someone else's belief or worship.

Such is Paul's nuanced application of the decision made by the Jerusalem Council ("abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols," Acts 15:29). If you **don't know** it has been sacrificed to an idol, **don't worry** about it. **If you know** it has been offered to an idol (because someone points it out), don't eat it lest you **offend the conscience of the other person** (1 Cor. 15:29).

### Thinking about the church's corporate worship

As they valued impressive, eloquent speech (cf. 1 Cor. 1:17; 2:1), the Corinthians also valued the mysterious speech of speaking in tongues. Their zeal for spiritual gifts was a good thing (1:7), but Paul had to correct them for their disorderly conduct in public worship not only with regard to the gifts (14:13-33, 39-40) but also in their practice of Holy Communion (10:17-34).

Because of multiple problems in their public worship, Paul had to write more about the gifts of the Spirit in 1 Corinthians than in all his other letters combined. So their problems and Paul's responses produced guidance for us in the exercise of spiritual gifts.

Paul first articulates the important principle that there are a variety of gifts, but all under the Lordship of Christ and dependent on the activity of the Holy Spirit (12:1-11). Right after that Paul emphasizes that the gifts are not to elevate an individual but to benefit ("edify") the entire church (12:12-31). This is where the famous "love chapter" comes in (1 Cor. 13). The Corinthian Christians and we today need to see love for others as the greater value that governs the valuable gifts of the Spirit. After all, "God is love" (1 John 4:8). And such a God would not want his gifts to be used to make people feel unloved, loved less than others, or loved more than others. If we follow Paul's illustration of the body (1 Cor. 12:12-31), we know that what happens to one member happens to all who are connected. To love and serve others in the body of Christ is good for you and for the person to whom you show love!

For the benefit of everyone in the church, everyone in the church should "pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy" (1 Cor. 14:1). Prophecy should not be primarily thought of as predicting the future. The Bible speaks of predictive prophecy elsewhere (recall Acts 21:10-11), but in 1 Corinthians 14 Paul emphasizes "upbuilding and encouragement and consolation" (14:3).

The essence of "**prophecy**" in the church is to speak **words that bring God's perspective** to people who hear it. Prophecy, in this sense and in this setting, is greater than speaking in tongues. The person speaking, praying, or singing in tongues may "build up himself" (14:4), but unless there is **interpretation** (stating the significance in understandable language, which is not the same thing as translation), the unknown tongue cannot build up the church. If we're motivated by love, we want to make things understandable, particularly in corporate worship. Paul says many things about prophecy and speaking in tongues in 1 Corinthians 12-14. He does not say much about the other gifts mentioned in 12:8-11. That probably means the other gifts were not causing problems in Corinth. Although Paul speaks words of correction and caution about tongues and prophecy, he by no means discourages those gifts. Quite to the contrary, he encourages them to "pursue love and earnestly desire spiritual gifts" (14:1). He says to them, "you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged" (1 Cor. 14:31), which seems to include the idea that all can learn how to hear from God and speak God's perspective to the church. Paul concludes this section with these words of exhortation: "So, my brothers, earnestly **desire to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues.**"<sup>40</sup> But all things should be done **decently and in order**" (1 Cor. 14:39-40).

### New ways of thinking about yourself—Philippians

Paul wrote Philippians while in prison (possibly in Caesarea, but more likely in Rome) about 60-61 AD. It is much shorter than either of the Corinthian letters, because the church in Philippi seems to have fewer problems! Paul does "entreat" two women in the church (Euodia and Syntyche) to get along better (4:2). Their quarrel must have been known to the church for Paul to call them out by name.

Probably Paul's first reason for writing Philippians was something he left to the end of his letter: to thank them for a financial gift they had sent him (4:10-19). He took the occasion also to report on his state of mind: Despite his confinement, Paul sees how his circumstances have "really served to advance the gospel" (1:12). Paul even has semi-kind words about preachers who want to compete with Paul for influence (1:15-18): "But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice" (1:18, NIV).

Paul seems to have grown in personal insight during his enforced pause from traveling and preaching. He does not know whether Caesar will execute him or release him. Either way, Paul cannot lose: "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (1:21). Paul has not reached perfection yet, but his focus on the prize has sharpened: "But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, <sup>14</sup> I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:13-14).

Among many good things in Philippians, the high point has to be Paul's exhortation to follow the humbled and exalted path of Jesus (Phil. 2:5-11). This exhortation contains one of the greatest statements about Christ in the New Testament. The passage is presented as poetry in many modern translations. The ESV editors chose to leave it as prose, a decision I don't agree with. So I quote it here from the New Living Translation:

<sup>5</sup> You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had.

<sup>6</sup> Though he was God,  
he did not think of equality with God  
as something to cling to.

<sup>7</sup> Instead, he gave up his divine privileges;  
he took the humble position of a slave  
and was born as a human being.

When he appeared in human form,  
<sup>8</sup> he humbled himself in obedience to God  
and died a criminal's death on a cross.

<sup>9</sup> Therefore, God elevated him to the place of highest honor  
and gave him the name above all other names,

<sup>10</sup> that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

<sup>11</sup> and every tongue declare that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father.

This may have been a song composed by Paul or by some other early Christian. If it isn't a song, it nevertheless poetically celebrates God's way to greatness—not gaining power over others but giving from oneself for others' gain.

### **New ways of thinking about social standing—Philemon**

The shortest of Paul's letters in the New Testament was sent to a man named Philemon, concerning his runaway slave, Onesimus. Paul wrote and sent it along with the letter to the Colossians. Paul does not protest the evils of slavery here or anywhere in his epistles. The abolition of slavery was literally an unthinkable option at the time, but Paul sowed a seed which would bear liberating fruit in later centuries.

Onesimus had become a Christian under Paul's influence (vs. 10). Paul and Onesimus want to do the right thing, which is for Onesimus to return to his legal owner, Philemon. Paul urges Philemon to receive him "no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as **a beloved brother**" (vs. 16). That's the seed that ultimately undermines slavery: seeing a slave as your brother or sister.

That seed continues (and needs to continue) to bear the fruit of love and respect for those whose social or economic standing is different from our own. As we know, racism is still a problem in our own society. What is the cure? Many things can be done to address injustice and inequalities, but ultimately to see another human being as your equal—equally loved, equally died for, equally offered eternity with the same heavenly Father—that's the vision we need when looking at any and all others.

### **Paul's thinking to guide those who guide—1 & 2 Timothy, Titus**

These three epistles are written to two individuals, church leaders mentored by Paul to continue the ministry of the church. Timothy had traveled with Paul on his "second missionary journey" (Acts 16:1ff.), and Titus had been entrusted with the delicate task of representing Paul in dealing with the fractious church in Corinth (2 Cor. 7:6-7; 12:17-18). Paul wrote these letters after his first Roman imprisonment (on the assumption he was released after his hearing before Nero, after Acts 28). The exact timing of the letters is difficult to establish, but clearly 1 Timothy and Titus were written while Paul was at liberty to travel (probably 62-64 AD). It's painfully clear that 2 Timothy was written from prison, with Paul expecting this confinement to end with his execution (probably in 68 AD).

To bring this lesson to a close, we'll note some characteristic instructions from each letter.

- In 1 Timothy, Paul addresses his "true child in the faith" (1:2), who now leads the church in Ephesus, one of the most important cities in the Empire. Ephesus is still devoted to the goddess Artemis (Acts 19:21ff.), but the church is growing in size and importance. So the church in Ephesus needs strong, wise leadership.
  - A problem Paul mentions immediately concerns people (in the church) who are fascinated with "myths and endless genealogies [probably angelic], which promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith" (1:4). Instead of such pointless pursuits, "The aim of our charge is **love** that issues from a **pure heart** and a **good conscience** and a **sincere faith**" (1:5). We might put it this way: Don't lose your focus, Timothy!
  - Paul warns Timothy: "Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons" (4:1). Paul does not mean the far-away future; he means the near future, near enough for Timothy to be alert for such developments.
  - Paul's concluding admonition is delivered tenderly: "O Timothy, **guard the deposit entrusted** to you. Avoid the irreverent babble and contradictions of what is falsely called "knowledge,"<sup>21</sup> for by professing it some have swerved from the faith. Grace be with you" (6:20–21).
- Titus leads the church in Crete, with instructions from Paul to "appoint elders in every town" (1:5), persons who are "above reproach. . . not . . . arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain,<sup>8</sup> but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined.<sup>9</sup> He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also

- to rebuke those who contradict it” (1:7-9). Note Paul’s concern that the next generation of leaders (Titus) be concerned for the leaders of generations still to come.
- Paul reminds Titus that “grace” brings salvation (2:11) but that grace also leads us “to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions” while we wait for Jesus’ return and occupy ourselves with “good works” (2:12-14).
  - “Good works” are mentioned several times in this short letter: 2:7, 14; 3:8, 14.
- When writing 2 Timothy, Paul is imprisoned in the notorious Mamertine Prison, which had one cell underground. Tradition says this is where Paul and Peter were kept until their executions by Nero. Paul does not know when, but he expects execution in the fairly near future. This may be his last message to Timothy.
    - Paul encourages Timothy to rely on God’s empowerment for his ministry (1:6) and not to be intimidated by opposition to the gospel: “God gave us a spirit not of fear but power and love and self-control” (1:7).
    - Paul instructs Timothy faithfully to pass on to other trustworthy men what he received from Paul. Those whom Timothy teaches should be able to teach the next generation (2:1-2). Four generations of leadership are in view: Paul, Timothy, those Timothy mentors, and those mentored by the men mentored by Timothy. Thus Paul shows concern for handing on the “tradition” of how to lead and keep the church safe from false doctrines.
    - Timothy is personally urged to “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth” (2:15).
    - Paul warns Timothy and all future church leaders “that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. <sup>2</sup> For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, <sup>3</sup> heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, <sup>4</sup> treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, <sup>5</sup> having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people” (3:1–5).
    - Timothy knows he can rely on “the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. <sup>16</sup> All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, <sup>17</sup> that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (3:15–17).
    - Paul solemnly charges Timothy to “preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. <sup>3</sup> For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, <sup>4</sup> and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths” (4:2-4).
    - Paul’s grim situation is apparent as he urges Timothy to “do your best to come to me soon” (4:9) and to “do your best to come before winter” (4:21). Travel was treacherous in winter, and Paul needs “the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments” (4:13).

## Overview of the New Testament

### Lesson 7:—Hebrews and General Epistles

#### Introduction to the lesson

As stated in Lesson 5, the Gospels give us the story and message of Jesus, and the Book of Acts gives us the story of the early Church, led and expanded by the powerful work of the Holy Spirit in faithful believers. The Epistles further explain implications of the gospel and how to apply its truth in various challenges faced by Christians. In Lessons 5 and 6, we studied some of the main points of Paul's Epistles. In Lesson 7 we will summarize the main topics of the General Epistles.

The General Epistles are called that because they can be read as instructions for the Church "in general." No doubt Hebrews and other books in this grouping were written with a specific audience in mind. But precisely who that audience was is difficult to pinpoint for some of the following epistles called "general":

Hebrews

James

1 & 2 Peter

1, 2, and 3 John (already discussed in Lesson 3)

Jude

#### Hebrews—an encouraging reminder of the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ

Who wrote Hebrews is an enduring mystery. Almost certainly it was not Paul; the style is completely different, and the author claims 'second-generation' knowledge of Jesus (2:3). It's called "Hebrews" because of a plausible inference that the audience knew a lot about the Old Testament, which the author uses extensively. The title is also inferred from the main warning of Hebrews **not to go back to the old system of sacrifices**, since Christ's sacrifice has rendered the old system obsolete (ch. 10 especially). So the epistle was written to Jewish (Hebrew) Christians (location unclear) who were feeling pressure—from family or persecution—to re-identify with Judaism as distinct from following Jesus. Since the writer does not refer to the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD (a point that would have made the author's case even stronger), the Book of Hebrews was probably written before that event.

There are several warnings against complacency (2:1-3; 4:11-13; 12:15) or going back to reliance on an inferior high priesthood and inferior sacrifices (10:1-4). The dominant tone of Hebrews, however, is encouragement. The writer calls his letter "a word of exhortation" (13:22).

What is the writer's strategy for encouraging these Hebrew Christians who have already "endured a hard struggle with sufferings" (10:32)? The epistle seems complicated at times because the use of the OT is not easy to follow. But if you know what the writer's strategy is, much of the book becomes clearer. Here's the strategy in three steps:

**(1) Remember who Jesus is.**

**(2) Remember what Jesus has done** (in light of who he is).

**(3) Respond** (to who he is and what he has done) with worship and grateful faithfulness.

**(1) Who is Jesus**, according to Hebrews? He's compared to Moses (3:1-6). He's compared with a mysterious Melchizedek, mentioned only in Genesis 14, Psalm 110, and Hebrews 5:6, 10; 7:1-17). Jesus is called "the founder and perfecter of our faith" (12:2). He's called "the great shepherd of the sheep" (13:20). But his most important name or title is "God's Son." In fact, Hebrews focuses on this term in chapters 1-2 and does not mention the name "Jesus" until 2:9. Why would the writer focus on "God's Son" first?

As God’s Son, Jesus is the unsurpassable **revelation** of God (1:2). His **name** (status and authority) is higher than any angelic being (1:4-14). Jesus is greater than Moses—who “was faithful **in** all God’s house as a **servant**”—“but Christ is faithful **over** God’s house as a **son**” (3:5-6). If you’re a persecuted, beleaguered Jewish follower of Jesus, why would you leave God’s Son to go back to God’s servant?

And who could be a better priest for you than God’s own Son? At this point, remembering Jesus’ identity leads us to remember **(2) what he has done**. Hebrews 4:14-16 is just one encouraging statement of Jesus’ majestic achievement and position:

<sup>14</sup> Since then we have a **great high priest** who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the **Son of God**, let us hold fast our confession. <sup>15</sup> For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. <sup>16</sup> Let us then **with confidence draw near** to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Jesus is more than our high priest; he is also the all-sufficient, final sacrifice for our sins: “And by [God’s] will we have been sanctified through the **offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all**” (10:10). How could Jesus be both priest and sacrifice, since the sacrifice has to die? How could he continue as our priest, who “**always lives to make intercession**” for us (7:25)?

The answer, of course, is the resurrection of Jesus, which Hebrews mentions explicitly only in the benediction near the end of the letter: “Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep . . .” (Heb. 13:20). But the writer has assumed Jesus’ resurrection victory since chapter one, where Jesus is described as God’s “Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. <sup>3</sup> He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power” (Heb. 1:2–3). So Jesus’ intercessory role is tied to what he did in **history**—he died and rose again—but it’s also tied to his **eternal** identity as God’s Son, Creator and Sustainer of the universe! Will such an intercessor be enough for us? If he sustains the universe, can he sustain you?

Knowing who Jesus is, is fundamental to understanding the significance of what he has done. Remembering his **eternal** identity and his **historic** achievements will always encourage us, no matter what we’re facing or enduring. So how should we **(3) respond**? Hebrews 12:1-2 can sum it up for this lesson:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses,\* let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us **run with endurance** the race that is set before us, <sup>2</sup> **looking to Jesus**, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

And if you want just one memory verse from Hebrews, it has to be 13:8—“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.”

\*The “cloud of witnesses” are the heroes of **faith and faithfulness** cited in Hebrews 11. “Faith” and “faithfulness” both translate the same Greek word, *pistis*. You cannot show faith without being faithful. You cannot be faithful without having faith, faith in God’s faithfulness.

## James—true wisdom and faith in practice

James identifies himself simply as “a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ” (1:1). Reliable tradition says this same James presided over the momentous conference in Acts 15, which concluded that Gentiles need not become Jews to follow Jesus. Reliable tradition also says this James was a member of Jesus’ family—one who did not believe in Jesus as Messiah during his ministry but who became a pre-eminent leader in the early Church because the risen Jesus appeared to him personally (cf. John 7:5 and 1 Cor. 15:7).

Addressing “the twelve tribes in the Dispersion [Diaspora],” James seems to be writing with Jewish Christians in mind. The “Dispersion” or “Diaspora” would be Jews living outside of the Holy Land. Quite possibly this is the earliest of all NT writings (40s-50s AD). James is said to have died in 62 AD. But the **wisdom** in this book is for believers of all times and places.

### True wisdom

James touches on many practical topics like patience (5:7-11), restraining one’s tongue (1:26; 3:2-12), expressing genuine faith (2:14-26), and how to deal with trials and temptations (1:2-4). The unifying element in everything he says is wisdom from God. We all need wisdom for dealing with life’s challenges. So, early in his letter (1:5-8) James exhorts us:

<sup>5</sup> If any of you lacks **wisdom**, let him **ask God**, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. <sup>6</sup> But let him **ask in faith** [faithfulness, *pistis*], with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. <sup>7</sup> For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; <sup>8</sup> he is a **double-minded** man, unstable in all his ways.

James says anyone can receive wisdom from God by simply asking, but the double-minded person cannot be wise. Later James will say “double-minded” people have impure hearts (4:8). “Double-minded” is just what it sounds like—not committed to a single-minded way of life. The minds and hearts of such persons may want God’s guidance (or say they do), but they also want to have their own way. Here’s another way to say what James says in 1:5-8—“If you are **committed** to following God’s directions, **ask him for wisdom**, and he will give it. If you are **not committed** to following God’s directions, you **need not ask**.”

When James says, “Let him ask in faith” (1:6), it helps to remember that “faith” is the Greek word *pistis*, which can also be translated as “faithfulness” (as in Hebrews 11 in every description of a hero of faith/faithfulness). The person who doubts is like “a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind” (James 1:6). The problem is not “doubting” **whether God will answer**; the problem is “doubting” **whether to do God’s will**. The problem is not thinking “Maybe God will give me wisdom, but maybe he won’t.” The problem is thinking “Maybe I will do what God says, but maybe I won’t.” That’s the “double-minded” person, who James says is “unstable in all his ways” (1:7). Those are the “double-minded” who need to “purify” their “heart” (4:8).

In another key text on wisdom (3:13-18) James says,

<sup>13</sup> Who is **wise** and understanding among you? By his **good conduct** let him show his works in the **meekness of wisdom**. <sup>14</sup> But if you have **bitter jealousy and selfish ambition** in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. <sup>15</sup> This is **not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic**. <sup>16</sup> For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. <sup>17</sup> But the **wisdom from above is first pure**, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of

mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. <sup>18</sup> And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

Ever practical, James says true wisdom from God shows in the way one lives, especially in one's attitude toward others. "Wisdom" that promotes jealous self-interest is not true wisdom; it's not from God; it's from our "unspiritual" egos, even demonic in its inspiration and direction!

### **True faith (2:14-26)**

James is perhaps better known for his emphasis on "faith without works is dead" (2:26) than he is for his emphasis on wisdom. That may partly be because some hear James and Paul contradicting one another. Paul says we are "**justified by faith apart from works of the law**" (Rom. 3:28). James says we are "**justified by works and not by faith alone**" (James 2:24). Quoting parts of verses in close proximity can give the impression of contradiction. But when the contexts are examined, the two writers do not contradict one another at all.

James condemns **claims to faith** which don't produce faithful acts. Even "demons believe" in God's existence (2:19), but that is hardly saving faith! Those who claim faith but do not show it by how they act have "dead" faith (2:17), "faith" that does not produce life. Paul condemns **claims to works** as badges of belonging to God (like circumcision) or as means of "earning" salvation through God's approval. In other words, Paul condemns **faith in our works**. Right in line with James, Paul says the grace and (living) faith by which we are saved will lead us "to do good works" (Eph. 2:8-10, NIV; Paul emphasizes good works in Titus). When read carefully, Paul and James completely agree about **true faith** and the works flowing from it.

### **1 & 2 Peter—Christian identity in the face of dangers outside and inside the church**

Peter probably wrote both of these letters in the 60s AD, not very long before his martyrdom in about 68 AD in Rome. The first epistle is addressed to the "elect exiles of the dispersion" in several Roman provinces in what is now Turkey (1:1). Peter uses the same word, "dispersion" or "diaspora," that James used to refer to Jews living outside of the Holy Land (James 1:1). But Peter has transferred this word to Gentile believers (1 Peter 1:18 and 4:3-4 would not likely be said to Jewish Christians). Possibly he simply uses the Greek word *diaspora* in its non-technical sense of "scattered" (thus the NIV). First Peter was written from Rome (identified as "Babylon" in 5:13). Second Peter was probably also from Rome, this time from prison as Peter awaited his execution (1:13-15).

### **1 Peter—Identity, inheritance, and integrity: our strategy of blessing**

To be called "**elect exiles**" (1:1) indicates something of the tension experienced by Christians under the cloud of persecution from the powerful Roman Empire—whether that persecution has already begun or is clearly about to begin, in 64 AD. As God's "**elect**" or "chosen" people, believers know they **belong** to God, their Father (1:2-3). At the same time, they are treated as those who **don't belong** here; their communities treat them as "strangers" (1:1, NIV).

Peter describes the true situation of everyone who seriously follows Jesus. Some will reject you, just as they rejected Jesus (2:4), but God has honored you as "precious" and "a holy priesthood" (2:4-5). Regardless of the world's opinion of you,

you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his

marvelous light. <sup>10</sup> Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. [1 Peter 2:9–10]

The dishonor sometimes shown to Christians cannot overshadow the honor of belonging to God and serving his purposes in the world. The disgrace you might be in the eyes of some cannot overcome the grace of God that adorns your life.

Along with the **identity** of being God's children comes “an **inheritance** that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, <sup>5</sup> who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time” (1:4-5). Your future is safe with God, and you are kept safe by the same divine power. All that God has for you has not been revealed yet, but it is good, and it will be revealed eventually (cf. 1 John 3:2). In the meantime, you and I are called to live with the **integrity** appropriate for God's children. In Peter's words, <sup>14</sup> As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, <sup>15</sup> but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, <sup>16</sup> since it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.” <sup>17</sup> And **if you call on him as Father** who judges impartially according to each one's deeds, **conduct yourselves with fear** [respect] throughout the time of your exile, <sup>18</sup> knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, <sup>19</sup> but with the **precious blood of Christ**, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. [1 Peter 1:14–19]

Note that the **identity** and the **inheritance** are **gifts**, not something earned by living with **integrity**. Rather, the grace which bestows this identity and which assures us of the inheritance calls us to live lives of grace, showing grace toward everyone, especially toward those who do not show grace to us (2:18-20). The **gift** of grace brings the **task** of living in gracious ways.

With such an identity and such an inheritance we can adopt the life-strategy Peter enjoins on us (as did Jesus): “Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, **bless**, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing” (3:9). We're the people of blessing because God has blessed us. We're the people of blessing; therefore we bless. We don't overcome evil by doing more evil; we overcome evil by doing good (cf. Gen. 12:1-3; Matt. 5:43-48; Rom. 12:21).

Peter applies this **strategy of being a blessing and doing good** in various specific ways:

- Citizenship (2:13-17)
- Servanthood or the workplace (2:18-25)
- Family (3:1-7)
- In general (3:8—4:11)

Peter knows this world does not always reward those who do good (3:13-22), but we should do good anyway, “For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil” (3:17). As always, Jesus is the best example, as Peter points out in 2:21–25.

<sup>21</sup> For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. <sup>22</sup> He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. <sup>23</sup> When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. <sup>24</sup> He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to

righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. <sup>25</sup> For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

Undeserved suffering can (by the grace of God) bring grace to those who don't deserve grace. "Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while **doing good**" (4:19). Your soul and your future are safe with God, your Father. "Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, <sup>7</sup> casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you" (5:6–7).

## 2 Peter—internal threats

In contrast to 1 Peter, this second epistle is concerned with the challenges of maintaining fidelity within the Church. Before issuing warnings, however, Peter provides this reassurance:

<sup>3</sup> His divine power has granted to us **all things that pertain to life and godliness**, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, <sup>4</sup> by which he has granted to us his **precious and very great promises**, so that through them you may become **partakers of the divine nature**, having **escaped from the corruption** that is in the world because of **sinful desire**. [2 Peter 1:3–4]

The highlighted words are important for encouragement but also for defense against the appeals of false teachers and prophets. If you know God has already given what you need to live a godly life, you're less likely to fall for the offers of those whose motives are not to escape "from the corruption" but rather to indulge in it. Given the chance, "in their greed they will exploit you with false words" (2:3).

As a defense against the lies of false prophets and teachers, Christians need to know the firm foundation of the apostolic witness:

<sup>16</sup> For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but **we were eyewitnesses** of his majesty. <sup>17</sup> For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased," <sup>18</sup> **we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain**. [1:16–18]

This is similar to John's declaration of apostolic experience in the opening verses of 1 John. But Peter follows his argument from experience with this declaration of the trustworthiness of Scripture:

<sup>19</sup> And we have **the prophetic word more fully confirmed**, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, <sup>20</sup> knowing this first of all, that **no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation**. <sup>21</sup> For **no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit**. [1:19–21]

To know the firm foundation of apostolic experience of Jesus and its agreement with the prophetic words of Scripture is to be forewarned and forearmed: "**False prophets also arose** among the people [in the past] just as **there will be false teachers among you**" (2:1). How will they be recognized? Peter focuses more on their immoral behavior than on their erroneous

doctrine. He mentions “their sensuality” (2:2) and “their greed” (2:3). He describes them as “those who indulge in the lust of defiling passion and despise authority” (2:10). From everything else he has to say about them (2:10-14), we might say their “defiling passion” is the only “authority” they don’t despise.

Peter follows this with a warning specifically against false teachers who question the reality of Christ’s return and the final judgment. Peter points out the flaws in their reasoning (3:5-10), but he particularly focuses on their **motives** in 3:3 (NIV):

First of all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and **following their own evil desires**.<sup>4</sup> They will say, “Where is this ‘coming’ he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation.”

Anyone can be mistaken in their theology at some point. But false prophets and false teachers **go astray first in their desires**; then they construct a theology to support their desires. Selfish desires (unchecked) lead to self-centered theology—false doctrine to serve my will rather than God’s kingdom. **Heresy starts in the heart**. A corrupted heart craves corrupted theology.

### **Jude—holding to the faith once-for-all delivered to the saints**

Jude describes himself as “a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James” (1:1). So this is another brother of Jesus’ family. He shares Peter’s concerns for the safety of true believers, that we not be deceived by false prophets and teachers. Jude’s short letter is somewhat distinct, but it is sufficiently like parts of 2 Peter that scholars debate about which letter came first and was partially copied by the other writer!

Jude gives us the memorable expression: “**Contend for the faith** that was once for all delivered to the saints” (vs. 3). “**The faith**” in this context has **content**: certain things are held to be true and good; certain things are held to be wrong and harmful. The need to “**contend**” means preservation of gospel truth cannot be taken for granted. Attention must be paid.

There is more than one way to distort the truth. Jude was especially concerned about certain teachers promoting “anti-nomianism,” which means being against all laws, rebelling against any constraints of one’s personal desires. Jude 4 (NIV) describes them:

For certain men whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are godless men, who **change the grace** of our God **into a license** for immorality and **deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord**.

As in 2 Peter, Jude focuses attention on the motives of the false teachers. This is one of the most common ways to distort Christianity, and it’s more than common today. Everyone celebrates “grace,” and we should. But if we **interpret grace** in such a way that no way of life is ruled out of bounds, we have denied that we have a “**Sovereign**” (other than ourselves). Jude’s word choice is deliberate and inspired. “Sovereign” is the NIV translation of *despotēs*, from which we get the negative word, “despot.” The ESV renders it as “**Master**.” It can also be translated as “**owner**.” Probably one or more of those possible translations can make people feel uncomfortable. But discomfort with the truth is not a reason to deny it.

**Lesson 8—The Book of Revelation (and related texts elsewhere in the NT)**

- A. What did John see? Present? Future?
- B. How do we approach this puzzling book?
- C. Matthew 24-25: how to be ready for the end
- D. 1 and 2 Thessalonians: certainty and uncertainty
- E. Unfinished business

The best news and the worst news: Jesus is coming again—as judge, to rectify all that’s wrong, to eliminate all that’s wrong

Appendix 1: timeline from the Gospels to Revelation

Appendix 2: order of books chronologically (when they were possibly written) This would not be easy, see F&S *Book by Book*, pp. 443-44 and my critique.

Appendix 3: Christianity’s relationship to the Roman Empire in the first century

