UNDERSTANDING THE NEW TESTAMENT
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Transcription

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Lesson 1 • Why and How Should You Study the New Testament

Welcome to this survey of the New Testament which we will divide into twelve messages of approximately fifty minutes each and introduce readers around the world to what at the very least has been almost universally viewed as one of the great collections of literature in this world’s history, but for Christian believers is far more – being their sacred book, or collection of sixty-six books, believed to be God’s very word to humanity and thus making it crucial for followers of Christ to understand it, to apply it, and to obey it.

WHAT IS THE NEW TESTAMENT?

We begin in this first lesson with some general introductory comments that will apply to any portion of the New Testament that one might be studying. Our first question is an appropriate place to start, namely, what is the New Testament. By giving it a single title it is easy to think of it as one individual book, when in fact the New Testament is a collection of twenty-seven different books, which have come to be accepted by Christians as sacred and as authoritative.

We will talk briefly in a later lesson about the process through which those convictions emerged, the process that is called the canonization of the New Testament, that is to say of coming to understand this collection of works as uniquely inspired and God-breathed.

But for now let us note that it is a collection made up of four literary genres or forms. Some people often come to the Bible and simply learn or hear or read individual verses or stories and are unaware of the larger context and the kinds of books in which they appear. Without this information it is easy to take passages out of context and interpret them in ways they were never initially intended to be interpreted.

The Gospels

We need to understand that there are, to begin with, four Gospels, the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The term “gospel” itself comes from a Greek word that meant “good news.” It was a term often used in the Roman Empire of the ancient Middle East into which Jesus and Christianity were birthed. The term euangelion, the Greek word for gospel meaning “good news,” was often used by imperial edicts announcing the latest victory of the Roman Empire over its enemies, the establishment...
of peace on its borders, and other similar events. Jesus and his followers used this same term to suggest that their message was good news of at least a comparable if not even greater scope.

The four Gospels all describe selected events from the life of Christ according to the particular interests of their authors and particular needs of their audiences, and again, in a later lesson we will come back and outline some of these details at greater length.

The reason for including four rather than simply one was because each told the story of Jesus in a somewhat different, though not contradictory, fashion. Those Christians who came to supremely value these four documents above any others that claim to record information about Jesus believed that their record of the story of this founder of their religion would be incomplete, would be impoverished, if they did not have the information and the prospectives of all four of these Gospel writers.

The order in which the canon of the New Testament, the collection of these twenty-seven books, believed to be uniquely authoritative, was finalized may have corresponded to the order in which some Christians in the early centuries of the faith believed that the Gospels were written. Today most scholars think that Mark was the first Gospel and then Matthew and Luke came shortly thereafter with John being the last and the latest. There is some evidence that some early Christians believed this as well, but it is not entirely clear.

At any rate, what is clear is that Matthew is by far the most Jewish of the four Gospels, probably written to the most Jewish Christian of the audiences of the four Gospels and certainly filled with all kinds of quotations, illusions, and references back to the Jewish Scriptures, what Christians now call the Old Testament. It made sense, therefore, whether or not someone believed Matthew to have been written first, to put his Gospel first. As a collection of books the New Testament was being added to the existing collection of Old Testament Scriptures. Matthew clearly formed the best bridge, or connection, or transition, with those Old Testament books.

Acts

After the four Gospels, understandably was placed one book that is known as the Acts of the Apostles. It too reflects a historical genre, though, whereas the Gospels all clearly have one central character, Jesus of Nazareth, and thus may be thought of even more as biographies than as simply general works of history, the Acts does not as clearly have a single leading character. We may think of it, therefore, more along the lines of the broader history writing of the ancient Mediterranean world. And because it describes selected events believed to be of particular significance in the first generation of the life of the early church, it was natural in the process of canonization to place it immediately...
following the four Gospels because its events chronologically come after the life of Jesus as described in the four Gospels.

Letters (Epistles)

The third category, or literary form, or genre that the New Testament contains involves letters, epistles, as they have come to be called. Thirteen of these are attributed to the Apostle Paul, that towering figure of the first generation of Christian history who next only to Jesus himself was responsible for molding the initial faith of Jesus’ followers into the forms that would endure over the centuries. The thirteen letters attributed to Paul include in their canonical order: Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon. Again, the order is probably not chronological. We will attempt to put these letters in their chronological order as we survey them in coming lessons in order to understand some of the historical connections between them.

But as was the custom in a variety of collections of documents in the ancient world, it would appear that their order in the sequence of the New Testament is simply that of decreasing length; first with letters written to entire churches, followed then by letters written to individuals, though, those individuals did form important parts of the churches of which they were members. Thus, Romans through Thessalonians are addressed to churches, Timothy, Titus, and Philemon to individuals. Within each of these two sequences, the longest letters are placed first proceeding to the shortest, although Galatians is ever so slightly shorter than Ephesians if one counts individual lines in the ancient scrolls, but it may be that no one was computing things quite this precisely.

The exception to this overall pattern was, of course, when two letters were written to the same church, even if the sequence of decreasing length was broken, they were kept together as with 1 and 2 Corinthians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, and 1 and 2 Timothy. In fact, most of these letters were actually written by Paul before the written form of the Gospels and Acts appeared. But it made sense to keep the historical and biographical material grouped together. To have produced a New Testament in strictly chronological sequence would have required interrupting the book of Acts at numerous places and inserting various letters of Paul, which then would not have permitted readers to read the book of Acts as Luke undoubtedly intended it to be read, namely from start to finish. Paul’s letters are placed before the letters of other early Christian leaders in the New Testament no doubt because he came to be viewed as the most influential of the letter writers in the first century.

The so called General Epistles, or Letters, because they were at one time believed to have been written to more than one single church, and some of them indeed were,
include Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1 and 2 and 3 John, and Jude. To speak a bit more precisely, the letter of Hebrews does not have an attribution, is not attributed to anyone in the oldest manuscripts or many centuries that we have. There was, thus, debate very early in the history of Christianity as to who wrote it. Some argued for Paul, many for a number of different other options all of whom were followers of Paul at one time or another. Hebrews then, technically, is not part of the General Epistles but forms a transition or bridge between those letters that have Paul’s name attached to them on all of the manuscripts that we know of and those who have someone else’s name attached to them, namely, the writings of James, Peter, John and Jude.

We have the least certainty as to why the letters of these four early Christian leaders were arranged in the order that they were, but the best guess perhaps is that it corresponded to their order of importance in the earliest stages of the Christian faith. For listeners to this series used to thinking of Peter as the later bishop of Rome and the predecessor to the line of Catholic Church leaders who eventually would be called Popes, this may come as a surprise.

But if one reads the Book of Acts closely, we see that James is described, particularly after Peter leaves Jerusalem and begins to minister in various parts of the Roman Empire, James is described as the leader of the church based in Jerusalem and the chief elder there and it is his word when there is a council in Acts 15 in Jerusalem bringing together representatives of numerous wings of the early church for important theological debate, it is James who makes the final and decisive determination of how Christians are to proceed.

Peter is, of course, clearly a key church leader and head of the group of the twelve apostles, so it is natural for his letters to come next. John is frequently described in the Book of Acts as Peter’s right-hand man. He was also the disciple who leaned on Jesus’ breast at the Last Supper and who is called, “the disciple whom Jesus loved.” He is placed then naturally third and Jude the half brother of Jesus and full brother of James, the half brother of Jesus is clearly the least well-known of these four early church leaders and understandably comes last.

Apocalypse

Finally, the fourth genre of the books of the New Testament is altogether different, the Book of Revelation with which the canon closes is above all an apocalypse. In fact, the English word revelation merely translates the Greek title of this work apokalypsis from which we get the English word apocalypse. The book is also a letter and contains seven letters to seven churches in Asia Minor or Western Turkey. It describes itself in 1:3 as prophecy referring to things that will happen in the future as well as explaining God’s intentions for the churches in the present time to whom the Apostle John writes.
But it is above all apocalypse, that is to say a highly symbolic description of present and future events in light of questions about the way the world will end. Thus, one of the worse things one can do if one wants to correctly interpret an apocalypse is to take what is intended to be symbolic as if it referred to the literal characters or figures described. To read that there is a great dragon, for example, in Revelation 12 does not commit Christians to believing in dragons, after all, that chapter goes on to explain that the dragon is a symbol and the visions that John is describing that he received, a symbol for Satan.

**WHY STUDY THE NEW TESTAMENT?**

More on all of these categories of Christian writing later, but let’s ask a second introductory question. Since this series of tapes is being transmitted around the world and people from many different backgrounds and even faith commitments may well at one time or another be listening, what if one asks the question, not from a distinctively Christian vantage point, but simply from the perspective of someone who wants to be more educated and well-trained in significant developments in the history and understanding contemporary events of our planet earth – why study the New Testament? Let me suggest six answers very briefly.

**The Literary Reason**

First, there is what may be called the literary reason. The Bible, Old and New Testaments alike, contain great literature and people throughout the history and cultures of the last two thousand years of this planet who have read and studied the New Testament in any depth, whether or not as Christian believers, have regularly come to the conviction that there are large stretches of text that when translated accurately into the language of the readers impress them with the profound nature of their thoughts, with the elegant way in which they are phrased with moving impressions that are created along the lines not nearly of other religion’s sacred literature but of the great poetry and prose of all of the world’s major cultures.

**The Historical Reason**

Secondly, there is a historical reason for studying the New Testament. It is the central book of Christianity, the religion of almost one-third of the world’s population and the book which has been published and distributed, both sold and given away free, and translated into more languages, in more editions, and with more copies than any book or collection of books in the history of the world, bar none. A book or collection of books
that has been this much in demand and has had this much of an impact is surely worth knowing about whatever nation one lives in, whatever culture one forms a part of, whatever worldview one may have been brought up with.

The Contemporary Reason

Thirdly, there is what we may call the contemporary reason for studying the New Testament. The effect of this book is not diminishing in the world today, even if in certain cultures Christianity does not have the impact that it once had, in many others it is growing rapidly. As churches grow and spread, as media and the internet make available an explosion of information never conceived of, never dreamed possible by previous generations, as persons with or without religious faith try to understand the beliefs that motivate people for political action, for humanitarian aid, for educational purposes, and countless other features of our societies throughout the world, an understanding of the New Testament and the many ways it has been interpreted proves crucial.

The Academic Reason

Fourthly, we may speak of an academic reason for studying the New Testament. Whether one is listening at the most elementary levels of learning to read and write or whether one is studying in the highest degrees that a given university may offer, the New Testament makes claims which thoughtful, growing, educated people should know, understand, and evaluate, to examine, to see if they are true, and these claims center around the identity, the person and the work, the teachings and the deeds of Jesus of Nazareth. Whether or not one chooses to become a follower of his, his claims and those of his followers are of such central significance to the meaning of life and human identity that one surely should examine them in some detail and make an informed choice as to whether one is going to accept them or not.

The Personal Reason

This reason leads closely to the fifth reason, the personal reason for studying the New Testament. Some of the claims of Jesus and his followers require a personal response to this self-styled, Jewish rabbi of the first third of the first century in Israel. The New Testament is not just a book of history, not just a great work of literature, but it is a work of theology. It is a work of making claims about God and humanity and their relationship. It appeals to its audiences to acknowledge and serve Jesus as the human expression of the Living God. It also is a book of ethics, teaching people how to live a God-pleasing life, one of love of God and fellow humans in ways that are alleged to be
of benefit for humanity individually and as a whole. Even if someone is not striving to be educated in the formal sense of going to school, personal identity, integrity, and destiny demand some awareness and assessment of the New Testament.

The Professional Reason

Finally and sixthly, we may speak of the professional reason or the vocational reason. Many listeners to this series of audio tapes will be in one form of Christian ministry or another, whether as a lay-person or as a professional. Part of what they regularly do more so than most people in the world will involve teaching and applying the Bible to themselves and to others and so obviously they will want the best possible understanding of the New Testament documents.

HOW SHOULD WE STUDY THE NEW TESTAMENT?

Let’s turn to a third introductory question. How should we study the New Testament? If one were to glance back at all the many things that Christians and many others have done with books of the Bible over the centuries we would hardly be able to limit our remarks to a series of twelve lessons of approximately fifty minutes each. We still will have to be highly and enormously selective, but we can at least explain up front what some of those criteria for selection will be.

When we have finished our various introductory remarks and set the books of the New Testament in their historical context, we will want to look at each of the twenty-seven books ever so briefly and ask four kinds of questions. One will be questions of introduction. Who wrote a given book – to whom, when, under what circumstances, and for what purposes? These are crucial questions for helping us to rightly understand each book.

Secondly, we will ask questions of exegesis or interpretation. How should the book be outlined? How do we understand its structure? What are the main points, section by section? What is clear? And what have proved some of the most controversial or disputed parts of the New Testament books? And what might be some of the best solutions to some of those controversies?

Third, we will ask questions of theology. What are the key themes overall that the book wants to teach and convince its readers of? Is there a unifying or central topic? Is there a single sentence or paragraph that seems to express the main idea of the writer in a nutshell and are there any problems created by these main themes because they seem to be different from the central emphases of other books of the Bible?
And then, fourthly, questions of application. What might be one or two key areas of contemporary life in the twenty-first century where the key lessons and themes of the book take on particular significance?

**WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE VIEWPOINTS ON THE NEW TESTAMENT?**

Let’s turn to a fourth introductory question. What are the possible viewpoints or presuppositions or understandings or faith commitments or lack thereof that we employ or should employ in coming to study these texts? Obviously there will be differences if one comes as a believing Christian with some predisposition, some bias, if we want to call it that, in favor of reverencing the text as containing the very words of God meant to be believed and obeyed compared with those who might come from a more skeptical perspective persuaded of another religious viewpoint or of an irreligious viewpoint such as atheism – believing that there is no God and therefore believing one of the many philosophies or perspectives that follow from atheism such as that all we have is this material world and that when people die they cease to exist and have no more conscious awareness of anything.

It comes as no surprise that this series of lectures represents a distinctively Christian worldview, not because we want to impose it on others in any heavy-handed or coercive fashion, but simply because in a short series like this it would, again, be impossible to go through each part of the New Testament and examine how it has been understood from Christian and non-Christian perspectives alike, though, we will address a handful of some of the most crucial issues that skeptics have raised over the centuries.

But even within the community of the people who use the label Christian for themselves there is great diversity. One very important divide in the twenty-first century is along a spectrum from those who would see themselves as more conservative or evangelical in their perspective, believing that the Bible contains accurate historical information, normative theological truths that we are meant to believe and obey, and timeless applicable concepts, ethical practices that were not just good suggestions for one culture or collection of cultures, but are binding on all humans whether they accept that fact or not as presenting the best possible way for people to live.

Or those who take a more liberal perspective that treat the Bible as a collection of documents written by first Jews and then Christians, but, at least for people today, not to be viewed as uniquely authoritative, but to be analyzed carefully and accepted only to the extent that what humanity has learned down through the centuries through
science, through philosophy, through all of the various areas of study that schools and universities have addressed over the years can today allow us to accept.

Within both of those broad divisions of the Christian faith there are then further denominational divisions. There are the three, broad, large categories of Eastern Orthodox, of Roman Catholic, and of Protestant Christianity. There are smaller groups that do not always identify with one of these three main branches of Christian faith and which those branches do not always identify as fully Christian, but who claim Jesus of Nazareth as their Lord, nevertheless.

One thinks, for example, of sectarian groups like the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, more popularly known as the Mormons or the Jehovah’s Witnesses or other somewhat unorthodox offshoots of the main branches of the Christian faith. One can then also take those three main branches and subdivide them with Eastern Orthodoxy dividing particularly along cultural lines of the various Eastern European churches, Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, Romanian Orthodox, Bulgarian, and so on and some of the countries go as far as North Africa with the Coptic Orthodox Church having originated initially in Ethiopia.

Roman Catholicism is institutionally unified worldwide, but there are branches of the Catholic Church that have rejected the authority of the Pope in Italy and Rome over them, and then, of course, Protestantism worldwide has subdivided into perhaps the greatest and into undoubtedly the greatest number of denominational perspectives as well as today increasingly people who in the name of the unity of the church do not align themselves, and churches that do not align themselves with a particular denomination.

This series and this lecture identify broadly with the Evangelical, Protestant, Christian perspective, though, wherever possible we stress agreements with all of the branches of the historic Christian church. Nevertheless, there will be times when we will be forced into a choice of perspectives, and while not aligning closely with a particular Protestant denomination for these short lectures, we will clearly be reflecting perspectives that have been prominent and typically have been dominant within Evangelical Christianity more broadly.

**SHOULD WE EVALUATE THE NEW TESTAMENT FROM OUR PERSPECTIVE?**

A final introductory question – does it make a difference if we do our best to bracket or put to one side all Christian faith or any commitments to religious or philosophical perspectives that may guide our lives and try to read the New Testament or any other
great work of religious literature with as open a mind as possible with what some have called a blank slate? Or, should we come with all of the beliefs and education and convictions and commitments that have made up our lives to this present moment making us who we are and then evaluate the New Testament from that perspective? Throughout the last two millennia of world history there have been thinkers, Christian and non-Christian, who have argued vigorously for both of these perspectives and often arguing that only one of them is the correct approach.

I would like to humbly suggest that there is truth in both approaches and that, in fact, however much one might want to limit oneself to one approach it is virtually impossible to do so anyway. What do I mean by that? In the case of trying to be as objective as possible, and there is no question that there is great merit to this, if I simply allow my prejudices or pre-understandings or predispositions to make me willing without much critical thought, without much analysis to accept these words no matter how unusual, strange, silly, or unbelievable they appear, then I will seldom be able to share my faith and persuade others with much success.

On the other hand, if I try as hard as possible to read the New Testament as if for the first time with no prior understanding or commitment to the text, I will find myself over and over again subconsciously, perhaps even unconsciously and thus in ways that I am barely aware of, if at all, reading in perspectives that I have heard before, that I have never heard challenged, that I am not aware of alternatives to, and I will fool myself into thinking that I am being objective.

What we need is a balance or a mediating approach between the two positions and I would suggest this is what we should do in reading sympathetically the literature of any authors who claim to be telling us true things about the world, about its creation, about humanity and for those who believe in a Creator, about the nature of that God.

We put out on the table for ourselves and others very clearly everything we have come to believe about life, but we hold nothing as so perfectly determined that no amount of evidence could ever convince us to change our mind. Some things we may believe quite firmly and we admit honestly it would take a huge amount of new evidence and a very different approach to thinking to change our mind, but if such should appear we will be open to it.

In other cases, on other issues, where we are not at all sure even of our own beliefs we can come to be persuaded much more readily. It would be my hope and prayer that readers would approach this series of lectures from that vantage point. I would hope that no Evangelical, Protestant, Christian, however much they may have reason to respect my perspectives, would accept them simply because I put them on a tape, but go back to the Bible and go back to every resource that you ever have had and ever will have access to by which to measure and test the truth of what you hear in these lectures.
Be like those Jews in Acts 17 at Berea who searched the Scriptures daily to see if the things the Apostle Paul was teaching them were true, or like Mary, the mother of Jesus, who even after she received an angelic revelation, we are told in Luke 2, kept all these things in her heart (Luke 1 and 2) pondering them.

But for those who are not Evangelical, Protestant Christians listening to this tape series my prayer would be that you not come with a hostile or overly suspicious approach, that you enter sympathetically and empathetically into the possibilities that I will trace, not gullibly, testing them even as the other group of listeners tests them, but open to the possibility of learning something new that might in fact change your mind, your behavior, your commitments in little ways or even in big ways. Let’s ponder on all of these introductory thoughts as we bring this first lecture to a close.
Lesson 2  ▪  Understanding the Background of the New Testament

This is the second lecture in the series New Testament Survey. In our first lecture we asked a number of introductory questions that formed the foundation for the whole series. In this lecture we want to introduce the historical and religious backgrounds for New Testament study. In the ancient world there was, of course, no separation of church and state as in some countries in the modern world, so it is somewhat artificial to separate the two concepts from one another, but it is customarily done for the sake of a clear introduction to certain important background concepts that need to be kept in mind whenever interpreting the New Testament.

THE HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL BACKGROUND OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

So we begin with the historical and what might also, in many cases, be called political issues that form the most important backdrop to the life of Jesus and to the movement that came to be known as Christianity, which he birthed. There was, of course, no earth-shattering event that marked the end of the Old Testament period.

The Persian Era (425–330 B.C.)

The last writing, profit Malachi, whose ministry probably came to an end with about one-quarter of the fifth century B.C. left to go, that is roughly around 425 B.C., wrote during the period of Persian occupation and rule over the nation of Israel. That period would continue all the way through the late fourth century B.C., that is to say until the time of the 330’s B.C., when the power of Philip of Macedon and his son Alexander in that part of Eastern Europe that we know of as Greece, began to grow immensely, so that Alexander eventually conquered more territory — spanning the regions from southeastern Greece all the way to India — than any ruler had previously held in that part of the world. Israel came under Alexander’s power in 331 B.C., and although he died a scant eight years later, his territories were divided among his generals since he left no living heir, and two of them, Ptolemy and Seleucus, eventually came to hold the southern and northern halves of Alexander’s kingdom, respectively.
The Greek Era (331–167 B.C.)

This brought in an era of more than a century and a half of Greek power and cultural influence throughout the Middle East and throughout Israel, more particularly. Greek language spread everywhere and became the common second language of any people or peoples who needed to do business or travel or speak, for whatever reason, with anyone other than their native neighbors and kinspeople who spoke their same language.

In Israel the typical first language of Jews was a Semitic tongue called Aramaic, very similar to but not identical with the Hebrew in which their Scriptures, the Christian Old Testament, had been written. But with the coming of Greek some Jews would have become at least minimally trilingual, knowing enough Hebrew to understand the Scriptures when they were read weekly in the synagogue, speaking Aramaic among themselves, and for those who needed to converse with outsiders learning at least some Greek on top of all that. This state of affairs continued even down into the first century and New Testament times, even after Rome conquered that portion of the ancient Mediterranean world, because Romans were content to utilize the benefits of a common language existing particularly in the eastern half of their empire with the Greek language, even though Romans by birth would have naturally spoken Latin.

The upshot of Greek language and culture spreading throughout the ancient Middle East also meant that the Greek forms of religion spread offering a challenge to any people who believed that theirs was an exclusive religion not to be blended together or compromised in any way by combining it with foreign views. Judaism, when it was true to its roots, was precisely such an exclusive religion, and so the era of Greek influence and culture beginning in the 330s and lasting all the way up to the 160s B.C. became a time of increasing turmoil as some Jews were happy to accommodate the new Greek ways of life including religious customs, and others recoiled and rejected the same developments.

The Hasmonean (Maccabean) Era (142–63 B.C.)

In the second century B.C., in the decades at the beginning of the 100s B.C., the Seleucid rulers ruling from the north, and more particularly from Syria over the nation of Israel, increasingly demanded that the more exclusive Jewish practices that set them off from their neighbors and from their Greek overlords be abandoned. Needless to say this caused even greater concern and upset and finally led to what we might today have called guerrilla warfare. Though considerably outnumbered, a group of Jewish rebels took up arms led by an individual by the name of Judas Maccabeus, the second name being a nickname that meant the hammerer for his fierce abilities in warfare, and hiding
in the Judean hillside and in caves and using the covering of night to surprise the occupying soldiers, over a three-year period fought a war of independence from 167 to 164 B.C. and ultimately succeeded in ridding the city of Jerusalem, and its holy temple, and eventually by 142 B.C. the entire land of Israel from the Seleucid power.

This then produced nearly a century of independence for the Jewish people in the land of Israel, a period that is sometimes called the Hasmonean dynasty, after the name of Judas’s great grandfather, an important family name for that tribe and kin. And here all the way until 63 B.C. we begin to see a strong conservative Jewish backlash against the most offensive Greek practices of the day such as not keeping Sabbath, not observing the dietary laws according to the book of Leviticus, not believing in Yahweh the one God of Israel as the God of the universe, or recognizing Israel as a distinct promised land and the temple as a distinctive holy place, and similar customs. Indeed, to this day Jews celebrate the liberating of their land and the century or so of independence that it ushered in with the festival known as Hanukkah.

A key result from this tension between Greeks and Jews can be seen on virtually all of the pages of the New Testament, namely the tension between what the New Testament writers regularly refer to as Jews and Gentiles, that is to say anyone who is not a Jewish person. When we read the letter to the Ephesians we will see how much Paul makes of the importance of Jewish and Gentile unity in the church. We have already eluded in our first lecture to the Jerusalem counsel in Acts 15 where it had to be decided if non-Jews becoming Christians had to obey all the laws of Judaism first. One can read in Acts 22:21 after Paul has been able to quiet the crowd that was trying to hurt him and tell his story of his conversion to believing in Jesus as Messiah they listened patiently, but it is when he speaks of his God-given commission to take the message of this Jesus to the Gentiles that they then reply, “Rid the earth, he is not fit to live.” This tension unfortunately has often continued throughout history and even to the present day.

The Roman Era (63 B.C. – Fifth Century A.D.)

The final major era of historical and political background to set the stage for the New Testament, a period that would continue all the way through the first century or New Testament era and indeed into the early fifth century A.D. was the period of Roman rule. Although Jews lived free from occupying forces from the mid-second century to the mid-first century B.C. they were having to come to grips with a growing power from the west, a power that occupied much of the Greek rulers’ attention as well, namely Rome from the peninsula of Italy. Slowing advancing eastward Rome gobbled up more and more territories and did not enter into other territories only because those countries were willing to pay heavy taxes to Rome to keep their forces out. Eventually
even this was not enough and the Roman General Pompey entered Israel and into the holy city of Jerusalem in 63 B.C.

To understand the claims of the New Testament for who Jesus was one must understand that in many instances the Roman Emperors were making the identical claims and therefore to say that Jesus was Lord, God, and Master was to say that Caesar, the Emperor was not. Notwithstanding this conflict until the mid 60s A.D. the fact that Rome was the leading power in the region was more of a positive benefit for Jesus and the first generation of his followers than it was a problem.

As we have already mentioned a common language, Greek, remained in place enabling the message, or for that matter any message, to be spread widely without it having to be translated into a dozen or more languages as it would have in a previous era and in many ever since. The Roman transportation and communication systems were state-of-the-art by the standards of the ancient world and they granted to the Jews special favors in allowing them limited self-government, so that they were not forced to worship the emperor acknowledging him as Lord and God. As long as the first Christians were viewed just as another Jewish sect or group Christianity received these same benefits and, of course, the famous Roman peace and its judicial system, neither perfect by a long shot by modern standards, but still the best that part of the world had ever known, also proved advantageous to Christians on more than one occasion as one can read in the book of Acts.

With the Emperor Nero in A.D. 64, however, things took a substantial turn for the worse and it is fair to say that from that period on, certainly for as long as the Roman Empire remained, Roman rule often was more negative than positive as far as Christians were concerned. Persecution broke out largely limited to Rome and nearby areas in Italy from 64 to 68 and it would break out again in more widespread fashion under the Emperor Domitian from approximately 94 to 96 and then beyond the New Testament period into the second century and beyond with even greater intensity.

For understanding the New Testament, however, we need not go beyond the first century, but we do need in addition to note during this period of Roman rule the significance of A.D. 70. From a historical or political perspective, that is taking religious matters out of consideration for a moment, A.D. 70 was probably the most significant date for the ancient Mediterranean world. This was the date at which the Jewish zealot rebellion, an attempt to once again gain independence for Israel, was decisively put down, the leading citizens and soldiers of Jerusalem deported, exiled from their country, and never again until the 20th Century in the events after World War II that led to the formation of the state of Israel would Jewish people live in independence in the territory that in Old Testament times had been promised to them as their Promised Land.
This then becomes for Christians the decisive moment at which it is clear that Christianity is no longer just another Jewish sect. They refused to participate in the revolt against Rome, even Jews who had become followers of the Messiah for the most part failed to participate, and from this point onward the sizable majority of people becoming Christians are not even Jews at all but Gentiles from all of the other nations and people groups of that region.

THE RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

Let us turn now to a brief religious introduction to the New Testament era using the divisions we have just talked about between Jew and Gentile, between Jew and what can be called the Greco-Roman world, that area that came under Roman rule from Spain to nearly India and had experienced successive waves of either Greek and/or Roman culture significantly changing the way people lived and thought. Indeed, if we begin with the Greco-Roman world and ask the question to what religion might you have belonged, what religious practices or beliefs might you have held if you were anyone other than a Jew in the first century in the Roman Empire, we may broadly categorize our answers under five main headings.

The Greek Religions

The oldest religious options are represented in the classic myths about the various gods and goddesses in Greek thought that lived atop Mt. Olympus with Zeus as the king or head of the pantheon of gods there, later called Jupiter by the Romans. Here we see elements of nature, different portions of the universe deified with elaborate stories explaining how they came to be: Apollo the sun god who drove his fiery chariot across the sky from east to west everyday, Dionysus or Bacchus the god of wine and the god who then could be honored as people enjoyed wine even to the point of excess, and many more.

In an early era such myths appealed to individuals because they seemed to explain the unknown and the seemingly random or erratic parts of the universe, they provided rituals and ceremonies to appease, to placate, to curry favor with the gods, they gave explanations for why tragedies occurred when the gods and goddesses were upset. But by first century times these myths were dramatically diminishing because the science of the day had already come to realize, in many cases, that these explanations were not the true ones for the heavenly bodies or for the forces of nature.
The exploits of several of the emperors already had surpassed those attributed to some of the gods. Perhaps the most important thing to remember from dependence on and belief in ancient mythology for interpreting the New Testament is that, apart from Jews and Christians, people in the ancient Mediterranean world were almost all polytheists, that is to say they worshiped many gods, not monotheists, believers in one god. And this will be a significant point that Judaism and Christianity challenge and try to correct.

**Emperor Worship**

A second religious option, by no means ruling out any other options in the Greco-Roman world at least, was emperor worship – the belief that the emperor becomes a god initially upon his death. But as the first century unfolded increasingly, particularly in the eastern half of the Roman empire, various people came to believe that he was a god even during his lifetime and some emperors, not all of them, actually encouraged this viewpoint, which then, as we have already noted, lead to tension particularly with Christians, particularly as it became clear they were not just another group of Jews and thus exempt from the requirement annually to offer a pinch of incense and sacrifice to the emperor and acclaim him as Lord and God.

The appeal of such a view was to the stability of the government and of the empire and the security of having an infallible or perfect authority in charge of making decisions for all the people. But it became clear to many that several emperors were cruel tyrants, all of them were mortal, and thus while many people went through the motions of the annual sacrifices to say that they truly believed and served the emperor as god in a way that made a dramatic difference in daily life would be to misunderstand the way life operated.

**The Mystery Religions**

A third option in the Greco-Roman world were a collection of religions or sects known as the mystery religions or cults often worshiping foreign gods, some imported from Egypt. These were small, elitist cults of various kinds open only to those willing to go through a rigorous, sometimes eccentric process of joining, becoming members, for example, being baptized in the blood of a sacrificed bull or having a special meal in which one believed that one was eating with the gods, or even to have sexual relationships in a temple with a priest or priestess who was in fact little more than a prostitute, believing that during the sexual act one was achieving union with the god or goddess of that temple.

In addition to the appeal of that which was new and unique and novel and exclusive, one feature of most mystery religions that Christianity also shared was the belief that no
matter how different one was from another in one’s normal walk of life one was a complete equal with a fellow member of the cult. Slaves, senators, men, women, native-born Romans, and ill-bred barbarians all could see each other as equals and peers at least when the cults came together, often at night under the cloak of darkness.

Greek Philosophical Systems

A fourth option comprised the various philosophies: Epicureans whose slogan “eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow you may die” is still known in today’s world, Stoics who were the exact opposite of the Epicureans in most of their beliefs of accepting ones predetermined fate courageously, Cynics and Skeptics the most pessimistic and countercultural of the various philosophers, and others. These lifestyles appealed to those usually in the upper classes who alone had enough free time to study with an existing philosopher at length and so, a certain elitism prevailed in these circles as well. Some philosophical terms appear to have influenced the New Testament writers’ usage as they compare and contrast Christian views with those of the various philosophers. One can read about Stoics and Epicureans in Acts 17 as Paul dialogues with the philosophers in Athens. Stoics believing that God was so close to the world that He, in fact, was a part of it, Epicureans believing that He was so distant as to be unknowable and Paul affirms elements of both of these perspectives while rejecting elements of both of them in Acts 17. The wandering nature of the cynic beggar living on handouts from others show some points of similarity with Jesus’ disciples when they go out two by two and rely on others’ hospitality, but there are noticeable differences. They proclaim an optimistic message whereas the cynics proved far more pessimistic.

The Gnostics

Finally, we may mention the Gnostics, perhaps the group most on the rise, most frequently combated, at least as the seeds of its philosophy were growing during the first century, going all the way back to the pre-Christian Greek philosophers who often held that the material and immaterial worlds were quite separate and different from one another, that matter was by nature evil and only spirit good. It became common to think only in terms of redeeming the spirit or soul and not to look for the resurrection of the body as Jews and Christians did.

Ironically such beliefs could lead to two quite different kinds of lifestyle. Some realizing, or believing that they realized, that there was no hope for the body tried to deny the body normal appetites, fasting, abstaining from all alcohol, leading a celibate lifestyle without having any sexual partners, and so forth. Whereas a minority from the same conviction that nothing could be done to keep the material part of a person from evil
believed in simply indulging it as long as one was trapped in this material body. Gnostics believed that there was a divine spark inside many human beings waiting to be fanned into flame through secret knowledge and particularly as we go through the Epistles we will see that Christianity denies these claims.

**THE JEWISH BACKGROUND OF THE NEW TESTAMENT**

But what if you were a Jew? There certainly were many Jewish beliefs common to Jews no matter what sect or party they affiliated with. But there were four leadership groups particularly prominent about whom we need to explore more than we can learn simply by familiarizing ourselves with the Old Testament and with Jewish laws and beliefs and practices there.

**The Pharisees (and Scribes)**

In the period in between the Testaments, that more than four-hundred year, intertestamental period, Pharisees and Sadducees grew up, during the Hasmonean Dynasty, during the period of Jewish independence. Pharisees who often also frequently overlapped with that group known from the pages of the New Testament as Scribes, those who copied the Scriptures, were expert students of the law, both the written laws of Moses in the Old Testament and also the oral interpretations and additions that had begun centuries earlier and would continue for centuries until they were written down well after the time of Christ.

They offered the Jewish people a detailed knowledge of right and wrong helping people believe that they truly were keeping the law and pleasing God in just about every context that they might find themselves in in life and thus worthy of God’s blessing. Some of these laws, however, overlooked genuine human need and some Pharisees tended toward an attitude of self-righteousness, both issues of which will become prominent on the pages of the Gospels. Pharisaic worship practice led to the model of early Christian church services with their patterns of prayers, hymns, and preaching of God’s Word.

**The Sadducees**

On the other hand, Sadducees denied most of what Pharisees affirmed much like the debates between Stoics and Epicureans in the Greek world. The closest one comes to finding pure atheism in the ancient world is in a tiny handful of Greek philosophers and
in the Jewish world among the Sadducees. They did not explicitly deny God, by any means, but questioned seriously belief in an afterlife or any resurrection of the dead, thus making it possible in good conscience for them to compromise with Greek culture, as the Romans grew intolerant to pay tribute to them, and once Rome had invaded Israel, to make their peace with the new occupying forces.

They tended to be part of the aristocratic wealthy class often overlapping with priests who ministered in the temple and they rejected the oral laws that the Pharisees had added to the written scriptures and rejected doctrines that could not be taught from the first five books of those scriptures, the five books of Moses. They often held the majority of power in the Sanhedrin, the Jewish supreme high court, and, because of their tie-in so closely with the political authorities, were not able to survive after the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70.

Whereas the Pharisees believed that when one was deported from the land and could not offer literal animal sacrifices for the forgiveness of sins in the temple in Jerusalem it was acceptable to replace prayer, repentance, and good works for those sacrifices, Sadducees did not agree and without a temple they could not have forgiveness of sins, and so died out. Ironically Christianity agreed with the Sadducees on this last point, but believed that Jesus himself had offered his body in his crucifixion as the once-for-all sacrifice for the sins of humanity.

The Essenes

A third group were known as the Essenes. These were the separatists, the ascetics, the monks, if you like it, of that day. The most famous group that we know of now lived at a site on the shores of the Dead Sea called Qumran where the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered just after World War II, including copies of Old Testament books dating one-thousand years earlier to pre-Christian times than anything that had previously been preserved, along with a veritable library of documents describing the beliefs and practices of the Essene community.

They looked for two Messiahs, one who would be a king, another a priest. They removed themselves from what they believed to be the corrupt world, even of the rest of Judaism around them and occupied themselves with the daily ritual, a regimen, and a disciplined communal lifestyle. They thought the solution to Israel’s ills and occupation by Rome was to simply obey the law better than anyone had before and await God’s spectacular intervention into history to throw off the yoke of the oppressor.
The Zealots

Finally, we may mention Zealots again; those who hoped to repeat the Maccabean miracle but who were brutally slaughtered in a revolt beginning in A.D. 67 and culminating in A.D. 70. These were those who believed that God helps those who help themselves and if they would but take up arms and rebel against Rome that He would then intervene and bring them independence once again.

It is interesting to reflect on each of these options. Though we don’t see them by name in our world today, most cultures have equivalents to most of them. One way to think of the four main leadership groups among the Jews, borrowing language similar to that which we find Jesus using in the Gospel of John, is to think of the Sadducees as being both in the world and of it, of the Pharisees as in the world but not of it, of the Zealots as not in the world but of it, and of the Essenes as not in the world and not of it.

It is also important to remember that 80% to 90% of all Jews were not members of one of these groups. They were ordinary, devout people following the faith of their ancestors, farmers, fisherman, craftsmen, merchants, housewives, most rather poor compared to the small minority of wealthy and middle class of the day, busy enough just eking out a living, not to be caught up in the various leadership philosophies. And not surprisingly most of the first Christians came from this majority of people, which the Pharisees called somewhat disparagingly, “the people of the land” or the ‘am ha ‘aretz in Hebrew. These then are a few key historical developments, political events, religious options and movements that form the backdrop for the New Testament world and for its contents.
Lesson 3 ▪ The Canon and the Text of the New Testament

HOW WAS THE OLD TESTAMENT CANON DETERMINED?

This is lecture number three in the New Testament Survey Series. To begin today we want to look at the questions of the canon and the text of the New Testament. As we mentioned in our opening lecture, to speak of the canon of Scripture is to refer to the question of how the specific sixty-six books were chosen that make up the Protestant Bible. Canon is an English word spelled “c-a-n-o-n” not to be confused with the old-fashioned form of warfare, cannon with cannonballs, that is spelled “c-a-n-n-o-n.” Canon with one “n” comes from the Greek *kanon*, which simply referred to a measuring rod or a form of measurement. In other words the canon of Scripture asks how the various books were measured, or analyzed in order to determine what would be considered uniquely sacred, first among the Jews and then among Christians.

The Protestant Christian conviction concerning the Old Testament simply followed the Jewish belief that was in existence in the time of Christ and the Apostles. The thirty-nine books of the Hebrew Scripture have been taken over by Protestants without any changes. Jews believed that prophesy had ceased with Malachi in the 400s B.C. and that subsequent religious literature written in their midst was potentially useful, but not at the same level of authority as what stage by stage came to be considered their canonical scriptures.

As Roman Catholics emerged as a distinct branch of the Christian world a number of books produced by Jews during the period between the Old and New Testaments were also treated as valuable and eventually in the Middle Ages, at the time of the Protestant Reformation as part of what has been called the Catholic counterreformation, these apocryphal works, or sometimes called the Old Testament Apocrypha were officially accepted as canonical as well. Both Protestants and Catholics, however, with ancient Judaism excluded a large number of additional Jewish writings often known as the Pseudepigrapha from two Greek words that refer to a false ascription of authorship.
HOW WAS THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON DETERMINED?

On the New Testament, which is the focus of this survey series, Protestants and Catholics have agreed on the precise twenty-seven books, which form the New Testament canon.

Why Were Any Books Added to the Old Testament Canon?

It is worth asking the question, however, why did Christians come to believe that any books at all should be added to the canon of Scripture and treated as on a par with the already existing Hebrew Scriptures or what Christians have come to call the Old Testament. Perhaps the most central answer to that question involves the open-ended nature of the Old Testament as a collection of books and the open-ended nature particularly of those prophetic books, which appear towards the end of the Old Testament canon. In more than one occasion Old Testament prophets looked forward to a coming age when a Messiah, a descendant of David would come and liberate his people, when once again Israel would live as a free nation in her land, obeying her laws and thus experiencing God’s blessing and living in peace and prosperity and freedom and safety from her enemies. These promises, Christians believed, were fulfilled, though not always in a literal, materialistic sense, often in a more spiritual sense, in the events surrounding the birth, ministry, death, resurrection, and subsequent sending of the Holy Spirit by Jesus of Nazareth.

It is also worth observing that just as the record of the establishment of the first covenant with Israel at the time of Moses on Mt. Sinai was accompanied by a written record and revelation, so also it was natural for Christians to expect once they believed that Jesus was the ultimate Messiah and final prophet that brought about the New Covenant prophesied in Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 36 and other places, that a written record and revelation should accompany those events as well.

Jesus himself taught that with his celebration of the Last Supper he was ushering in that new covenant with the blood he would shed on the cross at his crucifixion to come only hours later. And he also prophesied that last night of his life in the upper room in John 14:26 and 15:26 that he would lead his disciples into all truth and also help them to remember everything that had been spoken to them, suggesting that part of the Spirit’s role in the coming decades was to inspire people who had followed Jesus and could attest to the nature of his ministry an account or accounts of his life and reflections on its significance.
Why These Particular 27 Books?

A logical follow-up question to why any new books at all is why these particular twenty-seven books? We already looked in lecture one at something about their different literary forms, but what of their contents? All, of course, were traditions either about the nature of Jesus’ person and work, his teachings and ministry, or immediate developments of that tradition in the first century’s decades.

The specific criteria that seem to have been used to select these twenty-seven were that they were widely accepted, recognized, if you like, by the emerging church of Jesus Christ around that part of the world into which it had spread as uniquely true, inspired, valuable, relevant for Christian thought and life.

Secondly, that they were linked to an apostle either because someone who had direct experience of the risen Lord had written a document or one who was a close follower of such a person. Matthew, John, and Peter were of course among Jesus’ twelve apostles. Paul rightly claimed apostolic authority because of the special resurrection appearance that Jesus granted him on the road to Damascus, and Mark and Luke derived their traditions predominantly, at least initially, from Peter and Paul, respectively, so at least says strong early church tradition. We have already seen how people like James and Jude would have been half brothers of Jesus, not necessarily believers during his earthly life, but certainly eyewitnesses of portions of his life and recipients of resurrection appearances in ways that persuaded them subsequently of the legitimacy of his claims. That leaves only the author of Hebrews, who remains disputed, but both in the ancient and modern worlds debates surrounded whether or not this was Paul or a close companion of Paul and no other candidates were ever seriously suggested.

Finally, we have the criterion of non-contradiction with previous Scripture. In all kinds of ways the New Testament books were seen as appropriate, logical, natural supplements to, and fulfillments of the Hebrew Scriptures. And despite all kinds of differences in emphasis and the way different accounts are related, ultimately no contradictions of the kind that would require readers to choose one author instead of another were perceived either among the books eventually assigned to the New Testament or between those New Testament books and the Old Testament or Hebrew Scriptures.

What About Those Writings that Were Left Out?

Of course, this leads understandably to the question of what was left out? Are there other books purportedly from Christian circles from the earliest eras of church history that might have been candidates for inclusion in such a canon? If there were within the first century, except possibly for the very last years of the 90s of the first century, then
they no longer exist and we do not know about them. So one important answer to this question is that the books that were left out appear, almost without exception, to come from later eras and generations of Christian history in ways that make them less appropriate as founding or foundational documents.

One such group of writings comes from the second century often referred to as the Apostolic Fathers, writers of primarily letters to various Christian communities who spoke of their own writings in a way that suggested they understood they did not carry the same level of authority as the apostolic writings of the first century. For the most part their theology is orthodox or in keeping with the doctrines of the New Testament, though in a few places they do begin to go in slightly different directions.

A second large category of writings, not to be confused with the Old Testament Apocrypha that Roman Catholics canonized but Protestants do not, is what has been called the New Testament apocrypha. Although no Christian bodies have ever included these as canonical, there were additional second through fifth-century Gospels, Acts, and Apocalypses like the Book of Revelation and one or two additional letters beyond the era of the Apostolic Fathers, which purported to varying degrees to add to the body of knowledge that we have from the New Testament about the life of Jesus or about the lives of the Apostles who succeeded him. Scholars of most all theological traditions, however, recognize that the lateness of these documents and the patently legendary nature of many of their accounts add little or nothing to our database of historical truth about first-century people and events.

Perhaps the most intriguing group of books not found in the New Testament from the earliest years of the Christian movement are the Gnostic writings. We spoke a little bit about Gnosticism in our second lecture. After World War II, about the same time as the Dead Sea Scrolls were being discovered in Israel, a site in Egypt known as Nag Hammadi yielded a treasure trove of ancient scrolls from pre-Christian up through early Christian times, though again, most of these are second through fifth century in nature and even slightly later. Many of them are quite different from anything we find in the Old or New Testament; long, rambling, esoteric discourses about God’s ways with humanity and elaborate hierarchies of angelic and demonic beings, sometimes supposedly spoken by Jesus privately after his resurrection to a select few of his disciples.

But occasionally and particularly with one of the Gnostic Gospels falsely attributed to the Apostle Thomas, there are sayings that resemble what we find in the four New Testament Gospels as well as others previously unknown to us that could be interpreted in such a way as to be consistent with what the Jesus of the canonical Gospels taught. There are, however, numerous sayings even in the Gospel of Thomas that are clearly gnostic in nature and origin, so even here it seems unlikely that we have, at best, more
than a handful of sayings that perhaps add slightly to our knowledge of the historical Jesus.

Why were these three groups of books left out? The simple and short answer is that they did not pass all of the three major requirements for being accepted widely throughout the Christian world as uniquely relevant, as non-contradictory with previously acknowledged revelation, or as genuinely going back to an apostle or a close associate of an apostle. In the case of the Gnostic writings, typically all three criteria were failed. In the case of the New Testament apocrypha, sometimes three and often two of the three were not met and while the Apostolic Fathers were not always in any significant way contradictory to previous revelation and in a few instances became very widely known, they failed the test of being linked closely to the apostolic era.

What If We Found New Writings?

It is always interesting to raise the question, what if some spectacular new discovery were to unearth a document that could be proven to be of first-century origin, that beyond any reasonable shadow of a doubt could be linked with or to one of the apostles, and which appeared to have Orthodox Christian teaching and have a certain timelessly relevant nature to it. Realistically, practically speaking, it seems unlikely that even under such conditions would such a document be accepted into the canon and added into it simply because even if it was perceived as potentially widely relevant today, the fact that God had allowed it to disappear and not be used for two-thousand years or so suggests that He did not see it as crucial for His church in each era of human history. So, even if there are no arguments to absolutely prove that the canon of Scripture is closed, that it would be inappropriate to add any additional religious literature to it, practically speaking for all intents and purposes, this is the situation in which we find ourselves.

More theologically decisive perhaps is the Christian conviction that Jesus was God’s final and decisive word for humanity, for our sinful plight, and for the salvation that we therefore found ourselves in need of. Unlike the Old Testament, the New Testament does not look forward to a New Covenant, but only to the return of Christ to usher in Judgment Day and the events that lead us into a new heavens and a new earth after that.

Of course, the Holy Spirit remains active throughout the period in which the church awaits Christ’s Second Coming. Of course, the church receives guidance from the Spirit, sometimes in very dramatic and even supernatural fashion, sometimes much more quietly and gradually, but the vast majority of Christians throughout church history have not believed that such revelation ever merited being put on a par with inspired Scripture and some theologians, to keep this distinction clear, will not call the later work
of the Holy Spirit revelation at all, but refer to it with language something like "illumination," helping us understand and apply Scriptures to countless new eras in human history, but not supplementing theological truth or biblical history in ways that the Old and New Testaments provide us.

**IS THE TEXT OF THE NEW TESTAMENT RELIABLE?**

**The Number of Manuscripts (Copies)**

A topic, which naturally goes with the question of the canonization of Scripture, is that of the reliability of the text of Scripture and for the sake of this series, again, we are thinking of the New Testament. Unlike almost all other works from the ancient world we have a plethora of copies of virtually every portion of the New Testament books beginning already with the oldest fragment of a few verses out of the Gospel of John from the first quarter of the second century through to the first complete New Testaments that have been preserved dating to the fourth century A.D., and nearly complete copies of individual books of the New Testament already emerging by the end of the second and the beginning of the third century.

In fact, prior to the invention of the printing press there remain in existence more than 5,700 manuscripts in Greek, whether fragmentary or complete, of part or all of the New Testament that were copied by hand from copies of copies eventually dating back to the originals. Compare this with other works from antiquity where to have even double digits, even ten or more copies of the same document is considered quite fortunate and you can understand why through the meticulous and tedious process of comparing of these various documents we can say that with 99% or greater probability we have the ability to reconstruct what the original writers of the various New Testament books most likely wrote.

**The Nature of the Discrepancies**

There are, of course, differences among the thousands of copies that exist, the vast majority of which are very minor errors exactly the same kinds that modern-day writers including those who write today with electronic media will make: misspelling a word, accidentally omitting a word or letter or a portion of a word, or repeating all of those things by mistake. Occasionally, deliberate changes were introduced to try to clarify or smooth out something that appeared to be awkward in terms of its style or puzzling in terms of its content or to harmonize seemingly discrepant Gospel parallels.
In modern translations of the Bible footnotes or notes in the margins typically alert readers to the small handful of these many textual variants that actually affect the meaning of the passage in which they appear in any significant way or would have some bearing on Christian theology. It is important to stress that no Christian doctrine depends only on some disputed text somewhere in the New Testament and, therefore, even if we do not have the original documents that the apostolic writers penned, we have copies that have been preserved with remarkable care in which we can place our trust that we know what, with rare exceptions, the original writers wrote.

Some Longer Disputable Passages

Occasionally, there are variants that affect a longer stretch of text, about a dozen places in the New Testament, where an entire verse or two are affected. One of the most famous of these involves Matthew 6:13 when the Lord’s Prayer had as an appropriate conclusion using language out of Chronicles, the words added to it, “For Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever, Amen.” Only in two instances are entire stories most likely not to be attributed to the original manuscripts, because they do not appear in the oldest and reliable manuscripts. These stories are the longer ending of Mark, what came to be numbered Mark 16:9-20, and the story about the woman caught in adultery in John 7:53 – 8:11.

The Verse and Chapter References

Verse and chapter references were not added until the middle ages by which time most of the oldest manuscripts had been lost to the European scholars who produced what in their day were considered modern language translations from the original Greek bypassing the Latin versions of the Bible that for a thousand years had been so dominant in the Roman Catholic world. Thus, when an English translation like the King James Version, or Authorized Version, was produced in 1611, scholars doing their very best to produce a highly literal and highly reliable version did not always have access to the oldest and most reliable text, hundreds of which have been rediscovered in the four hundred years or so since that translation was created.

Of course, once additions and translations of the Bible included information and labeled them with chapters and verses new additions of the Bible are very reluctant to remove them altogether, but modern translations very consistently have footnotes or marginal notes explaining that these were not part of the earliest manuscripts, or in some instances they will take the entire passage and put it just in a footnote with such explanation.
Thinking about what was not in the earliest manuscripts gives us a good opportunity also to review that if one were looking at an ancient scroll of one of the books of the New Testament one would see multiple columns of lines of letters run together without spacing between words, without any punctuation marks, again, as we have said without any chapter or verse references, without any paragraph divisions, and all the Greek letters would have been written in capital letters so that there were not even lower case letters to suggest appropriate word divisions.

Certainly there were no titles to books, or sections of books, or footnotes, or pictures, or references cross-referencing one text with another, and so on. All of these have grown up as study helps over the centuries but must not be mistaken for parts of the original forms, which Christians affirm were uniquely inspired.

THE FOUR GOSPELS

Let us turn now turn to an introductory question that will set the stage for our next lecture to move us directly into the contents of the New Testament books themselves. We now focus our attention for a while exclusively on the four Gospels and particularly on the issue of writing a biography of Jesus of Nazareth. We have already eluded in our first lecture to the interesting fact of having four such uniquely authoritative accounts rather than one.

The Similarities and Differences

This in and of itself creates a whole set of interesting issues about the ways in which these four accounts resemble each other and are different from one another. Three of the four Gospels are more similar than different. Matthew, Mark, and Luke reasonably closely parallel books have been produced for centuries called synopses from a Greek word meaning “to look at together” in which Matthew, Mark, and Luke are printed in parallel columns and where the three writers, or even two out of the three, are describing the same episode from Christ’s life, the information is aligned so that one can look horizontally across the columns and see how the Gospel writers either used the same words or different words to describe those events. As a result Matthew and Mark along with Luke are often called the Synoptic Gospels. On the other hand, John is more unlike any of the three Synoptics than like them, quite different in what he includes. How are we to account for this? How do we explain the existence of three reasonably similar accounts of Jesus’ life and one that is quite different? That is one key issue.
Other Early Sources of Information about the Life of Christ

A second key issue, which in some ways creates the opposite problem. Whereas the first issue was created by having a wealth of evidence in the New Testament about Jesus, outside of the New Testament there is comparatively little historical mention. A few Roman historians mention him briefly, the same is true of a few Greeks and the Jewish historian writing in the latter third of the first century A.D., Josephus, goes into somewhat more detail.

But even if we put together all of the information that can be gleamed from about a dozen or so passages among ancient non-Christian writers, all that we learn is that Jesus did exist, that he was a first third of the first century Jew who lived in Israel, who was born out of wedlock, who was a popular teacher, who gathered a number of close followers called disciples who spent considerable time with him, and attracted larger crowds who came and went on various occasions from his ministry. He was known for various countercultural perspectives as over against conventional Jewish wisdom and interpretation of the law.

He was eventually, as a result, arrested by the Jews, convicted by the Romans, executed under the reign of a governor of Judea, the southernmost province of Israel, by the name of Pontius Pilate, and we know from other sources that Pilate himself reigned only from 26 to 36 A.D., so that helps to narrow down the time at which Jesus lived. We also know that his ministry intersected some with the ministry of a man named John who was known for baptizing people in water and calling them to repentance. And finally, we learn from these non-Christian sources that Jesus’ followers believed that he was raised from the dead after his death and, therefore, as had started to be the case during his lifetime, believed to be the Jewish Messiah, the liberator of Israel, and the Savior of all peoples of the world.

Now, I don’t know how you react to that brief summary of information from non-Christian sources. One approach is to marvel at how little we have compared to the rich wealth of detail in the canonical Gospels. But on the other hand this was an age in which history writing and objects for writing biographies were almost always surrounding kings and queens, other official political rulers and heads of state, major prominent philosophers in a given society, or if religious leaders were discussed they were those who held institutional positions of power and authority.

Jesus qualified under none of these headings and certainly no one in the earliest centuries of Christian history inside or outside of the movement suspected that one day it would grow to be the religion that claimed more followers than any other religion in the world. From that perspective it is perhaps significant that as many references to Jesus appear as do.
Methods for Explaining the Differences

The Traditional Approach

But what about the unity and the diversity among the Gospels? Throughout most of church history Christians have simply put the accounts side by side, sometimes even including John in a Synopsis, though more often than not those sections where John is printed simply will have no parallels in the columns for Matthew, Mark, and Luke and vice versa, and then embarked on the task of harmonizing the accounts assuming that everything that was said in all of the four Gospels Jesus actually did and taught, and doing the best to arrange them into one giant life of Christ in one plausible, chronological sequence that does justice to all of the data on the pages of the New Testament Gospels.

On the one hand this is quite doable; it does not result in any impossible contradictions. On the other hand there are plenty of places were very minor differences in wording or choices of which portions of an event to include or leave out mean that we should not take parallel accounts to be referring to separate events but simply to the same event described in various ways.

But can we say more? The history of the modern period of biblical study beginning at least by the late 1700s and certainly flowering into full bloom by the mid 1800s has proposed a number of much more significant and specific answers to the way in which the Gospels were most likely related.

Source Criticism

In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century the area of analysis known as source criticism, criticism when used in biblical studies simply refers to analysis, became extremely popular as people compared in minute detail those places where particularly Matthew, Mark, and Luke did run parallel looking at the exact wording of these texts in the Greek and for a whole host of reasons, that need not detain us here, came to the conviction that Mark was the earliest of the three Synoptic Gospels and that Matthew and Luke each relied on Mark’s text for what they chose to include and their wording of certain portions of those episodes that they chose to include even as Matthew and Luke also relied on various other, now lost, shorter written documents that they incorporated into their texts.

Form Criticism

In the twentieth century and particularly in the first half of the twentieth century a related discipline known as form criticism began to develop. It can also be called form history, in which it was recognized that like all of the oral cultures of the ancient Middle East prior to the first short written documents later turned into full-fledged Gospel
narratives, the teachings of Jesus and the accounts of his life and death and resurrection would have circulated primarily by word of mouth. And this discipline, which has gone through a number of stages but continues today with all kinds of interesting studies into how oral cultures, even in our world today, pass on sacred traditions primarily by word of mouth.

Although initially somewhat skeptical of the ability of people to pass on large amounts of information accurately over decades has come increasingly to recognize that when this was the sole method of education in a given culture and when traditions were valued enough to be deemed sacred great feats of memory were often cultivated from little on up enabling people to preserve quite accurately those things that they chose to. But many of the passages that do clearly appear in more than one of the Gospels have minor variations of wording in ways that suggest that much more than the copying of the source critics study or the oral tradition analyzed by the form critics was at work.

Redaction Criticism

The Gospel writers were also editors, or to use a bit more technical term, redactors. A discipline of study known as redaction criticism, or we could just call it analysis of the editing of the documents, grew up particularly in the second half of the twentieth century and is still with us. Another way to think of this is to observe how often Matthew and Luke smooth out or explain something awkward or potentially confusing in Mark’s text. Even more commonly they choose specific themes to introduce, to emphasize, because they have different theological points that they want to stress throughout their writings and when we come to looking at each of the Gospels individually we will review a few of these.

Other Methods

In the most recent years of formal biblical study a whole host of additional methods has developed understanding the sociology of the cultures into which the New Testament and in this case specifically the Gospels were written helps account for still more differences. Understanding the literary artistry and the desire to write something that was interesting and attention gaining has spawned considerable study.

Explaining the Uniqueness of John

The other issue that we have to say something briefly about is the relationship between the Synoptic Gospels and John’s Gospel. Although for many years it was assumed that because John was the last and latest to be written he simply did not want to repeat most of what had already appeared one or more times in the Synoptics and hence largely supplemented his predecessors with additional information. This may well be true but it does not go far enough to explain also a large number of theological and stylistic
differences. Jesus teaches in very different ways, in very different language, and at times with quite different concepts in John’s Gospel than in the Synoptics, and again, we will return to this issue when we treat the Gospel of John by itself.

But for now it is simply worth observing that this led in the twentieth century to a period of time in which it was assumed that the reason John was so different from the Synoptics was not because he knew them and chose to go in a different direction, but because he did not know them or at least he was not relying on their contents and their wording when he penned his particular document. This too has a measure of truth to it because if one does look at those handful of places where John is parallel to one of the Synoptic Gospels it is very rare for the actual wording of the parallel passages to be the same for more than maybe three or five words at a time and then there is a good chance that of those words one is the word “the” and another is “a” or “an,” in other words, not highly significant words that point to somebody consciously using a source in front of him.

But today the most likely synthesis of the question of why John is the way he is compared to the Synoptics is probably best answered by a mediating perspective between these two main historic alternatives. John probably did not have copies of Matthew, Mark, or Luke that he owned, that he could refer to. Whether or not he had ever seen them we may never know.

But on the other hand we do know from Acts and the Epistles that there was a consistent pattern of early Christian preaching that taught many details about the life of Christ and agreed on many aspects of His life that needed to be taught to young converts to the Christian faith. So whether John or anyone to whom he wrote his Gospel had ever seen or heard another Gospel read, they would have known many of the details contained in those Gospels, at the very least through repeated Sundays of Christian preaching, so that John could, if he chose, assume their knowledge of a large part of this information and then go on to other details.

We will pick up all of these threads in our next lecture as we proceed to begin to introduce each of the four Gospels as a book, as a story, as a version of the life of Christ each in its own right.
Lesson 4 ▪ Introduction to the Gospels

INTRODUCTION

This is lecture four of twelve in our New Testament survey series. We are finally ready to come to an introduction and overview to each of the four Gospels themselves. Because a sizable majority of scholars believes that Mark was the first one written, we will begin with that Gospel and then proceed to follow the canonical sequence of the remaining Gospels, Matthew, Luke, and John, which may well correspond to the chronological order of those three documents, though it must be admitted that Matthew and Luke were probably written so close in time to one another that it is difficult to know which came next after Mark.

Definition of Gospel

To introduce the Gospel of Mark we need to begin with some observations about the word Gospel itself. The Greek word behind this English term is *euangelion*, which is formed from two Greek words meaning “good news.” Roman emperors regularly announced proclamations with the term *euangelion*. Their decrees, they wanted others to believe, were good news. Mark’s writing about Jesus contains the oldest known references to *euangelion* as an expression for the good news that Jesus preached. But when titles were affixed to the four Gospels, probably early in the second century when they first started being brought together into a four-fold collection, *euangelion* was used in a second way, not merely to describe the good news from Jesus, but also to identify accounts of his life and ministry as themselves good news. In other words, the Gospels are now good news about Jesus. Christians believe that God even more so than any Roman emperor was acting uniquely in the God-Man, Jesus Christ, to benefit human kind in such a way that the story of Jesus of Nazareth could be considered the supreme good news.

The Gospels as Ancient Biographies

As we have already suggested from our surveys, however briefly, of the various critical or analytical approaches that have often been taken to the New Testament in general, and the Gospels in particular, these four documents are in many ways like ancient biographies, but because of that fact in many ways different from modern biographies, at least in western cultures in that they tend to be very selective in the events and episodes of the life of the person they treat and spend a, from our vantage point,
surprisingly long period of time discussing the events that led up to the individuals death. In the case of Jesus a disproportionate amount of Mark from chapter 11 onward is devoted entirely to the last week of Jesus’ life. But by ancient standards the way someone died and the events that precipitated their deaths were often as crucial as any to indicating the significance of their lives and this is certainly true in the case of Christian biographies of Jesus of Nazareth. Mark 10:45, in the verses immediately before Mark’s treatment of the last week of Jesus’ life, deals with Jesus’ own perspective on the significance of his death as he declares, “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

THE GOSPEL OF MARK

Background

What are the circumstances surrounding the writing of the Gospel of Mark? The traditional understanding of the title – The Gospel According to Mark – identified Mark as the John Mark that we read about in the Book of Acts as a companion of Paul remembered unfortunately sometimes most for his having left the first missionary journey of Paul along with Barnabas for some unknown reason long before its completion and this in turn precipitated a sharp division between Paul and Barnabas concerning whether Mark should accompany them on their second missionary journey, a sharp enough division that Barnabas eventually took Mark and went off on their own ministry and Paul gathered new companions, Acts 13–15. But there is indication in references at the end of Paul’s letters and also at the end of 1 Peter that Mark continues to have a significant ministry, that Paul comes to think of him as a valuable coworker for the Gospel and that, at least by the sixties, he and Peter are together in Rome where early church tradition suggests that Mark wrote up what one ancient writer called the memoirs of Peter about the life of Jesus.

Within the Gospel of Mark, however, and this is true for all four of the Gospels, there is no place in the text now identifiable by chapter and verse where Mark’s name ever appears, and so if the Christian doctrine of inspiration attaches solely to the original manuscripts one could certainly be free to question whether or not the early church was correct in writing – The Gospel According to Mark – across the top of copies of this document at some early stage in its transmission. Many modern scholars, particularly less conservative ones, have in fact made this question a prominent one for a variety of reasons that time forbids us from discussing here, but there were no competing traditions in the first centuries of Christianity and if Mark were not known to be the actual author of this Gospel his choice is a strange one. Why select a seemingly somewhat minor character from the Epistles, many of which would have already been
written, and from the narrative of the Book of Acts, whether or not it had yet been written down, why select someone who was often best remembered for his one act of desertion? And as a result of all of these factors conservative scholars maintain that the ascription of authorship to Mark is indeed reasonable.

If it is true that Mark wrote first and that Matthew and Luke each depended on him to one degree or another, then as we will see a good case can be made for dating Luke no later than A.D. 62, which means that Mark must be dated to sometime prior to that date in the first century. Luke from the Book of Acts we learn was indeed with Paul in Rome up to A.D. 62 and so if the evidence from the end of 1 Peter suggests that Mark and Peter were also together in Rome in the early 60s, we need not postulate a long period of time between the composition of Mark and the composition of Luke. Sometime in the early 60s, therefore, or perhaps very late 50s may be the best guess.

If on the other hand we opt for a later date for the Gospel of Luke, more on that to come, then it would appear that sometime one side or the other of the Zealot rebellion against Rome in A.D. 67 to 70 would make the best guess for dating this Gospel.

Either way it seems most likely that the circumstances surrounding the writing of Mark had to do with the circumstances facing Christians in Rome in the 60s, or just one side or the other of that decade, which was the period in which they were experiencing growing hostility and persecution from Rome, not least because it was recognized that they were no longer just a Jewish sect protected by the privilege of not having to worship the emperor and, therefore, Mark is concerned to emphasize aspects of Jesus’ life and ministry that can bring encouragement and comfort to Christians in Rome in these circumstances.

**Major Themes**

If we turn to then the themes that Mark seems most to emphasize we begin with views of Jesus. Immediately in 1:1 he is identified as both “Son of God” and “Christ” and these can be seen as two crucial titles for Mark’s Gospel. The title “Son of God” must be viewed against the Greco-Roman background of many emperors, great heroes of old, one or two philosophers who were viewed as divine men, whereas Christians claimed that Jesus was the unique Son of God, not a literal biological progeny of God, but God in human form in a fashion which is left unspecified with respect to any further detail. We see in Mark 15 at Jesus’ crucifixion that the Roman centurion also says, “Truly this man was the Son of God,” creating a framework around the Gospel even though the title is used only a handful of times in between to suggest that this is an important lens for viewing Jesus.
But he is also the Christ, the Jewish Messiah, God’s promised deliverer for his people. The problem is that in Mark, Jesus frequently tells people to keep this information quiet, what has come to be called the Messianic Secret. Someone recognizes that he is the Messiah, or he works a powerful miracle demonstrating his spiritual kingship, and he then commands people to not tell anyone. Liberal scholars, particularly a hundred plus years ago, developed the theory that this was an addition to the Gospel tradition because Jesus never really claimed to be the Messiah and this was Mark’s way of explaining how he indeed could have been the Messiah even though none who heard his earthly ministry remembered him specifically making that claim.

Conservative scholars, on the other hand, have consistently maintained with considerable plausibility that Jesus simply recognized his claim to be the liberator of Israel would be readily misunderstood by many in political and military terms as the one who would come to be a literal king in Jerusalem and perhaps also the general leading Jewish troops into battle and overthrowing the Romans. John 6:15 shows how this was indeed a genuine danger.

If one wants to add a third view of Jesus as a central emphasis of the Gospel of Mark it may indeed be one which is not so much based on the frequency of a specific title but can embrace the entire flow of thought of the book and the emphases found in numerous passages, namely that of Jesus as suffering servant based on the imagery of Isaiah 53 and recall again our quotation of Mark 10:45.

Other key themes in the Gospel of Mark include the frequent inability of the disciples and other followers of Jesus to understand or understand fully what Jesus was teaching climaxed in Peter’s remarkable confession of Jesus as the Christ in 8:27-29, followed immediately by the so-called Messianic Secret in verse 30, Jesus telling him to tell no one, followed by Jesus beginning to predict his suffering, so that we have all three views of Jesus classically illustrated back-to-back in this particular passage. But then Peter rebukes Jesus for talking about suffering showing that he really does not have anywhere close to complete understanding of the one he has confessed to be the Christ.

Application

If one thinks about contemporary application of a Gospel writer producing a document to this kind of audience with even just these few key themes that we have highlighted, we get the picture of one who is concerned to present in succinct fashion, a basic outline of those aspects of Jesus’ ministry that he deems fundamental to the Gospel, able to correct frequent misunderstandings about who Jesus is, but perhaps most importantly to encourage Christians in the midst of adversity. To remind us that despite our failures, the times we misunderstand and deny and even betray our Lord, that if we, like Peter as we read so powerfully in the Book of Acts repent, can be restored to as great or even
greater a relationship, a role of ministry, of leadership, of service among God’s people, that God is never finished with us until he brings us home to glory and that repentance and restoration and powerful reuse in Christian living and ministry always remain possible.

THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

Background

Secondly, we want to reflect some on the Gospel of Matthew. Here tradition has ascribed the Gospel to Levi, also known as Matthew, one of Jesus’ twelve disciples and a converted tax collector. Again there have been questions about the legitimacy of this ascription and it is certainly true that as one of the twelve apostles Matthew could have made a natural candidate for attribution of authorship trying to convince others of the authority of this document even if that tradition were not true. But again, as a converted tax collector perhaps next only to Judas among the twelve, after the fact he may have been the least likely of the twelve to be such a candidate. Later apocryphal Gospels were regularly attributed to characters such as Peter and James, and from those not among the twelve, Mary or even Nicodemus, not some of the less well known or more suspect of the twelve like Matthew.

Ancient church tradition dates Matthew to somewhere in the early 60s, of course such numbers were not yet in use, but putting together the information about who was where doing what at the time, perhaps a date of about 63 is most probable, just shortly after Mark having been written. It is often asked whether one of the Twelve would rely on the choice of passages and wording that Matthew does to such an extent, even though he then adds almost double the amount of information to what Mark included, but if indeed Mark was writing up Peter’s memoirs to a large degree as the leader of the early church at one stage and as the disciple during Jesus’ ministry who was the ring leader of the Twelve, it would be very natural for Matthew to want to see how Peter chose to write a Gospel about Jesus.

Tradition as well as the contents of Matthew also suggests that he was writing to primarily if not exclusively Jewish Christians somewhere in the Eastern part of the Roman Empire, perhaps in Jerusalem itself, or another common more recent suggestion has been in Syria particularly in its major city with a sizable Jewish minority of Syrian Antioch.
Major Themes

Theological emphases Matthew under our category of views of Jesus include Jesus as a teacher particularly like Moses. If one asks what does Matthew add most notably to Mark’s basic structure of powerful miracles followed by that pivotal scene of Peter’s confession of Jesus as the Christ but misunderstanding of Jesus’ prediction of his sufferings which then leads inexorably to the cross? The answer is that Matthew adds five major blocks of teaching, some of which have short partial parallels in Mark, some of which do not, but all of which create large segments of discourse or sermon punctuating Matthew’s narrative with key ethical teachings and also teachings on the Second Coming of Christ.

These five blocks appear in chapters 5 to 7 of Matthew, the famous Sermon on the Mount; chapter 10 as Jesus commissions the twelve to send them out on mission; almost all of chapter 13, Jesus teaching in parables; chapter 18, Jesus teaching the disciples on themes of humility and forgiveness, and chapters 24 to 25 perhaps to be grouped also with chapter 23, Jesus woes to the scribes and Pharisees followed by his teaching about his return.

A title, which is comparatively distinctive to Matthew’s Gospel, which may summarize much of his emphasis even beyond the shear frequency of the title, is the title “Son of David.” Jesus is descendent of the lineage of kings. He thus fulfills Old Testament prophecy a key feature of Matthew’s Gospel. He thus stands in a position to be able to interpret what in the law and in the Old Testament more generally applies unchanged and what must be understood as applying in a new way as a result of his mission and he demonstrates that he is a legitimate candidate to be the Christ or Messiah even if he redefines some of that role as well.

Other key themes include the progress as indicated by the structure of Matthew’s narrative from a Gospel that is offered first exclusively to the Jews, see 10:5-6 and 15:24, but eventually culminates in the Great Commission in the closing verses of Matthew’s Gospel as Jesus sends the twelve out to the entire world. Thus, along the way Matthew’s Gospel, as we have already suggested, more emphasizes Jesus’ fulfillment of the Law and Prophets, see especially Matthew 5:17-48 in the Sermon on the Mount, but he also looks ahead to a time when the kingdom will be taken from the current tenants of the vineyard, the current leaders of Israel, see Matthew 21:43, a verse in the parable of the wicked tenants unique to Matthew’s version of it and an entire passage or parable unique to Matthew’s Gospel about the sheep and the goats envisages a coming judgment of all nations.
Application

Matthew’s Gospel clearly in its day was best used with those from Jewish backgrounds and/or familiar with the Hebrew Scriptures, best used to stimulate the universal evangelistic mission of the church and very beloved in the early centuries of Christianity and most commonly cited of all four Gospels because of its key ethical teachings and all of those emphases remain crucial in our modern world as well.

THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

Background

The Gospel of Luke is traditionally ascribed to Luke the beloved physician and companion of Paul as he discloses in the closing verses of Colossians. It is also alleged from earliest days on that Luke wrote the book known as the Acts of the Apostles. The issue of authorship has been challenged, but again as with Mark one wonders if someone mentioned only in a couple of greetings at the ends of letters of Paul would ever have been chosen as the alleged author of a Gospel if there was not good reason for believing that tradition in fact to be accurate.

We mentioned that we would come back to the question of date as we discussed the circumstances of Mark and here is the place to do that. Acts ends by many readers’ perspectives, ancient and modern, very puzzlingly and very abruptly at the end of what we call now Acts 28 with Paul in house arrest in Rome for a two-year period awaiting the outcome of the appeal of his sentence to the Roman emperor. Luke has gone out of his way from chapter 21 of Acts on to highlight in detail Paul’s struggles with first Jewish and then Roman authorities and the imprisonments that they led to and the hearings in which he defended himself but was unable to secure his release from prison. It would appear that Luke is building toward the climax to tell us what indeed did happen to Paul, but then his Gospel followed by the Acts simply ends with the Kingdom of God being preached as people are free to come and visit Paul under house arrest and then go out and proclaim the message to others, but that is where the story ends.

A common explanation throughout church history for this puzzle is that Luke told us nothing further about Paul’s perils because he was writing precisely at the time with which his narrative ended and therefore he had nothing further to tell because it had not yet happened. If this explanation is the correct one, then the chronological indications given of how much time elapses at different points throughout the Book of Acts enables us to date, with the possible margin of error of a year or two in one
direction or the other, the events of the end of the Book of Acts to A.D. 62. And thus as we noted earlier, if Luke used Mark, because again much as with Matthew there are a large number of passages that are selected identical to those Mark chose and often, though not always, in the identical sequence even when shear chronology does not demand it and again as with Matthew considerable additional material supplementing Mark which would make little sense if one imagined Mark to be later than either Matthew or Luke, why then does Mark merely abbreviate without adding much of anything distinctive and indeed preserving passages which within themselves are often longer than their parallels in Matthew and Luke even as his Gospel is overall more abbreviated than Matthew and Luke. A very odd way of creating a digest or summary if that had been Mark’s intentions. So if we are correct in assuming that Mark is first and that Matthew and Luke both used him and came later, then Luke has to be dated to before Acts. But it is quite possible that the two volumes were conceived of together. Each fills about the maximum size of any known scroll of antiquity and so we may date Luke to 62 or ever so slightly before.

If, however, our explanation of the seemingly abrupt end of Luke-Acts as a two-volume work is not correct, then the door remains open to date Luke considerably later and many believe that his rewording of Jesus’ teaching about the end times in Luke 21 (see the parallels in Mark 13 and Matthew 24) suggest a level of familiarity with the exact events of the fall of Jerusalem to Rome in A.D. 70 whereas Matthew and Mark word Jesus’ prophesies much more vaguely. Could this be Luke interpreting after the fact for his readers the meaning of Jesus’ prophesies? Notice particularly language such as that surrounding Mark and Matthew’s cryptic phrase, “the abomination of desolation,” or “the desolating sacrilege,” which Luke calls Jerusalem surrounded by armies.

So we must leave the question somewhat open and again as we noted under our introduction to Mark, if we allow for Luke and Acts to come from a time after A.D. 70, then Mark does not have to be dated as early and then neither would Matthew have to be dated as early since we were concerned to put Matthew later than Mark, and the dates of the other Gospels would now be placed later as well.

Whatever the dating, Luke is clearest of all four of the Gospels as to his purpose. In his prologue in the opening four verses of Luke 1 as he describes for his patron, some otherwise unknown but probably well-to-do Greek or Roman interested in Christianity, perhaps a young convert commissioning this work, Luke writes that it seemed good to him, and then he addresses most excellent Theophilus to compose this Gospel so that he might know the certainty of the things about which he had been taught. In route Luke describes that he is aware of other Gospels or Gospel portions circulating in writing or orally, not all of which he finds equally adequate, at least for his purposes, and therefore he wants to create his particular version and provide his selection of key themes.
Major Themes and Application

Some of the most crucial key themes of Luke then, with respect to views of Jesus, include his humanity and his compassion for the outcasts of society, such as Gentiles, Samaritans, those who were the descendants of the unlawful intermarrying between Jew and Gentile centuries earlier, tax collectors and other notorious sinners, the poor, and even women.

He is portrayed as a teacher much as in Matthew’s Gospel, but not so much interpreting ethical or legal material but as a teller of parables. Luke includes approximately twenty not found in any other Gospel, dramatic illustrations of the in-breaking reign of God using clear, well-understood analogies from common, everyday life of first-century Israelites yet always with some surprising twist.

Other key themes include the power of prayer, the importance of the Holy Spirit, and clearly Luke is the best Gospel in our world today to focus our attention on the importance of the rich to be good stewards and care for the poor, to give generously or sacrificially from their material possessions and to recognize Jesus’ humanity and concern more generally for all the dispossessed and marginalized and those who have less materially or spiritually or socially than we do.

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

Background

Finally, we want to make a few brief introductory comments about the fourth Gospel, the Gospel of John. Here we do have authorship attributed to a very central figure, John, one of Jesus’ twelve apostles, one of the inner three along with his brother James and Peter. He is never referred to by name in this Gospel any more than any of the other Gospel authors are, but he is called the beloved disciple at the end of John 21. This disciple is the one who testifies and then apparently one or more of his followers have appended a seal of approval that they know that this testimony is true.

Five different occasions particularly throughout the events of the last week of Jesus life, his so-called passion narrative, one called “the disciple whom Jesus loved” plays a prominent role. And intriguingly in the fourth Gospel the character that the other three know as John the Baptist is never called the Baptist, is just called John. Surely this would lead to confusion among the readers of this Gospel as to which John the writer had in view at any point, John the Baptist or John the Apostle, unless it was known that John the apostle was indeed the author, that he had chosen not to refer to himself by name, and therefore that each reference to a John by name was referring to the Baptist.
What we can deduce from early church tradition, or at least its majority strand, suggests that John was written in the late 80s or even more probably in the decade of the 90s when John was a very elderly man ministering in and around the cities of Asia Minor and particularly Ephesus on the west coast of what today we would call Turkey. Here we have a majority of Gentile Christians but still a key core of those from Jewish backgrounds.

**Major Themes**

Key theological emphases include under views of Jesus, intriguingly again Son of God and Christ exactly as in Mark as disclosed in the key purpose statement of John 20:31, that “these things are written that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you might have life in his name.” So, even more than in Mark where beleaguered Christians are particularly in view, even more than in Matthew where primarily Jewish Christians are in view but with the key emphasis that evangelism moves on beyond them to the Gentiles, even more than in Luke where the one Gentile writer of the four Gospels is addressing primarily a Gentile inquirer and probably a church with whom he is associated, however loosely made up primarily, if not exclusively of Gentiles, here we have in John’s Gospel a document that is very evangelistic in its focus. If it was indeed first delivered to Christian churches in and around Ephesus it was not meant merely to address situations that they faced as believers, but to encourage them in their evangelistic mission with those in their midst.

Jesus is also uniquely in the Gospel of John the Word of God, the *logos*, the Greek word for “word,” the Word who in John 1:1 was indeed God, God’s creative expression of communication to humanity. He is in John’s Gospel uniquely the Lamb of God, the Passover sacrifice, and he is God Incarnate, the Word become flesh, John 1:14. And it is only John who contains the “I am” sayings of Jesus. “I am the light of the world,” “the resurrection and the life,” “the way and the truth and the life,” “the gate,” “the true vine,” “the Good Shepherd.” And it is only in John 8:58 where we read that Jesus simply refers to himself as the “I am,” probably an illusion to Exodus 3:14 and the name God revealed of himself to Moses in the burning bush. And passages like John 10:30 are also important where Jesus says, “I and the Father are one,” one in such a unique way that it is viewed as blasphemy, Jesus equating himself with God in the eyes of Orthodox Jews who attempt to take up stones to stone him.

Other key themes include the presence of eternal life beginning already when a person becomes a believer in this life, of miracles as key signs pointing to who Jesus is, of Jesus’ private teachings for his disciples particularly in his farewell discourse the last night of his life in John 13-17 emphasizing the theme of unity, unity between the Son and the Father and between the Son and his followers and then praying for unity among the
Son’s followers, a vision the church has far too poorly too often carried out. John 6:39 is indicative of a number of passages that likewise stress the eternal security of the believer.

**Application**

So perhaps John’s Gospel is best applied today and in every age to the widest variety of settings in the church as the best Gospel for a non-Christian to learn about Jesus’ unique claims to divinity that call for a response and the hoped for response is to believe and to follow and to become a disciple.

But also an excellent place for a new Christian to begin to study in most detail, perhaps read next after the Gospel of Mark so that Mark gives the succinct overview and then John moves into fuller detail about Jesus who is both fully human and fully God and in settings that emphasize, or that need to emphasize, God’s important promises about the assurance of salvation for those who continue in their belief.

These are just whirlwind overviews of the four Gospels. Much more could be said, but we must move on in our next lecture and turn to a harmony of the life of Jesus as we put the information from the four Gospels together and look at key highlights that emerge in route.
Lesson 5 • A Harmony of the Gospels (Part 1)

This is tape five of our series of lectures on an introduction to and survey of the New Testament. In this lecture we turn to the life of Jesus of Nazareth putting together information from all four of the Gospels and beginning to trace the major periods and activities and teachings of Jesus’ life.

AN OVERVIEW OF JESUS’ LIFE

Jesus Birth (6-4 B.C.)

By way of introduction we need to set the life of Jesus of Nazareth into its historical and chronological context. As odd as it may sound by modern dating standards, our best estimates for the date of Christ’s birth are somewhere between 6 and 4 B.C. Yes, I know that means 6 to 4 before Christ, but the calendar, as it came to be developed in European Christian circles by the monk Dionysius Exiguus in the early 500s, appears today to have been off in its calculation by a few years because of a lack of knowing for sure the date of Herod’s death, information that can be gleaned through the writings of the Jewish historian Josephus. So Herod died in the year that now has come to be known as 4 B.C., but because the calendar was changed from ancient Roman or Jewish forms of dating to this Christian form of dating without an accurate knowledge of the year of Herod’s death, who obviously died after Jesus was born since he sought to kill the Christ child, our numbers are just a few years off.

Jesus’ Adult Ministry (A.D. 27–30 or 30–33)

The adult ministry of Jesus most likely spanned the years 27 or 28 through 30 A.D., though some prefer dates corresponding to 30 or 31 through 33. The only years close to the necessary times for Christ’s death in which Passover fell on a Friday were in fact 30 and 33. The problem with choosing a date as early as 30 is that Luke speaks in the beginning of Chapter 3 of it being about the 15th year of the emperor Tiberius, whereas Tiberius came to rule in what we now call 14 A.D. But there is some evidence to suggest that he did have significant governing powers as early as 12, which would allow for a date using inclusive dating where 12 was the first year of his reign for 15th year to be 28 and given the greater ease of acknowledging that Jesus was about 30 years old when he began his ministry, so Luke 3:23, as well as fitting in all of the information that Acts and
the Epistles requires from the time of Jesus’ death and resurrection to the various events in the Book of Acts, most commentators prefer a date for Jesus’ death of about 30.

John’s Gospel uniquely records two or possibly three Passover trips of Jesus to Jerusalem outside of his final trip which allows for a period of ministry somewhere probably between two and a half and three and a half years. It has been popular over the centuries to break those three years, roughly, into a year of obscurity where Jesus was not yet well known, a year of popularity where he was considerably liked by the masses and a year of rejection as opposition to him grew leading up eventually to his execution. We really do not have enough information from the Gospels, however, to speak of each of these three periods as even close to a year in length, so it is probably better to speak of them as phases or periods of Christ’s adult public ministry instead.

THE BIRTH OF JESUS IN MATTHEW AND LUKE

Matthew and Luke begin their accounts of the life of Jesus with incidents surrounding his birth. They include incidents just before and a few years after that birth and Luke uniquely ties Jesus’ birth together with the birth of another key figure, John, the son of Elizabeth and Zachariah, who comes to be known as John the Baptist and comes to be believed to be the metaphorical fulfillment of the prophecies that a prophet like Elijah would come before the advent of the Messianic Age to prepare the hearts of God’s people, to preach judgment, repentance, and restoration. It is interesting to observe Luke 1–2 interweaving accounts related to the promise and the birth and the subsequent ministries of both John and Jesus showing ways in which they are both similar but ultimately also even more dissimilar with Jesus far outstripping John in his significance.

The Fulfillment of OT Prophecy

Matthew in Matthew 1 and 2, on the other hand, focuses primarily on the ways in which Matthew sees Jesus’ birth as fulfilling Old Testament prophesies. Some of these are straightforward prediction and fulfillment such as the Messiah having to be born in Bethlehem, but others are what Christians over the centuries have come to speak of as typology, the kind of fulfillment that was common and commonly understood among ancient Jews to represent recurring patterns of God’s acting, particularly in creating and redeeming his people throughout history, such that the believing Jew seeing an Old Testament event remarkably paralleled in some event surrounding the life of Jesus, would conclude that these were not random or chance parallels but rather signs of the same God acting in recognizable, predictable ways throughout history and thus filling full the original teachings of Scripture. The Hebrew Old Testament and Greek New
Testament words for fulfillment can in fact mean precisely what in English we often describe as filling full.

Thus, for example, in Matthew 2:15 citing Hosea that “Out of Egypt I have called my son,” in its Old Testament context in Hosea 11:1 this refers to the past event of God bringing the children of Israel, his collective son, out of Egypt into the Promised Land. Matthew following early Christian tradition, however, sees it as no coincidence that the holy family has had to flee to Egypt so that Jesus, as he comes also as a very young boy back to Nazareth, is indeed coming out of Egypt again. Given all the other possible experiences of his early childhood, the fact that this particular parallel transpires convinces Christians that God is filling full that original Hebrew Scripture.

The Virgin Birth

Both Matthew and Luke describe the fact that Jesus was conceived of the Virgin Mary and biologically there was no human father involved. Why is such a miracle significant surrounding the birth of the Messiah? If this liberator was indeed to pay an infinite penalty for the world’s sins he had to be fully divine, but if he was to be our representative so that he took our place and died a sacrificial death that humans deserve to die he had to be fully human. While we do not entirely understand the interplay between the human and the divine in Jesus’ birth, nor would we want to insist that we know only what God knows, that this was the only possible way to bring about such a human-divine combination. It does make sense that one who was both fully God and fully human could have on the one hand the direct, divine parentage of God through the Holy Spirit and on the other hand the human lineage of Mary.

Jesus’ Infancy

Apart from this theological doctrine, the accounts in Matthew and Luke of the infancy of Jesus emphasize the testimony of angels, of shepherds, of the Magi, often known as the wise men, and speak of peace to people of good will or those with whom he is well-pleased, introducing Jesus as the one who will be both Christ and Lord.

Jesus’ Childhood

There is only one incident that occurs in Jesus’ childhood, narrated in any of the four Gospels after these opening events and before the narration of the beginning of Jesus’ adult ministry, and that is his visit to the temple at age twelve where again he impresses his teachers and his parents with his wisdom. But the main emphasis for Luke seems to be not so much on his divinity here as on his humanity as the passage, and indeed Luke’s infancy narrative more generally, concludes in Luke 2:52, “Jesus grew in wisdom
and stature and favor with God and humans.” As we might phrase it today, Jesus grew intellectually, he grew physically, and he grew spiritually. In the voluntarily adopted limitations of the incarnation he did not emerge from the womb able to access his divine omniscience, omnipotence, or omnipresence, but grew as all human children did and then finally he grew socially. Nevertheless, it will be clear that at key junctures in his adult ministry, when and only when it is his Father’s will, he can tap into the supernatural knowledge and power that are his alone by virtue of his divinity.

THE PHASE OF OBSCURITY

At this point all of the Gospels move to Jesus’ initial ministry or his period of obscurity. For Mark this is where his Gospel begins. For John there is the lofty prologue describing the God-Man from all eternity past as divine now becoming flesh in the human baby Jesus, but after these opening eighteen verses John 2 picks up the story with Jesus in the context of the ministry of John the Baptist, as in the other three Gospels, even though Luke alone had narrated events about John’s birth.

The Gospel writers agree that John is the prophet come to herald, to testify, to witness to the coming of the Messiah. His message is one of repentance for the forgiveness of sins and baptism to symbolize this change and newness of life.

The ceremony of baptism was not a new one. In Jewish circles they required it of those converting to Judaism from other religious backgrounds. But John was unprecedented in calling all Jews to undergo this particular ceremony as if none of them was adequately right with God.

Jesus’ Baptism

Jesus appears on the scene and indeed submits himself to John’s baptism despite John’s protests (see Matthew 3:17) not therefore because he needed to repent himself of any personal sin, but in order to identify with John’s ministry and message and put his stamp of approval on it, as it were. Perhaps to identify with the collective sin of the children of Israel and certainly as an opportunity for his Heavenly Father to testify in the voice from Heaven to Jesus as his beloved Son whom all people must follow.

Jesus’ Temptation

One might imagine that such a striking introduction to Jesus ministry would lead naturally to the beginning of his dramatic public teachings and miracles, but in fact we read in all three Synoptic Gospels that the Spirit immediately drives Jesus into the
wilderness where he is tempted by Satan. It is probably not a coincidence that this is the sequence Jesus must experience, testing what kind of Messiah he will prove to be. Will he attempt to prematurely usurp the kingly role, which is not yet to be his? Or will he be the suffering servant of Isaiah 52 and 53 who will lay down his life for the sins of the world and await a coming future day when he will return in glory as the triumphant king and general of the heavenly armies quenching all evil at his Second Coming?

The nature of his three temptations strikingly resemble the three kinds of temptations that John will later summarize in 1 John 2:16 as indicative of all human experience. The temptation to turn stones to bread to satisfy the desires of the flesh, to rule over the entire kingdoms of the world satisfying the desire of the eyes, and to have his life spectacularly saved by God’s angels after jumping off the temple top thereby exemplifying the temptation of the pride of life.

Hebrews 2:17-18 powerfully depicts the relevance of resisting such temptations that represent all human temptation. Christ can therefore identify with anything we experience, any seductions to sin. As the writer of Hebrews phrases it, he has been tempted in every way like ourselves but without sin. And again in chapter 4, we have a great high priest who is not unable to sympathize with our weaknesses. He, by never giving into temptation therefore, had the hardest life-long struggle with temptation, since those who give in immediately experience a period of time in which they no longer struggle since they have given in. It is wrong then for any Christian ever to say or think that Christ cannot relate to him or her, because he has experienced representatively and resisted and gives us the power to resist, see 1 Corinthians 10:13, if we but choose to avail ourselves of it through the Holy Spirit for any temptation that may come our way. When we give in, therefore, we have only ourselves to blame.

Events Unique to the Gospel of John

After the ministry of John the Baptist the Gospel of John includes, and John alone includes, additional information, very selective though it is, about this opening phase of Jesus that we have called his period of obscurity. John 2-4 reflects this segment of selected events from Jesus’ life prior to the phase of popularity, also known as the great Galilean ministry, which all four Gospels proceed afterwards to narrate.

John 2-4 narrate four main episodes unique to the Gospel of John. The first miracle of John 2 of the turning of water into wine in Cana, which occurs in six stone jars used for the Jewish rights of purification suggests in a culture steeped in Old Testament and other Jewish writings in which wine frequently represented, in moderation, the joy that God brings particularly at celebratory times among his people that new wine was being needed for the new age or covenant that Jesus was bringing about. One thinks of the little parables or metaphors of new wine requiring new wineskins in the Synoptic
Gospels in Mark 2 and parallels. The old deluded water of Judaism, as it were, was being replaced by the new powerful refreshment of Jesus.

Then, in what appears to be a quite different incident from those that the Synoptics relate at the end of Jesus’ life he clears the temple as a protest against worship being replaced by commerce, but even more directly uses this as an opportunity to predict his own resurrection and to speak of his body as the new temple, which ultimately it will become clearer both before and after the cross that such a metaphorical temple means that Jesus’ followers no longer need worship at simply one location where the Jewish temple stands or have sins forgiven uniquely through animal sacrifice at that location, see especially the middle segment of John 4 and the dialogue with the Samaritan woman at the well, where the one who is coming will enable worship in spirit and truth irrespective of the location on the various mountaintops of both Samaritan and Jewish temples.

The third main episode of John 2-4 involves Jesus’ nighttime discussion with Nicodemus, a key pharisaic and Jewish teacher. Here the key verses involve 3:3 and 3:5 in which Jesus declares that human birth alone is not adequate. Simply being born a Jew into the covenant family of God’s people does not make one automatically right with God and fit for heaven. One must have a personal relationship indicated by the metaphor of a new birth, a spiritual birth, and thus just as the miracle of water into wine speaks of a new joy in the Messianic age, followed by Jesus’ temple precincts protest reflecting the new temple of the Messianic age, now we understand Jesus to be teaching about a new birth, which the Messianic age brings. John 3:16 often has been the most common and beloved and well-known verse used by Christians to sum up this teaching, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him might not perish but have everlasting life.”

And then fourthly and finally after some additional information and dialogue about John the Baptist and Jesus and a comparison of their ministries, in some senses a carryover from the events of chapter 1, we turn in John 4 to the dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan woman. There is quite a striking contrast between this conversation and the one dominating chapter 3 between Jesus and Nicodemus. One could hardly imagine two more different dialogue partners for Jesus in his world; one a powerful, well-to-do, well educated, religiously orthodox man, and the other a powerless, maritally-suspect, outcast, Samaritan, uneducated woman, and yet Nicodemus’ final contribution to his conversation with Jesus suggest that at least at that point in his life he does not adequately understand what Jesus is trying to teach him, whereas the Samaritan woman, by the end of the narrative of her involvement with Jesus in John 4, understands enough to become a messenger and missionary and witness to her own townspeople as many Samaritans, the woman included, acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah.
From this episode Jesus concludes in commenting to his disciples that the fields are indeed white or ripe for harvest, a passage regularly cited throughout the history of the church to encourage missionary activity. But we must remember that not all fields around the world are at every time equally ripe. More often than not it is those whom society has stigmatized as of the wrong gender, or the wrong race, or the wrong religion, or of immoral background among whom God is most working and wishing to draw people to himself. If we wish to be on board with the heart of God’s plans, we will always make sure that a heart for the poor and the marginalized and those discriminated against in our world take a central place in our ministries.

There is here, thus, a fourth new feature exemplified in John’s Gospel, a new and more universal offer of salvation, one which probably accounts for the final incident in John 4, the healing of the nobleman’s son as well since the word basilikos, for nobleman in this context, was commonly used for a Gentile or non-Jewish official.

**THE PHASE OF POPULARITY**

Now we are ready to turn to what all four Gospels recognize as the second major period of Jesus’ public ministry, what has often been called the period or phase of popularity. At this point it is impossible to itemize a detailed chronology of events, not because the Gospels are necessarily contradictory at any point, but simply because they often arrange material by theme or topic or literary form and simply do not provide us enough information to always know which events came after or before other ones.

Listeners to this tape series who have access to a synopsis of the four Gospels, sometimes also called a harmony, that lists parallel accounts of the same events or teachings of Jesus in more than one Gospel in parallel columns on the same pages of the book can see how often events occurring in one sequence in one of the Synoptics appear in a quite different sequence in one of the other Synoptic Gospels, and without fail it is possible in these instances to recognize that at least one of the Gospel writers is not intending to write in chronological sequence, so that there are no genuine contradictions among the texts, but neither are we able to put together a flawless chronology, though harmonies have often suggested various such possible chronologies.

Because this is a very short tape series we will primarily follow Mark’s outline for the Galilean ministry or phase of Jesus’ popularity and very occasionally comment on certain distinctives in Luke or Matthew, after which we will then come back and pick up more major unparalleled episodes that occur in either Matthew or Luke during this same period of time.
Jesus Announces the Kingdom and Calls for Repentance (Mk. 1:14-15)

So, to Mark 1, after the introductory material on Jesus and John the Baptist, Mark gives us a kind of headline in 1:14-15 about the message and ministry of Jesus during this period. He is coming to announce that the Kingdom of God is at hand or has drawn near and just as John had proclaimed before him, it is time to repent and to believe in the Gospel. All of these terms are crucial terms for understanding Jesus’ message throughout the Gospel accounts.

“The Kingdom of God” is the most common way that Jesus describes the heart of activity through his ministry, which he is announcing. It refers not so much to a place as to a power, not so much to a realm as to a reign and in English it is perhaps better to translate basileia as God’s kingship or his dominion or even sovereignty, or as one scholar has put it, God acting in strength in the ministry of Jesus. This power has drawn uniquely near in the person and ministry of Christ and after Jesus’ death and resurrection can be said to have arrived, though in the period between Jesus’ First and Second Comings the power of sin and Satan, though limited, remains significant and the kingdom will not have fully arrived on earth until Jesus’ return.

The call to repentance refers to a change not merely of mind or heart involving apologies but a change of action. The Old Testament Hebrew word underlying the Greek term here for repentance involves a turning around, a 180-degree change of direction in behavior and we have already commented in an earlier lecture about gospel as the key mark and way of summarizing the good news initially that Jesus brought and eventually applied to the message about Jesus as well.

Jesus Calls the First Disciples

After this headline Mark gives an account of the calling of some of Jesus’ first disciples. John 1 had already noted some earlier encounters between Jesus and some of the same individuals when they were followers of John the Baptist. They have had some time, therefore, to form opinions about Christ and therefore we need not understand Mark 1:16-20 as referring to the first occasion that Peter, Andrew, James, and John had ever seen or heard of Jesus. Nevertheless their response is dramatic.

By chapter 3 Mark will describe a collection of twelve such individuals who formed the inner core of Jesus’ followers and it will become clear that the choice of the number twelve is not an accident. Like the twelve tribes of Israel formed from the twelve sons of Jacob in Genesis in Old Testament times, Jesus is constituting a new and true and freed Israel led initially by these twelve disciples also known in the New Testament as apostles in context where writers wish to distinguish them from the larger group of Jesus’ followers who also can be called disciples.
Jesus’ Healing Ministry

Mark 1:21 to the end of the chapter then introduces us to a series of Jesus’ healings of individuals, all of which raise the question of the supernatural just as the miracle of Jesus’ virginal conception did, just as the miracles framing the period of obscurity in John 2-4 did.

If we do not believe even in the possibility of a God existing and therefore by definition a being who has the power when it is his choice to supernaturally intervene and temporarily work outside of the normal processes of cause and effect in nature, then of course we will take all of these and many other miracle stories throughout the New Testament as ancient myths or legends, at best designed to teach some spiritual truth but not intended to record factual history.

On the other hand if God, as classically conceived in the major religions of the world as a being at least partially separate from his creation and uniquely powerful and in control in sovereign power over that creation, then miracles follow naturally as a conceivable outgrowth of this God’s interaction with people on earth. On the other hand a miracle by definition refers to a very rare event, so we dare not conclude simply from believing in the miracles of the New Testament that these must be frequent events or that we somehow have the power to manipulate God through prayer or faith or ritual or any other mechanism and dictate to him when he must act in miraculous ways.

Mark 1 like the other Gospel writers in each context of describing a group of miracle stories, however, is not interested in raising the question of whether or not they are possible, almost everyone in Jesus’ world believed that they were, rather the miracles become testimonies to the in-breaking of God’s kingdom culminating in Mark 3 with parallels in Matthew 12 and in Luke 11 that if God is working through Jesus, to use the language of Christ himself in the passages in Matthew and Luke in the context of Jesus casting out demons, a kind of healing narrative illustrated here in Mark 1 as well, “If I cast out demons by the kingdom of God, by the Spirit of God,” two complimentary ways of referring to the same power, “then the kingdom of God has come upon you.”

Either the Spirit or the finger of God acting in this unique fashion demonstrates the arrival of the kingdom, which therefore means that the king has appeared. If the new or Messianic age has arrived then the Messiah must have arrived and therefore the most fundamental meaning of the miracle stories in the Gospels have to do with a demonstration of the arrival of the kingdom and of the king of that kingdom, thus bearing witness to Jesus’ identity.
The ‘Conflict’ Stories

Mark 2 all the way through 3:6 provides a collection of what have sometimes been called pronouncement stories, because they all climax in a key declaration or pronouncement of Jesus, but more specifically they all represent radical teachings of Jesus that arouse the wrath or ire of certain Jewish authorities, so that they have also been called controversy or conflict stories.

The first of these, the healing of the paralytic in Matthew 2:1-12 is a bridge or transitional passage that in fact partakes both of the form of a healing narrative as well as that of a pronouncement or conflict story. There is a dramatic healing of a paralyzed man that occurs here, but it is simply the introduction to the even more dramatic claim and certainly the more controversial portion of the story that the Son of Man, Jesus’ favorite form of self-reference, has authority on earth to forgive sins, an authority understood in Jewish circles rightly on the basis of the Hebrew Scriptures as reserved for God alone.

We go on to see equally dramatic pronouncements of Jesus having to do with the call of sinners to repentance and to become his followers because it is the sick not the healthy who need a doctor. Jesus’ claim to be Lord even over the Sabbath and determine what does or does not violate the commandment from the Ten Commandments about resting and not doing any work on the Sabbath, and then jumping ahead to an additional pronouncement story at the end of Mark 3 declaring that his true family are those who do his will, who become his followers and that his biological family, if they are at this point not yet his followers, do not as was regularly believed in Judaism take priority over his spiritual family.

Jesus’ Public Ministry Challenged

Tucked in between the pronouncement stories of 2:1 to 3:6 and the little pronouncement story with which Mark 3 ends in verses 31 to 35 are the first significant challenges to Jesus’ public ministry and as such set up a kind of sandwich structure in which teachings on discipleship including the formal calling of the twelve beginning in Matthew 3:7 frame the first significant opposition and alternate interpretation of Jesus’ ministry found in the middle section of Mark 3.

The official leadership response anticipated already in 3:6 is to attribute Jesus’ supernatural powers to the devil, to Beelzebub, to Satan, which Jesus in turn responds to by suggesting that such a charge comes perilously close to the threshold of what he calls the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Apparently he does not believe that this border has been crossed, because he distinguishes in some of the accounts between blaspheming against him as the Son of Man and blaspheming against the Spirit itself,
presumably a reference to those who truly do have a witness, a testimony given to them from the Spirit of God, which they then flagrantly and without ever seeking repentance, refuse and repudiate, but nevertheless it is a warning to any whether they think themselves to be a Christian or not, against reacting so diametrically opposite to one whose entire life exuded pervasive signs of God’s power and love and divinity, to so consciously confuse him with a servant of the devil, the closer one comes to doing that the more they are in jeopardy of being guilty of an unforgivable sin.

It is important at the same time to stress that this sin is not one that Jesus warns those who have already committed themselves to him as followers against. Many times in the history of the church believers with very tender and sensitive consciences have worried that some specific act or attitude of theirs might have become such a blasphemy against the Spirit that they have forfeited salvation in a way they could never recover. The very fact that someone is worried and concerned and desperately wants to avoid such a sin is itself normally proof that they could not have committed such a sin, because, by definition, the one whom the Spirit cannot restore is the person who never wants to be restored or never wants to come to Jesus in the first place and continues throughout their entire lives from this point forward completely opposed to Jesus as one whom God has brought into and revealed to the world.
Lesson 6 • A Harmony of the Gospels (Part 2)

This is the sixth tape and lecture in our series on introduction to the New Testament. We left off in the middle of the great Galilean ministry during the life of Christ in our survey of harmony of the Gospels and the main themes and events they describe about Jesus.

THE END OF THE PHASE OF POPULARITY

The Parables

We pick up our overview of Mark as our baseline Gospel with chapter 4, which contains a series of parables in verses 1 to 34. Matthew and Luke contain most of these and considerably more. Indeed, parables form perhaps the most characteristic and distinctive form of Jesus’ teaching in the Synoptic Gospels.

At first glance their purpose seems straightforward to reveal or illustrate the nature of God’s Kingdom through well-known stories involving metaphor or symbolism trying to depict God’s ways with humankind through generally familiar objects or events that first-century Jews in Israel would have understood, but at the same time challenging them with surprising twists of plot in most of the parables so that for those who were not spiritually as well as intellectually prepared to accept Jesus’ claim, there was also a concealing function to the parables as the otherwise puzzling verses in Mark 4:11-12 make plain.

Throughout the history of the church, perhaps based on the detailed point-by-point explanations of two of Jesus’ parables already in the Gospels, the Parable of the Sower at the beginning of Mark 4 and parallels and the Parable of the Wheat and Weeds found only in the middle of Matthew 13, it has often been common to treat all of the other forty or so parables of Jesus in similarly detailed allegorical or symbolic form. But it is probably significant that the Gospel writers record Jesus’ detailed explanations only for these two passages. Other narratives do not seem to be as naturally interpreted through every detail containing hidden symbolism, at least not if we are to adopt the approach of assigning meaning to elements of the stories of Jesus which his original audiences could have discerned. It is better to focus on the main characters of the parable to look for a central point of the passage that all of the sometimes rich detail points to and to unpack that point if one wishes to go into more detail in interpreting the parable following the actions and lessons learned by the central characters.
If we jump outside of the parables of Mark 4 for a moment to illustrate we may consider a parable as detailed as that of the prodigal son in Luke 15 where the lesson learned from the younger brother is that repentance is always possible, or another way of saying that is that God delights in the return of his children no matter how far they have fallen, but no older brother would have been necessary in that story if that was the only lesson communicated, so presumably there is a second prong as well, that we are not to begrudge God’s generosity to the particularly wayward. And finally, the father as the unifying character who interacts with both sons as the master figure with two subordinates, a very common structure in Jesus’ parable, shows remarkable grace and mercy to both of his children just as God’s nature as Heavenly Father leads him to show great mercy and compassion to his people.

We may apply a similar approach to the parable of the Good Samaritan also outside of Mark 4, this time in Luke 10:29-37. Clearly a key lesson of the passage is that one is to imitate the mercy shown by the Samaritan so that Jesus ends his account saying – “go and do likewise” – but again the contrasting foils of the priest and Levite would have been unnecessary to make solely this point, presumably something along the lines of the lesson that religion or religious duty should not ever be used as an excuse for not showing love is taught by their negative model. But thirdly, a simple Jewish lay person could have been the hero of the story. Once we realize that Samaritans and Jews were often hated enemies of one another, the sting in the tail, the twist in the story that gives it its surprising punch, which makes some unwilling to accept it, is that Jesus is calling us to show love and compassion even to our enemies. Again we see a parable with three prongs to it.

The Nature Miracles

After these parables, and we could certainly take the time to discuss many others, Mark proceeds both in Mark 4:35-6:45 and again in 9:2-29 to present another series of miracles, this time primarily involving not healings or exorcisms but more spectacular miracles over nature – the resurrection of people from the dead, walking on water, stilling a storm, and the like.

We are to understand these not first of all as simply signs of Jesus’ compassion, though they doubtless include this motive, nor merely to serve humanity in response to faith, though there are times when the text says that Jesus declares someone made whole because of his or her faith, nor merely to respond to the lack of faith in a given individual as we see particularly if we turn this time to similar nature miracles in the Gospel of John and consider such passages as the changing of water into wine or the healing of the nobleman’s son in John 2 and 4, respectively, which we have already considered briefly, but while of all of these purposes do appear at times, the overarching
significance seen in Mark 6:50, 9:7, and elsewhere is, again, as with the miracles of healing to demonstrate who Jesus is and to bring people to worship him.

**Jesus’ Teaching on Kingdom Ethics**

Tucked in between these additional miracles are a section in Mark 7:1-8:22, which we might refer to as Jesus’ teaching on kingdom ethics. Here more than anywhere else he rejects and indeed contradicts the oral laws of the Pharisees (see especially Mark 7:8) and even foreshadows a coming time when certain elements of the written laws of Moses will no longer apply in the way they have during the Old Testament and intertestamental periods (see Mark 7:19 with his declaration of making all foods clean). This leads very naturally to the assumption that Jesus is also declaring all people clean, since one of the major barriers to intimate fellowship with Gentiles in Jesus’ Jewish world was their eating of unclean food.

Thus, we should not be surprised that this segment turns quickly to Jesus’ withdrawal from Galilee and his one extensive mission in Gentile territory during his earthly life (note the references in the latter part of this section of Mark to his traveling among Tyre and Sidon, cities northwest of Israel and Phoenicia, to Decapolis and Bethesda, cities east of the Sea of Galilee and of the Jordan River).

**Jesus Confessed as Messiah**

All of this then brings the opening half of Mark’s Gospel and the parallel segments of the other Gospels to a pivotal or initially climatic position with Peter’s confession on the road to Caesarea Philippi in 8:23-9:1. We already commented on how at on the one hand Peter reaches a peak of understanding among Jesus’ followers at this stage. If we add the parallels in Matthew and Luke into the mix we have Peter describing Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God, the divine God-Man, but also immediately afterwards we discover that he still lacks significant understanding because he is not prepared for Jesus’ predictions that the Messiah must suffer. This then leads in all of the Synoptic accounts to the last main segment of Jesus’ ministry, that period or phase or stage often referred to as one of growing rejection.

Before we turn to that final phase, we must go back and make at least a few brief comments on the remaining unique material found in Matthew and Luke and also to a certain degree in the Gospel of John that has overlapped with the period of his popularity, but which is not treated in the Gospel of Mark.
Additional Material in Matthew

We noted briefly in introducing Matthew’s Gospel that the main structural distinctive of Matthew when compared with Mark was that he added or expanded five major segments of teaching, sermons or discourses, if we like. The first was the Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5 through 7 sometime early in Jesus’ Galilean ministry. The topic is the Kingdom of Heaven, a euphemism or polite way of avoiding the divine name of God used particularly in Jewish circles, and undoubtedly this sermon has spawned about as many different interpretive positions in the history of the church as one can imagine, not least because it is so challenging and at the same time so popular and well-known.

We are convinced with most contemporary scholars and Christians who have looked in detail into this question that the best way of understanding Jesus’ overall teaching about the Kingdom, particularly with its very perfectionistic commands seemingly creating an ideal that no one in this life could live up to, is that they fit into the framework of Jesus’ teaching more generally. Through his ministry he is bringing about a new stage in God’s reign on earth, but it will not be completed and his people will not be able to perfectly fulfill his desires until he returns at his second coming. So the Sermon on the Mount does reflect a classic summary of Jesus’ ethical ideals, of God’s demands for a new covenant age, which should always challenge us to greater spiritual maturity, never allowing us to think that we have arrived, but on the other hand not discourage us so that we despair of living the Christian life, because God knows that we will only make certain amounts of progress in this world.

Probably the three most famous parts of the Sermon on the Mount involved the Beatitudes at the beginning, God’s kingdom blessings dramatically reversing human standards as to what kinds of people Jesus declares blessed. The Lord’s Prayer in 6:9-13, a model of praise and repentance and intercession and petition given to Jesus’ followers when asked how to pray, and the Golden Rule in 7:12, a classic summary of Christian Ethics – do to others what you would have them do to you.

The second key sermon in Matthew is the sermon on mission when Jesus first sends out the twelve to replicate his ministry of preaching and enacting the kingdom without him physically present with them. Here the emphases include an urgency to the task, an expectation of persecution, which will indeed be fulfilled after Jesus’ death and resurrection and hence an interpretive key to this sermon recognizing that the initial commands in verses 1 to 16 primarily focus on the ministry of the twelve during Jesus’ lifetime with verses 17 through 42 primarily focusing on ministry after the resurrection.

Matthew 13, as we have already noted, expands Mark 4 with Jesus’ sermon on parables about which we have talked briefly. Matthew 18 is his sermon on humility and
forgiveness spoken just to the disciples, which strikingly contrasts on the one hand an endless demand for forgiveness where genuine repentance occurs, but balanced by the need to take disciplinary steps within the church culminating as a last resort if all other steps fail in the removal of certain degrees of fellowship from the flagrant and unrepentant Christian sinner.

Finally, chapters 24 to 25 expand considerably Mark’s shorter sermon on last things in Mark 13. On one level they address the disciples’ request for a sign or signs about the coming destruction of the temple that the disciples and Jesus are looking down upon from the Mount of Olives as they gather with him there and the signs of the end of the age and of Christ’s return, which the disciples have understandably in their minds linked together with the destruction of the temple.

Jesus, in fact, in his reply to their questions clearly separates the two events. He does talk about things that must occur before the destruction of the temple such as false Messiahs appearing, wars, famines, earthquakes, persecution, and the Gospel being preached throughout the known world, which seems to have occurred according to Paul’s claims in Romans 10:18 and in the opening chapter of Colossians, at least in a representative way, during that first generation of Christianity that spanned A.D. 30 to 70, so that the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70 can be seen as the fulfillment of these prophesies.

But, Christ goes on to speak of a tribulation beginning at that time of the destruction of the temple greater than the world has ever known or ever will again experience and, at least in Matthew’s account, immediately after that tribulation, the Son of Man appears in heaven and Jesus is seen to descend on the clouds to earth ushering in the events surrounding his second coming.

Of many possible interpretations of this we think the best one is to understand this tribulation that Jesus refers to as the entire period of time between the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70 and his return, thus most of what we often today call the church age. This is not to suggest that there is nothing but tribulation during this period, but on the other hand it has been the experience of the majority of Christians worldwide in the majority of periods of church history that they do experience persecution for their faith to one significant degree or another and that life for them on this fallen planet is hard in many other ways as well. 2 Timothy 3:12 puts it almost as sweepingly when Paul declares that those who would live godly lives in Christ will be persecuted.

The upshot, then, of Jesus’ discourse on the Mount of Olives is to say that the precise timing of the end is something that no one knows or can know and that even in the voluntarily accepted limitations of becoming human that Jesus adopted while he walked on earth, that he the Son did not know the time or hour of his return (see Mark 13:32). Acts 1 will describe the same truth using terms in Greek for times and seasons
that are the broadest terms in the Greek language for any period of time suggesting that not only is it wrong to set specific dates for Christ’s return, it is wrong to suggest that we know the year or the decade or the generation or even the century of his return. Rather, we are to be alert for it at all times, but that alertness, particularly in Matthew’s expanded version of this sermon in the end of the chapter 24 and all of chapter 25, is not one of trying to observe signs of the times and thus calculate dates, but rather one of faithful Christian living at all times so that one is prepared for Judgment Day whenever it might come.

Additional Material in Luke

Turning now from Matthew’s Gospel to the material that Luke primarily adds to Mark’s outline during the major phase of the public ministry of Christ and the substantial popularity attached to it, we come to that large central section of Luke’s Gospel spanning 9:51-18:34, which in fact appears to occur towards the end of his period of popularity and perhaps also spanning the initial phases of his period of rejection.

Whereas Mark 10 and Matthew 19 seemingly present one straightforward trip of Jesus from Galilee in the north of Israel to Judea and the capitol of Israel, Jerusalem, in the south in preparation for the Passover and Jesus’ death and resurrection there, Luke describes Jesus journeying on the road in a fashion which suggests not one straight last trip but a longer period of journeying on the road after he has left Galilee for the last time, or at least after he has left his hometown of Nazareth.

It may well be that Luke has organized this section more topically than chronologically since outlines of it seem to demonstrate that he groups together small units of material on similar themes, thus potentially gathering additional teaching of Jesus not found in Mark from a number of phases of Jesus’ public ministry. But the theological significance of the journey is clear in 9:51. Jesus is traveling under the shadow of the cross knowing the fate awaiting him in Jerusalem and not shying from ultimately accepting that fate.

Here is where we find the greatest frequency of Jesus’ parables about which we have already shared a little bit. Here is where we find some of the major themes of Luke’s Gospel which we dealt with ever so briefly in first introducing this Gospel in an earlier lecture, Jesus’ ministry to the poor and outcast among them, the sick and the Samaritans and perhaps in some instances even some Gentiles.

Here is where we have some of the most dramatic teachings dealing with prayer, dealing with the ministry of the Holy Spirit, dealing with Jesus’ concern for women and placing them in significant roles counter-culturally among his followers and treating them with special dignity in contrast, I should say, to the standards of his day.
Additional Material in John

If we then turn to the Gospel of John, we discover that quite differently from Matthew, Mark, and Luke, John’s major focus during Jesus’ primary public phase of his ministry is to narrate the various times that he travels at Jewish festival celebrations to Jerusalem and the teachings and claims and controversies that he generates there. All of them match Jesus’ claims with the meaning of a key festival or ritual in Judaism showing him to be the true fulfillment of Jewish hopes.

John 5 describes him healing on a Sabbath and claiming that he can work just as his Heavenly Father works on the Sabbath, a claim that would have made sense to a Jewish listener only if he was claiming to be God himself. Then in chapter 6, although Jesus is not in Jerusalem, it is only John in 6:4 who links the feeding of the 5,000 and Jesus’ sermon in the Capernaum synagogue about being the bread of life, the natural symbolism of that miracle to the time of Passover, which, of course, was the Old Testament festival celebrating the exodus of the children of Israel from Egypt to the Promised Land when in their need to hurry they could not allow the bread to rise that they took for them on their journey and so ate unleavened bread.

Chapters 7 through 9 discuss the ministry of Jesus in Jerusalem at tabernacles time, a festival celebrating the wilderness wanderings and God’s preservation of his people during that phase of their journey from Egypt to Israel described in the Book of Exodus. Here it was two key rituals associated with the tabernacles festival, lighting daily of a giant candelabra in the temple and a daily procession during the week-long festival, of priests drawing water from the Pool of Siloam and recalling the Old Testament text – “With joy you shall draw water from the wells of salvation” – that Jesus himself exploits as he refers to himself as the light of the world and the life-giving water.

John 10 occurs in association with the Feast of Dedication, or Hanukah, that festival commemorating the liberation by the Maccabees at the time of Syrian and Hellenistic rule in 164 B.C. And here Jesus refers to himself as the Good Shepherd echoing Ezekiel 34–36 in contrast with the evil shepherds of Israel, both Gentile at the time of the Maccabees, but now even more ironically the evil shepherds who are themselves Jewish leaders at the time of Jesus’ life and ministry.

THE PHASE OF REJECTION

Finally, we may resume our survey of the events described in Mark where all four Gospels begin to follow much the same sequence of events and where, with a few exceptions, the events are narrated in chronological form and topical or thematic groupings appear with much less frequency.
The Key Turning Point – Raising Lazarus

John 11 fits somewhere early in this period and we might as well discuss it first since we have just been talking about the major claims of Jesus in this central portion of the Gospel harmony. John 11 involves the most dramatic miracle that Jesus performed of all, raising Lazarus of Bethany from the dead, and as with those earlier passages in John’s Gospel just discussed again lead to a particular claim by Jesus, namely that he is uniquely the Resurrection and the Life, but John also notes towards the end of this chapter that it forms one of the climactic events to convince the Jewish leaders that Jesus is too dangerous and must be done away with, a greatly ironic observation given that if Jesus has the power to raise Lazarus, surely he has the power to avoid death himself or return from the dead were the leadership of Israel to be successful in executing him. Nevertheless, the events continue that will lead precisely to that death and resurrection.

A Changing Message

Returning then to Mark 10 we see a noticeable change in the narration of events as Jesus journeys toward Jerusalem there. Instead of the dramatic miracles, particularly of healing and over nature that have so punctuated the Synoptic narratives thus far, we now see an emphasis on teaching, on teaching his followers and would-be followers about how to prepare for hardships to come both before and after his death and resurrection.

Mark 10 begins with Jesus’ views on divorce in answer to Pharisaic questions trying to trap him since that was a hotly debated issue in their oral laws as well. Jesus on this occasion takes a stand that is stricter than either of the main Pharisaic positions, one of which said that any good cause could prove grounds for divorce, the other arguing only in the case of sexual immorality. While Jesus sides with that second view, he insists that this grants merely permission to divorce, it does not require divorce as in the case of the one Pharisaic position.

Self-denial is continued as a theme in the brief account of becoming like little children, utterly dependent on the adult world just as believers or would-be believers must give up their own autonomy or independence and become utterly dependent on God if they would see the Kingdom of God.

Then comes the rich young ruler who is told that he must sell all that he has and give to the poor. Is this a requirement for every would-be disciple? It is, in fact, the only such example in all of Scripture and Luke’s distinctive addition, not long after the account of the rich young ruler in Luke 18, of the converted tax collector Zacchaeus in Luke 19 who gives up voluntarily half of what he has and promises to restore four-fold to those whom he has defrauded followed by the Parable of the Pounds in which wise servants
actually invest their master’s money and make more, but use it for God’s Kingdom purposes shows that there are many ways to use money and be faithful to God. But whatever is the greatest stumbling block to wholehearted obedience for any follower or would-be follower of Jesus may well be that which God is asking us to give up.

Passion Week

In Mark 11 and its parallels Jesus finally enters Jerusalem for what has come to be known as his triumphal entry celebrated in the seasons of the church as Palm Sunday, but it is probably better described as the non-triumphal entry, because, although Jesus receives acclamation from the crowds and his popularity apparently reaches a high point, there will be a dramatic contrast five days later from at least some of the same people as were in this Palm Sunday crowd, because like Peter earlier, they too do not have room in their thinking for the concept of a suffering Messiah. They recognize that Jesus riding on a donkey fulfills the Messianic prophecy of Zechariah 9:9, but they are still thinking of a sociopolitical and even military Messiah not realizing the significance of the humble beast of burden as over against, for example, the white horse of Roman conquerors or the white horse of Revelation 19 that Jesus himself appears on in the visions to John symbolizing his return in triumph at the end of the age.

Jesus goes into the temple the opening days of the last week of his life, confronts the Jewish leaders symbolically through clearing the temple, showing the corruption, the lack of access to Gentiles present there, symbolizing the coming destruction of that temple if Jesus’ teaching does not produce repentance extremely quickly. He also curses the fig tree in the final nature miracle of his ministry, the only one which is one of destruction, no doubt using the common Old Testament symbolism of fig trees for Israel to show the coming destruction of the unrepentant generation in which he finds himself in.

Jesus also confronts the Jewish leaders in his teaching with the chief priest over who is the true authority over the temple, with Pharisees and Herodians, who took opposite sides on the issue of paying taxes, and he finds a way to avoid their trap by suggesting there are appropriate ways of showing loyalty to Caesar, to the emperor, to human authorities, but only when they do not contradict loyalty to God. He debates the Sadducees on the resurrection since the Sadducees believed doctrine could be based solely on the laws of Moses and they did not find resurrection taught in the first five books of the Old Testament, but Jesus does.

Debate with a lawyer on the greatest commandment summed up in terms of loving God and loving neighbor. And then as he turns tables on the leaders and the crowd Jesus quotes Psalm 110:1 in which David said, “The Lord says to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your foot stool.’” Jesus in essence then asks the
question of who the second Lord in this verse is. One is obviously God but who else is above David, King of Israel. The implied answer can be only one who is a divine Messiah and the crowds marvel and the leaders are stumped. This leads then to Jesus’ final departure from the temple, his Sermon on the Mount of Olives, which we have already discussed, and then the events of Thursday and Friday that lead in a short span of time to his death on the cross.

The Last Supper on Thursday night with his disciples, a Passover meal commemorating Israel’s redemption from Egypt, now sees Jesus instituting additional symbolism for the bread and the wine that were part of that ritual. They represent his body and blood about to be sacrificed in death for the sins of the world. He commands his disciples to repeat the ceremony as a memorial of what will have happened, but also as an anticipation of the coming banquet in the last days when he returns and whether literally or symbolically feasts with all of his followers of all ages.

John does not describe the meal itself as do Matthew, Mark, and Luke but adds considerable teaching that Jesus gave in the context of this meal, teaching which prepares his disciples for his death, focuses on the coming ministry of the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, the Advocate, the one who comforts and counsels and is called alongside his followers to help them. He teaches them some of his most intimate revelations of the relationship between the three persons of the Triune Godhead.

Prefacing all of this teaching is his dramatically symbolic act of washing his disciples feet completely reversing typical roles of master and followers and taking the role of a very lowly servant to highlight that their leadership should also be based on servanthood and not on strong, authoritarian, or hierarchical model as was so common in his day and tragically has been too often the common model in church history ever since.

He concludes his teaching on this last night of his life in the Upper Room where he celebrated the Last Supper with his followers with a prayer to his Heavenly Father for himself, but then primarily for his disciples and for all of us under the heading of all of those who would become followers through the testimony of the disciples, which, of course, ultimately came to be written down in what we call the New Testament. It is striking that the central focus of this prayer is one for unity and sadly the church today as the result of two-thousand years of church history has fragmented into countless denominations and groupings where there is a desperate need under the banner of biblical truth to work together particularly across those natural dividing lines that humans have erected in the world to demonstrate to a fallen, watching world the unity that is possible, indeed that is uniquely possible in Christ as John 17 ends – so that the world may know that Jesus is who he claimed to be. In other words, the greatest evangelistic strategy for the church has never been a specific program, but always has
been a visible modeling of the unity of God’s people across those barriers that humans so naturally erect.

After this period of time on Thursday night in the Upper Room Jesus leaves, takes the twelve through the darkened town of Jerusalem, across the Kidron ravine or valley, to the Garden of Gethsemane, at the foot of the slopes of the Mount of Olives, asks them to remain awake and pray for him, though they fail him as they will again during these last hours of his life while he demonstrates his utter complete true humanity in repeatedly and fervently praying that if there be any way to avoid the agonizing torture of the cross, God take it from him.

Here is a classic example of a prayer by one who is sinless not answered in the way he most fervently desired as a full human being, disproving all claims that unanswered prayer can only be the sign of a lack of faith. It would be blasphemous to apply that logic to Jesus’ unanswered prayer here.

On the other hand we see Jesus’ true divinity and his perfect acceptance of his Heavenly Father’s will in the conclusion to these prayers when he says, “Not my will, but yours be done.” If God’s will cannot be accomplished except through the cross, then he is prepared to go through it. This sets up the closing phase, the climatic stage, and the most important elements of Jesus’ life and ministry, namely his death and resurrection, which is where we shall resume our narrative in the next lecture.
Lesson 7 ▪ A Harmony of the Gospels (Part 3) and Introduction to Acts

THE PASSION OF CHRIST

This is lecture seven of our series surveying the New Testament and introducing it. We left off ready to scan the passion narrative proper, those events that involve Jesus’ crucifixion, and then move on to its sequel, his glorious resurrection.

The Trial of Jesus

All four Gospels narrate various hearings of Jesus before Jewish and/or Roman authorities. Boiling them down to the most straightforward harmonization we find from John’s Gospel, Jesus brought first to Annas, the father-in-law of the current high priest Caiaphas and previous high priest, a plausible scenario, because although Rome installed and deposed high priests at its willing, a high priest in Jewish thought occupied that position for life. Jesus’ confession before the Sanhedrin, or Supreme Court, over which the high priest presided was in bare-bones form to acknowledge that he was the Christ, the Messiah. Mark puts it in that straightforward form of language whereas Matthew and Luke use the more indirect form – “you say that I am.” This is probably not a denial but an implication of the authorities in the very charge they are pressing against Jesus.

Contrasting with Jesus’ bold confession is Peter’s cowardly denial before maid servants and other people of little power in the Jewish world and certainly not compared to the authorities before whom Jesus is on trial for his life. Because nighttime hearings, whether with Annas or then subsequently with Caiaphas, were not contexts in which legal verdicts could be rendered in Jewish law, Mark and Matthew appear to describe a subsequent brief hearing as dawn comes to rubber stamp or repeat in brief the proceedings of the night giving it some semblance of legality (see Mark 15:1 and parallels).

The charge against Jesus turns out to be blasphemy, probably not just because he has acknowledged that he is the Christ, Jews were in fact looking for someone to be their Messiah, but because of his subsequent language (found in Mark 14:62 and parallels) that the Jewish leaders would see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven, an illusion to Daniel 7:13-14, one who was much more of a heavenly or divine Messiah than most Jews expected and therefore could be viewed as transgressing the boundaries between humanity and divinity in Jewish thought.
Here is a key text for helping us to understand Jesus’ use of the term “Son of Man,” his most characteristic and distinctive term. It is not so much a mere affirmation of Jesus’ humanity, though it is that, but as an allusion back to the remarkable human being who is ushered into the presence of the Ancient of Days in Daniel 7. We see here one who is exalted and apparently divine as well. We might sum up these comments by stressing that “Son of Man,” therefore, in the Gospels is more commonly a synonym rather than an opposite expression from “Son of God.”

Next comes Jesus’ trial before Pilate since Rome forbade Jews under most circumstances to instigate on their own capital punishment. We see in Mark 15:2 another guarded confession with a similar interpretation as that which should attach to Jesus’ reply to the Sanhedrin. Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, is convinced of his innocence and tries to release Jesus but the crowd demands Barabbas, one who is called a *lestes* in Greek, a criminal, a revolutionary, an insurrectionist, perhaps today we would use the term terrorist, not merely a thief as in some translations. He would have represented the fledgling emerging Zealot movement that wanted to overthrow Rome by force and hope for a repeat of the Maccabean miracle.

Pilate caves in to the pressure of the crowd but also tries to pawn Jesus off on his Galilean counterpart Herod Antipas who has been ruling there since the death of Herod the Great in 4 B.C. and who was visiting Jerusalem during this Passover festival. But Antipas also finds him innocent and sends him back to Pilate who finally gives in to the crowd’s shouts for Jesus’ crucifixion and delivers him up to this form of cruel execution.

**The Crucifixion**

Normally a crucified individual, a death reserved for the most part for criminals or slaves, took place over a two to three-day period as the condemned individual died slowly and finally by suffocation, unable to lift his head sufficiently off of his chest in order to breathe. Jesus, on the other hand, dies unusually quickly, within three to six hours on the same day that he was put on the cross. Historically this may well have much to do with the fact that he has received the whippings from the Roman authorities, which alone in some instances proved fatal. But theologically it may well be to stress the voluntary nature of his sacrifice. Even at his death he still has the strength to cry out and surrender his spirit to God.

The meaning of the crucifixion is perhaps best seen in what have come to be called the seven last words of Christ from the cross, though in fact what this means is the seven last sayings, or sentences, that Jesus speaks as recorded in the four Gospels. In one probable chronological sequence they are first – “Father forgive them for they know not what they do” – forgiveness offered to his enemies in their presence, in their hearing, even as they are killing him in one of the most agonizing forms of execution devised by
humanity, a remarkable distinctive of Jesus’ ministry and of the Christian faith when it is functioning in a way faithful to its origins.

Second, to the criminal, or insurrectionist, next to him on the cross who has a change of heart and asks to be remembered when Jesus comes into his kingdom, Christ replies, “Truly, I say to you, today you shall be with me in paradise” – a reminder that eternal life is available to the truly penitent even when it is in the very last moments of their deaths.

Thirdly, looking at Mary and John the beloved disciple, he says, “Woman, behold thy son; son, behold thy mother” – concerned for his family and closed friends and followers even in his agony. Joseph may well have passed away by this point and Mary in a highly patriarchal society would need to come under the umbrella protection of some man. Her sons, Jesus’ half-brothers, have not yet displayed faith in Jesus, so it is natural for he who taught on spiritual kinship being closer and more important than biological kinship, to turn to the disciple he most loved to care for his mother and vice versa.

The fourth saying from the cross involves Jesus crying out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” It would appear that this is the moment in which he senses he is bearing the sins of the world and their penalty, separation from God, experiencing God’s complete abandonment, the rupture of that wonderful and previously unbroken relationship of community and perfect oneness and intimacy with his Father.

Fifthly, “I thirst” – physical anguish, no doubt, but it is hard not to see a spiritual depth to this cry coming after God’s departure, as it does.

Sixth, “It is finished.” – the drink that he refuses to swallow to alleviate his pain and suffering, but again the spiritual mission of his on the cross of atonement.

And then finally, “Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit” – echoing a common Jewish child’s bedtime prayer. Despite the agonizing sense of abandonment, he remains trusting with childlike faith in the God who had promised to raise him from the dead after his agony.

The Resurrection

And so, accounts of that resurrection follow the accounts of the crucifixion. Here is the most spectacular miracle and most central event and doctrine flowing from Christ’s life and defining the Christian faith.

In an age of modern skepticism we have to ask if it can be believed. But what are the alternatives? Are we to accept the swoon theory that Jesus never quite died on the cross, only appeared to, and revived in the cool of the tomb, managing to push an enormous
stone away, escape, appear to his followers and convince them that he was a strong and healthy individual? Preposterous.

Or perhaps the body was stolen? This was the Jews’ original fear in Matthew 27 and the excuse they gave when their attempt to put a guard at the tomb to prevent the ruse had failed in Matthew 28. But if Jesus’ followers somehow pulled off this ruse, then they built their religion, for which many of them died martyrs’ deaths, on a known lie. A huge psychological improbability.

Did the women go to the wrong tomb as has been suggested and thus find it empty and begin to preach the resurrection? But then Jesus’ antagonists, particularly the Jewish leaders, would merely have had to go to the proper tomb and produce the body to disprove them.

Perhaps we have what some have called mass hallucination or a little bit less unacceptably, a subjective visionary experience? But with Paul explaining in 1 Corinthians 15 that over five hundred people, many who were still alive and could be interviewed at the time of the writing of 1 Corinthians 15, had had this experience it becomes more difficult to account for this way. More importantly the disciples were psychologically in a spirit of defeat, cowering behind locked doors for fear of their arrest and execution next, not the state of mind to experience a vision in which they believed to have seen their Lord risen.

The only even somewhat plausible alternate explanation to the resurrection besides that it really happened is that it is some kind of late, legendary addition to the Gospels. Perhaps originally the Jews believed only that Jesus lived on in spirit and not in body, but over time the story took more and more details making it sound as if it were a bodily resurrection. There could be some plausibility to this explanation. If Jesus had been a Greek and ministered, say in Athens, and a few generations later the story of his life had made its way to the east to Israel to Jewish circles, because Jews believed strongly in the resurrection of the body, whereas Greeks did not. But given that the rise of Christianity was in exactly the opposite direction, the theory becomes most implausible. If anything, what would have initially been described as a bodily resurrection should have lost elements of the material or bodily nature in its story as it spread in Greco-Roman circles, but this theory has to proceed in the opposite direction.

Even more significantly Paul speaks of his testimony in 1 Corinthians 15 to the resurrection and to having been taught about it and learning who the first eyewitnesses were as something that was passed on to him, that he faithfully communicated to the Corinthians. He uses here the technical language of oral tradition and oral tradition in a context of central Christian doctrine, the kind of thing, which would most likely have been taught as soon as Saul of Tarsus was converted. Chronologically we can date this conversion to within two to three years of Jesus’ crucifixion and thus the atheist,
skeptical historian, Gerd Lüdemann from the University of Bonn, has written two works on the resurrection with the remarkable claims that, notwithstanding his conviction, that the resurrection is accounted for on the basis of some kind of subjective vision, hypothesis, it cannot be a late legend. It must have been something that was widely believed even if misjudged or misperceived within the very first year or two of the rise of the Jesus movement.

But then if there are good reasons for rejecting mass hallucination we are thrown back on the probability of a genuine miracle of resurrection. Probability that is reinforced by such observations such as all four Gospel accounts stress that women were the first witnesses to the miracle, an unlikely invention in an age in which women were most commonly disallowed as legal witnesses in legal courts.

Or the fact that something dateable to one particular Sunday had such a pronounced affect on the early church that within one generation it had changed its weekly day of worship from the Jewish Sabbath, or Saturday, to Sunday morning in honor of the resurrection despite the appearances of the Old Testament or Hebrew Scriptures that the day of the Sabbath was inviolable and could not be changed.

Or consider the testimony from Deuteronomy 21:23 that, “Cursed is anyone who hangs on a tree” – and that already in intertestamental Jewish thought crucifixion and its posture, a victim nailed to a crossbar arrangement of pieces of wood, was viewed as similar enough in appearance to hanging from a tree that the same biblical penalties and interpretations were attached to it. Jesus, for every Orthodox Jew including Jesus’ Jewish followers, was by his death proclaimed by the very Word of God to have been cursed by God and yet Christians believed he was still the Messiah. Cursed by God for the sins of the world, but not for his own sins. What on earth led them to that remarkable conviction if not a bodily resurrection?

Or again, consider the fact that of the many would-be Messiahs in the first century after their deaths, either their followers disbanded and their movements died out, or allegiance was transferred to a son or a brother, a close family member or follower and yet neither of these things happens in the case of Jesus.

We must take account of the very real likelihood of Jesus’ bodily resurrection and recognize its significance again as explained in 1 Corinthians 15 that the possibility of all humans’ bodily resurrection and eternal enjoyment of a life to come depends on the credibility and the truth of Christ’s bodily resurrection and that it also gives some indication of the nature of that body. In continuity with the body of this life, so that we all retain some recognizable distinctives even as Jesus did, but with enough change that just as Jesus was not always recognized, we will have what Paul in Romans 8 will speak of as a glorified body, remedied from all the imperfections of this fallen and finite world. What a marvelous future to which to look forward.
INTRODUCTION TO ACTS

We are ready now to leave the Gospels and turn to the Acts of the Apostles, to the one example of a literary genre in the New Testament that forms a sequel to a gospel, in this case to the Gospel of Luke.

Background

We have already discussed most of the relevant introductory details about Luke as author, a date probably near to 62, an audience of primarily Gentile Christians perhaps somewhat more well-to-do than the addressees of the other three Gospels, but we may itemize some distinctive purposes of this theological history book as a sequel to the theological biographies of Jesus.

In Acts, Luke charts the progress of the Gospel from Jerusalem to Rome, from an exclusively Jewish sect to a predominantly Gentile religion over the course of barely over three decades. He highlights the ministry of key figures in the early church but scarcely all or even a majority of the twelve apostles. Most focus in the first twelve chapters is on Peter and an even more exclusive focus in chapters 13 to 28 is on Paul. Thus the traditional title, the Acts of the Apostles, can be a bit misleading. And as with the titles for the Gospels it would not have formed part of the original manuscripts but would have been added, no doubt, early in the second century. Many over the centuries have suggested that perhaps the Acts of Peter and Paul would be a better title, though theologically because of Luke’s emphasis on the Spirit’s role and guidance throughout the formation of the church, an even better proposal is that it could be called the Acts of the Holy Spirit. But the title after nearly two-thousand years is not likely to change.

Finally, we may note that Luke defends Christians in the Acts against charges of lawbreaking both under Jewish and under Roman law and that Roman leaders during this first generation of Christianity, things will change afterwards, are in fact described as consistently upholding the innocence of the Christian movement.

Possible Outlines

A very simple three-fold outline of the book can be suggested by Act 1:8 in which Jesus, during his appearances during the forty days between his death and his ascension to heaven, promises the Twelve that they will be his witnesses first in Jerusalem and then in Judea and Samaria and finally to the uttermost parts of the earth.

Another way to outline Acts is to observe the six places where Luke gives a summary statement, something to the effect of “the Word of God grew and spread,” or similar
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statements that suggest a particular phase in the narrative of the life of the early church as he is presenting it has been completed.

Outline of Acts

On either outline we begin in Acts 1 through at least 6:7, the first such summary statement with the church in Jerusalem spanning approximately the years A.D. 30 to 32. We are told about Jesus’ resurrection appearances and then his ascension back to heaven, which demonstrates that the period of resurrection appearances is over, that God has now exalted Christ to his former heavenly position.

We read in chapter 2 of the Pentecost Feast that May of A.D. 30, most likely, fifty days after the Passover, the Jewish harvest festival, that in intertestamental Jewish literature had come also to be associated with the time of the giving of the law to Moses on Mount Sinai and thus a fitting time for Jesus to pour out his Spirit as promised in the farewell discourse of John 13-17 at the beginning stages of the New Covenant with his people.

Although the Holy Spirit came and went on faithful Jews in Old Testament times empowering them for special acts of service, it will now be the case that the Spirit will indwell permanently all believers from the moment of their conversion onward. This arrival of the Spirit is testified by the dramatic miracle of the followers of Jesus being able to be heard in a myriad of the native languages of those Jews who have come to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover from all over the empire. Of course, they could have understood someone speaking in, what for most would have been a second language, namely, Greek, and so Peter proceeds to explain this phenomenon in Greek in what we might think of as the first Christian evangelistic sermon culminating in the call to repent, to be baptized, to receive the Holy Spirit, and the forgiveness of sins, a package that will consistently throughout the rest of the New Testament be kept together, a package of events which has only two exceptions and a third apparent one, which we will have to deal with in the course of our survey of the Book of Acts.

Shortly thereafter the first Christian healing, Peter and John with a lame man with striking parallels to Jesus’ healing various paralytics leads to Peter’s second evangelistic sermon and the numbers grow from three thousand to five thousand who respond appropriately.

Not surprisingly, the arrest that Jesus’ followers feared immediately after Christ’s death comes now that Jewish authorities see what a powerful affect his followers’ ministry of preaching and healing is having. They are forbidden to the speak in the name of Jesus, but their reply, which has been a classic text defining when civil disobedience is appropriate in every era of church history, is that when God’s and human’s laws or rules conflict, we must obey God rather than humans.

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We are also introduced in these opening chapters of Acts to a striking arrangement or method of caring for the poor, first of all within Christian circles and then beyond, namely, communal sharing. Combining Acts 2:45 with the later passage in 11:29 we have, in fact, the two halves of what would many centuries later become the summary of Karl Marx’s *Communist Manifesto* – From each according to his ability, to each according to their need – but Marx, of course, believed that this had to be done in an atheist rather than in a religious context and that it was something that could and should be legislated. Both of those changes probably making it as ineffective as it, in fact, has proved to be in parts of the world afflicted with Communism.

Barnabas is presented to us as a positive example at the end of Acts 4 who when a need arises sells a field and gives the financial proceeds to the Apostles to distribute to the poor. Immediately afterwards, and in striking contrast, is the negative example of Ananias and Sapphira who are condemned not for failing to share all that they received or for not giving enough with what they did offer to the Apostles, but for lying about the amount that they were sharing. The harsh action of striking them dead is mercifully not God’s typical way of dealing with his disobedient children, though occasional parallels throughout church history give us pause if we try to claim that he would never act that way again.

In context, however, such disobedience and deception within Christian ranks so early in the church’s movement could have thrown the entire movement into jeopardy and it is striking that the one other place that the word for “kept back,” which can also be translated “swindled” found in Acts 5 for the sin of Ananias and Sapphira, the one other place that word appears in the Greek Bible is in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament in Joshua 7:1 for the sin of Achan during the time of the Israelites’ conquest of Canaan. Achan and his family likewise were struck down for the sin of lying about what they held back from God. Perhaps this is, therefore, another testimony to the fact that God is bringing about his New Covenant at this new juncture in human history and treating it as seriously as he did the time of the establishment of Israel in the Promised Land in fulfillment of the first covenant given to Moses on Mount Sinai.

The first segment, or subsection, of Acts comes to a close in 6:1-7 with the calling of the first helpers of the Apostles, using a word that would later give rise to a similar term translated as “deacon” in English, here to ward off what could have been the first full-fledged church split along ethnic lines, Hebrew-speaking Jews, probably mostly from Israel, versus Hellenistic Jews, or Greek-speaking Jews and perhaps those who were more inclined to follow various Greek rather than Hebrew customs as well.

We see important principles here about the delegation of authority crucial to solving problems in leadership and in ministry. Those called to more “spiritual ministries”
should delegate those who have more practical skills, but subsequent ministries of two of these seven deacons, as it were, Stephen and Phillip, show that this is scarcely a rigid distinction. We also see that all seven deacons represent Hellenistic names and that this is a separate way of dealing with one group of poor people from simply having one common pot administered by the same people to all.

In chapter 11 we will see what, in the modern world, is an even more familiar model for caring for the poor anticipated in verses 27-30 as a predicted famine leads to a special offering to help those who are becoming particularly impoverished. No one way appears uniformly or is mandated to deal with all the poor and needy in Christian circles, but the concern to help such people remains constant.

The second panel, or subsection, begins with the stoning of Stephen after a brief description of his ministry and continues with the ministry of Philip the deacon, thus spanning 6:8–9:31. Here we see hints that the gospel is beginning to move out from strictly Jewish territory as well as beginning to take on conceptually broader understandings as well.

It would appear that Stephen has recognized more clearly than anyone so far that the law no longer applies in the same way since Christ’s death and resurrection and that temple sacrifices are therefore altogether unnecessary. He thus becomes the first Christian martyr through stoning, perhaps an illegal and more mob-based action with some aura of legality attached to it, but this and subsequent persecutions merely cause the fledgling church to spread out and grow in the process. So we see the church moving out to Judea and Samaria and even to Galilee over the years of approximately 33 to 47 A.D.

The ministry of Philip takes us to Samaria including the conversion of a sorcerer, Simon the magician, and to the converting of an Ethiopian eunuch, one who was castrated so that he could work safely in the royal harem, who was on the Gaza Strip traveling and reading from the Isaiah scroll.

There are all kinds of theological debates about the coming and going of the Holy Spirit and the timing of baptism that have divided God’s people over the centuries, but we must not lose site of the unifying theme that the Word of God is spreading to people who by Orthodox Jewish standards would have been most unlikely candidates for repentance and incorporation into the people of God, a magician, his fellow Samaritans, and one who probably was a black African and considered forever unclean because of his bodily mutilation.

It is also in Acts 8 where the seemingly delayed arrival of the Holy Spirit after the belief and baptism of the Samaritans has led many to wonder if there is precedent here for some kind of second blessing, or even for saying that the Spirit does not always arrive
when a person converts, or even for saying that he does not arrive at all until someone speaks in tongues. But the exceptional situation of the gospel making inroads into Samaria, the descendants of the half breeds, the unlawful intermarrying of Jews and Samaritans, probably accounts for the exceptional timing, which we do not find repeated anywhere else in the New Testament.

Finally, in this panel we come to the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, a Pharisee, who had the best of both Greek and Jewish upbringings and education, whose very dramatic conversion experience was probably required precisely to convince him that he was as misguided as he was thinking that it was in persecuting and executing Jews become Christians that he was pleasing God.

It is this Saul who will use his Gentile name, Paul, when he begins ministering primarily in Gentile circles later on in his Christian life, who becomes the main character in the second major section, or half, of the Book of Acts. But before we get there, Luke has some more stories to tell us of the gospel moving out even as it is still primarily thought of as Jewish in nature. These stories take us into the third panel, or subsection, of the first half of the Book of Acts and it is there that we will begin on our next tape.
Lesson 8 ▪ Acts (Part 2), Galatians, and 1 Thessalonians

ACTS (PART 2)

Acts 9:32–12:24

This is lecture eight in the series introducing the New Testament. We left off at the end of our last talk in the Book of Acts towards the end of chapter 9. Beginning in verse 32 we come to the third segment of the first major half of Luke’s theological history of the first generation of Christianity. The first half, as we will recall, focuses primarily on the Christian mission in the Jewish world with Peter as the primary leader of this enterprise, but with each successive subsection the gospel is moving out to less and less predominantly or distinctively Jewish territory.

In 9:32-12:24 we see the gospel advancing in those portions of Israel that had both God-fearers, Gentiles or non-Jews who had come to believe in the God of Israel and practice some of its laws, perhaps even worshipping in the synagogues with its people but without fully converting to Judaism. The dominant event that this segment recounts is the dramatic vision from heaven that Peter receives even as God is preparing a Gentile centurion, or commander of a hundred troops, to receive a messenger from him, which thus brings Peter and Cornelius together and after Peter preaches the gospel Cornelius receives salvation along with those accompanying him. The gospel is moving out to God-fearers and not just full-fledged Jews. Because Peter receives a vision declaring all foods clean, he understands that God must be declaring all people clean since one of the major barriers to intimate fellowship with Gentiles, often occurring around meals and tables in the ancient world, was the unclean food that Gentiles regularly ate.

Acts 12:25–13:1

In the second half of the Book of Acts beginning in Acts 12:25 and 13:1 the scene shifts to the ministry and missionary journeys of Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles, as he calls himself, although Paul continues wherever possible to begin by preaching to his fellow Jews. But the pattern recurs often enough that before too long the majority of those listening to him in Jewish circles reject his message, even as a significant minority accept him and become Jesus’ followers. But he will then move on and continue primarily preaching and ministering in Gentile territory.
Paul’s Missionary Journeys

The First Journey (13:4–14:28)

Paul’s first missionary journey probably spanning the years 47 or 48 to early 49 occurs with Barnabas and part way with John Mark into the cities of Cyprus, the island in the Mediterranean Sea, the southern shore of what we would today call Turkey, and then up into the central high plateau country. Paul’s new home base is no longer Tarsus but Syrian Antioch. From there he and Barnabas travel to the coast and then to Barnabas’ home island of Cyprus where among other things he confounds a sorcerer who has a Jewish name, Bar-jesus, making it all the more inappropriate for him to be practicing occult magic. We also see that the governor, Sergius Paulus, comes to faith as a result of what some have called power evangelism, countering supernatural power with a stronger supernatural power.

From there the group travels to the southern coast of Turkey, but we learn little about any stay or evangelistic mission there. By the time we have surveyed all of Paul’s journeys we will see that he typically follows major roads going to major urban centers because reaching the cities in his world, as in many places in times throughout church history, then enables the message to go out to nearby rural areas whereas reaching rural peoples does not always cause the reverse effect, namely having a significant impact on the major cities.

Why the exception then early in his missionary career? One possible answer is that archaeology has shown that Sergius Paulus had relatives in and around Pisidian Antioch, the largest of the cities in central Turkey, which Paul and Barnabas visit. It may also have something to do with an illness, because these were the cities of southern Galatia to which Paul would write in the Galatians in chapter 4 – that it was because of an illness I first preached the Gospel to you. Some have tried to link this with Paul’s famous thorn in the flesh from 2 Corinthians 12, considering a disease like malaria that was rampant in the swampy lowlands of southern Turkey and which people tried to recover from often times by retreating to the higher less humid plateau country in the middle of Galatia.

Be that as it may, he preaches in the synagogue of Pisidian Antioch, then moves on after a fair amount of rejection to preach to Gentiles, goes to the apparently almost exclusively Gentile city of Lystra where he interacts with the pagan superstition that think he and Barnabas are gods come down to earth, but Jews from Antioch arouse the ire of the people against them. He is nearly stoned to death and he continues on his
way, but not without later returning to follow up on the fledging churches planted showing his remarkable courage for the sake of the gospel.

The Jerusalem Council (15:1-35)

It is during this point also that we read in Acts 15:1 that some came to Antioch from Jerusalem insisting that Gentile adult men coming to faith in Jesus had to be circumcised, that is, had to take on all of the demands of the law of the Jews and not simply convert directly from paganism to following Jesus. In a world without anesthesia one can understand how uncircumcised adult Gentile men would have found this a particularly challenging threshold to consider crossing.

And theologically the council comes to the conclusion in Acts 15 made up of James, Peter, Paul, and Barnabas and others to sort this issue out that it is by faith alone that salvation comes to an individual, not by any works of the law. Even the restrictions that are suggested for Christians working among Jews for the sake of evangelism are not legal mandates, just as the conclusion that circumcision is not necessary does not mean that it might be voluntarily appropriate for the sake of unnecessarily offending Jews whom Christian believers would like to come to Christ. Thus the somewhat striking example of Paul circumcising Timothy who along with Silas becomes his two main traveling companions on his second journey shortly after the council has concluded that circumcision is not a requirement for salvation.

The Second Journey (15:36–18:22)

The second missionary journey begun in Acts 16 and carrying on into the middle of chapter 19 takes Paul and his companions further afield revisiting cities evangelized on the first missionary journey in southern Galatia, but then continuing all the way across to the continent of Europe to the city of Philippi where Lydia and her household, an apparently single, reasonably well-to-do Jewish woman becomes Paul’s first European convert. Trouble once again leads to danger for Paul and he is arrested with his imprisonment taking place for at least one night until, through a dramatic earthquake, he has the opportunity to escape, but refusing to do so he so impresses the Philippian jailer that he too comes to faith and he and his household are baptized.

Paul moves on along the roads roughly paralleling the eastern seaboard of Macedonia and Achaia, the two provinces of Greece, comes to Thessalonica where we will see when we come to the Thessalonian epistles in a very short period of time the gospel has dramatic effect in helping to plant a church there. Then on to the nearby city of Berea, famous in 17:11 for the praise that these listeners were more noble than those of Thessalonica, at least among the Jewish community, for they search their Scriptures daily to see if the things Paul was preaching were true.
Later in Acts 17 Paul finds himself for a more extended stay in Athens, the capital of Greece and the historic center of culture and education and philosophy for that country, and in what has come to be known as the Mars Hill speech he preaches a model in cross-cultural evangelism focusing as he does wherever he goes on Jesus and the resurrection and the implications of that for all people of the world, but beginning again, as he tries to do in every location with points of common ground, this time among Greek philosophers, among those who worship an unknown god, which Paul wants to disclose to them. Reaching the people where they are and taking them from there via various conversational bridges to challenge them with the claims of Christ, a model for Christian evangelism in every day and age.

From Athens Paul moves on to Corinth, a city with such a reputation for sexual immorality that to call a girl a Corinthian girl was in that part of the Greco-Roman world a slang term for prostitute. Not surprisingly this is the first place that Paul stays, or at least that we are told that Paul stays, for quite a long time, namely about a year and a half. And even after that we will see when we come to the Corinthian letters a very immature church with a lot of problems. Finally, he prepares to set sail back to Israel, to Jerusalem, and then returning to Syrian Antioch bringing his second missionary journey to a close.

**The Third Journey (18:23–21:16)**

His third missionary journey once again finds him traveling over land revisiting cities previously evangelized, but this time heading for and staying for nearly a three-year period of time in the major port of Asia Minor, the western province of what today would be called Turkey in the city of Ephesus. This was a center of ancient magic, of occult religion, so it is not surprising that we read about confrontations with demonic powers and the destruction of the scrolls containing the formula, incantations, chants, different ways in which Gentiles tried to communicate with and even manipulate their various gods and goddesses.

It is also a place where a large riot threatens to run Paul out of town, but he departs secretly and quietly instead. Demetrius, leading a group of silversmiths, has protested that their trade in making the idols, the statues of the Greek goddess Artemas to whom there was an enormous temple erected in Ephesus, the Christian faith was having so powerful an impact on leading people out of paganism that their trade and their business was coming under threat. Would that Christian living today was so pure and holy that those businesses that profited from immoral or illegal activities would be threatened by going out of business.
The Trials of Paul in Jerusalem and Caesarea (21:17–26:32)

After another return eastward and to home starting with Jerusalem and an offering to help with the particularly impoverished Christians there after the famine predicted back in Acts 11, Paul, though wanting to travel to Rome and points even further to the west in the empire that he has not yet visited, finds himself arrested by the Romans in Jerusalem, not least to protect him from a mob that might have stoned him on the spot having heard false rumors that he was actually abolishing the law, teaching Jews not to obey it in his Christian evangelistic mission.

After successive hearings before the Jewish Supreme Court and the Roman governor Felix, Paul languishes in prison from 57 to 59. Felix is replaced in 59 by Festus. Herod Agrippa II becomes the new ruler in Galilee and eventually in larger parts of Israel. Hearings before all of these different individuals give Paul several opportunities to recount his own story and he again regularly explains that he has committed no crime by anyone’s laws, but is on trial simply for believing in Jesus as the resurrected Lord.

There is no indication that any of the courts or individuals before which Paul appears has a legal basis for charging him and, in fact, the succession of hearings ends with the ironic observation between Agrippa II and Festus that he could have been set free, but after two years of being held without legal reason in prison Paul has already appealed to the highest judge in the empire, the emperor in Rome, and therefore Agrippa and Festus send him there for his appeal to be heard.


Lest this sound like nothing more than a case of tragic irony, we learn that God has promised to Paul through a word from Jesus in the night in prison that he not worry, that he will get to testify on behalf of Christ in Rome. Interestingly, this does not simply lull Paul into a false sense of security or into passive inaction, but rather gives him confidence as he hears of a plot against him which he finds a way of thwarting through his nephew sending a message to the Roman commander and through his appeal to the emperor that God will, in fact, honor his promise and get him there. God’s sovereign plans and responsible human action are never pitted against each other in Scripture but work hand in hand.

Neither does Paul realize that the boat that sets sail in Acts 27 will founder after a violent two-week-long storm in the Mediterranean Sea on the island of Malta. More danger, more miracles, more delay before the end of winter and a spring commercial traveling vessel will enable the boat full of prisoners to finally make its destination in Rome. Here the book ends with Paul under house arrest awaiting the outcome of his trial, yet with the remarkable claims that the kingdom of God was advancing unhindered.
Paul would have been free to receive visitors and as Christians and those who became Christians continued to invite others to come to the home and hear the message and as the various soldiers who took turns guarding Paul inevitably heard the message as well and passed it along to fellow soldiers in the Roman barracks housing the troops in that capital city, more and more people became followers of Jesus.

**Four Key Theological Emphases**

We may summarize four key theological emphases as the result of this rapid survey of Acts. 1) God oversees the development of the church and the progress of the gospel. Nothing happens accidentally. 2) The message of Christianity centers on the resurrection of Jesus making forgiveness of sins available to anyone who repents. 3) The offer of salvation, thus, is for all nationalities, all geographical regions, all religious backgrounds on the same terms, and faith in Christ apart from good works of the Jewish law or any law. 4) And, finally, the church will progress and, indeed, flourish despite persecution, sometimes even because of it.

**Two Key Applications**

Two key applications of all this for Christians in any day and age – first, for the unbeliever, the salvation package first described at Pentecost, with an exception in Samaria and seeming exceptions with Cornelius, where the Spirit appears to come before we are told of any repentance, but, in fact, if one reads Peter’s sermon in Acts 10 carefully their belief comes right at the time Peter is talking about repentance and the Spirit descends. And then there are those odd followers of John the Baptist at the beginning of Acts 19 whom Luke calls believers, but we soon discover they have never even heard of the Holy Spirit, which means they cannot be Jews, they cannot even have known much about the message of John since the Spirit was central for him, so the reference to believers seems merely in this context to be a description of those who have some vague belief of some certain things associated with the Christian faith but not genuine, saving faith.

In all other instances, and thus even in these two seemingly exceptional instances, we have an unbroken pattern, that salvation comes through repentance, believing in Jesus, outwardly symbolized by baptism and inwardly ratified by the reception of the Holy Spirit and the experience of the forgiveness of sins. There is much more involved in the Christian life than these foundational events, but this much, no more, no less, is fully adequate for salvation, for making people right with God, but it is only through Jesus Christ, for as Acts 4:12 puts it, “There is no other name under heaven by which people must be saved.”
Applying the major themes of Acts to Christians, here are models for true New Testament churches in any age. How to know what is timeless versus what is situation-specific can change from one context to another requires reading all of Acts, indeed reading all of the New Testament, and seeing what practices and patterns remain constant and what take a variety of forms. Alleviating poverty remains constant, the methods vary. The need for regular Christian fellowship, growth, nurture, apostolic teaching, celebration of the sacraments or ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, prayer, evangelism, all remain constants. The particular organizational forms and methods used to accomplish those ends consistently vary and we could give additional examples.

**GALATIANS**

But now we are ready to turn to the New Testament letters, the epistles of Paul, grouped together first as we noted in a our opening lecture and here we will continue just as the Book of Acts did in chronological sequence going back in time from the end of the Book of Acts and looking briefly at each letter in what seems most likely to be the chronological order in which they were written, fitting them into the places in the Book of Acts that we have already described.

**Background**

The earliest letter appears to have been Galatians, although traditionally only a small portion of north-central Turkey, to use modern terminology, would have referred to itself as Galatia, the Roman provincial reorganization of the empire into larger administrative territories led to the cities evangelized in the Book of Acts by Paul including Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe, all to be part of a larger territory known as Galatia making historic Galatia just the northern half of the larger province. It was most likely this southern half that Paul has in mind in addressing this letter, which means that we can date Galatians to about 49 A.D. after Paul’s first missionary journey, but just before the apostolic council of Acts 15. This explains how Peter can still be uncertain how to deal with the issue of eating with Gentiles who eat unclean food. Yes, he has by this time received the vision from heaven allowing him to eat with Cornelius, but Cornelius was a God-fearer already in route to becoming Jewish, perhaps. Does this principle apply to total pagans or Gentiles? And even if it allows table fellowship, does it mean that Gentiles are free from having to keep any of the distinctively ritual or ceremonial or civil laws of the Jews? The earlier we can date a letter to the Galatians, the more understandable is the action that Paul describes having to confront Peter over when he came to Syrian Antioch (see 2:11-15).
Understanding an early date and a southern Galatian audience also helps us make sense of little details like Galatians 3:1, where Paul uses the rare word often translated “bewitched” – “who has bewitched you, O foolish Galatians?” – language applicable only to very superstitious, traditional, pagan, magical beliefs or occult practices. Precisely the thing that was dying out in some parts of the empire, more urbane locations like Athens and Rome, but still a problem in the more isolated rural areas like those of southern Galatia tying in perhaps very closely with the story in Acts 14 in which Paul and Barnabus were mistaken for gods, but then not long afterwards treated as virtual demons, violent swings of an interpretive pendulum from one extreme to another.

**Keys to Understanding Galatians**

The circumstances therefore of the letter involve the debate over keeping the law, which comes to a head with the clash between Paul and Peter over table fellowship with Gentiles. A large party of what Paul calls Judaizers, people insisting that Gentiles become, as it were, Jews first in order to become Christians is now similarly troubling the Galatians as it had afflicted Syrian Antioch. The date is approximately seventeen years after Paul’s conversion in 32 (see the references to fourteen plus three years having elapsed in Galatians 1:18 and 2:1).

**Outlining Galatians**

Paul’s letter can therefore be divided into three major segments, roughly one for each of the two chapters of the book.

**Paul Defends His Authority (1:1–2:14)**

In 1:1-2:14 Paul has to, once again, defend and reestablish his authority as an apostle, as one who has seen the resurrected Lord on equal grounds with the twelve apostles in Jerusalem, and he does so by describing how his message and call came directly from God and how each time he did go to Jerusalem his understanding of the Gospel and his part in the Christian mission was ratified and reaffirmed and how when Peter did come to Syrian Antioch and hypocritically backed away from agreed-upon principles, Paul rebuked him and Peter was unable to effectively reply.

**Paul Defends Justification by Faith Alone (2:15–4:31)**

It is difficult to know if 2:15-21 continue Paul’s words to Peter on that occasion or if in a world without quotation marks or any felt need for them, Paul’s words to Peter come to an end at 2:14, and 2:15-21, in essence, form the theological thesis or central lesson of the epistle addressed now directly to the Galatians. Either way, 2:15-21 sets up chapters 3 to
Understanding the New Testament

4 in which Paul defines and defends justification – being declared righteous by God – as accomplished through faith and not works of any law.

He does so by showing how Abraham, the very father of the Jewish nation, was justified by faith even before he acted on that faith in obeying God in a variety of ways and four-hundred plus years before the law was given to Moses to show the Israelites how to live out their faith. He defends these convictions also by showing how the age of the law, centuries old as it was, was nevertheless temporary and now with the arrival of the Messiah and the Messianic age, the age of the law had come to an end and the principle of living by faith became even clearer as one reverted back to the original state of affairs before the giving of the law, salvation by faith alone.

He reminds the Galatians how even the law itself contains numerous examples that point forward to Jesus as the fulfillment of the law so that now one pleases God and is made right with him only by trusting in the completed work of Jesus on the cross paying the penalty for our sins which we could never pay for ourselves and in a way which we could never deserve. Because it is not based on human effort, this plan of salvation is true for Jew and Gentile alike, Galatians 3:28 – for slave and free, for male and female. Dramatically in contrast to one Pharisaic prayer in which a faithful Orthodox Jewish male prayed, “I thank God that you have made me Jew and not Gentile, free and not slave, a man and not a woman.”

Paul Describes the Nature of Christian Freedom (5:1–6:17)

Finally, in chapters 5 and 6 Paul goes on to describe the nature of Christian freedom. Freedom from the law is not freedom from moral living, but freedom to serve a living God. Faith expressing itself through love, Galatians 5:6. A life inspired and directed by the Spirit producing the fruit of 5:22-23 – of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, goodness, faithfulness, self-control, and the like. These things cannot ever be legislated or produced simply by a long list of do’s and don’ts. The gospel is not a new law, the gospel fulfills the law. Abstract principles like love for God and neighbor are acted on situation by situation with the guidance of both Testaments and without jettisoning the absolute moral commands of Scripture, but without implying that those cultural customs that varied from one time and place to the next, so dear and precious to Jewish thinking, in particular, had to be preserved unchanged everywhere the Christian message spread.

The Theology of Galatians

To sum up the theology of Galatians it is hard to do better than the Protestant reformer from the sixteenth century, Martin Luther, when he summed up this letter as the charter of Christian liberty. A foundational document defining how Christians become free, free
from the sin that enslaves them, free from the penalty of that sin, and thus free to establish a relationship with God through the work of Christ on the cross, empowered by the Holy Spirit who comes to dwell in believers and produces the good works that do not save, but demonstrate the presence of salvation in an individual. Christians are thus free from every type of legalism that requires certain actions for salvation or claims that certain sins can lead one to forfeit salvation.

The only unforgivable sin, as we recall from Mark 3, in all of Scripture is the blasphemous, total, absolute denial and repudiation of Christ from which one never seeks to repent. Throughout the world, unfortunately, there continue to be beliefs and ceremonies, rituals and practices that are held up by many, if not as marks or requirements of actual salvation, then surely of Christian maturity, and while in given situations certain behaviors do often signal Christian maturity, to hold up any of these as absolute and unchanging for all time risks falling into the very trap of the Judaizers in Galatia and when it reaches a level where people are requiring certain good works or practices for salvation, even such fundamental ordinances as baptism or celebrating the Lord’s Supper, then one has crossed the boundary, which leads Paul in chapter 1 of Galatians in the harshest of language to pronounce divine condemnation. Because in teaching anyone that certain works are a requirement for salvation, if others believe and follow, they too are damned for all eternity.

But in context where avoiding certain practices or participating in certain events are merely bridges to evangelism, then Paul bends over backwards to accommodate himself (see 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 with its teaching on being all things to all people).

1 THESSALONIANS

Background

We pass finally in this lecture to start a look at the Thessalonian epistles. 1 Thessalonians was written shortly after Paul planted the church in Thessalonica and thus probably in about A.D. 50, more urban than the cities of Galatia but still a far cry from, say, Athens.

Outline

Paul had spent at most a few months and possibly only a few weeks with these new Christians (see the beginning of Acts 17) and yet the opening three chapters of 1 Thessalonians involve more unbroken praise than any other section of similar length anywhere in the letters of the New Testament.
In 1:3 he speaks of their faith, hope, and love. In 1:9 and 10 he talks about how others, presumably non-Christians in communities as Paul just begins to evangelize tell them they have already heard the gospel and seen exemplary models of its life from the Thessalonian church. And 2:13 gives the explanation for this rapid growth and effectiveness – these new believers understood the message of the gospel to be God’s very divine word, and not merely a human message, filled with divine power to have remarkable and remarkably positive effects on their corners of the world. Thus, chapters 1 to 3 of 1 Thessalonians encourage continued growth; “excel still more” is a concise summary of what Paul is trying to say here.

And then in chapters 4 to 5 he exhorts them to godly living, especially in light of Christ’s coming return. 4:16-17 has, at least in recent church history, been a somewhat controversial passage as people struggle to understand the imagery of what has been called a rapture; believers being caught up to meet the Lord in the air and so be ever with the Lord. Is this a separate event from Christ’s public, visible return to earth to establish his earthly kingdom at the end of human history as we now know it? Some say yes, it is separate. Here believers are caught up to meet the Lord in the air and therefore the assumption is they continue on back to heaven.

Other says, no, since elsewhere there are no clear passages indicating two separate stages of Christ’s return; once only part way to earth to pick up believers and help them escape the earth for awhile and then once at the very end when he comes back with those believers to set up his earthly kingdom.

The Bible is not fully clear, so we should tolerate differing interpretations on this topic. But by far the most dominant answer throughout church history, which seems to this lecturer to be the best, is that the term used for meeting the Lord in the air here is one which in the Greek language often was used for a welcoming party leaving a Roman city through the city gates, going out on the road to greet a visiting king or military general returning home in triumph, or honored guests, and then escorting him and any companions that might be with him back to the city to honor him publicly. Thus, it makes good sense to see the imagery here metaphorically referring to a human, Christian welcoming party of Jesus returning to earth, going out of the earthly gates, as it were, to meet the Lord in the air and then usher him and escort him back to earth in triumph. We will pick things up with further reflection in 2 Thessalonians on this topic in our next lecture.
Second Thessalonians in many ways resembles the first letter that Paul wrote to the church at Thessalonica, but there are certain features that have puzzled readers throughout the ages.

Debated Theme: The Day of the Lord (2:1-2)

The main issue, indeed, the thesis statement of this letter, appears to be 2 Thessalonians 2:2 in which Paul encourages the Thessalonians not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by the teaching allegedly from us whether by a prophecy or by word of mouth or by letter asserting that the day of the Lord has already come.

In 1 Thessalonians it appeared that part of the audience’s concerns with respect to Christian teaching about Christ’s return had to deal with the fact that it had been now some twenty years since Christ’s death and resurrection, from A.D. 30 to A.D. 50, and one or more Thessalonian believers had passed away so that in 1 Thessalonians 4:13 he encourages them not to grieve like those who have no hope, which we might add does not mean not to grieve at all, but not to grieve in a hopeless way for deceased Christian brothers or sisters, and then goes on to explain that those who might be fearing that Christ’s return, seemingly delayed, was not going to happen at all were being reassured that it would indeed happen and the rest of chapter 4 and the first half of chapter 5 of 1 Thessalonians go on to itemize various details surrounding that event.

Now it would appear the opposite problem requires Paul’s response in 2 Thessalonians. How can this be? One plausible suggestion is that the first letter, so to speak, worked too well, that those fearing that Christ was not coming back at all or any time soon now were so reassured that they were afraid that perhaps they had somehow missed his return, but that would be a misinterpretation of his words.

Another possibility is that someone has taught falsely in Paul’s name teaching contrary to what he himself teaches. One may ask how can anyone believe that the day of the Lord had already come when things continued seemingly uninterrupted by cosmic events. The answer would appear to emerge from within emerging Gnosticism, namely, that Christ’s return was reinterpreted as something invisible and spiritual perceivable only by the spiritually in-crowd or elite.
It is also possible that some in Thessalonica did not go so far as to say that the day of the Lord had already come, but were sure that it was coming so soon that they were willing to stop working and simply wait for the end to arrive. This could account for the references, particularly in chapter 3, particularly with reference to verse 10, about those who are not willing to work not being allowed to eat, perhaps a reference to the communal meals of the worshipping Christian community there.

But that feature of 2 Thessalonians can also be given a second interpretation. It is quite possible that in light of the common Greco-Roman practice of patronage in which wealthy Greeks and Romans were in their society considered responsible for gathering the poor people in their immediate vicinity and in their sphere of influence and providing seasonal jobs for them and other forms of aid so that they at least were able to live, in return for personal and political support for the patrons in various ways. It is possible that some of the newly converted Christians in Thessalonica are assuming they do not have to seek full-time work because there will be Christian patrons who will take care of them as well.

On either interpretation 3:10 should not be taken to mean that care should not be given to those who want to work but can’t find jobs, rather the Greek here has two separate verbs best translated as “anyone who is not willing to work.” When we say in English translation “anyone who will not work,” it could be misunderstood as simply the future tense of the verb “to work,” which is not what the Greek text reflects here.

**Signs that the Day of the Lord Approaches**

What 2 Thessalonians is probably best known for, however, we have yet to consider. Just as the major doctrinal topic of 1 Thessalonians involved Christ’s return, the major doctrinal topic of 2 Thessalonians comes in the response to the false report, outlined in 2 Thessalonians 2:2, in 2 Thessalonians 2:3-12 and particularly verses 3 through 10. In defending the view that the end has not yet come Paul stresses that there are events which must yet take place, events that clearly are interpreted as sufficiently public that he can assume the Thessalonians will recognize that they have not yet taken place.

**The Man of Lawlessness (2:3-4)**

The first one of these is a rebellion leading to the disclosure, or revelation, of an evil figure called the man of lawlessness doomed to destruction who opposes and exalts himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, and even sets himself up in God’s temple proclaiming himself to be God, 2:3-4.

This is language used in other Jewish literature of the intertestamental period for what John in the letters of John will dub “the antichrist.” A key anti-god and anti-Christian figure who persecutes those who worship the true and living God in Jesus and who
apparently is a powerful political as well as religious, or we might say anti-religious leader on the stage of world events. Some have inferred from the fact that Paul says he will set himself up in God’s temple, that there must be a rebuilt temple where today appears only the Islamic mosque, the Dome of the Rock in the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. But every other use of the word “temple” in Paul’s writings is a reference to the Christian church as the temple, or an individual Christian as the temple of the Holy Spirit.

So it would seem more likely that what will also be depicted in symbolic form in the Book of Revelation is being described here, namely, that the antichrist will masquerade, at least for a time as a Christian, as someone who emerges out of at least professing Christian orbit. But we must admit that there has seldom been much agreement throughout Christian history on these finer matters of teaching about the end times and, therefore, not hold to any of the pictures dogmatically.

The Restrainer (2:6-8)

The other major sign that Paul says in 2 Thessalonians 2 must still take place is that something and someone described both as a power and a person, from the Greek grammar employed, is a restraining force holding back the disclosure or the revelation of this man of lawlessness. When this power and person is removed, then he will be revealed in all of his ungodliness in the last days.

Again there has been little agreement throughout church history, is this person or power an emperor or key world leader like the Roman emperors and the power, the power of the empire behind him? Is it the Spirit of Christ and is the church to be taken out of the way in the last days allowing evil to reign unchecked? The latter seems less likely since the two grammatical genders used for this restraining person and power are masculine and neuter whereas the Greek word for church, ekklesia, is grammatically feminine. It may simply be that it is God himself who is restraining, perhaps through his Spirit, though that need not be explicitly implied here, the antichrist until he withdraws his hand of restraint.

Key Theological Themes

At any rate, if we combine 1 and 2 Thessalonians and sum up key theological teachings we may conclude first that despite apparent delays, Christ’s return is certain. It will come quickly, suddenly, and unexpectedly, like a thief in the night, 1 Thessalonians 5:1. Nevertheless, secondly, there are certain signs still to be fulfilled so that even today in the 21st century we do not have to worry that we have somehow missed this event.
Key Applications

Key applications that flow from these two summary points of theology include the need for all believers to keep alert for the end, which could come at any time. And for that matter most of us are very much aware that our physical lives could come to an end at any time, either way bringing us directly before our Creator. Thus, we should neither assume or presume to know that we have a normal lifespan ahead of us in which to live and serve God and if there are things we are delaying making right with God, deal with them at some later time, just as we should not assume or presume to know that the end must come very soon, within a few days or months or years so that in an irresponsible way we do not properly plan for the future.

Secondly, as an application we must not misjudge the direction of human history. All of the scientific and technological progress of recent centuries has not changed human nature one whit; we are morally as fallen as ever. Indeed, when the end finally comes and Christ’s return is visible throughout the world it will become clear that morally, if anything, the human race has gotten worse and that events in world history have made life more difficult for believers rather than more tolerable. Nevertheless, the good news is that God’s causes and his people will triumph and, therefore, we should take every step to ensure that we are trusting fully in Jesus and his gracious salvation for us, even while living out a life of gratitude of service to him in response, so that we are sure we are on the winning side in the final day.

1 CORINTHIANS

Historical Background

In chronological order we turn now among the letters of Paul to 1 Corinthians. For historical background see the opening paragraphs of Acts 18 and our comments in our survey of Acts earlier in this lecture series. Corinth was still a very immoral and immature church even after Paul’s one and a half years there.

He has received information both from personal messengers from an otherwise unknown woman in the Corinthian congregation and people from her household (see 1 Corinthians 1:10-12, the woman’s name is Chloe). And he has also received a letter from the Corinthian congregation with various questions (see 7:1). It also appears that Paul has written a now lost letter to the Corinthian church, which led to certain misunderstandings (see 5:9), those misunderstandings surrounding the practice of not associating with sexually immoral people. Paul meant those who refuse to repent within the church, not outsiders to the Christian church, and it appeared that the
Corinthian church was reversing his commands. The date is approximately 54 or 55 A.D., since Paul is writing from Ephesus towards the end of his third missionary journey (see 1 Corinthians 16:8).

Outline

**Greeting and Thanksgiving (1:1-9)**

After the by now predictable opening greetings, which in fact were a conventional form of all Greco-Roman letters and a thanksgiving couched in the form of a prayer, which we saw in 1 and 2 Thessalonians but not in Galatians, that too was a typical form of Greco-Roman letter writing, which Paul avoided in Galatians to shock the readers into paying close attention to what he had to say because of the urgency of the problem with the Judaizers there, nevertheless here and in subsequent letters we will see that far more often than not Paul reverts to conventional form.

**Divisions in the Church (1:10–4:21)**

After these two then reasonably predictable opening portions of the letter the body of 1 Corinthians begins in 1:10 and the first major topic spanning the rest of chapter 1 through the end of chapter 4 involves these divisions that Paul has heard about in the church. Divisions which may be traced to competing philosophies at Corinth, divisions which may be traced to an overly triumphal or victorious attitude toward the Christian life, key leaders believing that the church was more mature than it actually was, divisions that almost certainly can be traced to differences among the rich and the poor as we will see as we proceed at several junctures in the text, but which above all right here in chapter 1 apparently have to do with a kind of celebrity worship, following human Christian leaders inordinately, putting too much stock in those Christians who came to town through whose ministry various Corinthians were converted and baptized. This most likely explains the reference to the different Christian leaders in verse 12 and to Paul’s apparent playing down of baptism in verses 13 to 17 in partial tension to his teaching elsewhere where baptism is the consistent and appropriate ritual and outward sign of a converted heart and life, but when it leads to combativeness and competition among Christians, then it is being given too much importance.

How does Paul respond to this problem of divisions in the church? We may understand the rest of the letter up through the end of chapter 4 in this first subsection as in essence a series of answers to this problem. From 1:18–2:5 he in essence replies by saying focus on the cross, focus on the humbling and humiliating event of Christ’s crucifixion on behalf of all peoples, which seems so foolish to an unconverted mind, but is the very wisdom of God and it is hard to be elevating oneself above others with that kind of focus and view.
Chapter 2:6-16, the end of that chapter give, as it were, a second answer pointing out that there is such a thing as true Christian wisdom, but it is spiritually discerned only by those who have God’s Spirit. Thirdly, there is a reminder that despite the varying contributions of different Christians, despite the varying responses on judgment day to what Christians have done with their lives compared to the role that God in Christ plays in human salvation and discipleship, the contribution of believers is comparatively equal and comparatively small (chapter 3).

And then finally summarizing 1 Corinthians 4, dealing with the right attitude toward apostles and other Christian leaders, the sign is not one of worldly wisdom or triumphant living, but rather one of weakness, of persecution, of pouring out ones life physically and spiritually for the Gospel in a way that leads Paul in a climactic exclamation in 4:13 to refer to such leaders, including himself, as the scum of the earth, the garbage, the refuse, the rubbish of the world, right up to this very moment.

Three Topics of Concern (5:1–6:20)

Chapters 5 and 6 complete the first main subsection of Paul’s letter body in 1 Corinthians by turning to other topics that he apparently learned about from the representatives of Chloe’s household. They involve three main topics that move from sexual matters to the issue of lawsuits and back to sexual matters again. While today in many cultures these issues trouble a broad cross section of individuals and while certainly in the ancient world the practice of prostitution cut across all socioeconomic boundaries, a good case can be made here for a disproportionate amount of the problem occurring among the more well-to-do minority of Christian believers, including those most likely to be leaders of house churches.

Only that seems to explain why the Corinthian church tolerated a man living with his father’s wife, probably a way of referring to his stepmother and perhaps a considerably younger woman than his father’s first wife, making sexual attraction between the son and the stepmother more understandable. Cicero agrees with 1 Corinthians 5:1, that great Roman orator and philosopher of the first century, that incest of this and related kinds was virtually unknown even among the very promiscuous pagan world. How could it be tolerated in the church in Corinth unless the perpetrator was a very well-to-do power broker, one used to being a patron and able to call the shots and pull strings and not be held accountable? Paul requires that this person, who apparently has not repented when given the chance repeatedly, now be disassociated from those activities that are of uniquely Christian nature for the sake of the church’s purity.

Lawsuits in the ancient world were almost exclusively carried out among the well-to-do, with only a tiny middle class there would be no point in the middle class or rich people suing poor people, because there would have been little to gain from them,
rather it seems it was largely the rich who sued the rich and then not so much for material advantage, though they gained that, but for the honor that accrued to them in a culture obsessed with honor and shame and avoiding the shame that would come to the loser in such a situation. Paul says, in essence, if there are disputes that would otherwise go to court among believers by analogy with what Jews had already developed in the synagogue, Christians should settle the matters in-house rather than airing their dirty laundry, as it were, in public and thus bringing the gospel to disgrace. If that was not possible it was preferable for them to simply be wronged rather than retaliate in a pagan legal context, where much like in 21st-century courts in many cultures of the world it appears that from a spiritual and emotional point of view no one comes out the winner.

Then, returning to sexual immorality more generally and prostitution in particular in the final part of chapter 6, Paul appeals to the unique one-flesh relationship designed by God from Genesis 2 onward between husband and wife to exclude the practice of prostitution altogether.

**Responding to the Principle of Celibacy (7:1-40)**

From chapter 7 to the beginning of chapter 16 we now have Paul responding to the issues the Corinthian church wrote him about. The translation of 7:1 is important; it is most likely, as we know from Origen’s commentary already around 200 A.D., a Corinthian slogan that Paul is quoting here, “it is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.” There were those in the first century, and in the centuries ahead, this movement would grow larger, who believed that celibacy, a lifelong refraining from sexual relations, was the Christian ideal based on certain Greek and Roman philosophies in which it was a moral ideal.

All of chapter 7 makes sense if we understand each subsection as Paul’s response, in essence, saying “no,” this principle cannot be made an absolute but apart from heterosexual men and women, one of each, paired together after a public marriage ceremony, committing themselves to each other for life and being faithful to those promises, celibacy should be practiced. Paul can affirm the Corinthian slogan up to a point, but he has to qualify it in each specific category of people that he deals with in this chapter.

He also adds one exception, just as Christ did in Matthew 5 and Matthew 19, divorce and therefore remarriage can be accepted in the case of sexual unfaithfulness, which therefore has already ruptured the marriage, or abandonment, particularly by an unbeliever with no intent to return or preserve the relationship. In other situations a believer should not divorce. If a believer has already initiated a divorce on other grounds, they should remain single or seek reconciliation if at all possible.
**Food Sacrificed to Idols (8:1–10:33)**

Chapters 8 through 10 deal with the issue of food sacrificed to idols and in essence enunciate three principles. This is an example of an area that falls outside of moral absolutes. This is an example of many grey areas in Christian ethics, grey in the sense that they are not black or white, there are no clear cut rules that apply in identical fashion to every situation, but there are broader principles that must come into play.

First of all, when an issue is not inherently morally wrong, there is nothing wrong with eating meat or any particular kind of food that makes it sinful, one should ask if there are weaker brothers or sisters who might be led into sinning if they see fellow Christians engaging in this practice, or if they might be led into imitating their Christian brothers or sisters without having a clear conscience that such an action is acceptable for them. We cannot over emphasize how crucial it is to stress here that the weaker brother or sister is not merely someone who objects to a practice or who may be offended by a practice that is otherwise morally neutral, but who precisely because they object to or are offended by that practice are not in the least likely to imitate it.

Let’s take an often-used example, drinking alcohol in moderation without drunkenness, clearly practiced in biblical times in both Testaments. There may be times to refrain from drinking alcohol if there are Christian brothers or sisters present who are alcoholics or recovering alcoholics who would be tempted to drink with a person but not be able to limit themselves to one or two drinks, or who might be able to so limit themselves but think that the practice is wrong and therefore sin against their consciences. In those situations Christians should refrain from drinking, even in moderation.

But simply because there are Christians who object to the practice, but who are in no way likely to actually drink alcohol, does not qualify them for being a weaker brother or sister. This does not mean that we should not be concerned when it comes to offending them. There are other biblical passages about not causing unnecessary offense, but the language of stumbling in 1 Corinthians 8 to 10, in context (read chapter 8 particularly, and particularly carefully), makes it clear that in this setting the weaker brother or sister is one who will actually be led into sin or to sinning against their own conscience. In some situations, therefore, believers should voluntarily refrain.

The same principle is illustrated in chapter 9 by Paul’s willingness to refrain from accepting money for ministry from the community to which he is currently ministering in an era of patronage where those who gave large gifts to support traveling religious and philosophical teachers often assume that they had the right to call the shots in terms of what was taught and how it was taught. Paul will not be brought into bondage by this. But at the same time chapter 9 stresses the responsibility of Christians to take care of financially those who minister in a full-time way to their communities. He is not
Chapter 10 stresses that there are times even in morally neutral areas for absolutes where behavior closely related to, but not identical to, the morally neutral issue is, in fact, absolutely wrong. In the case of food sacrifice to idols sold in the marketplace, the parallel experience would be food eaten in the context of a pagan worship service that had previously been sacrificed to idols. This is absolutely wrong, because a Christian participating in that which is actually worshipping a false god, not merely being an observer from the periphery to another religion’s worship, inherently includes that believer in the idolatrous practice.

What is the unifying theme in Paul’s diverse strategies here? Chapter 9:19-23 puts it very clearly. He is not nearly as concerned for what certain in-house Christians may or may not think is right if they are unlikely to be involved in those practices themselves. He is desperately concerned with winning the outsider to Christ. If a morally neutral practice can be engaged in, in order to build bridges and friendships and pave the way for sharing the Gospel and leading people to the Lord, he will participate in a heartbeat, but if a practice is likely to lead someone away from the Lord, then he will do his best to avoid it (read verses 19-23 of 1 Corinthians 9 very carefully, please). These principles are simply summed up again in fashion applicable to the issue of food sacrificed to idols in 10:23-31.

**Head Coverings (11:1-16)**

Chapter 11 contains one of the more puzzling passages in the New Testament commanding men not to wear head coverings when they come before the Lord and women to wear head coverings. There are a whole host of meanings of such practices in the first century depending on whether one was Jewish or Greek or Roman, male or female, but all of them involve sending the proper, rather than improper, cultural signals to a watching audience that one was sexually faithful to one’s spouse, rather than not, and religiously faithful to God in Christ, rather than not.

In cultures where head coverings or other forms of clothing or ways of adorning oneself do not communicate anything about one’s sexual or religious faithfulness, one obeys chapter 11 not through head coverings, but by asking what other manners of dress and outward appearance do or don’t convey such messages.

**The Lord’s Supper (11:17-34)**

The second half of chapter 11 turns to the use and the abuse of the Lord’s Supper. Here again the rich would have been able to come earlier to the original church meal, shared more food with one another and easily left too little for the poor who worked longer days, came later, and had less to bring themselves. Thus when verse 29 says – “those
who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves,” whatever else may be implied here, the context suggests that, first of all, these are people who are taking the Lord’s Supper without recognizing the body of Christ, without recognizing the church, without recognizing the fact that in Christ rich and poor are all equal in God’s eyes and all need equal access to the food and drink that symbolize that relationship with Jesus. It might revolutionize many of our churches if those we ask to refrain from taking the Lord’s Supper were those who had no regard for the poor in their midst in terms of sharing with them materially, but that is the context of 1 Corinthians 11.

**Spiritual Gifts (12:1–14:28)**

Chapters 12 to 14 turn to the issue of spiritual gifts with chapter 12 teaching a variety of key principles such as every Christian from the moment of conversion on has at least one spiritual gift (v. 7). Not all have the same gift or should be encouraged to seek the same gift; the Spirit sovereignly decides who gets which (v. 11). All of the gifts are important, none should be minimized, none should be overly exalted, we are all interrelated, the beautiful metaphor of the body that dominates this chapter. Chapter 13 goes on to stress in a nutshell in context that the use of any gift without love is worthless.

And then chapter 14 narrows down the focus to the gifts of prophecy and tongues that appeared to be particularly troubling the church at Corinth and dividing them. Chapter 14 boils down to the claim that prophecy is to be preferred to tongues because it is more immediately intelligible; it is a word from the Lord in the language of the people to whom the prophet is speaking. A study of the concept of prophecy in both Testaments and in the relevant background literature suggests that it ranges all the way from prepared Spirit-filled preaching of what we today call sermons to the spontaneously-acquired, sudden, God-given burst of insight into his wisdom for a particular situation, which is then communicated to the congregation.

Tongues, however, are never ruled out altogether even though they are said to be not nearly as significant as prophecy, but both gifts and by implication all the gifts must be monitored, there must be those who judge what is said, what ministry is performed, that it is in keeping with God’s word and in the spirit outlined in these chapters, mostly notably the spirit of love, and that an accountability mechanism be devised for at least temporarily silencing those claiming to use their gifts, but failing to meet these criteria.

It is in this context very abruptly in verses 33 to 38 that women appear to be silenced. This cannot mean in every context in church life because back in 11:5 women were already praying or prophesying and Paul does not forbid that activity, but merely tells them to wear the proper head covering for the reasons we have already explained. Perhaps the best explanation, therefore, of the silencing of women in chapter 14 means
that in the context of evaluating prophesy or tongues plus their interpretation, which
together combine to form the equivalent of prophesy, eventually it will be the job of the
highest levels of leadership of the church to determine the appropriateness of any such
message and as will emerge as we continue through the epistles, it appears that this
highest level of leadership in Paul’s day was reserved for men. In other contexts women
are regularly seen as active and encouraged to be active participants and chapter 14
should not be viewed as silencing them in these contexts.

The Resurrection (15:1-58)

Finally, we turn to chapter 15 with its precious teaching on the factuality of the bodily
resurrection of Jesus based on all of its eyewitnesses followed by its significance,
namely, that we too can look forward to bodily resurrection, perfected sinless bodies
with Christ and with fellow Christians forever.

The Collection for the Saints (16:1-24)

Chapter 16, much more briefly, anticipates a topic that Paul will turn to in much greater
detail in 2 Corinthians, a collection for the impoverished believers in and around Judea
and encourages planned, generous giving. He closes with his travel plans and final
greetings.

Key Theological Themes

As we attempt to summarize the teaching of 1 Corinthians theologically the center of
the Christian message is the crucifixion, that is what Paul determined to know nothing
but in 2:2, but given the span of topics the letter communicates it is clear that he does
not mean he taught on no other topic, but that this was the unifying theme of his
message.

And, of course, crucifixion is meaningless without the resurrection, so it is not
coincidence that the second to the last chapter has a detailed defense of that doctrine
just as the second chapter centers on the necessary prelude or precursor to the
resurrection, the crucifixion of Jesus.

The governing principle of Christian behavior, therefore, is what promotes unity and
true maturity in the church, a necessary prelude to successful evangelism as we saw in
John 17 and perhaps the most significant way of distinguishing God’s people from the
world’s, those who in true humility serve others above self rather than competing for
honor and status.
Key Applications

Already we see the massive potential for contemporary application and the massive need for contemporary application. 1 Corinthians is by far the most detailed and practical New Testament letter dealing with a huge array of problems in a very immature church that thought it was mature and it is perhaps the best illustration of a balanced Christian life. Over and over again Paul refuses to exclude behavior that was so often being abused, instead he walks a tightrope, seeks theological balance, refuses to exclude morally neutral behavior that, in fact, can be good and proper for up building the church. Such activity as close association with pagans, such activity as women in key positions of teaching and leadership and preaching, such activity as eating the food without question that is served to one in a pagan’s home, questions such as allowing and even encouraging within the right framework prophecy and tongues, and yet in every case guarding against the kind of abuse that the Corinthians were afflicted with by laying down the principles for the right use of each of these practices.

One commentator has referred to this as Paul’s “Yes, but” logic. Unfortunately throughout the history of Christianity too many believers have missed out half of this summary. Either in their eagerness to affirm the culture and to relate to it they say nothing but “yes” without the appropriate restrictions or fearing the compromising influence of culture they say only “but,” they speak only of restrictions, or perhaps more subtly they say “but, yes,” that is, they do acknowledge some positive value, but the first and primary emphasis is the negative warning. It would appear Paul’s approach, again summed up in 9:19-23 is “yes, but.” The first thought is how to relate to culture – how to affirm anything possible in the beliefs and practices of those who are not yet Christians, “but” there will be some things that cannot be affirmed and those are warned against.
Lesson 10 • 2 Corinthians, Romans, and the Prison Epistles (Part 1)

2 CORINTHIANS

Background

This is tape ten in the series New Testament Introduction and Survey. After 1 Corinthians, the reaction in Corinth to Paul’s letter appears to have been mixed. By the time he writes 2 Corinthians the first nine chapters sound much more positive whereas chapters 10 to 13 sound much more negative. Has fresh news arrived as Paul writes? Are different groups in Corinth being addressed? Is 10 to 13 a separate letter either before or after chapters 1 to 9?

All of these options have been suggested, but recent studies of the letter suggest a way of seeing it as written all at one time in a kind of A, B, A structure with chapters 1 to 7 dealing with the positive results of the Corinthians’ reforms in response to a correct understanding of Paul’s apostolic ministry, followed by the one main area they still have some progress to make in, Chapters 8 to 9 with the collection for the impoverished believers in Jerusalem, followed by the area in which they do not yet grasp Paul’s apostolic ministry, namely the role of suffering as ever against those who are misguided in their views of how mature the church has become and thus 10 to 13 use more tough tones in dealing with the topic and addressing the Corinthians.

At any rate, we know that Paul has both visited the church in Corinth and written them an additional letter since 1 Corinthians (see the references in 2:9 and again in chapter 7) to a sorrowful letter that Paul has penned that seemed necessary to finally get the believers there to come around and also the reference in 12:14 to this now being his third visit as he is en route from Ephesus after his third missionary journey having traveled through Troas in northwestern Turkey (see 7:4-5) and having come into Macedonia, the northern half of the Greek peninsula, en route to Achaia where Corinth was located in the southern half of the Greek peninsula. The date is, thus, probably A.D. 56, give or take a year.

Problems in Outlining

The outline of the letter, not least because of all of these separate parts is by far the hardest to perceive of all of Paul’s letters, 2:14–7:4 has sometimes been called a major digression, because Paul’s comments leading up to this section deal with his travel
plans and his eagerness to find out how things are progressing in Corinth and 7:5 picks up right where he leaves off in 2:13. 6:14–7:1 has often been called a minor digression, because the same phenomenon occurs if you delete these verses that sternly warn against improper, intimate mixture with idolatry and idolaters, those serving false gods, again the text reads quite smoothly.

Even chapters 8 and 9 together and separately have at times been taken as not central to Paul’s purposes and all of these segments just referred to as digressions have by some been taken as separate letters. But there is no actual textual support in antiquity for this approach, so if there is a way to understand the letter as being a unity, it is better to see it that way.

It seems as if Paul is here following a kind of logic that proceeds more along the lines of Jewish outline by linking words and themes each leading to the next, and then it is at least arguably that in chapters 6 and 7 he is retracing those themes in reverse order, which creates some of the symmetry and parallelisms that we find between the beginning and the ending section of this material. At any rate, it may prove more valuable simply to highlight some key themes and passages along the way rather than to confidently declare we have discerned the exact outline of the book.

**Key Theological Themes**

Certainly one of those key themes is the role of suffering in the Christian life. Already in Paul’s thanksgiving, which is expressed in the more Jewish category of a *berakah*, or a praise or blessing to God for his mercies, we read in 1:3-11 of the comfort that Paul repeatedly has received from God as he has gone through tough times, not least in order that he might turn around and bless others by sharing some of that comfort with them when they are going through tough times.

As we move on into chapter 2 and the reference to a particular sinner who has now repented and should be welcomed back into the community tantalizing to question whether this was the incestuous offender of 1 Corinthians 5, though there is no way to be sure about this, we see a second principle relating to suffering, namely, that it should lead to repentance if sin has been involved. It is important not to assume that sin, other than the general sin of living in this fallen world, is behind a particular experience of suffering, but it is also important to diagnose oneself in each such context in case there are sins one needs to confess and repent of and change one’s ways.

In 4:7-11, a powerful catalogue of Paul’s sufferings, we learn a third principle that when we allow God’s grace to sustain us in such situations and live, as it were, above our circumstances, then others can much more clearly see than in normal situations that it is God’s supernatural power that gives us the ability to continue to live in faith and hope.
and love, in other words, it points people to Jesus rather than to ourselves. For this reason we can expect that the normal Christian life will include some suffering, some of which is overt persecution for our public Christian stands (see 6:4-10).

A fourth principle appears several times as we read about how whatever suffering, however severe it may be in this life that we must experience, it is more than offset or counterbalanced or compensated for by the present glory of the New Covenant, of unity with Christ and his church (3:18), of the fact of our individual salvation and new birth, we are being made into a new creation (5:17), and most important of all, the hope of immediate presence with Christ and eventual resurrection of the body and life everlasting after our deaths and/or after Christ’s return (see 5:1-10).

The theological heart of the letter then comes in 5:11-21 as we are called to be ambassadors of reconciliation, helping others overcome their alienation with God by repenting and trusting in Jesus as well as functioning as peacemakers and helping people to be reconciled one with another. In this context 5:20 appears as one of Paul’s most significant statements on the substitutionary role of Christ’s death or atonement, the one who knew no sin was made sin on our behalf that we might be reconciled to God.

Chapter 6 does indeed include a somewhat distinct, brief exhortation beginning at verse 14 and running through 7:1 about not being unequally yoked with unbelievers. The word for yoked here is different from that used elsewhere in the New Testament for marriage, and while one can deduce from a passage like 1 Corinthians 7:40 that it is important to marry someone who shares one’s spiritual commitments, Paul probably has other kinds of concerns such as worshipping false gods and being yoked in any context, and particularly in worship, with such people here in 6:14–7:1 as one reads the actual details of the passage.

Chapters 8 and 9 do indeed provide crucial teaching about financial stewardship in the context of Paul’s collection for those still suffering in Judea in and around Jerusalem as a result of the famine in the late 40s. We see here principles of giving that climax in such texts as 8:13-15 in which it becomes clear that the more one has the higher percentage one ought to share with the needy, giving from one’s surplus, not trading places with rich and poor, but being very honest about how much is surplus. And then again in 9:6-7 where we see the principle that generous or stingy giving in the material realm will have consequences for God’s generous or stingy blessing of us in the spiritual realm. This is not a passage that promises material compensation for material giving but refers to blessings of every kind and it is up to God in his sovereignty through his Spirit which kind of blessings he will give his people when they are generous in any particular situation.
Chapters 10 to 13, then, as we have already mentioned, do take on a much harsher, at times even ironic or sarcastic tone. It is possible without seeing the letter as formed out of more than one separate piece of correspondence to imagine Paul dictating his thoughts over a period of time as he is traveling en route to Corinth and having received fresh news of new intruders into the Corinthian church, perhaps very much like the Judaizers that we saw at Galatia and thus having to add these chapters, if they were not planned from the outset. But, as we have already said, there are ways to see the letter as a unity from the start as well.

Although Paul feels like a fool in being forced into doing so, his main tactics in these chapters is to compare his credentials with these false teachers, apparently along the lines of those who were insisting that Jewish credentials gave them some superior role and so he boasts in his Jewish credentials also, particularly in 11:21 through the middle of 23. But then he abruptly shifts gears and shows that the area in which these competing teachers cannot even begin to match him is in the catalogue of sufferings he has endured. Some of them simply for itinerant ministry and travel with the hardships of the ancient world, some of them overtly for his Christian faith, and so the most profound and extensive list of all he has had to endure proceeds through the end of chapter 11.

Perhaps the most striking of all being the number of times that he subjected himself to the thirty-nine lashes, the severe whippings from Jews in local synagogues, five times he declares in verse 24, which Paul could easily have exempted himself from by simply renouncing his Judaism and his affiliation with the synagogue and allegiance to Christ as any Gentile coming to Christian faith did in his time. But his concern for reaching his fellow Jews for the Lord made him stay in his Jewish context and receive repeatedly these horrific punishments.

Chapter 12 also returns to the theme of the value of suffering with Paul’s thorn in the flesh, some mystery ailment or bodily injury that refused to go away, that Paul prayed about particularly intensely on several occasions only to eventually be told it was not God’s intention to remove this. Strikingly, this passage comes in 12:7-9 right after his admission that he had some very unique, supernatural, possibly out-of-body experience that granted him visions of heaven and the throne room of God in ways that few other people have ever claimed to experience.

But to balance that, lest he become too prideful, he then had to endure these subsequent sufferings. The key principle in all of this, which is applicable to any situation of suffering, comes in 12:9, another rare, red-letter verse in which Jesus speaks directly, as it were, from heaven even after his earthly life. The Lord says to Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Here we have perhaps the most important text in all of Scripture against the common but extremely misguided
notion that it is always God’s will for his people to be healthy and/or wealthy, to experience good circumstances in this life. Indeed the text comes close to saying the opposite, that the more common experience, the situation in which God seems most likely to work is the situation in which his people are not outwardly blessed as among the rich and lovely and beautiful and most fortunate of human beings, because it is precisely in such contexts when God’s people turn to him and live with a measure of victory above their circumstances that others can truly see the supernatural power that they are relying on and as a result be drawn to Christ.

Key Applications

If we sum up this theological overview for 2 Corinthians then we might say something along the lines of suffering need not lead us to despair, it is not always, or perhaps often directly caused by God, but he does allow it, he sustains us in the middle of it, he uses it to bring us to maturity as Christians and to accomplish his will on earth often in more profound ways than in other settings. Clearly, by way of application, this is the most important New Testament book on dealing with the hardships of life and they are to be expected as the norm and not the exception.

ROMANS

We turn now to the epistle to the Romans, perhaps the most beloved and well known of New Testament letters, certainly one of the most influential throughout church history leading Martin Luther at the time of the Protestant Reformation, even much earlier leading Augustine to his conversion in the 400s, and countless others who have seen the heart of Paul’s Gospel most clearly and comprehensively surveyed, the most systematic exposition of salvation as God has provided it in Christ for humanity.

Background

The readers are Christians in Rome, the capital of the empire in the Italian peninsula, and this will be the first church chronologically to which Paul is writing which he did not personally establish or found. It may be Jewish pilgrims to the first Pentecost after Jesus’ death back in A.D. 30, or possibly 33, who returned back to Rome after hearing Peter preach and some of them becoming believers in Jesus who began the church there, we simply do not know. At any rate, because Paul cannot count on the church in Rome having heard the Gospel presented the way he believes it is important to phrase things, we have this most systematic of presentations of the Gospel.
We learn from reading verses in chapters 1 and 15 when Paul is discussing his travel plans that he is en route to Jerusalem, which means we are at the very end of the third missionary journey, he is departing from Corinth. If we compare the itinerary described in Acts 18 and 19 he is hoping to deliver the collection to the Christian leaders in Jerusalem and then begin again on a fourth missionary journey traveling still further afield, further to the west, and to make it for the first time now all the way to Rome and after a period of ministry there go even to the western-most parts of the known world for someone in the ancient Mediterranean, namely, the province and country of Spain.

Of course, we know from having read Acts that these plans, at least in the short run, are thwarted by his arrest in Jerusalem. He does, in fact, make it to Rome, but not as part of a fourth missionary journey, rather as a prisoner. Whether or not he makes it to Spain depends on whether he was released from that imprisonment and we will discuss this matter further when we come to background for 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus. Our date, therefore, is probably around 57 A.D. shortly after writing 2 Corinthians and returning to Corinth and finding the situation significantly improved there.

Outline

**Thesis: Not Ashamed of the Gospel (1:16-17)**

Paul begins with the conventional greeting and prayer of thanksgiving and then starts the body of his letter in 1:16-17 with two sentences that together form a likely thesis or main point for his entire epistle. He is not ashamed of the Gospel, because it is salvation for both Jews and Greeks and the principle by which people appropriate this through which the righteousness or justice of God is revealed is entirely by faith and not works of any law or to use Paul’s exact words in verse 17, “The righteousness of God is revealed as by faith from first to last just as it is written” – and then he quotes Habakkuk 2:4, “the righteous will live by faith.”

**God’s Wrath against Ungodliness (1:18–3:20)**

One might expect Paul to proceed to unpack these thoughts immediately, but instead he refers in 1:18 to a parallel revelation, namely, of the wrath of God against all sin and ungodliness. His logic, no doubt, is that for the good news of salvation to be cherished one has to convince one’s audience that there is something from which they need to be saved and so 1:18-3:20 outlines the universal sinfulness of humankind. The rest of chapter 1 clearly focuses on classic Gentile sins, particularly as viewed from a Jewish perspective.

2:17 clearly introduces the case of the Jew as well. Jews who have the law but fail to live up to it find themselves in the same predicament of sin having separated them from God, as do Gentiles who are without God’s special revelation in the laws of Moses. In
between 2:1-16 can be seen as anticipating the argument about the sinfulness of the Jew – “you who pass judgment on someone else” – in 2:1 perhaps reflecting the smugness that some hearing all of the Gentile sins ticked off in the previous half chapter could have begun to have, but because there is no explicit reference to Jews until 2:17 it is also possible to take 2:1-16 as reflecting the morally upstanding Gentile who would not see him or herself necessarily reflected in the vice list of the end of chapter 1. At any rate, by the time Paul reaches 3:10-20, he calls on no less than ten Old Testament passages to demonstrate that all humanity is sinful, no one is righteous by God’s perfectly holy standards, and, therefore, all of us need a savior.

**Justification by Faith (3:21–5:21)**

That brings him then to return to unpacking the thesis of the letter in 3:21 and following. 3:21-31 can be seen as the one or two paragraph version of Paul’s thesis that one is justified or declared righteous by God, wholly by faith and not through human merit of any kind.

As in Galatians, Paul appeals to the example of Abraham who was the father of the Jewish nation, but long before his obedience demonstrated his righteousness we read in Genesis 15:6 that he was declared or reckoned as righteous because of his faith. This accounts for the heart of Romans 4.

Romans 5 then develops the results of justification, which lead to peace objectively, that is, right-standing and cessation of hostility with God, but also the interpersonal dimension that we find in reconciliation, a relationship that goes beyond objective peace to subjective joy. But the Christian life does not end with being declared righteous.

**Sanctification through the Spirit (6:1–8:39)**

We are expected to grow in righteousness so that chapters 6 through 8 turn to what Paul frequently calls sanctification, actually becoming progressively more and more righteous or holy. It is assumed that the beginning of one’s Christian life contains the public right of initiation of baptism in water that is the outward sign of an inward change of heart. Thus, it can be closely associated with conversion as in 6:1-4, but it will involve a lifelong struggle against sin as the rest of chapters 6 and 7 make clear culminating in 7:14-25 with its striking contrast between Paul now even as a Christian struggling between what he knows he should do and what he does not do, what he knows the law of God tells him to do, but he finds himself violating it over and over.

Some finding this tension too strong to be reconciled with a redeemed life have assumed it must refer to an experience Paul had struggling with his obedience as a Jew prior to coming to faith in Christ, but texts like Galatians 1 in which Paul describes how he was growing in the faith as a Jew, and again in Philippians 3 blameless with respect to works of the law, and the various contexts of those statements suggest it is more
probable that this is a tension that Paul did not experience as a Jew. It was only as a result of God’s revelation of himself on the Damascus Road that he recognized his plight, and precisely because he now understood correctly how God is pleased and what holiness and perfection by God’s standards look like, that he is aware of how far short he falls. Certainly this has been the recurring testimony of those Christians throughout church history whom many of us would nevertheless look to as the great saints or most godly servants of God over the last two thousand years.

Nevertheless, there is the promise, Chapter 8, that there are no judgments that will lead to the ultimate condemnation of the believer, which he or she needs to fear, verse 1. And by the end of the chapter we read that the process begun with justification progressing through sanctification will come without fail to the true believer in the state of glorification, namely, being perfected and made sinless for eternity in the resurrection life to come. Thus, the chapter culminates in marvelous promises related to the believer’s security such that no one, nothing in all of creation can separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus.

The Role of Israel in God’s Plan of Salvation (9:1–11:36)

Much as we discussed with digressions in 2 Corinthians, Romans 9–11 can at first glance be seen as something not expected in this progression of Paul’s theological instruction, but on closer inspection they probably do make very good sense in this context. Romans 9–11 deals with the role of Israel in God’s plan of salvation, and after outlining all that he has in the first eight chapters it would have been very natural for Jew and Gentile alike in Paul’s Roman audience, having heard all of the many times that he bolsters his teaching with quotations from the Hebrew Scriptures, to ask why then, even now, a scant 25 years or so after the death of Christ are more Gentiles than Jews becoming believers and conversely why have comparatively few Jews accepted the Gospel message.

Oversimplifying some we can reply that Paul gives three answers, one for each of the three chapters, or a bit more precisely that each answer follows on from a question that the previous answer raises. Thus, chapter 9 in a nutshell teaches that sadly this pattern of predominant rejection of God’s message and messengers among Jewish people has been the case throughout their history. This is no new phenomenon unfortunately in the first century.

The tail end of chapter 9 sets up chapter 10 by then answering the question of why this has been the case. It is because Jews more often than not, again tragically, have been tempted to assume that salvation was by adequate obedience to the law rather than through faith in trusting God’s promises for the future and now that the fulfillment of those promises has arrived in Jesus the Messiah trusting in him explicitly.
Chapter 11 can then be seen as responding to the implicit question of whether this will always be the state, and the answer is no. Paul envisions a time in conjunction with the end of human history when the general whole of Jewish people alive at that time will come to faith in Jesus as Messiah, but these now are the times which he describes as of the Gentiles in which those who accept the Gospel are much more likely to be Gentiles than Jews, a period of time that we would still appear to be in. Now he is ready to turn to the ethical implications that flow from these theological truths that have dominated the first eleven chapters.

**The Ethics of Christian Living (12:1–15:13)**

Chapters 12 to 16 of Romans, therefore, teach on the ethics of the Christian life. We can see a systematic order of principles here as well especially after having encountered a similar sequence in 1 Corinthians. The basic principle is renewal of body and mind (12:1-2), but the individual task varying for each believer in specifics is for them to exercise their spiritual gifts but to do so in love, 12:3-13:14, a section, which after speaking of the gifts, begins and ends with explicit teaching on love and whose topics in between can be seen as specific outworkings of that Christian love. Finally, in areas that the Bible does not pronounce absolute right or wrong concerning, there should be tolerance as yet another outgrowth of Christian love, 14:1-15:13. Here we recall much of Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians 8 through 10 on the weaker and stronger brothers or sisters.

**Conclusion (15:14–16:27)**

Paul then concludes with detailed travel plans and closing greetings.

**Key Applications**

To summarize the heart of Paul’s theology in this magnificent letter we may distill three particular points. Every human being is a sinner and therefore separated from God. The process of reconciliation with God, therefore, involves justification, being declared right by God because of what Christ did on the cross, which we do not deserve; sanctification, in which we actually begin to grow in righteousness; and glorification in the life to come, in which we are made perfect never again to sin.

Finally, the truly reconciled person will exhibit substantial behavioral changes as reflected in the closing chapters with its ethical exhortations, while at the same time exhibiting substantial struggle or tension even if in time it is more inward than outward so that one can never claim to have arrived spiritually in this life or even to have come anywhere close to it. Clearly this is the best epistle, if we seek a one-sentence context in which to apply it, for clearly outlining God’s plan of salvation for those who know little or nothing of it.
THE PRISON EPISTLES (PART 1)

Background

The remaining letters of Paul fall into two major categories: the Prison Epistles, so called because Paul is in prison in Rome, that period of house arrest described at the end of the Book of Acts when writing them, and the Pastoral Epistles, the three letters written to individual pastors of local churches rather than first of all to the churches collectively, and apparently if they are genuinely from Paul’s hand must reflect a time subsequent to Acts 28 – these letters are 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus.

The four prison epistles are Philemon, Colossians and Ephesians, and Philippians. Philemon and Philippians are accepted by almost all scholars as genuinely from Paul’s hand. Colossians and Ephesians have often been disputed, however, due to a very different Greek style of writing, due to some key differences in contents of the letters, and due to questions about the circumstances in which they were penned. It may well be, though, that Paul was using a different scribe for these two letters and/or giving that individual freedom to write up Paul’s thoughts more in their own words.

It does appear that the circumstances are identical for Colossians and Philemon given the number of individuals who appear at the end of these letters who are identical as Paul’s traveling companions or those greeted in the church of Colossae. It also appears that Ephesians and Colossians belong together because of the joint references to Tychicus as the letter carrier. It may well be that Ephesians has a different style and/or contents because it appears to have been written for more than one church and indeed the oldest manuscripts in verse 1 do not have the words “in Ephesus” suggesting that each church may have filled in its own location as it was passed around to a variety of communities.

In terms of the readers, Philemon is the owner of a runaway slave by the name of Onesimus and the first letter thus far addressed to an individual, though it appears that he may be the owner and patron and elder of a house church that meets in his home, probably in Colossae because of the links between those two letters.

The letter to the Colossians then written to Colossae, a church roughly a hundred miles to the east of Ephesus, but again as with Romans no record of Paul ever having visited them, so that here we have the second church in which Paul needs to write somewhat more generally and he probably learned about them through his disciple Epaphras (see 1:7) who founded the Christian church there. Perhaps Epaphras was a person that Paul met when he was ministering during that three-year period of time in Ephesus and who then moved to plant the church in Colossae, or perhaps he was visiting from Colossae.
since Ephesus was the nearest major city and trade port to Colossae in the ancient Mediterranean world.

Ephesians may have been a circular letter because of its reference at the end of Colossians to an unknown letter to the Laodiceans, which the Colossians are to read and then give their letter to them. Intriguingly, Ephesus and Laodicea are both cities that the Book of Revelation would later be written to as part of a circular collection of letters and narrative that the Apostle John would send out to seven churches in Asia Minor and western Turkey all connected by roads in the order in which their names appear in that document. All of this makes it attractive to imagine Ephesians having been sent out to a number of communities including Laodicea and on this occasion including Colossae, though again, this is a speculative hypothesis.

Philippians, finally, is addressed to that church that Paul founded on his second missionary journey as the first church plant of his in the continent of Europe, a congregation, which, we learn from the details of Philippians 1:13 and 4:22 and elsewhere, had been of great encouragement to Paul even while he was in prison, a great help financially (4:10-20), so that in a sense this document functions as a thank you note to the Philippians for their support as well as addressing key theological and ethical concerns of the church in Philippi.

Because of the links already noted between Philemon, Colossians, and Ephesians, if they do genuinely come from Paul, they were probably sent out with the same letter carrier or carriers at about the same time from Rome eastward to Ephesus and then to Colossae somewhere in 60 or 61 A.D. Because of the more difficult times that Paul has gone through in prison that appear to suggest a later, bleaker stage of his imprisonment during that two-year period of house arrest with which the Book of Acts ends, Philippians may well have been sent out separately after the other three prison epistles closer to A.D. 61 to 62.

Exegetical Highlights

Philemon

Turning now to exegetical highlights of these various letters, in Philemon, Paul is sending the runaway slave Onesimus back to his master, Philemon, urging him to welcome him back now as a fellow Christian. Seemingly too short a letter to be considered inspired and timeless forever, but when we turn to theological implications we will see why.

Colossians

Colossians like Romans falls into two major sections, this time of almost equal halves, doctrinal and theological teaching in chapters 1 to 2 and ethical or practical teaching in
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chapters 3 to 4. Key exegetical highlights of the doctrinal section of Colossians include the so-called poem or hymn stressing the deity of Christ in 1:15-20, followed by one of the strongest statements of the deity of Christ in 2:9, while the rest of chapter 2 turns to combating the so-called Colossian heresy, false teaching there that seems to have combined certain elements of Judaizing, note the emphasis on ceremonies and rituals that fit into the Jewish calendar described in 2:16-17, but also the worship of angels in 2:18, a characteristic feature of Greek thought and of developing forms of Gnosticism and almost unknown in Jewish circles.

As a result, Paul encourages godly, ethical behavior highlighting particularly in the latter verses of chapter 3 and the opening verses of chapter 4 what many scholars have come to call the household code or domestic instructions, right relationships among believers in positions of subordination and of authority. Here the three pairs described are wives and husbands, children and parents, slaves and masters. Paul will unpack his thoughts in more detail in Ephesians with a similar household code.

**Ephesians**

Ephesians likewise divides into two equally-sized halves of doctrine and ethics, three chapters a piece. Ephesians begins with lofty thoughts introduced already in Romans 9, though we did not stop to comment on them there, about the predestining and electing role of God in calling believers to himself. But it is interesting that this is never described here or elsewhere in Scripture as in any sense violating human responsibility and freedom (see 1:11-12).

The doctrinal portions of Ephesians also stress as strongly as anywhere God’s saving grace, Ephesians 2:8-9, not by works, not by anything that humans could ever merit, and yet with a paradox that also is found throughout all of Scripture, to paraphrase the words of Calvin at the time of the Protestant Reformation, while salvation is always by faith alone, the faith that saves is never alone, it always does produce or is demonstrated by good works, so that Ephesians 2:10 immediately follows this magnificent statement of salvation by grace through faith with the complimentary affirmation that we are the workmanship of Christ Jesus created for good works.

Chapter 3 focuses on the mystery of the unity in Christ, now more clearly displayed than ever in the history of God’s dealings with humanity between Jew and Gentile and by application between any two warring nationalities or ethnic groups on the face of the planet.

The ethical half of Ephesians then turns in chapters 4 to 6 to using spiritual gifts to promote the unity of the church (recall Paul’s similar comments in 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12). An expanded household code that makes it clear that right relationships in situations of authority and subordination are a sign of being filled with the Spirit just as
much as is praying and giving thanks and singing spiritual songs. Indeed this segment in Ephesians is prefaced in Ephesians 5:21 by the reminder of mutual submission, all Christians submit to certain other Christians in a variety of contexts throughout life and unpopular as it may be in some parts of the world, deferring to others and putting others needs above self is a characteristic quality trait of the Christian life. Nor can we relegate the statements about submission and authority solely to situations in the first century, for in the context of the submission of wives and the authority of husbands; this is likened to the relationship between Christ and his church, clearly New Covenant imagery.

On the other hand the concept of biblical authority for people in relationships of headship has very often been abused and treated as if Christ made no difference. Clearly the way Christ exercised his authority, as Ephesians 5 explicitly goes on to highlight, was by giving of himself sacrificially in love for his people. Thus, the only legitimate form of Christian authority that a head of a family or of a church or of a community or a nation can exercise is that of servanthood rather than authoritarianism, that which puts the interests of those under that individual above one’s own interests, thus challenging a large segment of the Christian church throughout history, even where it has been recognized, that these commands have a timeless nature.

The fact that Philemon as well as 1 Corinthians 7:21 and elsewhere suggest that Christians should free themselves from slavery whenever possible, also reminds us that commands such as those to slaves and masters in the household codes of Colossians and Ephesians are not meant to insist that the very institution of slavery is timeless, merely that when people find themselves in these kinds of situations, without any alternatives, this is how Christians are to relate to each other.

In our next tape we will turn to the exegetical highlights of Philippians and then we will go back much more briefly through each of these four epistles commenting on significant theological and applicational summaries.
Lesson 11  ■ Prison Epistles (Part 2), Pastoral Epistles, Hebrews, and James

PRISON EPISTLES (PART 2)

Exegetical Highlights in Philippians

This is tape eleven of the New Testament introduction and survey series. We left off considering the Prison Epistles as a package and we are ready to discuss some of the exegetical highlights of Philippians. This is a less-clear letter in terms of Paul’s standard outlining, perhaps because it seems to take the form of a much more personal letter, though still addressed to a Christian congregation, what has sometimes been called a family letter or a letter of friendship dominated by reports on the well-being of the author and various intermediaries and go-betweens between himself and his audience as well as repeated expressions of concern for the well-being of that particular audience, in this case the congregation of the church at Philippi.

Nevertheless, 2:5-11 has certainly proved throughout history to be highly influential in the study of this book. An extremely important statement, perhaps originally in creedal or hymnic form, about the person and work of Jesus, his preexistence, his equality with God, his complete humanity in the incarnation, and the horribly agonizing death, which he was willing to die on the cross as an illustration of the full extent of his identifying with human kind and taking upon himself our sins.

As a result God restored him to the highest place of authority at his right hand and one day all humanity will bow before him and acknowledge his deity and lordship, his mastery and sovereignty over the universe. This does not suggest that one day all will be saved, for Paul uses language here similar to that found in Isaiah 45 in a context where it is clear that God is judging his enemies, rather it will simply be the impossibility of denying who Jesus is when he appears on earth at his return in glory in front of all the nations that every human being will have to acknowledge.

Chapter 3 also contains an important autobiographical sketch of Paul’s background as a Jew to which we have eluded before. Hardly feeling the frustration that some have attributed to him in trying to be a law-abiding Pharisee, but rather thinking that he was doing exceedingly well until Christ turned him around on the Damascus Road, so that now what once was of great value he considers as rubbish or dung, a term similar to what we saw in 1 Corinthians 4, that if it were to be translated as literally as possible would be strong enough to offend some modern-day people. Nevertheless, he does not
Imagine that he has arrived simply by becoming a Christian. In helpful tension with the great promises at the end of Romans 8 about the security of the believer is this reminder that it is the one who always continues striving along the path of righteousness seeking to attain the resurrection in the life to come who is the one who is eternally secure.

Indeed, already in 2:12-13 the juxtaposition of God’s sovereignty and human responsibility that we have seen several times already is present once again, perhaps as starkly as anywhere. “Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed, not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence, continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and act to fulfill his good purpose” (2:12-13). The command to continue to work out one’s salvation immediately followed by the reminder of the promise that God is the one who enables people to do precisely that.

Finally, in chapter 4 we see some injunctions and very precious promises about prayer, not to be anxious about anything, but to bring everything with thanksgiving to the Lord in prayer (v. 6), the promise of a supernatural peace, not the kind that the world can or can’t give as a result in verse 7. Notice that it does not say we will automatically get all of the specific requests we make of God. And then an exhortation to focus on all that is good and lovely and moral and upright in our world as an antidote, both to the anxiety that we are to turn over to Christ as well as to all of the temptations to sin.

The letter closes with a poignant statement by Paul of his ability to thrive in all socioeconomic circumstances – 4:13 must not be taken out of this context – “I can do all this through him, that is Christ, who gives me strength” – does not mean that we have the power to defy gravity or the power to defy spiritual laws or to do things God has not gifted us for, etc., but rather that we can, whether in prosperity or in poverty, with God’s help, relying on the power of the Spirit, be content in all circumstances. Thus, he expresses gratitude indirectly for the Philippians financial gift without in any way using language, which in his culture would have suggested that he owed the Philippians some kind of favor in return.

**Key Theological Themes in the Prison Epistles**

If we now sum up some key theological messages of the four Prison Epistle – from Philemon, at the very least, we learn that Christian freedom means equality in God’s eyes, treatment as fellow brother or sister even with those who are masters of some kind over us if they too are Christian, regardless of human circumstances. Philemon does not explicitly abolish slavery, but when Paul has already asked for Philemon to welcome Onesimus home as a brother, as a fellow Christian, and then goes on to suggest that he is confident that Philemon will do even more than what he has asked, there seems to be little more left than to actually grant him his freedom. Whatever the specific outcome of
Onesimus’ return to Philemon in Colossae, certainly as F.F. Bruce has put it well, this passage and this principle found elsewhere in Paul, as well, sowed the seeds for an atmosphere in which the institution of slavery could only wilt and die.

A theological summary of Colossians might well focus on Christ’s preeminent role as Lord over the church and, indeed, over the entire cosmos, the universe, and, therefore, the appropriate ethical outworking of acknowledging that Lordship. Theologically nothing more needs to be done to complete or add to the finished work of Christ on the cross. From a human perspective, therefore, no good works of Judaism, or rituals of Gnosticism, or any other performance-driven patterns of religion are necessary to bring about salvation or to merit any kind of other favor with Christ.

Ephesians, containing very similar teaching to Colossians, perhaps stresses somewhat more that Christ’s preeminence and finished work on the cross should lead to our understanding of the church as his body, of people all equal and equally dependent on his gifting, so that while we have great spiritual privileges as we are seated metaphorically now and one day literally in the heavenly places with Christ, our lives on earth are one of accompanying spiritual responsibilities – to be filled with the Spirit, to live out a life in right relationship with those in position of authority over us or subordination under us, and climactically in Ephesians 6 to recognize all of the Christian life as one of spiritual warfare, which we can win as we put on such basic Christian virtues that constitute the armor of God as faith and hope and sharing the Gospel of peace, salvation, etc., all undergirded by prayer. There is no exotic set of commands here to such things as territorial exorcisms or incantations or rituals of any kind to defeat Satan, God’s enemy, but simply recognizing who we are in Christ, claiming that victory, and living out the kind of ethical, godly life supported by prayer to which he calls us.

Philippians, therefore, finally, can be summarized perhaps most simply as the call to rejoice in all circumstances, as Paul in prison, indeed, is doing when conditions seem bleak as well as when he expresses gratitude for the arrival of a gift of material support from the church in Philippi as he does on the occasion of the receipt of this letter.

Key Applications

Contemporary applications beyond what have already been suggested in our remarks for Philemon, an excellent example of blend of pastoral tact, of indirect, polite requests, and yet, hence, that Paul has the authority not only to make such a request but to make them in a much more blunt fashion. For those of us who are in positions of Christian leadership, the more we can gain through others voluntarily supporting our leadership the better relationships we will develop, but there are times when authority must be exercised if more gentle indirect routes are not working well.
Colossians undoubtedly is one of the best epistles for someone to read for a short explanation of who Christ is, particularly in all his deity and exaltation. We might think of it somewhat akin to the role the Gospel of John plays among the four Gospels.

Ephesians, again quite similar, may also be thought of as the second-most detailed and systematic summary of the Christian message both in doctrine and in life after the Book of Romans and certainly one of the clearest expressions of the many facets of the spiritual life in Christ as both already triumphant in principle, but still a struggle even with cosmic evil forces.

Philippians, finally, is the second-most important statement of joy despite suffering after 2 Corinthians and a model of how to encourage others about one’s well being in ministry, challenging others to selfless unity, commending faithful believers publicly, warning against heresy forthrightly when necessary, but also thanking others for their support and demonstrating contentment.

PASTORAL EPISTLES

Background

We turn now to another collection of epistles taken in the interest of time together, the so-called Pastoral Epistles of 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus. All except very conservative scholars doubt if Paul is the author of these three letters even more so than the many who doubt the Pauline authorship of Ephesians and Colossians. Not only is Paul’s style here different again, different from even the different style of Ephesians and Colossians, but he deals with what appear to be more advanced, organized church structures than we see in the first generation of the church in the other letters and perhaps most puzzling of all, the letters do not seem to fit neatly anywhere into the chronology of Acts.

Thus, most scholars date these letters to the 80s or 90s after Paul has died, treating them as pseudonymous, that is to say falsely ascribed to Paul, though not in an attempt as a forgery to deceive anyone, but following what is argued to be a common, ancient practice of writing in the name of a revered master after he has died, a transparent literary fiction as a way of suggesting these are the things Paul would have said were he alive in a given context.

On the other hand, the different style may again reflect a different scribe and/or one given a greater freedom of composing in his own words Paul’s thoughts. There are hints of church leaders instituted from very early on the prototypes of the deacons in Act 6, the fact that in chapter 14 Paul and Barnabas appoint elders everywhere they plant
churches, and the reference in Philippians to the very two categories of church leaders, overseers and deacons, in the opening verse of Philippians that we see in 1 Timothy and Titus.

As for the date, these letters are probably after the end of the Book of Acts with 1 Timothy and Titus being written after Paul was released from the house arrest in Rome with which the Book of Acts ends as two early church traditions, seemingly reliable, suggest that he was. 2 Timothy would then reflect a second arrest and the arrest that did ultimately lead to his execution during the time of Nero’s persecution, sometime before Nero’s death in A.D. 68 back in the horrific Mamertine underground dungeon prison in Rome, not merely under house arrest.

If this reconstruction is accurate, then 1 Timothy and Titus must be dated to sometime between 62 and Paul’s death with enough time to write 2 Timothy just before that and 2 Timothy sometime not long before his death, which we cannot date precisely other than to say it was sometime during the four years of Neronic persecution of Christians between 64 and 68.

The readers are, first of all, Timothy and Titus currently functioning as pastors of local churches in Ephesus and the island of Crete, respectively, but also as we mentioned in an earlier lecture functioning as apostolic delegates since their roles throughout their ministries with Paul have taken a broader and more authoritative twist than simply being local pastors. This may well explain further for some of the distinctive style and contents of 1 Timothy and Titus. Recent commentators have suggested calling them mandate letters akin to the letters filled with commands written by Roman government officials to their underlings, a magistrate being commanded by a regional governor, for example, and charging them with how to conduct the local community affairs.

Clearly there are churches that Paul expects these letters to be read to behind the more specific and occasionally personal charges to Timothy and Titus. 2 Timothy then becomes an even more personal exhortational letter to Timothy to carry on Paul’s work after his soon-coming death.

**Exegetical Highlights**

**Criteria for Church Leaders**

Exegetical highlights of the three books include the most specific details of requirements or criteria for church leaders. Elders, when one compares 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, seem to be interchangeable with overseers and with pastors each reflecting a different function of that office. The word “elder” suggesting the common link with age in a world where age was understood and often, indeed, imply greater wisdom and certainly life experience. The overseer from which we get the English word “bishop”
reflecting the supervision and care with which such leaders had to watch over their flocks and the pastor, or shepherd, reflecting the nurturing, caring, coming alongside advisory or even counseling role of such church leaders.

The most famous and controversial criterion of these elders is no doubt the requirement that they be “the husband of one wife.” It is unlikely that this means that Christian leaders must be single since Paul was single, perhaps single again at this stage in his career as we saw in 1 Corinthians 7 and Jesus was always single and it is unlikely that Paul would have excluded both Jesus and himself from church leadership. Does this mean, “married only once” as in the case of ruling out polygamy? Perhaps, and yet if it means married only once this would also rule out a widower remarrying, which Paul allows for, or in the case of a widow as in 1 Timothy 5 he actually encourages younger ones to remarry.

Many have thought it rules out a divorced church leader, but it is not possible from the expression “husband of one wife” to say that divorce and remarriage are excluded, but being widowed and remarried are not. The language simply is not that precise. It seems more likely with a growing consensus of modern scholars, therefore, to see this like all of the other criteria in Paul’s lists as not a lifelong, unbreakable pattern, but a current practice. If a candidate for church leadership is currently married, then they should have demonstrated for some considerable period of time a lifestyle of faithfulness to that particular spouse.

**Deacon vs. Elder**

The key distinction between the elder and the deacon here in 1 Timothy 3 is that the former must be able to teach and whereas women are listed among the instructions for deacons, sometimes translated as “deacons’ wives,” but the word simply refers to women and more likely refers to women deacons, since we have considerable information from second, third, and fourth-century Christianity that such an office did exist of deaconess, it would later mutate and turn into the female orders of the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches such as nuns and abbesses in their abbeys.

On the other hand, there is nothing about any women listed among elders suggesting that, at least in Paul’s day, he envisaged the supporting role of leadership applying to men and women alike, but the final authoritative role, note the reference to authority in reference to elders in 1 Timothy 5:17, being reserved for men. This observation helps us to explain the puzzling and very controversial passage in 1 Timothy 2:11-15, particularly verse 12. Is Paul here forbidding all women from teaching all men or from exercising authority over all men in all conceivable circumstances in life? Chapter 3:15 clearly teaches that this is instruction for how people should live in the household of God. So, it would appear that Paul’s instructions are only in the context of church, and in the first century there were not all the diverse kinds of church gatherings and meetings that we
often have today. The church gathered for the purpose of worship and instruction (recall Acts 2:42). More likely, it is that office of elder that uniquely combines the two verbs and functions noted here, that of teaching under the auspices of the single authoritative office of the church, of elder, that is what is being limited to men.

That still leaves the question of whether such a restriction applies today or not. Many have argued that our world is so changed that the reasons involving some kind of false teaching at Ephesus, clearly discernible from a careful perusal of both 1 Timothy and Titus, simply do not apply today and all positions in churches should be open to all men and all women as long as they meet the other criteria.

On the other hand, the most immediate reason Paul gives in 1 Timothy 2:13 for his command, “because Adam was formed first,” suggests, by whatever logic Paul sees that as a rationale, that he is appealing to the order of creation and, therefore, to some more timeless principle. If we then ask does that mean that women should not hold the office of elder in contemporary churches but can do everything else, we are still not quite ready to give an answer, because as is the case with many labels for Christian ministry and service, just because a given church or Christian uses a certain label first found in the Bible in some setting today does not guarantee that that setting is indeed identical and functioning in the same way as it was in the Bible. I may call somebody a rector or a vicar or a term that is not even found in Scripture and they may, in fact, be functioning along the lines of a biblical elder, but I may call somebody an elder and have something quite different in mind than Paul did in New Testament times. So, if we are to be faithful not only to interpreting Paul’s meaning, but also to applying it, it would seem that the office or role today, and the only one still reserved for men in a church context is that which is acknowledged by the congregation as the authoritative teaching office.

In some churches in which there is a plurality of elders and all take reasonably equal turns preaching and all clearly are deemed to have the same gifts and authority when it comes to teaching, then this group of elders probably should still be all men. But in many contexts there is one key pastor, sometimes called a senior pastor, sometimes called a teaching pastor, sometimes in a small church the sole pastor, who alone among the various church leaders, no matter what they are called, exercises this particular role. Then other leaders, even though they may be called elders, should be allowed to be women.

It is also important to stress that even on this interpretation, which is a controversial one, too conservative for many and too liberal for many others, we are not suggesting that women should never preach. Women have preached more than many people realize in ways that God has uniquely blessed throughout church history, but they have tended to be in contexts where they have not held formal institutional office, though today in our modern world this is rapidly changing.
If 1 Corinthians 11:5 permits women to prophesy as long as they have the appropriate cultural signal of submission to their head, a husband if married, a Christian congregation if not, and Christian congregation as well even if married and its leadership, then if prophecy includes, as we suggested it did, the whole range of messages from those believed to have been directly and suddenly given by God for a specific congregation or time all the way to carefully thought out prayer-bathed and Spirit-filled messages as we hope we are giving when we preach, women must be encouraged to preach, but they can always be so encouraged under the supervision of a male elder or group of elders.

**Additional Topics**

After this, the remaining topics in the Pastoral Epistles, at least in the modern world, generate much less controversy. Certainly 2 Timothy includes an important charge to pass on sound doctrine as Paul realizes his life is almost over. 2 Timothy 2:2 itemizes four key stages in this process: oneself, one’s disciple, priming the disciples to teach other faithful individuals, and then casting the vision that they must in turn disciple those under them.

**Theological Themes and Application**

Broadly summarizing the theology of all of these letters, the church must be well organized with godly leadership concerned to guard the truth against heresy. For application these are the best epistles to turn to for how church should run and function and careful attention to the actual textual details no matter what one’s particular church tradition is about how church leadership functions, decisions are made and implemented needs to be much more carefully followed.

**HEBREWS**

**Background**

We have now completed our survey of the epistles of Paul and turn to the remaining letters of the New Testament beginning with the Book of Hebrews. We do not know who the author of this epistle is. Even in early years many suggestions were made. Some thought it was Paul and Paul’s name was later written at the end of some extremely late Greek manuscripts and as a result has made it into some translations of the Bible, particularly at the time of the Reformation, in English most notably certain editions of the King James, but these are very late manuscripts and all of the ancient ones lack any reference to any author.
All of the suggestions, ancient and modern, if it was not written by Paul suggest that it was one of his followers, such people perhaps as Barnabas or Silas or Luke or Apollos or others. But the Christian writer Origen around 200 A.D. perhaps said it best, that God only knows who wrote it, but it certainly has all of the marks of inspiration found in other writers and enough Pauline concepts, if not style, to suggest that someone related to Paul, much like Luke in the case of writing the Gospels, was the apostolic author in the sense of apostolicity that the early church meant when it used this as a criterion for including books in the Bible, not necessarily written by one of the twelve per se but, if not, written by someone who had access to the apostles and to the teaching that reflected orthodoxy in the first century.

We are not entirely sure of the readership either. At the end of Hebrews the writer brings greetings to his audience from those who are with him from Italy, probably a reference to Rome, the major city and capital of that peninsula. But does this mean that the writer is in Rome writing elsewhere, perhaps to Jerusalem as some early church traditions suggested? Or that he is outside of Italy with some others who are from Rome writing back to the Roman church? Another frequent suggestion throughout church history and probably the most common one today. If this is the better of the two suggestions then we may hazard some further guesses. From 12:4 that “no one has yet shed his blood by resisting sin,” if that sin includes the sin of persecution by oppressors, this would suggest that we have not yet reached A.D. 64 when Nero’s persecution and martyrdom of believers, particularly in and around Rome, began.

In Hebrews 10 we read about those who experience the confiscation of their property at an earlier date, probably an illusion to the expulsion of Jews including Jewish Christians from Rome in A.D. 49. This suggests that we are in those years of the early 60s building up to the Neronic persecution if not there yet. And because of the Jewish contents and the traditional title of this letter that the author is writing from somewhere outside of Rome, perhaps Jerusalem, back to Jewish Christians no doubt congregating in fairly homogeneous house churches of largely or exclusively fellow Jewish Christians in Rome as times are getting tougher.

The main thrust is to warn these Christians not to fall away from explicit faith in Jesus believing that they could revert back to pure, non-Christian Judaism and thus avoid persecution. If we recall from earlier lectures, this was that freedom that Jews were uniquely granted under Roman law, not to have to worship the emperor. Because, as Hebrews stresses, Jesus is superior to all other religious options and particularly to all the various institutions and rituals and persons of Judaism one might otherwise be tempted to trust in. Apart from Jesus there is no salvation, thus to reject Christ is to commit a sin from which one cannot be brought back to repentance unless, of course, it is not full-fledged apostasy and there remains some spirit of genuine faith that can indeed call on the living God.
Outline

Thus, an overall outline of the book would highlight Christ’s superiority over angels, over Moses, over the entire priesthood, over the old covenant and finally even over all of the great heroes of faith of Old Testament times.

Punctuating these theological affirmations, some developed briefly, some in great detail, are five major warning passages against committing apostasy, against once and for all rejecting Jesus with no thought of return. Here the classic debate over the security of the believer continues to rage. When someone professes Christ, perhaps is active in church circles, even to their close friends seem to have a genuine faith and then gives it all up, not just committing some individual sin, not just having perhaps even a prolonged period of less active faith, but publicly, clearly, once for all, without any hint of changing his or her mind throughout the rest of their earthly lives rejects any allegiance to Christianity that they might once have claimed to have, what does this mean about the spiritual state of such a person?

The more Calvinist perspective argues that such behavior shows that one was never truly a Christian in the first place. The more Armenian perspective is more willing to say these are people who were true believers but through the freedom God grants humanity, which includes the freedom to choose for Christ initially, they can turn their backs on Jesus and be lost.

While the debate remains an important one, what is even more important is to note what both sides agree on. It is possible to do the various things we have outlined and to be lost for all eternity, therefore, the author of Hebrews warns in no uncertain terms again and again against such behavior. The two sides disagree on what that proves about what a person once was, which is an important debate, but it is certainly not the most important.

We also see here, particularly in chapter 7, the development of the theme of Jesus as the great high priest. Indeed, this is the only New Testament document that explicitly develops this concept in Christian theology. But how could Jesus be a priest by Jewish standards since you have to be of the tribe of Levi and the family of Aaron, whereas the Messiah, as Jesus was believed to be, had to come from the tribe of Judah and, indeed, we learn from the Gospels that Jesus did?

The answer according to the author of Hebrews is that Jesus is not like the literal Jewish priests, but like that strange figure introduced ever so briefly in Genesis 14 and in the Psalms by the name of Melchizedek who was a priest in the Canaanite city of Salem back at the time of Abraham, which was the predecessor to the city of Jerusalem, and yet he is called in the midst of a pagan people, “the priest of God Most High,” a term normally used in the Old Testament to refer to the God of Israel.
Perhaps he had a vestige of true knowledge of the one living God of the universe, if, indeed, the Genesis story is true that monotheism actually preceded polytheism in the history of religious worship. If Melchizedek was a true believer, then a priesthood like his, coming even before Abram was marked out and sealed with the demonstration of his obedience at the time of the offering of Isaac in Genesis 22 confirming the covenant that Abraham had been receiving from God in stages up to that point, it would seem that Melchizedek is superior even to Abraham, the grandfather of Jacob and father of the various Jewish tribes.

But the psalmist enables the author of Hebrews to take the argument one stage further. Psalm 110 refers to Messiah, the Lord who is above David the king to whom God speaks, thus leading to the provocative statement, “the Lord says to my Lord, ‘you are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek,’” an indestructible priesthood, one not based on paternity or ancestral credentials. This is what Hebrews most likely is meaning when he says Melchizedek is without father or mother or without offspring.

Thus, Jesus’ priesthood, not derived from his biological father or his human mother, not derived from being of the right tribe to be a priest, and not passed on to any children is a superior priesthood to that of the literal sons of Israel and, therefore, if Melchizedek’s priesthood is superior and Jesus has a priesthood like that, he also is superior and his priesthood is superior to the Jewish high priests.

This leads to the related superiority of the New Covenant to the Old, which also is unpacked under the concept of the once-for-all sacrifice by Christ and its eternal effects. We see further in Hebrews a powerful cluster of definitions and examples of faith in chapter 11 as confidence in the future despite the appearances of the present.

Key Theological Themes and Application

Summarizing Hebrews theology then, the way of Christ has replaced every other way of salvation both real and imaginary and apostasy is warned against in very strong language. For application, salvation is found only in Christ, but this must be demonstrated in a changed life, which perseveres to the end. Many who profess to be Christians who lapse back into unbelief may have never been genuinely saved. We should be very careful before ever presuming to be sure of anyone else’s spiritual state.

**JAMES**

Finally, on this lecture we will look briefly at the short but very important letter of James, the first of the General or so-called Catholic Epistles, because it was believed in
the early church that they were written to multiple congregations at least over one particular geographical area.

Background

The author here, if we follow unanimous ancient church tradition, is James the half-brother of Jesus, since the major apostle by that name was martyred already in 44, too early, and the other James, a disciple, seems to have been a much more insignificant figure. This James is the one who became the leader in the church of Jerusalem particularly at the time of the apostolic council in Acts 15 and writes to a Jewish Christian readership in the dispersion outside of Israel (1:1), perhaps as early as the late 40s, since language is used that appears to contradict Paul, but with different definitions so that it, in fact, does not. But is it likely that James, writing after Paul’s letters began to be well known, would have used such potentially misleading information?

The circumstances of this community appear to be one of largely poor, marginalized, agricultural day laborers akin to what we might call migrant workers in the modern world, or guest workers, more euphemistically, as the expression is used in some parts of the world today.

Three Key Topics

Three key topics are interspersed throughout the letter in an outline, if one exists, that is very hard to determine, but it is clear that those three emphases are dealing with trials and temptations, the former coming from difficult external circumstances, the latter sometimes even first produced by the former, triggered by internal improper desires, trials meant to bring us to maturity are to be welcomed (see especially 1:2), but seductions to sin are clearly to be shunned.

A second key theme that James comes back to again and again deals with the topic of wisdom and speech, of right, godly behavior, particularly in the area of the use of one’s tongue. God will give us supernatural wisdom if we ask for it. We are to be good stewards of it particularly by what we say. Not too many should become teachers because teachers speak a lot and sins of speech whether via factual and theological error or by unkind words can affect far greater numbers of people than those who speak in more private contexts and while such sins can certainly be forgiven, the damage may often take a long time to undo.

And then, finally, the third key exegetical topic of James involves the right use of riches. It is the poor whom God shows special favor to precisely to undo the imbalance that rich people most often receive in this life. It is not that poor people are automatically saved, but they often are, as history has shown, much more open to the Gospel, because
they realize that their wealth and position in this life cannot provide them all of the needs that they think they have. Thus, we should not discriminate against the rich but recognize that the rich more likely than not are going to exploit the poor. The right use of riches, therefore, is one that takes care of the poor and needy particularly in the Christian community, particularly in our midst, and great woes are pronounced on those, whether professing Christians or not, who simply continue to oppress and/or ignore the needy.

**Faith vs. Works**

It is out of this latter theme, this last topic in chapter 2, that emerges the subordinate topic that has occupied the greatest amount of attention, particularly since the Protestant Reformation; namely, faith versus works in 2:18-26. Paul speaks about justification coming by faith apart from the works of the law clearly in Romans 3 and Galatians 4. James at first glance appears flatly to contradict this by saying, “Faith without works is dead.”

But for James faith refers in this context to an intellectual ascent to Gospel truths without the appropriate behavior that must flow from it, the kind of faith that even demons can have because they know that God exists (2:19). When Paul speaks of saving faith apart from works, he is referring to full-orbed trust in Jesus, which as we have seen in texts like Ephesians 2:10 and Galatians 5:6 and Philippians 2:12-13 does indeed lead to good works, but they are not the works of the law, they are not legal works, they are not acts of obedience to the commandments of the law of Moses without having filtered them through the grid of how they have been fulfilled in Jesus and whatever changes Jesus’ life and death may have introduced, and what is more they are works of the law offered in the hope of earning salvation, not demonstrating out of gratitude God’s salvation already provided for us as James understands things. In short, Paul is speaking of Christian faith and Jewish works while James is speaking of Jewish faith and Christian works and there is no contradiction.

**Key Applications**

Summing up the key emphases of James, therefore, faith like God is single-minded, single-minded in recognizing God in Christ doing works as an outgrowth of one’s faith and anything else that might go by the name of Christian apart from this is not the real thing. A key application, therefore, is to recognize that one who claims to be a Christian should have noticeable, significant transformations in their behavior and especially in their use of material possessions. As Jesus said way back in the Sermon on the Mount, “You cannot serve both God and mammon” – money and all the material resources
Mammon is undoubtedly God’s strongest modern competitor for human allegiance even within the church of professing believers.
Lesson 12 • General Epistles (Part 2) and Revelation

1 PETER

Background

This is the twelfth and final lecture in our series on New Testament introduction and survey. The remaining General Epistles that we have not yet covered include 1 Peter. The author according to uniform early church tradition was the Apostle Peter himself, the early leader of the twelve and one of the three inner core who were close to Jesus throughout his life and participated in various events that the entire group did not.

As with the letter to James the opening verse suggests that these could be Jewish people in the dispersion, Peter calls them God’s elect and specifically identifies them as dispersed throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, five provinces in the western and central parts of what today we would call Turkey.

But unlike James where references to God’s elect or to other uniquely Jewish terminology seem to be implied literally. In 4:3-4, we read Peter writing to his congregations, “for you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do,” and then come distinctively pagan vices: debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing, and detestable idolatry. The pagan friends and family members are now surprised that these new believers do not join them in their reckless, wild living and they heap abuse on you.

It would appear, therefore, that Peter has taken terminology that once applied exclusively to ethnic Jews or those who converted to their religion and is now applying it to the church of Jesus Christ, Jew and Gentile alike, but in this context primarily Gentile. This makes 2:9-10 particularly important because of its broad cluster of such uniquely Jewish terms now applied to Christians: a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, once not a people, but now the people of God, once not having received mercy, but now having received mercy.

On Petrine authorship we must date this letter prior to Peter’s death according to church tradition, martyred under Nero sometime between 64 and 68. But it is not clear that full-fledged state-sponsored persecution has begun yet. 3:13-14 read, “Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good, but even if you should suffer for what is right you are blessed. Do not fear their threats, do not be frightened.” In other words, this
appears to be at a time when Peter can still think that more often than not Christians who are good citizens will not be harassed or punished for that.

The closing greetings of the letter refer to “she who is in Babylon, chosen together with you sends you her greeting and so does my son Mark.” Babylon was, of course, the great evil empire in Old Testament times, but here is probably a code name for Rome as it is even more clearly in the Book of Revelation since ancient Babylon lay in ruins and only a small village had emerged in that part of what today would be Iraq. Rome, however, is being viewed increasingly as the contemporary Babylon, but if this letter were to fall into the wrong hands Christians could deny that it had anything to do with the Roman authorities. All of this combines to suggest that we are probably in the early 60s, perhaps even as late as 62 or 63 or the earliest days of 64 just before Nero’s persecution broke out, it may be looming on the horizon but has not yet unleashed its full fury.

Outline and Exegetical Highlights

In response, the outline and exegetical highlights of the letter can be understood as a series of antidotes, or ways of thinking and behaving in all kinds of suffering, but particularly in persecution for one’s faith. The opening greeting reminds the readers of their true identity in the world as strangers, because their citizenship is in heaven. And then the praise or thanksgiving from verses 3 to 12 encourages us to keep an eternal perspective on sufferings, however intense they may be, they are extremely temporary compared to all eternity and with the right attitude can have a refining and maturing effect on us.

1:13–2:10 then encourage believers to rally around each other, to make the church a refuge, a place of love and holiness and care and nurture for one another when the external world proves particularly hostile. But balancing that in 2:11 and running at least through 3:7, some would take the section to go considerably longer, is a reminder to be a good citizen within society, just as slaves who cannot yet gain their freedom are to obey their masters, just as wives, particularly those who have unsaved husbands, should lead an exemplary, submissive life in hopes of winning their husbands to the Lord.

This has been called a New Testament equivalent to that remarkable passage in Jeremiah 29:7 in which the Israelites exiled in literal Babylon of old were called by the prophet to seek the welfare of the city, because as the city prospers so they would prosper. So, on the one hand they are to be pure and distinct from the world. On the other hand, they are to model that with good behavior according to expected social norms of the time in full view of the world.
In this context there is in chapter 4, actually beginning in 3:18 and extending through 4:6, the passage that has perhaps led to the most spilled ink, what does Peter mean when he refers to Christ, who throughout this letter is the model for patience and godliness and suffering as having suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, a clear reference to his atoning death on the cross, but then Peter continues, “he was put to death in the body, but made alive in the Spirit in which he went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits, to those who were disobedient long ago and God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built”?

We do not have time to survey all the different suggestions that have been made throughout church history, but merely to outline the view that seems to reflect the majority of modern scholars across the theological spectrum. This does not appear to be any second-chance offer of salvation to those who have died, nor even a first-chance offer of salvation to those who had not heard the Gospel in this life. Rather, the verb here for “made proclamation” or “preached” is not the typical New Testament word for preaching the Gospel with an offer of repentance, *euangelizo*, from which we get words like evangelize, but it is rather *kerusso*, which simply means to announce a message like an ancient herald did.

Imprisoned spirits, using the plural reference “spirits,” most likely refer to the demonic world. In all but one instance elsewhere in the New Testament where “spirits” is used in the plural there is unambiguous evidence that these are angels or demons unless there is some clear qualification in the context to point out that human spirits are in view. In fact, a case can be made that in all other passages in the New Testament, with some ambiguity in one instance, such supernatural spirits are in view when the plural appears without some further qualification. Most likely, then, Christ is being described here, after his death, at some unspecified point, while his spirit remained alive, going and announcing to Satan and his demonic hoards in the realm of the dead that they were defeated, although the full outworking of this would await his second coming, it was guaranteed by Christ conquering death on the cross.

What then is the reference to those who disobeyed long ago in verse 20? Probably to the particularly wicked race that led God to destroy all but Noah and his extended family in the flood. That reminds Peter typologically of baptism, but the phrase “baptism that now saves you” must not be taken out of context, we must read the entire sentence. It is not the removal of dirt from the body, not a literal washing, but the pledge or appeal of a clear conscious toward God. In other words, the outward symbolism of an inward change of heart and life which is what, in fact, truly saves, not the ritual but the trust in Christ and the repentance that accompanies it.

And the reason that is possible is because of Jesus conquering death in the resurrection, the last part of verse 21, “who has gone into heaven,” a reference to the ascension, “at
God’s right hand,” a reference to Jesus’ exaltation with angels, authorities, and powers in submission to him so that this second reference to angels and demons seems to confirm our earlier interpretation as well as perhaps indicate when all of this took place, not necessarily between Christ’s death and resurrection, but as part of his return to God during the ascension given the common Jewish conviction, not merely that demons could be depicted as part of the underworld, but also that Satan, as in Ephesians 2:2, was the prince and power of the air.

Or that in 2 Corinthians 11 when Paul was given a vision of the third heaven it was because the first heaven is the atmosphere, the skies that we can see, the third heaven is the very throne room of God, but in between in the second heaven is the area of unseen warfare between angels and demons. This is more than just idle theological speculation, because 4:1 goes on to suggest that because Christ conquered even despite and indeed through suffering we can as well.

Verse 6 then will not contradict anything that we have said in terms of a second chance after death or even a first chance after death of receiving Christ, but rather as in the NIV and several other modern translations, this is the reason the Gospel is preached even to those who are now dead, an interpretation that suggests because all when they die will eventually have to stand before God on Judgment Day, we want to try to preach the Gospel to as many in this life even when harassment and persecution accompany that, because those who have responded properly, even though they have now died are living eternally with God.

The rest of the letter includes a reminder that it will not be long before such judgment begins and encourages proper responses and submission to church leaders along with proper sacrificial self-giving leadership on the part of those elders of the church.

Key Theological Themes

Summarizing the theology of the book we may conclude that Christians are called to endure persecution patiently and as one key application, prayer may be more effective than rebellion in overcoming many problems. But in a democratic society, unlike the totalitarian regimes of Rome, we must participate as much as possible in the corrective process as well.
2 PETER AND JUDE

Background

2 Peter and Jude are often taken together because of their very similar contents, at least when one compares the second chapter of 2 Peter with the single chapter letter of Jude. Jude is, like James, another half brother of Jesus. Here the claims to authorship, particularly of 2 Peter, are highly debated, in fact, 2 Peter is the one letter whose authorship was doubted despite the ascription to Peter even in the early period of church history.

The readers are not specified at all. There may be specific communities in mind, but one can understand why they were included among the General Epistles, because there is no way to limit them simply from the texts themselves.

If 2 Peter does indeed go back to Peter despite a radically different writing style, then it must be dated before his death, again in the mid to the late 60s and Jude would appear to be earlier still because 2 Peter 2 reads much more like it has depended on and modified Jude than vice versa.

Key Themes

The main theme of both letters is the concern to preserve true Christian teaching in view of widespread heresy, especially in three areas brought out most clearly in consecutive chapters in 2 Peter: the inspiration of Scripture (see especially 2 Peter 1:16-21), the immoral depraved lifestyles of the false teachers (2 Peter 2 and the entire letter of Jude), and a denial of the belief in Christ’s return (2 Peter 3).

It would appear that behind these manifestations of the false teaching is the unifying conviction of disbelief in the supernatural and, therefore, disbelief that the world would end one day with the return of Christ supernaturally, resurrected from the dead to usher in final judgment for all peoples leading to eternal destinies of either heaven or hell. Apart from the supernatural there is no supernatural inspiration of Scripture making them uniquely authoritative. There is no reason not to live according to one’s pleasures as long as one’s lifestyle does not get in the way of preserving those pleasures and there is no reason to believe in the return of Christ to hold us accountable. Of course, Peter and Jude vigorously deny these claims so that a central application of these letters is that Christians must know what beliefs are central to their faith, that put their salvation in jeopardy, and only those, and take care not to let church leaders teach or practice them.
Perhaps the most significant verses in either letter come in 2 Peter 3:8-9 as an explanation for the problem of suffering and evil in the world or more particularly an explanation for why God has not already brought an end to human history as we know it and Judgment Day, which has promised to right all of the present and past wrongs of the world. The answer is that he is not desiring any to perish.

This does not mean that many will not be lost, but that it is not his desire, but he has given us a measure of freedom to choose for ourselves within the limits of his sovereign choices himself. And, of course, as soon as all the evil in this world is put to an end then all human freedom to rebel as well as to choose in favor of God is also put to an end and no more can be saved. Thus, what seems to us like a delay increasing human suffering is actually his gracious choice to allow more people in turn to respond to him.

THE LETTERS OF JOHN

Background

The three little letters of John tradition scribes to that beloved apostle, son of Zebedee, and their style is, indeed, quite similar to the Gospel ascribed to John as well. Certainly it is the easiest Greek to read in the New Testament and reads quite like what a fisherman writing in a learned second language might have been expected to produce.

That same early church tradition as with the Gospel suggests that the readers are Christians in and around Ephesus. 2 John specifically is written to the elect lady and to her children, which has from early times on most often been understood to be a house church within the community of churches in Ephesus. And 3 John is written to an otherwise unknown Christian in that vicinity by the name of Gaius.

The date and circumstances as with the Gospel appear to be the late 80s or early 90s, probably a little bit after the Gospel combatting Gnostic tendencies, which we have discussed earlier in this lecture series, or at least combattingDocetic tendencies, that view that believed in Christ’s full deity but not his humanity. The epistles may even be a response to a possible over-reaction to the Gospel of John stressing the deity that he emphasized there so strongly that now a corrective has to be made in the area of his humanity and in other responses to the theology of the Gospel of John as well.

Three Key Themes

The letter is about as difficult to outline if not more so than the letter of James and like James is better analyzed simply under the headings of three key themes or tests of true life that John keeps coming back to again and again throughout the letter. These include
belief in Jesus as the Son of God come in the flesh, obeying all of God’s or Christ’s commandments, and loving one another. 3:23-24 is a good sample of how all of these are intertwined.

Unconsciously, perhaps, John has combined the emphases of James – belief plus good works, that is obeying the commandments, and of Paul – belief plus love. All three help combine together to demonstrate who is a true believer and who is not. If someone is wrestling with the question of whether they have truly trusted in Christ or believe adequately, a good barometer is to see if they are living a transformed life in ways that they were not before having made any professions of faith. But, conversely, for those who are kind, compassionate, humanitarian, loving people, often following morality similar to that of the Bible, one takes heart that they are true brothers or sisters in Christ, much more so if they have a clear profession of faith in Jesus.

A key problem in these letters has often been referred to as the appearance of perfectionism – 3:6 perhaps focuses the problem as poignantly as anywhere. “No one who knows God sins, no one who has seen him continues in sin” and similar statements are made throughout these epistles. But the full force of the continuous present tense needs to be taken into account here along with the repeated denials in 1, 6, 8, and 10 that anyone who claims to be sinless is a liar. John is not contradicting himself, but, again, simply saying that true believers will live transformed lives even while continuing to struggle, at times in many areas, at times particularly acutely in one area, with sin in their lives.

Nevertheless, John has particularly in 1 John 5:13 wants to stress by way of a contemporary application a strong assurance of salvation. But again it is assurance based on present realities. “I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.” He did not say, “I write to those of you who at sometime long past made some profession of faith, but have showed no interest in spiritual things ever since and indeed have been living consistently by quite different moral and ethical standards than those of Christianity.”

REVELATION

Background

Finally, we come to that very enigmatic and controversial Book of Revelation. John is the traditional author. Again, the style is quite similar to the Gospel and epistles, though with a little bit of variety, no doubt accountable for by the unique contents and genre of this closing document of the New Testament.
The readers are the seven churches in Asia Minor spelled out in the opening chapter and then addressed in the seven discrete letters that form chapters 2 and 3. John is writing a record of visions he has received from God while in exile on the Greek island and penal colony of Patmos in the Aegean Sea. This is, therefore, probably the last New Testament book written in the mid 90s during the persecution of the emperor Domitian.

In addition to containing two chapters of short letters and being delivered to communities as epistles more generally were, the Book of Revelation partakes of two main literary genres. The apocalyptic – “revelation” in Greek is *apokalypsis*, which was a commonly used form of writing by Jews, Greeks, and Romans alike and later Christian writers as well to depict in highly symbolic fashion convictions about the nature of history and particularly how it would end suggesting that humans are incapable on their own of bringing about a good and just and utopian society on earth so that God, and in Christian context in Christ, will have to intervene supernaturally to change the course of human history from the way we know it and bring about a golden age of peace and prosperity and/or the final state of humankind for all those who are God’s faithful followers and eternal punishment for those who are not.

But 1:3 makes it clear also that Revelation is genuine prophecy. However symbolically couched, however many visions God gave John in forms that would have been understandable to him as a Jew living in the Greco-Roman world at the end of the first century and meant to be communicated to people who would understand Old Testament backgrounds, intertestamental developments, and contemporary affairs in their world, however symbolic in light of all of these backgrounds John’s visions were, they do refer to real events – past, present, and/or future. Indeed, the close of chapter 1 with its reference to John writing down the things which were and are and will be, suggest that this past, present, future scenario can form the simplest outline of this twenty-two chapter book.

**Interpretive Grids**

There are all kinds of interpretative grids that could detain us at great length. One hears about premillennial or post-millennial or amillennial approaches to Revelation. In other words does Christ come back before the golden age of peace and prosperity or after it or is it entirely a symbolic description of the church age?

One hears particularly in premillennial circles debates of pre-, mid- or post-tribulational raptures. Does the event described as believers being caught up to meet Jesus in the air depicted in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 and elsewhere occur prior to that great tribulation, which climaxes in Jesus’ public return to earth? Does it occur halfway through it or at some point in its midst, or is it simply part and parcel of the picture of Jesus final public return to earth after the great tribulation.
Again, we don’t have time to go through the book reflecting all these different perspectives but merely to suggest our conviction that a post-tribulational, premillennial perspective does most justice to the work, but large sections of the book can be interpreted without recourse to this particular presupposition.

Outline

Thus, as we turn to the details of the book itself, after the opening vision of chapter 1 in which Jesus commissions John now as the triumphant returning judge to announce what must soon take place, the letters to the seven churches in chapters 2 and 3 reflect the full range of obedience through disobedience of representative churches in John’s world and probably the full range of obedience and disobedience in churches in every age.

The church in Philadelphia receives the greatest amount of praise with no criticism at all and is promised an open door, perhaps for evangelism and a powerful effect in its world. Although the church at Smyrna is also not criticized and yet promised a short period of suffering, a reminder that good circumstances by worldly standards are by no means promised to all those who remain faithful.

The church that has no praise attached to it and that is most condemned, the church at Laodicea is described as lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, neither therapeutically refreshing like the nearby hot springs at Hierapolis, nor invigoratingly cold like the cold mountain streams coming down from nearby Colossae, but like the actual water supply of Laodicea in the ancient world after long aqueducts pumped it from both of those sources disgustingly lukewarm, and, therefore, about to be spewed out of Christ’s mouth.

Chapters 4 and 5 turn to a heavenly scene of praise, of temporary wondering who will be able to open the scrolls that will describe the judgments with which this age of human history will come to a close, but then after pause and lament when it appears that no one was qualified to open those scrolls, Christ appears, described simultaneously as a lion, the king of all creatures in the universe, but also as a sacrificial lamb reflecting his completed, atoning work on the cross. It is important to recall this image because in apocalyptic literature in visions that are given one individual or entity can be described with two seemingly diametrically opposite visions or symbolisms. On earth there are no creatures who are simultaneously lions and lambs. They are about as distinct animals as one could imagine. But since this character is neither a literal lion nor a sheep, but Jesus Christ depicted in symbolic form as both coming triumphant king even after he once was a suffering sacrifice, both contrasting visions can be applied to the same reality.
Chapter 6 through 19 then forms the backbone of the Book of Revelation with a series of three sets of seven visions portrayed as symbolically depicted seals, trumpets, and bowls of God’s wrath. The seals are the kind of seals that one puts on a scroll and thus all of the seals have to be opened before one can read the contents of the scroll. This suggests that the judgments depicted in the visions of the seals beginning in chapter 6 are not part of the great tribulation of the final, unprecedented horrors of human history that take place subsequently, but the necessary prelude or precursors to those judgments.

And the nature especially of these first four judgments, things like famine and warfare and imperialism occurring on earth have indeed happened many times throughout church history. So, too, have the prayers of the saints asking how long such suffering must continue as in the fifth of these sealed judgments. The sixth of the sealed judgments at the end of chapter 6 seems to bring us to the climax of human history, but then when the seventh seal is depicted we have initially nothing but silence in heaven and more seals follow. Perhaps we are brought up to the threshold of the very end much like someone reaching the edge of a cliff looking over into the abyss only to withdraw from it and then to have another series of judgments move that person again towards the cliff’s edge, perhaps approaching it even more closely.

Thus, the trumpet judgments, many of them reminding us of the supernatural plagues unleashed by Moses against Egypt and against her Pharaoh in the Book of Exodus take on a greater intensity, now affecting repeatedly a third of the earth (see chapters 8 and 9). But still the majority of the earth remains unaffected. Again when we come to the sixth of the trumpet judgments we have the gathering for battle of the armies of the earth and it would seem that human history cannot continue in its same form, but the seventh trumpet judgment, which this time creates all kinds of cosmic and heavenly sound effects, but not a judgment of the same character as those that have been depicted earlier then gives way to yet one final sequence of seven judgments, the bowls of God’s wrath. Only after which do we read then that all has been finished or accomplished and we move to Christ return and final judgment. This suggests a kind of telescopic function of the twenty-one judgments. Each of the three series of judgments intensifying, no limitations to the final seven, but a certain recapitulative approach as if each one started nearer to the end bringing one even closer to the end at the end of its series, but then withdrawing some only to build and escalate toward the end yet again.

Key Theological Themes

Trying to correlate specific visions of judgment with specific contemporary events normally proves futile, though hundreds of such schemes have been suggested throughout church history, to date all of them have proved wrong. Thus, it is better to
see the broader theological themes that emerge through this main central section of Revelation. Themes such as God’s people will have to go through suffering. This is true on any interpretation of the Book of Revelation, because beginning in chapter 7 there are a group of people described as God’s servants who are sealed and protected from the judgments that reflect God’s wrath on unregenerate humankind, but those seals do not protect them from the attacks of the enemy or from normal human persecuting forces.

If God’s people will have to undergo unprecedented suffering in the final age, this is simply the climax of what God’s people have had to endure in most periods and most places of church history. Those who, like many of us in the western world, have had more comfortable lives than not are in the minority throughout Christian history and Paul could say in 2 Timothy 3:12, “Those who want to live godly lives in Christ will experience persecution.”

At the same time the sealing of Revelation 7 vividly depicts that God’s people will be protected from his wrath and common misunderstanding of Christians who believe that those alive in the final days who are Jesus’ followers will undergo the tribulation, is that such Christians believe that we must experience God’s wrath and the reply is – God does not pour out his wrath on his people, only on fallen humankind. But post-tribulationists agree with pre-tribulationists that Christians, whoever they are in the great tribulation, will not experience God’s wrath, just as the Israelites, thanks to the blood on their doors and on their thresholds, were passed over at the time of the judgment of the Egyptians and it is telling that many of the judgments in the second and even third series of judgments of the Book of Revelation remind us of the plagues of fire and of blood and of both fresh and saltwater turning to blood, and hail and darkness and so on, reminiscent of the plagues at the time of Moses.

At the same time these series of judgments also remind us that in this life even the most severe of God’s judgments on fallen humanity is always meant to give them one last chance to repent, to alert them to the reality of God and of his supernatural power. At the end of chapter 9 we are told in a back-handed confirmation of this truth that despite the great sufferings incurred by unbelievers through the trumpet judgments that they still did not repent, but this does, in fact, show us that that was one of the objectives and one of the possibilities of unbelievers’ response to these judgments.

It is possible that Revelation 11, however, suggests a more positive outcome. The two witnesses described in language that evokes memories of the miracles of both Moses and Elijah, whether referring to two individuals or the entire church or some option in between, all have been suggested, nevertheless shows that many after an earthquake in Jerusalem give glory to God, language which could, although it does not always, mean
repentance and response to God’s judgments. At the same time others remain simply more and more hardened in their opposition to God’s people and to God’s power.

Arguably, then, one of the major themes uniting these main central chapters of Revelation is that in the end times there will be trends, as have often been suggested throughout the interpretation of this book, but not often suggested at the same time by the same interpreters, namely trends both on the one hand that world evangelism and doing good throughout the earth, bringing justice and physical and social health and wholeness along with spiritual salvation in many parts of the world may well be on the increase. The conversion of people from every tribe and tongue and nation and people group, every ethnic grouping of humanity we are told in four separate passages in Revelation, will have representatives in the end times, so that God will have people from every division of humanity.

But at the same time evil and opposition and political and even religious powers will increase in their hostility eventually to create some worldwide empire with huge political, social, and religious influence that is not godly, that is anti-Christian. That such developments could, indeed, happen simultaneously is hinted at by the number of times throughout church history when persecution actually spawns the growth of the church.

Finally, however, this cosmic competition for the souls of men will come to an end. Christ will return. He will put an end immediately to all of the growing opposition and preparations for battle that have been made by the armies of the world. He will usher in final judgment, bring a thousand years in which he rules on earth in peace and prosperity and which sin is constrained, the devil is bound.

But as if to demonstrate both God’s remarkable concern that all people have free choice as well as to reflect the depths of evil and hardness of heart of those who choose to rebel and thus the justice of eternal punishment, at the end of this millennial kingdom Satan is released and he is able to deceive people from all nations again and there is one final rebellion against Jesus which is finally decisively squelched so that the final judgment of the wicked dead accompanies the earlier judgments of all other people throughout human history ushering in the eternal state described in chapters 21 and 22, where for believers of all ages and all places, there is no more suffering, no more crying, no more mourning or lamenting, no pain, no evil.

And these new heavens and new earth are depicted in glorious perfection with a new Jerusalem, all of the prophecies to Israel and to the church as the new Israel now coming to a climax in a city descending from heaven and depicted as a perfect cube of enormous dimensions meant to evoke the only building in the ancient world that was a perfect cube, namely the Holy of Holies within the Jewish temple in Jerusalem.
All of the prophecies of a rebuilt temple that have thus far not seen literal fulfillment seem to come to their symbolic culmination in the new community of redeemed people functioning like a perfect cube or temple in a city which we are told, in fact, has no literal temple because the priestly mediation, so central to the function of a temple, is accomplished by Christ himself and has been fully accomplished through his first and second comings so that no such mediation is further needed.

Nevertheless, we are reminded in this context that there is a reality outside these new heavens and new earth where those who have been hostile to the Gospel and persecuting Christians remain and their smoke goes up forever and ever as well, as we read back in chapter 14.

The ultimate theological summary of the Book of Revelation can be expressed in two words, Jesus wins. Ultimately, humanity will be divided despite all of its many humanly created divisions, into only two camps of individuals, those who are on God’s side and those who are not, who have rejected every offer he has made to them and who have however quietly or overtly rebelled against him and resisted his gracious offer of rescue. They would rather live in an imprisoned state of existence throughout all eternity than with God and all things good.

Key Applications

Clearly the most crucial application at the end of the Book of Revelation, at the end of this New Testament survey, is for every reader to search his or her soul and ask – are you one of Jesus’ people, are you one of his followers, are you on his side, will he acknowledge you at the final judgment because you have trusted in him as your Lord and Savior, you have committed your life to him, you do not believe you can do anything to deserve salvation, you are not trying to merit God’s favor on your own, either before or after some profession of allegiance to Jesus, but you are entrusting entirely in Christ’s merits, in his mercies. If so, you can have that blessed everlasting hope of a joyous existence beyond our comprehension in a life to come. If not, now is the day of salvation. Turn to Jesus. Say a prayer to invite him into your heart.

Seek out fellowship of believers, however close or far away they are from you. Learn his Word. Learn what it means to follow all of the teachings of Scripture in detail. Follow Jesus even to your death, for the alternative, however metaphorically depicted in the various images of Scripture, is an agonizing, conscious existence apart from God and all things good in a reality called Hell, and for our friends and for all people that we don’t have confidence know Jesus. As we saw in 2 Peter 3 he delays, or what seems to us like delay, so that as few as possible might perish.
Are our lives organized around serving Christ with our unique gifts, as Paul would put it in his images of each one with different gifts, united in building up the church as the body of Christ. Anything we do in life that does not in some way contribute to the well-being of humanity and open doors for us to talk about God’s plans eternally for humanity, as well as in this world, and under the Spirit’s sovereignty to give people every chance to become part of Christ’s forever fellowship and then to build them up in what it means as Christ said in the Great Commission – “teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.”

Anything that has no role to play in some aspect of that grand charge of God’s people on earth has no eternal or lasting significance at best and at worst distracts us and hinders us from doing God’s work, or in a worst case scenario from even being a part of that forever fellowship.

Will you take this time at the end of this series to pray that Jesus would reveal what parts of your life fall into which of these categories and to help you do all that you can to maximize the parts of your life that will count for eternity and to minimize those that won’t and then be faithful to the guidance the Spirit of God in Christ gives you as you seek to serve him?