

EXPLORING THE NEW TESTAMENT

Shepherds Global Classroom exists to equip the body of Christ by providing curriculum for rising Christian leaders around the world. We aim to multiply indigenous training programs by placing a 20-course curriculum tool into the hands of spiritual trainers in every country of the world.

This course is available for free download at <https://www.shepherdsglobal.org/downloads>

Lead writer: Dr. Randall D. McElwain

Copyright © 2019 Shepherds Global Classroom
Second Edition. ISBN: 978-1-943953-51-6

All rights reserved.

Third-party materials are the copyright of their respective owners and shared under various licenses.

Unless otherwise indicated, all scriptures are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Permissions notice:

This course may be printed and distributed freely in print and digital formats under the following guidelines: (1) Course content may not be altered in any way; (2) Copies may not be sold for profit; (3) Educational institutions are free to use/copy this course, even if they charge tuition fees; and (4) The course may not be translated without the permission and supervision of Shepherds Global Classroom.

Contents

Course Overview	5
(1) The World of the New Testament	9
(2) Matthew, Mark, and Luke	21
(3) John	33
(4) Acts	41
(5) Romans	55
(6) Corinthians and Galatians	65
(7) Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon	79
(8) Thessalonians	93
(9) Timothy and Titus	101
(10) Hebrews and James	111
(11) Peter, John, and Jude	123
(12) Revelation	133
Recommended Resources	140
Record of Assignments	147

Course Overview

Students should read the book or books of the Bible that will be studied in the lesson prior to studying the lesson as a group. At the end of each lesson, please remind students of the **reading assignment** for the following lesson. This will ensure that students know the basic content of the book prior to the study.

If studying as a group, you may take turns reading the material. You should stop periodically for class discussion. As the class leader, you are responsible to keep discussion from wandering from the material being studied. It is helpful to have a time limit for each discussion period.

Discussion questions and **in-class activities** are indicated by arrow bullet points ►. Try to make sure that all students in the class are involved in the discussion. If necessary, you can call on students by name.

Many footnotes refer to a **scripture** reference. Please have students look up the verses and read them during the class. Unless indicated otherwise, Scripture quotations in the lessons are from the King James Version (KJV) of the Bible.

Each lesson will include two assignments:

1. A **test**. Each test includes memorization of key Scripture passages from the books being studied. At the end of each class, the leader may review the test questions with the students. The following class session should begin with the test. Testing can be done orally or in written form. Tests should be taken without referring to the course book, written notes, Bible, or classmates. A test answer key is included in the back of this book.
2. A **project** or **writing assignment** that relates to the books and themes discussed in the lesson.

If the student wants to **earn a certificate from Shepherds Global Classroom**, he should attend the class sessions and complete the assignments. A form is provided at the end of the course for recording the assignments completed.

Map of the New Testament World¹

Please reference this map throughout the course.

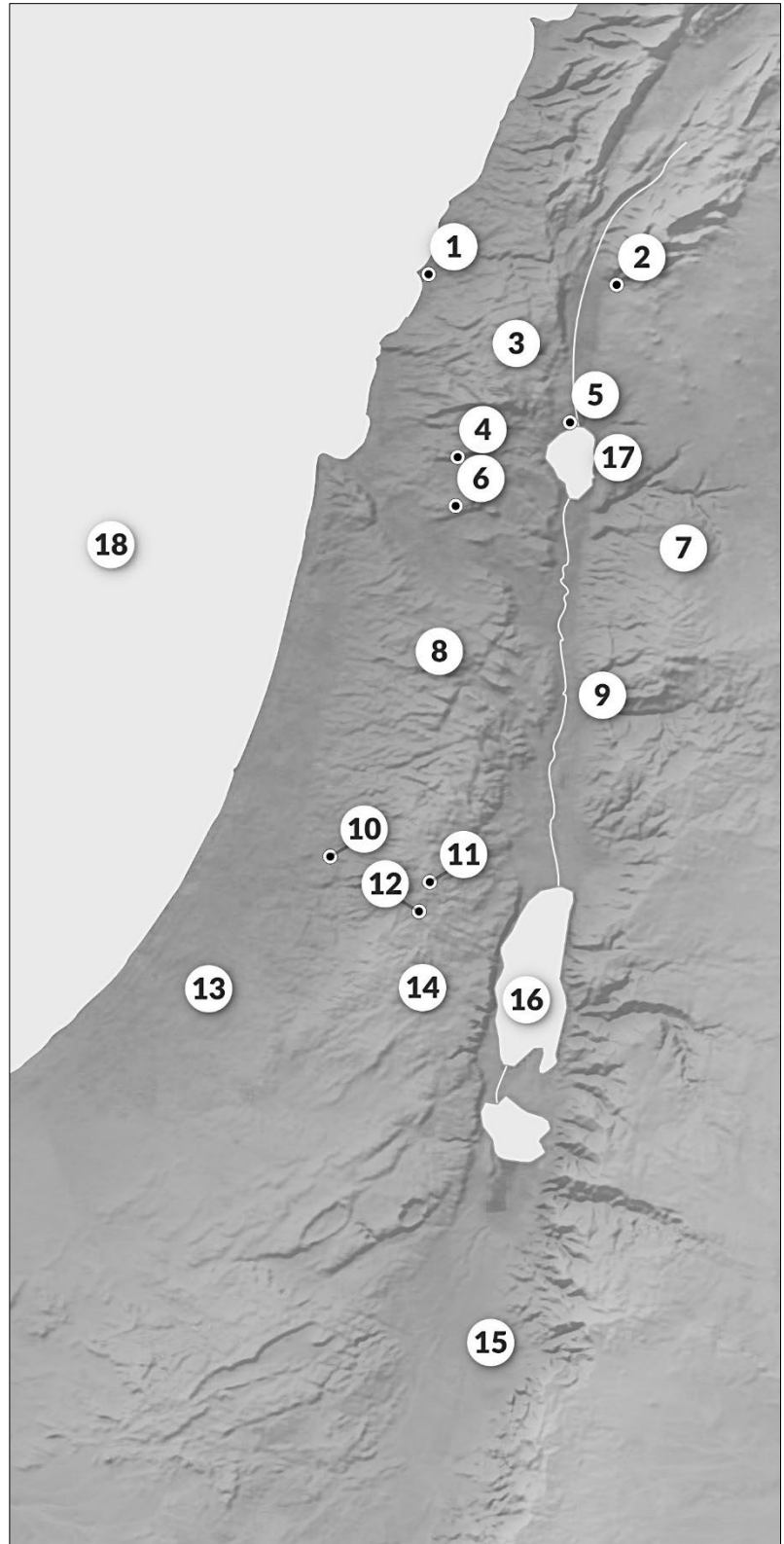


Paul wrote to	Important NT Areas	(15) Churches in Revelation
(1) Rome (city)	(8) Italy (region)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ephesus• Smyrna• Pergamum• Thyatira• Sardis• Philadelphia• Laodicea
(2) Corinth (city)	(9) Asia Minor (region)	
(3) Galatia (region)	(10) Antioch (city)	
(4) Ephesus (city)	(11) Israel	
(5) Philippi (city)	(12) Jerusalem (city)	
(6) Colossae (city)	(13) Crete (island)	
(7) Thessalonica (city)	(14) Mediterranean Sea	

¹ "Map of the NT World" was created by SGC with open data from NED and Bible Geocoding (CC BY 4.0), available from <https://www.flickr.com/photos/sgc-library/52344115203>, public domain (CC0).

Map of Israel²

- (1) Tyre
- (2) Caesarea Philippi
- (3) Galilee (region)
- (4) Cana
- (5) Capernaum
- (6) Nazareth
- (7) Decapolis (region)
- (8) Samaria (region)
- (9) Jordan River
- (10) Emmaus
- (11) Jerusalem
- (12) Bethlehem
- (13) Coastal Plain
- (14) Central Highlands
- (15) Judean Wilderness
- (16) Dead Sea
- (17) Sea of Galilee
- (18) Mediterranean Sea



² “Map of Israel” was created by SGC with open data from NED, SRTM, NASA, and Bible Geocoding (CC BY 4.0), available from <https://www.flickr.com/photos/sgc-library/52344178339>, public domain (CC0).

Lesson 1

The World of the New Testament

Lesson Objectives

- (1) Know the geography of Palestine and its importance to the New Testament.
- (2) Understand the historical setting of the New Testament.
- (3) Recognize Roman, Greek, and Jewish influences on the New Testament.
- (4) Appreciate the ancient customs and manners of the New Testament.

Preparation for this Lesson

- ▶ Read Matthew 1:1-7; Luke 1:1-5; 2:1-5.
- ▶ Memorize Galatians 4:4-5.

The Importance of History and Geography to the New Testament

- ▶ Is the historical accuracy of the Bible important to the Christian faith? Why?

The Christian faith is based on the acts of God in human history and in the life of Jesus who “was made flesh, and dwelt among us...”³ Because of this, knowing the historical setting of Christianity helps us understand the New Testament. The excerpts from Matthew and Luke at the beginning of this lesson show the authors’ emphasis on the historical setting of Jesus’ life.

Christianity is much different from many world religions. Students of eastern religions have shown that Buddhism is essentially the same without the Buddha; Hinduism is largely the same without many of its gods. However, Christianity is empty without the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. “If Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain.”⁴

Christianity is a historical faith; the Bible is a historical book. It does not record legends and myths; it is a record of historical events. Some scholars claim that the Bible is a collection of great ethical teaching illustrated by pre-scientific myths. However, the Bible does not give us this option; Scripture clearly professes to be historical truth.

The New Testament is based on events in a particular time, place, and culture. The time is the first century A.D.; the place is Palestine and the Roman world; the culture is Jewish, Greek, and Roman. Because of the importance of this historical and geographical setting, we will begin our study with a description of the world of Jesus and the early church.

³ John 1:14

⁴ 1 Corinthians 15:14

The Geographical Setting of the New Testament

See the map of Israel on page 7 to better understand this part of the lesson.

The land of Palestine is central to Israel's history and the earthly ministry of Jesus. Even the title "Jesus of Nazareth" suggests the importance in his life of a particular place.

Palestine is approximately 75 kilometers wide by 235 kilometers long.⁵ Though small, this area was in a strategic location for the events of ancient history. Its location between Egypt to the southwest, Syria to the north, Assyria to the northeast, and Babylon to the east made it a crossroads for trade and a place of strategic military importance.

West-East Land Features

Moving west to east (from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan River),⁶ a person traveling through Palestine encountered three distinct terrains. From the Coastal Plain along the Mediterranean Sea, the land rises through the Central Highlands to a high point of approximately 800 meters⁷ above sea level. Jerusalem was the high point of Israel, both spiritually and geographically.

Further east is the Judean Wilderness. A desolate area of mountains and rugged terrain, this region was dangerous for travelers and a difficult place to live.

From this mountainous area, the Jordan Valley drops to 415 meters⁸ below sea level, the lowest point of land on our globe. The Jordan River winds 100 kilometers⁹ from the mountains north of the Sea of Galilee to the Dead Sea in the south.

For much of his ministry, the Jordan River was the easternmost border of Jesus' travels. However, at times he crossed the Sea of Galilee to travel in the Trans-Jordanian area (across the Jordan—the area to the east of the Jordan River). This region included the *Decapolis* ("Ten Cities" founded during the period of Greek domination) and Perea. To the surprise of his followers, Jesus was willing to serve Gentiles in this region. In Decapolis and Perea, Jesus' disciples saw hints of his later commission to preach "in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."¹⁰

North-South Land Features

Moving from north to south, a traveler moved from Galilee through Samaria to Judea, the religious and political center of Palestine. Galilee was a commercial region surrounding the Sea of Galilee, a freshwater lake. Nazareth was one of many small villages in this beautiful area. Galilee enjoyed an abundance of fish from the Sea of Galilee as well as fruits and

⁵ 45 miles wide by 145 miles long

⁶ Image: "Israel's Topography," retrieved from https://www.preceptaustin.org/biblical_maps

⁷ 2,600 feet

⁸ 1,370 feet

⁹ 65 miles

¹⁰ Acts 1:8

vegetables produced year-round on the Plain of Gennesaret, a mild area on the northwest edge of the Sea of Galilee.

The region of Samaria separated the Jews of the north from the Jerusalem Temple. Samaritans were descendants of Jews who had intermarried after the Assyrian invasion in 722 B.C. Samaritans followed the Old Testament Law, practiced circumcision, celebrated the Festivals, and looked for a coming Messiah. However, Samaritans had their own place of worship on Mount Gerazim and were considered unclean by Jews. Many Jews crossed the Jordan River to travel along the eastern shore of the Jordan rather than to travel through Samaria. Jesus, however, traveled through Samaria in order to minister to the woman at the well. This Samaritan woman heard Jesus' first direct claim to be Messiah.¹¹

Judea and its central city, Jerusalem, were located in the south. Visible for miles, Mount Zion was the religious center for the Jewish faith. Each year at Passover, Jewish families visited the Temple. Jesus' family made this journey when he was a child; and it was in his Father's house that Jesus was found sitting among the teachers.¹²

The Historical Setting of the New Testament

Beginning with the fall of Jerusalem to Babylon in 586 B.C., the history of Palestine is a story of turmoil and upheaval. Judah never regained her earlier glory.

The Babylonian Empire controlled Palestine until Babylon fell to the Persian emperor, Cyrus, in 539 B.C. Cyrus allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem. During the next century, the city was rebuilt under the leadership of Ezra, Zerubbabel, and Nehemiah. However, Jerusalem was still under Persian control. Because of this Persian influence, the common people in Jesus' day spoke Aramaic, the language of the Persian Empire.

In 334 B.C., Alexander the Great defeated Persia. Palestine became part of the Greek Empire. After Alexander died in 323 B.C., his empire was divided among four generals. Palestine became a battleground between two of these generals and their followers, the Ptolemies and the Seleucids. This was one of the darkest periods of Jewish history. During this time, Antiochus Epiphanes (a Greek Seleucid ruler) desecrated the temple when he built an altar to the Greek god Zeus in the Temple.

The tyranny of Antiochus Epiphanes inspired a revolt led by the Maccabees, a Jewish family. The Maccabee family retook control of Judea and established the Hasmonean dynasty. From 166-63 B.C., Palestine was governed by the Maccabean family. Unfortunately, this was a period of national instability due to family rivalries and religious apostasy. By 67 B.C., the family had fallen into civil war.

Rome quickly took advantage of the division between the Jewish leaders to take power over Palestine. In 63 B.C., the Roman General Pompey conquered Jerusalem. Pompey appointed

¹¹ John 4:26

¹² Luke 2:41-52

his representative, Hyrcanus II, as high priest and made him the *de facto* ruler of Judea.¹³ At the time of Christ, Palestine was governed by Rome.

In 37 B.C., Herod the Great was appointed king of Judea by the Roman Senate. Herod was an Idumaeen, a descendant of the Edomites. For centuries, Edom had been enemies of Israel: from when they refused to allow Israel to pass through their land on the way to Canaan during the Exodus to their cooperation with Babylon at the destruction of Jerusalem.¹⁴ As an Edomite, Herod the Great was viewed with distrust by the Jewish people.

By 30 B.C., Herod had conquered his enemies and was the sole ruler of Judea under Rome's authority. Herod was a complex mixture of positive and negative qualities. On one hand, he respected the Jews - rebuilding the temple and complying with their dietary laws. On the other hand, he was insanely jealous - killing several of his own sons when they reached an age to become rivals to the throne.

After the death of Herod the Great in 4 B.C., Rome divided his kingdom among between his three sons. These rulers directly impact New Testament history and the ministry of Jesus.

Herod Archelaus was given control of Judea. Because of Archelaus' reputation for brutality, Joseph and Mary returned to Nazareth rather than Bethlehem.¹⁵ The cruelty of Archelaus caused a Jewish delegation to appeal to Rome for relief. Archelaus was banished, and Judea was placed under the rule of a procurator (or governor) sent by Rome.

At the time of Jesus' trial, Pontius Pilate was the Roman procurator, residing in Caesarea and traveling to Jerusalem during important festivals.¹⁶ The procurator had the unenviable task of mediating between Rome and the Jewish leadership. Pilate had to enforce the demands of Rome without causing the Jews to revolt. To accomplish this, he allowed the Sanhedrin a great deal of freedom. The Sanhedrin included the leading Jewish rabbis. This council met to make religious, cultural, and judicial decisions for the nation. Caiaphas the High Priest was afraid this freedom would be taken away if Jesus' actions brought the anger of Rome.¹⁷

Herod Phillip was the most tolerant of Herod's sons. He ruled the area northeast of Galilee. Jesus spent time in this region to avoid the danger of arrest by the Jewish religious leaders in Jerusalem. Herod Phillip rebuilt the city of Panias and renamed it Caesarea Philippi. This is where Peter made his great confession, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God."¹⁸

¹³ A *de facto* ruler is the one who holds power in a country, even though someone else may have the title of ruler. Pompey was the ruler, but Hyrcanus II held the political power.

¹⁴ Numbers 20:14-21; Obadiah 1:1-21

¹⁵ Matthew 2:22-23. Bethlehem was under the control of Archelaus; Nazareth in Galilee was under the control of Herod Antipas.

¹⁶ Pilate ruled from A.D. 26-36.

¹⁷ John 11:49

¹⁸ Matthew 16:16

Herod Antipas was ruler of Galilee and Perea from 4 B.C. to A.D. 39. Antipas imprisoned and killed John the Baptist.¹⁹ Because Herod Antipas had authority over Galilee, Pilate tried to avoid responsibility for Jesus' fate by sending him to Antipas for trial.²⁰ However, Herod refused to make the judgment and returned Jesus to Pilate for sentencing.

The Cultural Setting of the New Testament

The cultural setting of the New Testament is as important as the historical setting. God sent Jesus into a world influenced by three distinct cultures. Each of these cultures had an important impact on the world of the New Testament.

The Greek Setting of the New Testament

The influence of Alexander the Great lasted long after his death in 323 B.C. He wanted everyone in the empire to speak the same language. Because of this, Greek became the language of the New Testament. Most Jewish people spoke both Aramaic and Greek.

The New Testament was written in *Koine Greek*, the common Greek spoken throughout the Mediterranean world in the first century. While Aramaic (the spoken language of Palestine) and Hebrew (the language of the Old Testament) were limited to the Jewish people, Greek was spoken throughout the Roman Empire. The apostles' message was understood wherever they preached.

The precision of Greek was appropriate for the deep theological concepts of Paul's letters. Hebrew is a beautifully poetic language suited to the rich imagery of the Old Testament poets and prophets. Greek is more precise and allowed Paul to instruct his converts in the profound doctrines of justification and sanctification.

The *Septuagint* is the Greek translation of the Old Testament. This translation, from the third century B.C., allowed Greek speaking Jews to read the Scriptures. In addition, the *Septuagint* made the Old Testament (the Bible of the early church) easily available to Gentile converts.

The Roman Setting of the New Testament

The Gospels

Roman influence in Jesus' life is seen at his birth. God used a census conducted by a pagan emperor to fulfill Micah's prophecy that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem.²¹ Just as the Persian ruler Cyrus became God's instrument to return his people from exile, Caesar Augustus became God's instrument to bring Joseph and Mary from Nazareth to Bethlehem.

There were two methods available for conducting a census. The Romans preferred to register each person in the city where they lived. However, the Jews preferred to maintain

¹⁹ Mark 6:17-29

²⁰ Luke 23:6-12

²¹ Micah 5:2; Luke 2:1-5

tribal records in each family's ancestral village, so Rome allowed Judea to conduct the census in their traditional manner. This required Joseph and Mary to travel 100 kilometers²² from their home town in Nazareth.

The gospels show the conflict between Jesus and Roman rulers who felt threatened by his message of a new kingdom. Although Jesus said little about Rome and her politics, the message of the Kingdom of God was a challenge to the kingdoms of this world.

The Book of Acts

Acts shows how God used the Roman Empire to enable the spread of the gospel. The term *pax Romana* refers to the brutally enforced peace of the Roman Empire.²³ While Rome's power was often used unjustly (as in the crucifixion of Jesus), Roman power also protected travelers from barbarians, unified the Empire, and made the missionary travel of the apostles possible. Rome built 85,000 kilometers²⁴ of roads, from the Euphrates River in the east to Scotland in the west, and established sea routes across the Mediterranean. Paul's missionary journeys were possible largely because of the roads and sea routes established by Rome.

Unlike traditional Jewish culture, which grew around small towns and rural areas, Rome was an empire of great cities. These cities were of great importance for the spread of the gospel. Paul's travels can be traced by marking the major cities of the Roman Empire. In each region, Paul evangelized the leading cities in order to reach the most people. Paul preached the gospel in the primary cities of the Roman Empire and planned to preach in Rome itself, the center of the first century world.²⁵

Paul made full use of the rights of Roman citizenship to help spread the gospel. From his claim of legal protection at Philippi²⁶ to his appeal for a hearing before Caesar,²⁷ Paul used his citizenship for the cause of Christ.

Paul's Letters

Philippians uses the terms of citizenship to remind readers that their citizenship is in heaven.²⁸ Paul wrote his letter of appeal to Philemon knowing that Roman law provided for the execution of Onesimus, a runaway slave and Paul's convert. In Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians, Paul uses Roman legal language to explain theological concepts such as justification and pardon.

²² 65 miles

²³ "Roman peace"

²⁴ 53,000 miles

²⁵ Romans 1:11-15

²⁶ Acts 16

²⁷ Acts 25:11

²⁸ Philippians 3:20

Even Paul's imagery of adoption was more familiar to Romans than to Jews.²⁹ Adoption was very common in Roman society. Romans understood that adoption include the cancellation of old debts, inheritance rights for the new son, and the start of a new life. Paul used these Roman legal concepts to explain the change when a new believer is adopted into God's family.

The Book of Revelation

Rome prided herself on her tolerance of various religious beliefs; however, all people were required to recognize the divinity of the Emperor. Rome would allow Jewish or Christian teachings as long as the worshipper stated that "Caesar is lord." However, the Christian message that "Jesus Christ is Lord" was unacceptable to the Roman government.³⁰ It could not be long before the church came into conflict with Rome.

However, although man planned evil, God used it for good. Persecution became a primary means God used to further the Great Commission. Because of persecution, Christians were scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria. In God's plan, they that were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the word.³¹

The Book of Revelation was written in the context of this Roman persecution. John's visions assured suffering Christians that Rome (or any power that opposes God) will be defeated. God, not Caesar, is in control of human history.

The Jewish Setting of the New Testament

Messianic Expectations

Christ is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew word for *Messiah*. The crowds following Jesus were looking for Messiah. Paul announced "this Jesus, whom I preach unto you, is Christ."³² Their expectation of a coming Messiah opened people's ears to Jesus' preaching.

Synagogues

After the destruction of the Temple in 586 B.C., the synagogues provided a place of worship for the Jewish people. Any community with ten men had a synagogue. The synagogue was a place of worship, a school, a religious and civil court, and a center for social activities. Jesus preached his first recorded sermon in a synagogue, healed in the synagogue, and taught in the synagogue.³³

Even after Cyrus allowed the Jews to return to their homeland, many Jewish people remained in Babylon; Alexandria, Egypt; and other cities to which they fled after the fall of

²⁹ Galatians 4:5; Ephesians 1:5

³⁰ Philippians 2:11

³¹ Acts 8:1,4

³² Acts 17:3

³³ Luke 4:16-30; Mark 3:1-5; John 18:20

Jerusalem. This became important for the spread of the gospel. In almost every city the apostles preached, they would find a synagogue for the local Jewish people.

When Paul visited a new city, he began by preaching in the synagogue to Jewish worshipers and devout God-fearers, Gentiles who were seeking truth.³⁴ These Gentiles were open to the message of the gospel.

Jewish Religious Groups

The **Pharisees** were the best-known religious people of Jesus' day. Although few in number (approximately 6,000), they were popular with the common people. The name Pharisee meant the "separated ones." They were respected for their careful obedience to the Mosaic Law. Pharisees held many beliefs in common with Christians: resurrection, angels, prayer, and a respect for the Old Testament. However, they added many oral traditions to the Mosaic Law. Ultimately, most Pharisees rejected Jesus' claim to be Messiah.

The **Sadducees** held political power during Jesus' day. By cooperating with Rome, the Sadducees gained control of the high priesthood and the Sanhedrin. Sadducees accepted only the *Torah* as authoritative.³⁵ They rejected the prophetic books and oral tradition. As a result, they rejected belief in angels, spirits, and the resurrection. Because their power came from their position in the Temple, the Sadducees disappeared after the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70.

Customs of the New Testament World

Understanding the customs of the New Testament world can help us better understand the message of the New Testament. Two examples will demonstrate the value of studying New Testament customs.

- Most Jewish families lived in homes of one room. Animals were often housed in an outer room of the house, with mangers for feeding the animals. When Mary and Joseph came to Bethlehem, they were probably allowed to stay in this outer room, even though the main guestroom (inn) was filled during the census. The innkeeper, far from being unkind, was offering the best hospitality available during this busy time.
- Judean shepherds often allowed several flocks of sheep to mix together. When it was time to separate the sheep, each shepherd would call his sheep. The sheep knew their shepherd's voice. Jesus said that his sheep "follow him: for they know his voice. And a stranger will they not follow, but will flee from him: for they know not the voice of strangers."³⁶

³⁴ (e.g., Acts 13:5)

³⁵ *Torah* means "the Law." This is the Hebrew term for the five books of Moses.

³⁶ John 10:4, 5

For more information on the customs of the New Testament world, you can read *Manners and Customs of the Bible*, available online.³⁷

The Authority of the New Testament

Can we trust the authority of the New Testament? Many false teachings come from those who deny the integrity of the Bible or who claim to find new sources of revelation outside the Bible. Two issues are important for understanding the authority of the New Testament.

1. The issue of canon: *Which books are the inspired Word of God?*
2. The issue of textual integrity: *Is our text faithful to the original text?*

Canon: Which Books Are the Inspired Word of God?

The canon of Scripture is an important issue for the Christian. It answers the question, "What books are God's Word for God's people?" How do we know that the New Testament books are truly God's Word?

The term *canon* comes from a Greek term meaning "rule" or "standard." The New Testament canon consists of those books that measure up to the standard used by the early church to determine which writings were truly God's Word. The formation of the canon was inspired by two issues.

- 1. False doctrine.** In the early church as today, false teachers denied parts of biblical revelation. For example, in the second century Marcion taught that the God of the Old Testament was evil. To support his teachings, Marcion rejected all books of the Bible except Paul's writings and parts of Luke. The acceptance of a universal canon was important to provide a solid foundation for doctrine. Teachers could be sure that the doctrine they preached was based on God's Word.
- 2. Persecution.** During times of persecution, Christians could be killed for possessing Christian Scriptures. They must know, "Which books am I willing to die for?"

By the fourth century, the Christian church had agreed on a list of divinely inspired texts. They applied three tests to books which were claimed as Scripture. In order to be considered part of the New Testament canon, a book had to meet three standards.

- 1. Author.** The author must be an apostle or closely associated with an apostle. In the case of the gospels, Matthew and John were apostles. Mark traveled with Peter; Luke traveled with Paul.

³⁷ Fred H. Wight. *Manners and Customs of the Bible*, 1953. Available online at <http://www.baptistbiblebelievers.com/OTStudies/MannersandCustomsInBibleLands1953/tabid/232/Default.aspx> as of September 8, 2020

- 2. Message.** The message of a book must not conflict with Old Testament revelation. The message must be faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ. The book must be spiritually edifying.
- 3. Acceptance.** To be considered part of the canon, the book must be accepted by the entire church. The books of the New Testament were widely quoted by the early church Fathers.

Modern skeptics argue that the canon was created by church authorities as a means to gain power. Such critics fail to recognize that the canon was a universally agreed standard; it was not the product of a handful of ambitious bishops. The New Testament canon was officially approved in A.D. 397 at the Council of Carthage. However, the books of the New Testament were listed by theologians 200 years before this council.

Theologian J.I. Packer writes, "The church no more gave us the New Testament canon than Sir Isaac Newton gave us the force of gravity."³⁸ Newton did not invent gravity; he discovered what God had already created. In the same way, the church did not invent the canon; the church discovered the books which God had already inspired.

The Council of Carthage confirmed a canon that was already accepted throughout the household of faith. The canon includes those books that Christians of all ages have agreed are the divinely inspired Word of God.

Apocryphal books from the New Testament period are books that have been claimed as sacred Christian writings, but which were rejected by the early church. In the second century, writers such as Tertullian and Irenaeus wrote against heresies. Some of these works were already listed as false books in the Muratorian Canon, a second century list of New Testament books. The Epistle of Jude shows that even in the first century, it was necessary to "earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints."³⁹ False teachers had already "crept in unawares."⁴⁰

Apocryphal books range from orthodox texts which may be valuable for portraying practices of the early church to heretical texts which promoted false doctrines. Reputable apocryphal books include *I Clement*, the *Epistle of Barnabas*, the *Didache*, and the *Shepherd of Hermas*. These texts are orthodox in their teaching, but they did not meet the early church's standards for inclusion in the canon.

Heretical apocryphal books include the *Gospel of Thomas*, a second century gnostic text falsely attributed to the apostle Thomas; the *Epistle to the Laodiceans*; and the *Apocalypse of Peter*. Such texts were not accepted by the church because they contradicted established Christian truth. Rather than being rejected by the Council of Carthage, it is much more

³⁸ J. I. Packer, *God Speaks to Man*. (Westminster Press, 1965), 81

³⁹ Jude 3

⁴⁰ Jude 4

accurate to say that these books were never considered as Scripture by any cross-section of the church.

Apocryphal texts do not represent a valid source of truth for Christian believers. Our belief is founded on "the faith which was once delivered unto the saints."⁴¹ That faith has not changed and will not change. Our faith rests on the firm foundation of God's Word.

Textual Integrity: Is Our Text Faithful to the Original Text?

Skeptics often say that the New Testament text is unreliable. They argue that mistakes were introduced as the Scriptures were copied. These critics insist that even if the original text was inspired, we have no way to know that the Bible we have today is accurate.

Can we trust the textual integrity of our Bible? The answer to this question is "Yes!" It is true that the New Testament books were passed down in handwritten form, and it is true that mistakes can be made when copying a manuscript by hand. However, because this was the inspired Word of God, the copyists approached their task with great care. Scholars devoted their lives to copying the New Testament as accurately as possible.

With more than 5,000 manuscripts containing all or part of the New Testament, we have ample evidence that our text is consistent with the earliest manuscripts. There is no other ancient text with as much manuscript support as the New Testament.

A Comparison of Two Ancient Texts	
The New Testament	Homer's <i>Illiad</i>
Over 5,000 manuscripts	643 manuscripts
Earliest surviving manuscripts are less than 100 years after writing	Earliest surviving manuscript is 500 years after the original composition
Less than ½ of 1% of words have any question ⁴²	5% of the words are uncertain
Which text do you trust?	

⁴¹ Jude 3

⁴² None of these words affect doctrinal issues or historical fact. Differences between manuscripts are seen in verses such as Luke 10:1; some manuscripts indicate seventy workers while others indicate seventy-two workers. There are no questions of accuracy that relate to the gospel message or Christian doctrine.

But When the Fullness of the Time Was Come...

Paul's phrase suggests a pregnant mother awaiting the moment of birth. At just the right moment, God sent His Son into a world that had been divinely prepared. The world was ready...

"But when the fullness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law...."
- Galatians 4:4

- 1. Geographically.** Palestine was a small land at the crossroad of ancient cultures. This provided a launching pad for the spread of the gospel around the world.
- 2. Historically.** The Roman Empire provided a ready environment for the spread of the gospel.
- 3. Culturally.** A mixture of the Greek language, the Roman political system, and Jewish religious traditions provided the setting for the birth of the Christian church.

God spared no effort to prepare the world for the gospel in the first century. Today, He works in the same way to prepare people for the gospel. As you finish this lesson pray, "God, what are you doing to prepare my world for the ministry you have given to me?"

Lesson 1 Assignment

At the beginning of the next lesson, take a test based on this lesson. Study the test questions carefully in preparation.

Lesson 1 Test

- (1) Moving from west to east, list the three geographical regions of Palestine.
- (2) What is the importance of Samaria to Jesus' ministry?
- (3) List three contributions of the Greek language to the early church.
- (4) Define the *pax Romana*.
- (5) List four roles that the synagogue played in the Jewish community.
- (6) What teachings did Pharisees and Christians have in common?
- (7) What were the primary doctrinal differences between the Pharisees and Sadducees?
- (8) List two reasons for the formation of the New Testament canon.
- (9) List three standards used in establishing the New Testament canon.
- (10) The term *textual integrity* addresses what issue related to the New Testament?
- (11) Write Galatians 4:4-5 from memory.

Lesson 2

Matthew, Mark, and Luke

Lesson Objectives

- (1) Understand the reason for four gospels.
- (2) Know the author, likely date, and historical setting of each Synoptic Gospel.
- (3) Recognize important themes in each Synoptic Gospel.
- (4) Relate the message of the Synoptic Gospels to the needs of today's world.

Preparation for this Lesson

- Read Matthew through Luke.
- Memorize Matthew 5:48; Mark 10:45; Luke 19:10.

The Synoptic Gospels

- Why do we have more than one account of Jesus' life?

After the Ascension, the apostles wrote accounts of Jesus' life to teach new believers and to avoid distorted accounts of Jesus' life. As the church spread across the Roman Empire, pastors and teachers needed authoritative written accounts of Jesus' life and ministry. These were important reasons for writing the gospels.

The first three gospels are called the Synoptic Gospels because they provide different viewpoints of many of the same events.⁴³ While the Gospel of John contains much unique material not included in any other gospel, Matthew, Mark, and Luke share much material in common.

The gospel writers, often called the Evangelists, were not mere secretaries copying dictation. Instead, the Holy Spirit miraculously worked through the personality of each Evangelist to communicate, without error, God's message.

One example will show the differences between the gospels. Matthew gives a detailed account of Peter's testimony to Jesus' deity, Jesus' blessing of Peter, and Peter's rebuke of Jesus.⁴⁴ Mark and Luke give shorter versions of the story.⁴⁵ Mark omits Jesus' blessing of Peter, while Luke omits both the blessing and the story of Peter rebuking Jesus. There is no contradiction between the stories; it is one event presented from three different perspectives.

⁴³ The term *synoptic gospels* means the "seen together" gospels.

⁴⁴ Matthew 16:13-23

⁴⁵ Mark 8:27-33; Luke 9:18-22

Matthew 16:13-23	Mark 8:27-33	Luke 9:18-22
"Simon Peter replied, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.'"	"Peter answered him, 'You are the Christ.'"	"And Peter answered, 'The Christ of God.'"
"And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah!'"	Not included	Not included
"And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, 'Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.'"	"And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him."	Not included

No single gospel tells the entire story of Jesus' life. In fact, John said that a complete record would fill all the books in the world.⁴⁶ The gospels are not comprehensive biographies. Instead, the Holy Spirit inspired each writer to emphasize different aspects of Jesus' ministry. By studying the background of each gospel, we will better understand the choice of material in each gospel. Each writer addressed a different audience and wrote for a different purpose.

Matthew: The Gospel of the King

Introduction to Matthew's Gospel

The Gospel of Matthew was probably written between A.D. 50 and A.D. 70. An important theme in Matthew is the fulfillment of prophecy. Because Matthew does not mention the fulfillment of Jesus' prophecy regarding the destruction of the Temple, it is likely that Matthew's Gospel was written prior to A.D. 70.⁴⁷

Several characteristics suggest that the Gospel of Matthew was addressed primarily to a Jewish audience:

- Matthew does not explain Jewish customs to his readers.
- Matthew uses more Old Testament quotations than the other Evangelists.
- Matthew gives special attention to Jesus' fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy.
- Where Mark and Luke use the phrase "Kingdom of God," Matthew uses the equivalent phrase "Kingdom of Heaven." This reflects a Jewish reluctance to use the name of God.

⁴⁶ John 21:25

⁴⁷ This prophecy (Matthew 24:2) was fulfilled in A.D. 70 when the Roman general Titus conquered Jerusalem. The "Arch of Titus" celebrating the Roman victory over Jerusalem still stands in Rome.

The Content of Matthew's Gospel

► How does Matthew show that Jesus is the King?

Jesus as the King

Matthew is often called "The Gospel of the King." Throughout Matthew, Jesus is portrayed as the King of the Jews and, ultimately, of all nations. Magi travel from the East to recognize the birth of a new king. Herod seeks to destroy this rival king. In Matthew, Jesus is seen as the king.

Matthew uses the phrase "Son of David" more than any other gospel. This is a kingly title, showing that Jesus is in the line of descent from David. This name is used when Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey, a royal entrance that fulfills Zechariah 9:9.⁴⁸

Jesus teaches the law of the kingdom in his Sermon on the Mount. He teaches about the kingdom of heaven through a series of parables. Above his cross is the inscription, "This is Jesus the king of the Jews." Matthew is the gospel of the King.

Jesus as the Fulfillment of the Old Testament

Matthew refers eleven times to the fulfillment of prophecy in Jesus' life. Prophecies mentioned in Matthew include:

- Jesus' birth to a virgin (Matthew 1:22)
- The journey to Egypt (Matthew 2:15)
- The killing of the infants by Herod (Matthew 2:17)
- Jesus' ministry of healing (Matthew 8:17)
- The triumphal ride into Jerusalem (Matthew 21:4)
- The price of thirty pieces of silver for his betrayal (Matthew 27:9)

The Sermons of Jesus

Matthew preserved more of Jesus' sermons than the other gospel writers. Where Mark focuses on Jesus' actions, Matthew pays more attention to Jesus' words. There are five major sermons in Matthew, providing a structure for the entire gospel. Early commentators noticed that just as the five books of Moses established the foundation for Israel, these five sermons establish the foundation for the church. The five major sermons in Matthew are:

- The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7)
- The commissioning of the Twelve (Matthew 10)
- The Kingdom Parables (Matthew 13)
- Teaching on relationships in the Kingdom (Matthew 18)
- The Olivet Discourse on the end of the age (Matthew 24-25)

⁴⁸ Matthew 21:4

The Gospel of Matthew in the Church Today

The sermons in the Gospel of Matthew speak to the church today as powerfully as when Jesus first preached them in Galilee and Judea.

The **Sermon on the Mount** provides the classic summary of life in the Kingdom of God. By showing the contrast between the traditions of the Pharisees and the law of love, Jesus teaches how we are to live as citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven. The theme of the sermon is "be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect."⁴⁹ This command comes in a context showing that our Father is a God of love who "maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust."⁵⁰ To be perfect in the Kingdom of God means to have the heart of our Father in heaven, a heart of selfless love. Although a heart of perfect love is impossible in our human strength, our Heavenly Father who commands us to have a perfect heart is the God who makes it possible through his grace.

"Therefore ye shall be perfect; as your Father who is in heaven is perfect...' He well knew how ready our unbelief would be to cry out, this is impossible! And therefore stakes upon it all the power, truth, and faithfulness of him to whom all things are possible."

- John Wesley

Notes on the New Testament

Jesus' teaching on **relationships in the Kingdom of God** provides a model for relationships in the church today.⁵¹ Matthew 18:15-20 provides a guide for biblical church discipline in which sin is addressed through the church, not through gossip and rumors. This discipline takes place within a context that provides for forgiveness and restoration, a principle that is seen in Jesus' response to Peter's question about forgiveness.⁵²

The Great Commission calls us to make disciples in all nations. Like Jesus' call to perfection, we fulfill this call not in our own power but through the power of the one who gave the commission. The one who gave the call is the one who promised, "I am with you always, even unto the end of the world."⁵³

⁴⁹ Matthew 5:48

⁵⁰ Matthew 5:45

⁵¹ Matthew 18

⁵² Matthew 18:21-35

⁵³ Matthew 28:18-20

Mark: The Gospel of the Servant

Introduction to Mark's Gospel

John Mark was a cousin of Barnabas who traveled with Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey.⁵⁴ Although his failure on that trip led to conflict between Paul and Barnabas, John Mark later regained Paul's trust and became useful in his ministry.⁵⁵

"As Peter had preached the Word publicly at Rome, many requested that Mark, who had followed him for a long time and remembered his sayings, should write them out."
- Clement of Alexandria
quoted in Eusebius,
Ecclesiastical History 6.14.5-7

The early church fathers identified Simon Peter as Mark's apostolic source. John Mark worked so closely with Peter as to be called "my son."⁵⁶ The Gospel of Mark records Peter's firsthand memories of Jesus' ministry.

Because events in Mark do not always follow the order of Matthew and Luke, it is helpful to know that Bishop Papias, an early church father, quoted the Apostle John as saying that Mark "became Peter's interpreter and wrote accurately all that he remembered, not indeed in order of the things said or done by the Lord."⁵⁷ Mark's account is accurate, but he did not attempt to put the events in a strict chronological order.

The Gospel of Mark was probably written from Rome and is addressed primarily to a Gentile audience. Mark often explains Aramaic expressions used by Jesus.⁵⁸ In addition, Mark explains Jewish terminology to his Roman readers. For example, Mark explains that "two mites" (Jewish coins) "make a farthing" (a Roman coin).⁵⁹

Mark is the shortest gospel, with far fewer details than the other gospels. Mark is a gospel of action, a trait that may reflect Simon Peter's influence. It is a straightforward record of the life and ministry of "Jesus Christ, the Son of God."⁶⁰

The Content of Mark's Gospel

► How does Mark emphasize Jesus' role as a servant?

Jesus the Servant

Mark is often called the "Gospel of the Servant." Mark gives more attention to Jesus' actions than to his words. In contrast to Matthew's five major sermons, Mark includes only one

⁵⁴ Colossians 4:10; Acts 12:25

⁵⁵ Acts 15:36-40; 2 Timothy 4:11

⁵⁶ 1 Peter 5:13

⁵⁷ Quoted in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.39.14-17.

⁵⁸ Aramaic was the common language used in Palestine during the first century, replacing Hebrew. Examples of Mark's explanations of Aramaic terms include Mark 5:41, 7:11, and 14:36.

⁵⁹ Mark 12:42

⁶⁰ Mark 1:1

sermon (Mark 13). The Gospel of Mark gives more attention to the miracles; Mark records nineteen miracles in a short book of sixteen chapters.

Reflecting his picture of Jesus as a lowly servant, Mark gives no genealogy and no birth narrative. He begins with Jesus' adult ministry.

A key verse for the Gospel of Mark shows two aspects of Jesus' earthly ministry. "For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many."⁶¹ Jesus came to serve and to give his life as a sacrifice.

Jesus the Son of God

Mark begins with a statement of Jesus' deity, "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."⁶² At the cross, a Roman centurion confesses, "Truly this man was the Son of God."⁶³

Mark shows that Jesus was a servant, but he also shows Jesus' authority as the Son of God. A Roman reader would expect a divine ruler to show power over this world. Mark shows that power in many ways. Throughout the gospel, Mark includes testimonies to Jesus' deity:

- At the baptism, the Father testifies, "Thou art my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."⁶⁴
- Demons recognize Jesus as "the Holy One of God."⁶⁵
- Jesus exercises authority that belongs to God when he forgives sins⁶⁶ and claims authority over the Sabbath.⁶⁷
- Jesus' miracles demonstrate his authority over nature,⁶⁸ illness,⁶⁹ and even death.⁷⁰

The Messianic Secret

In light of Mark's emphasis on Jesus' deity, some readers have been confused by repeated commands to silence throughout the gospel. Over and again, those who recognize Jesus as Messiah are forbidden to speak of it. This has become known as the "Messianic Secret." There are three circumstances in which Jesus gave a command to silence.

⁶¹ Mark 10:45

⁶² Mark 1:1

⁶³ Mark 15:39

⁶⁴ Mark 1:11 and again at the Transfiguration in Mark 9:7

⁶⁵ Mark 1:24, 3:11, 5:7

⁶⁶ Mark 2:5

⁶⁷ Mark 2:28

⁶⁸ Mark 4:39 and 6:47-48

⁶⁹ Mark 5:27-30 and 7:32-37, for example

⁷⁰ Mark 5:38-42

- **Demons** were prevented from speaking of Jesus' divine nature.⁷¹ Jesus avoided association with demons, even when their testimony was true.
- **People who were healed** were sometimes commanded to silence.⁷² This was probably to avoid the crowds that gathered when Jesus' healing ministry was publicized. When a leper disobeyed this command and told of Jesus' power, so many people gathered that "Jesus could no longer openly enter a town, but was out in desolate places."⁷³ Jesus' earthly ministry was not primarily about physical healing. He did not allow spectacular healings to replace the longer-lasting ministry for which he came – training disciples to spread the gospel and build the church.
- When the **disciples** finally realized who Jesus was, he did not allow them to tell it.⁷⁴ The most likely reason is the danger of misunderstanding. Even after Peter testified that Jesus was Messiah, the disciples did not fully understand what Jesus came to do.⁷⁵ They were not prepared to preach the coming of his kingdom until after the resurrection and ascension. Until then, any statements by the disciples would have been confused.

The Gospel of Mark in the Church Today

The priority of service in Jesus' ministry reminds us that as we meet the physical and emotional needs of our world, we gain opportunities to serve their spiritual needs. Christians in the Roman Empire risked their lives to care for the dying in plague-stricken cities. Christians in the Middle Ages established hospitals to serve lepers and the poor. Christian organizations today clothe orphans, visit prisoners, feed the hungry, and care for the sick. Service to the neediest elements of our society must always be part of the church's mission. "For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve...."⁷⁶

Luke: The Gospel of the Son of Man

Introduction to Luke's Gospel

Luke's authority as a New Testament author comes from his association with the apostle Paul. Luke was a well-educated Gentile, a doctor who traveled with Paul and was with him near the end of Paul's life. Parts of Acts show Luke's presence; Luke switches from "they" to "we" when writing about events when he was with Paul.⁷⁷

The date for the Gospel of Luke is largely based on its relationship with the book of Acts. Luke begins a narrative that continues in the Book of Acts. Based on the conclusion of Acts,

⁷¹ Mark 1:34; 3:11-12

⁷² Mark 1:44; 5:43; and 7:36

⁷³ Mark 1:45, *English Standard Version*

⁷⁴ Mark 8:29-30

⁷⁵ Mark 9:9-10, 31-32

⁷⁶ Mark 10:45, *English Standard Version*

⁷⁷ The sections of Acts which imply Luke's presence in the group are 16:10-17; 20:5-21:18; 27:1-28:16.

it can be assumed that Acts was written sometime before Nero's persecution began in A.D. 64.⁷⁸ This implies that Luke was probably written in the late 50s or early 60s.

Luke's audience and purpose for writing are identified in the prologue.⁷⁹ Luke is writing to Theophilus, probably a Roman official. Acts 1:4 implies that Theophilus was a new Christian who had been instructed regarding Jesus' life. New converts, particularly Gentiles, were given several months of teaching about the life of Jesus, the new life of a Christian, and the doctrines of the Christian church. Luke wrote to show the historical basis of the things Theophilus had been taught.

The Content of Luke's Gospel

► Which details does Luke emphasize to show Jesus' humanity?

Jesus the Son of Man

The Chalcedonian Creed was composed in A.D. 451 to clarify the church's teaching regarding Christ's nature. The creed states that Christ has two natures (divine and human) unified in one person: "perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood; truly God and truly man."⁸⁰ Luke gives a vivid picture of Jesus' humanity, "perfect in manhood."

Luke shows that Jesus was fully human. He gives a detailed story of Jesus' birth.⁸¹ While the conception was supernatural, Jesus was born as a normal infant. He was fully man.

Matthew's genealogy, addressed primarily to Jews, traces Jesus' ancestry to Abraham. Luke's genealogy, addressed to a Greek recipient and showing Jesus as the Son of Man, traces Jesus' ancestry to Adam.⁸²

The order of Luke's early chapters reflects his intent to show Jesus as the second Adam. Instead of beginning with a genealogy (like Matthew), Luke puts the genealogy after the baptism account. The genealogy ends "which was the son of Adam, which was the son of God." This is followed immediately by the account of Jesus' temptation. The first Adam (living in a beautiful garden) fell to temptation; the second Adam (weakened by forty days without food and alone in the wilderness) resisted temptation. As man, Jesus provided a model for every believer facing temptation. Jesus showed that we should face Satan's attacks with the power of the Holy Spirit (gained through prayer) and Scripture.⁸³

Throughout the gospel, Luke shows the physical aspects of Jesus' life on earth: hunger, sleep, and his agony in the Garden of Gethsemane.⁸⁴ Jesus was fully man.

⁷⁸ In Acts 28:30, Paul was under house arrest, but was not yet in danger for his life.

⁷⁹ Luke 1:1-4

⁸⁰ Retrieved from <https://carm.org/creeds-and-confessions/chalcedonian-creed-a-d-451/> July 26, 2022.

⁸¹ Luke 2

⁸² Luke 3:23-38

⁸³ Luke 4:1-13

⁸⁴ Luke 22:44

Jesus the Savior of the World

The Gospel of Luke shows that Jesus came as Savior of all mankind. Simeon spoke of Jesus as “a light for revelation to the Gentiles.”⁸⁵

Luke’s desire to show Jesus as the Savior of all the world is seen in his focus on those who had no social status. Matthew shows the Magi, respected scholars from the East, honoring Jesus’ birth; Luke points to shepherds.⁸⁶ Shepherds had no credibility as witnesses; their testimony was not accepted in a Jewish court. Luke points to the angelic announcement to the shepherds as testimony that Jesus came to all people.

Women, another group that had little social status in Jesus’ day, play an important role in Luke’s Gospel. Anna, a prophetess, stands beside Simeon at the dedication in the temple.⁸⁷ Jesus allows Mary to sit at his feet alongside male disciples.⁸⁸ Surprisingly, women were financial supporters of Jesus’ ministry.⁸⁹

Many other groups of low social status are represented in Luke. Jesus visits the home of Zacchaeus the tax collector, one of the least respected groups in first century Palestine.⁹⁰ Jesus tells a parable in which the hero is a Samaritan.⁹¹ On the cross, Jesus shows compassion to a thief who deserves nothing but judgment.⁹²

The Importance of Prayer

Luke shows that prayer was important in Jesus’ life. Of fifteen specific references to Jesus’ prayers in the gospels, eleven are found in Luke. When facing a crucial decision, Jesus devoted the night to prayer.⁹³ Two of Jesus’ important parables on prayer are recorded in Luke 18. These parables teach about persistence and humility in prayer.⁹⁴ Prayer is an important theme in Luke.

The Role of the Holy Spirit

The Gospel of Luke pays close attention to the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of Jesus. This theme will continue in the Book of Acts as Luke shows the role of the Holy Spirit in the early church.

⁸⁵ Luke 2:32, *English Standard Version*

⁸⁶ Luke 2:15-20

⁸⁷ Luke 2:36-38

⁸⁸ Luke 10:39

⁸⁹ Luke 8:1-3

⁹⁰ Luke 19:1-10

⁹¹ Luke 10:25-37

⁹² Luke 23:39-43

⁹³ Luke 6:12

⁹⁴ Luke 18:1-8; Luke 18:9-14

The role of the Holy Spirit is seen throughout Luke:

- John the Baptist, Elizabeth, and Zacharias were filled with the Holy Spirit.⁹⁵
- The Holy Spirit came upon Mary at the conception of Jesus.⁹⁶
- Simeon was guided by the Holy Spirit.⁹⁷
- The Holy Spirit came at Jesus' baptism.⁹⁸
- The Holy Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted.⁹⁹
- The Holy Spirit was with Jesus when he returned to Galilee for ministry.¹⁰⁰
- Jesus promised the Holy Spirit to those who ask.¹⁰¹

The Gospel of Luke in the Church Today

For today's skeptical world, Luke's **careful attention to detail** provides a powerful testimony to the truth of Scripture. Luke places the beginning of Jesus' public ministry in a context that shows the careful detail of his account:

Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judaea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of Ituraea and of the region of Trachonitis, and Lysanias the tetrarch of Abilene, Annas and Caiaphas being the high priests....¹⁰²

As we present Christ to a doubting world, we can preach with confidence. Our faith is not blind faith in a mythical religious figure. Our faith is grounded in a historical figure, the incarnate Son of God who lived among us, died for our sins, was raised on the third day, and ascended to heaven where he sits at the right hand of the Father.

The **role of prayer in the life of Jesus** serves as a model for every Christian. If Jesus, who knew no sin and who had intimate communion with his Father, saw the importance of prayer, how much more should we see prayer as a priority in our lives. The evangelist Leonard Ravenhill wrote, "No man is greater than his prayer life. The pastor who is not praying is playing...."¹⁰³

Finally, just as the **Holy Spirit** was vital in the ministry of Jesus, the Holy Spirit must be central in the life of the church today. Church history shows two dangers in relation to the Holy Spirit. One danger is to emphasize the role of the Holy Spirit to the exclusion of the other persons of the Trinity.

⁹⁵ Luke 1:15, 41, 67

⁹⁶ Luke 1:35

⁹⁷ Luke 2:25-27

⁹⁸ Luke 3:22

⁹⁹ Luke 4:1

¹⁰⁰ Luke 4:14

¹⁰¹ Luke 11:13

¹⁰² Luke 3:1-2

¹⁰³ Retrieved from <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/314673-no-man-is-greater-than-his-prayer-life-the-pastor> May 22, 2020.

The opposite danger is to minimize the role of the Holy Spirit in the church. A.W. Tozer warned that the church was capable of allowing “a cheap and synthetic power to substitute for the power of the Holy Ghost.”¹⁰⁴ More recently, Francis Chan warned: “The church becomes irrelevant when it becomes purely a human creation. We are not all we were made to be when everything in our lives and churches can be explained apart from the work and presence of the Spirit of God.”¹⁰⁵

Acts demonstrates the importance of the Holy Spirit in the church; Luke demonstrates the importance of the Holy Spirit in the life of the individual. Jesus relied on the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit in his earthly ministry; we must allow no cheap and synthetic power to substitute for the power of the Holy Ghost in the church today.

Conclusion

Thomas Linacre was an Oxford professor and personal physician to King Henry VIII. After reading the gospels for the first time, he wrote in his diary, “Either this is not the gospel or we are not Christians.” Linacre recognized that the life of a true Christian is transformed by Jesus Christ. When he compared his life and the life of professed Christians around him to the picture of Jesus that is given in the gospels, Linacre realized, “We profess to be Christians, but we do not show the image of Jesus Christ.”

From Matthew’s sermons on the Kingdom, to Mark’s picture of Jesus’ service to the needy, to Luke’s emphasis on the Holy Spirit, the gospels give a portrait of the ministry of Jesus Christ. Through this, the gospels show what it means to be a Christian. As we read the gospels, we should ask ourselves, “Am I living a life that reflects the life-changing grace of Jesus Christ?”

¹⁰⁴ A.W. Tozer. *Of God and Men* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, reissue edition, 2015)

¹⁰⁵ Francis Chan. *Forgotten God: Reversing Our Neglect of the Holy Spirit* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook, 2009)

Lesson 2 Assignments

Demonstrate your understanding of this chapter with the following assignments:

(1) Choose **two** of the following assignments:

- Prepare a sermon or Bible lesson on one of Jesus' parables. This can be a 5-6 page manuscript or a recorded sermon or lesson.
- Prepare a sermon or Bible lesson on the importance of either the crucifixion or the resurrection in the life of the Christian. This can be a 5-6 page manuscript or a recorded sermon or lesson.
- Prepare a timeline of Passion Week that can be used for teaching. This can be a paper-based or computer-generated presentation. The timeline should include the major events of Passion Week.
- Draw a map of Palestine showing the location of each of the following regions and cities: Judea, Galilee, Samaria, Decapolis, Jerusalem, Nazareth, Jericho, and Caesarea Philippi.

(2) At the beginning of the next lesson, take a test based on this lesson. Study the test questions carefully in preparation.

Lesson 2 Test

- (1) Why are the first three gospels called the Synoptic Gospels?
- (2) Give three evidences that Matthew was addressed to a Jewish audience.
- (3) List three major themes in Matthew.
- (4) List three major themes in Mark.
- (5) List and explain the three audiences related to the Messianic Secret of Mark.
- (6) What do we know about Theophilus? About Luke?
- (7) What does the Chalcedonian Creed teach about the nature of Jesus?
- (8) List four major themes in Luke.
- (9) List three examples from Luke of Jesus' ministry to those of low social status.
- (10) List three examples of the Holy Spirit's work during the earthly life of Jesus.
- (11) Write Matthew 5:48; Mark 10:45; Luke 19:10 from memory.

Lesson 3

John

Lesson Objectives

- (1) Contrast John with the Synoptic Gospels.
- (2) Know the author, date, and historical setting of the Gospel of John.
- (3) Recognize the theme and purpose for John.
- (4) Appreciate the importance of both Jesus' humanity and his deity.
- (5) Relate the message of John to the needs of today's world.
- (6) Apply the content of the lesson in a ministry setting.

Preparation for this Lesson

► Read the Gospel of John. As you read the Gospel of John, keep a devotional journal in which you respond to the presentation of Jesus seen in each chapter. (This is Assignment 1 for this lesson.) For instance, in chapter 1, you might respond to the presentation of Jesus as the eternal "Word." What does that mean to you as a Christian? How does Jesus' eternal nature impact your faith and confidence as his child?

► Memorize John 20:30-31.

Introduction

► Christians are called "believers." What does it mean to believe? How will true belief affect our lives?

For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.¹⁰⁶

These are some of the most familiar words of Scripture. They promise that whosoever believes in Jesus will have eternal life. These are also some of the most frequently misused words of Scripture. "Only believe" is often misinterpreted to mean a mental belief with no change of life. John shows that belief is much more than mental assent. The words "I believe," spoken from the heart, will change your life. True belief changes a person's will and behavior.

¹⁰⁶ John 3:16-18

Background to the Gospel of John

Author, Date, and Place

John, the son of Zebedee, was the author of the fourth gospel. Ignatius of Antioch, Justin Martyr, Polycarp, and Irenaeus all testified to John's authorship.

John, with his brother James and Simon Peter, was part of Jesus' Inner Circle. These were the only disciples in the room when Jesus raised a dead girl to life.¹⁰⁷ They were with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration and in the Garden of Gethsemane.¹⁰⁸

John was an influential leader in the church. Only Paul wrote more New Testament books than John. John wrote the Gospel of John, three Epistles, and Revelation.

According to tradition, John lived in Ephesus. During the reign of Domitian John was exiled to Patmos, where he wrote the Book of Revelation. He then returned to Ephesus and died there at nearly 100 years of age. The Gospel of John was probably written from Ephesus. It is usually dated to A.D. 85-95, the last of the gospels.

Purpose

The Gospel of John is markedly different from the Synoptic Gospels. John contains no stories of Jesus casting out demons; it has no parables; and, unlike Mark, there is no messianic secret.

While many authors have noted the differences between John and the Synoptic Gospels, it is important to also see the similarities. John presents a different perspective of Jesus' life, but his message is the same as the other Evangelists. John shows that Jesus is the Son of God who lived among us, was crucified for our sins, and rose from the dead on the third day. John's stated purpose is to record evidences of Jesus' deity.

There were two early heresies related to Jesus. One denied his full humanity, claiming that Jesus only appeared to be man. Luke spoke to this error with his descriptions of Jesus as fully man. The other heresy denied his deity, claiming that he was a great teacher but not the Son of God. John pays special attention to the deity of Jesus through a series of miracles that reveal him as the Son of God and through statements that show him to be the Word made flesh. John's purpose is "that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name."¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ Mark 5:37-42

¹⁰⁸ Matthew 17:1-9; Mark 14:32-36

¹⁰⁹ John 20:31

Content of the Gospel of John

Prologue (John 1:1-18)

Presenting **Jesus the King** to a Jewish audience, Matthew traced Jesus' genealogy through David to Abraham. Presenting **Jesus the Servant** to a Roman audience, Mark included no genealogy. Presenting **Jesus the Son of Man** to a Greek audience, Luke traced Jesus' genealogy to Adam, the first man. Presenting **Jesus the Son of God**, John begins with what one could call a "divine genealogy":

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made.¹¹⁰

John's Gospel begins with the dramatic claim that Jesus was the Word and the Word was God. He writes, "the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father) full of grace and truth."¹¹¹ The rest of the gospel presents evidence to support this claim.

The Book of Signs (John 1-12)

The first half of John is often called the "Book of Signs." In this section, John records seven miracles that show Jesus' divine power. When he turned water to wine at a wedding in Cana, Jesus revealed himself to his disciples. "This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him."¹¹²

The miracle at Cana was the first in a series of seven miraculous signs in John 1-12. The other six signs are:

- Healing an official's son in Capernaum (4:46-54)
- Healing the paralytic at Bethesda (5:1-18)
- Feeding the 5,000 (6:5-14)¹¹³
- Walking on the water (6:16-24)
- Healing a man born blind (9:1-7)
- Raising Lazarus from the dead (11:1-45)

A miracle is more than an event that we can't explain. A miracle involves "supernatural interference with nature or the course of events. In the history of the church, miracles have been seen not only as extraordinary expressions of God's grace, but as divine attestation of the person or the teaching of the one who performs the miracle." This is why John uses the term *sign* to describe Jesus' miracles.
- Sinclair B. Ferguson and J.I. Packer, *New Dictionary of Theology*, 1988

¹¹⁰ John 1:1-3

¹¹¹ John 1:14

¹¹² John 2:11, *English Standard Version*

¹¹³ This is the only miracle reported in all four gospels.

Each miracle showed Jesus as the Son of God. John uses the term *signs* to describe Jesus' miracles. The miracles were signs pointing to Jesus as the Son of God. As we follow signs to find a road or airport, John asks us to follow the signs of Jesus' miracles to find his deity.¹¹⁴ Jesus' final miracle, the raising of Lazarus, is recorded only in John and is the climax of the first half of the gospel. This miracle led directly to the final confrontation between Jesus and the religious leaders. Because many Jews were turning to Jesus as a result of this undeniable miracle, the leaders decided to kill both Jesus and Lazarus.¹¹⁵

In addition to the seven miracles, John records a series of statements by Jesus that testify to his deity. Where Mark mentions occasions when Jesus forbade the disciples to testify that he was Messiah, John records occasions when Jesus revealed his nature to others. Testimonies recorded in John include:

- Jesus' testimony to Nicodemus (John 3:1-21)
- Jesus' testimony to the Samaritan woman (John 4:1-41)¹¹⁶
- Jesus' testimony after healing the man at Bethesda (John 5:17-18)
- Jesus' testimony after feeding the 5000 (John 6:24-59)
- Jesus' testimony at the Feast of Tabernacles (John 7:14-44)
- Jesus testimony that "Before Abraham was, I am" (John 8:52-59)
- Jesus' testimony at the Feast of Dedication (John 10:22-38)

"...people often say: 'I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God.' That is the one thing we must not say. A man who said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice.... You can shut Him up for a fool, you can... kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us."

- C.S. Lewis
Mere Christianity

Skeptics have argued that Jesus did not claim to be divine. John shows that Jesus repeatedly testified to his own deity. Jesus' audience knew very well what he meant when he said, "Before Abraham was, I am."¹¹⁷ These are the words used by God to reveal himself to Moses, "I am that I am."¹¹⁸ Those who heard Jesus knew what he meant; they tried to stone him, the punishment for blasphemy.¹¹⁹ They did not seek to kill Jesus because he was a

¹¹⁴ Kris Samons, "What is a Biblical Definition of 'Miracle'?" Retrieved from <https://probe.org/what-is-a-biblical-definition-of-miracle/> May 22, 2020

¹¹⁵ John 11:45-53, 12:9-11

¹¹⁶ See especially John 4:25-26.

¹¹⁷ John 8:58

¹¹⁸ Exodus 3:14

¹¹⁹ John 8:59

great teacher and healer; they sought to kill him because he claimed to be divine. People may reject Jesus' claim to deity, but it is foolish to deny that he made the claim.

The Book of Glory (John 13-20)

In Jesus we see "the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth."¹²⁰ During the last week of Jesus' earthly ministry, his glory was revealed in a much different manner than the disciples expected. The disciples thought of Jesus' glory in terms of military victory, political power, and popular public ministry. Instead, Jesus showed that his glory involved a cross and self-sacrifice.

At the Last Supper, Jesus demonstrated the humility with which his followers should serve each other.¹²¹ In his final discourses, Jesus taught about the Comforter who will "abide with you forever."¹²² With the metaphor of a vine and branches, he taught about the necessity of continually abiding in him; "if a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered...."¹²³ These examples were the opposite of political and military power; instead, Jesus' path was that of self-surrender and humility.

In Jesus' high priestly prayer he prayed for those issues closest to his heart. Facing the cross, Jesus prayed

- For himself: that he would be glorified through the Father (John 17:1-8)
- For the disciples: that they would be preserved and sanctified (John 17:9-19)
- For all believers: that their unity would testify to the world (John 17:20-26)

John records Jesus' arrest, trial, crucifixion, and resurrection. Early in John, Jesus told Nicodemus that, "as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life."¹²⁴ Later, Jesus spoke of the manner of his death; "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me."¹²⁵ On the cross, the Son of man was lifted up to draw all men unto himself in order that they should not perish, but have eternal life. This was the goal to which Jesus' entire life was directed. His crucifixion is even called the "hour of his glory."¹²⁶ This was the glory for which he came into the world.

John concludes this section with the testimony of Thomas after the resurrection, "My Lord and my God."¹²⁷ The transforming power of Jesus' resurrection can be seen in Thomas' later life; he was killed as a martyr while evangelizing in India.

¹²⁰ John 1:14

¹²¹ John 13

¹²² John 14:16

¹²³ John 15:6

¹²⁴ John 3:14-15

¹²⁵ John 12:32

¹²⁶ John 12:23

¹²⁷ John 20:28

Epilogue (John 21)

The final chapter of John reports a post-resurrection appearance by Jesus to a group of disciples at the Sea of Galilee.¹²⁸ John concludes his gospel by affirming the truth of his accounts; “This is the disciple which testifieth of these things, and wrote these things: and we know that his testimony is true.”¹²⁹

The Gospel of John in the Church Today

To new believers, John reveals the divine nature of Jesus. Because of its clear and simple presentation of Jesus, pastors often encourage new believers to read the Gospel of John. In John, we see Jesus as the bread of life (John 6:35); the light of the world (John 8:12); the good shepherd (John 10:11); the resurrection and the life (John 11:25); and the way, truth, and life (John 14:6).

To a skeptical world, John offers a picture of Jesus as the Son of God. The miracles in John speak to those who look for powerful signs to authenticate Jesus’ claim to deity. Through the miracles, Jesus demonstrated that his claim to be the I AM was supported by his divine power.¹³⁰

To a modern church that preaches a cheap grace without any call to true discipleship,¹³¹ the Gospel of John shows the true meaning of faith. True faith transforms the life of the Christian. After they heard Jesus explain the bread of life, “many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him.”¹³² These followers claimed that they believed in Jesus. They followed him; they enjoyed the bread and fishes; but they did not truly believe. They did not live out their professed faith with continued obedience to Jesus’ demands. The Gospel of John teaches the meaning of true faith.

Conclusion

The Gospel of John shows that true belief changes the believer’s life; it may even cost the believer’s life. Dietrich Bonhoeffer contrasted cheap grace with what he called “costly grace.” He wrote, “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.”¹³³ This type of true faith is seen in the life of the second century martyr, Polycarp.

Polycarp was a disciple of the Apostle John. He had listened to John teach and had heard John’s recollections of Jesus’ life. At the age of 86, Polycarp was arrested. The officers did not want to execute such a respected old man and offered him the chance to save his life by recanting and by swearing that “Caesar is lord.” The magistrate said, “Swear the oath,

¹²⁸ John 21:1. John calls the Sea of Galilee by an alternate name, the Sea of Tiberias. Tiberias was the capital city of Galilee.

¹²⁹ John 21:24

¹³⁰ John 8:58

¹³¹ The term “cheap grace” comes from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Translated by R.H. Fuller. (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 89

¹³² John 6:66

¹³³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Translated into English by R.H. Fuller. (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 89

and I will release thee." Polycarp's response echoes through the centuries as a witness to the meaning of true belief: "Fourscore and six years have I been His servant, and He hath done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King who saved me?"¹³⁴ Polycarp had learned the lessons taught by his teacher, John. He knew that true faith transforms a believer, even to the point of death.

Lesson 3 Assignments

Demonstrate your understanding of this lesson with the following assignments:

(1) (Completed in preparation for Lesson 3.) As you read the Gospel of John, keep a devotional journal in which you respond to the presentation of Jesus seen in each chapter. For instance, in chapter 1, you might respond to the presentation of Jesus as the eternal Word. What does that mean to you as a Christian? How does Jesus' eternal nature impact your faith and confidence as his child?

(2) At the beginning of the next lesson, take a test based on this lesson. Study the test questions carefully in preparation.

Lesson 3 Test

- (1) Why is Polycarp's testimony to the authorship of John of particular importance?
- (2) What was John's purpose for his gospel?
- (3) How is John's purpose seen in the material included in his gospel?
- (4) What does the prologue of John show about Jesus' genealogy?
- (5) List the seven signs in John.
- (6) Give three examples of Jesus' testimony to his deity.
- (7) What was the response of the Jewish leaders to Jesus' claims to be divine?
- (8) In Jesus' high priestly prayer, he prayed for what three things?
- (9) Write John 20:30-31 from memory.

¹³⁴ The story of Polycarp's martyrdom retrieved from <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/richardson/fathers.vii.i.iii.html> May 22, 2020

Lesson 4

Acts

Lesson Objectives

- (1) Understand the geographic and historic background of the early church.
- (2) Know the author and date of Acts.
- (3) Recognize the purpose and important themes of Acts.
- (4) Trace the spread of the gospel from Jerusalem through the Roman world.
- (5) Understand the difference between prescriptive and descriptive teaching in Acts.
- (6) Gain an overview of Paul's ministry.
- (7) Relate the message of Acts to the needs of today's world.

Preparation for this Lesson

- Read the Book of Acts.
- Memorize Acts 1:7-8.

Introduction

In the Old Testament, the book of Joshua shows Israel's transition from life in the wilderness to life in Canaan, and from the leadership of Moses to the leadership of Joshua. Joshua portrays an important transition in the history of God's people, Israel.

In the New Testament, the book of Acts shows the transition from the earthly ministry of Jesus to the spiritual ministry of the Holy Spirit through the church. It moves from a focus on the work of Jesus to a focus on the work of the apostles. Acts portrays an important transition in the history of God's people, the church.

The book of Joshua shows a partially successful transition. At the end of the book, the people of Israel pledge loyalty to God.¹³⁵ However, the Canaanites are not completely defeated. By the next generation, Israel is worshiping Canaanite gods.¹³⁶

Acts shows a much more successful transition. The commission that opens the book is fulfilled at the end of the book.¹³⁷ Acts begins with a Jewish church centered in Jerusalem; it ends with a multicultural church centered in Antioch. Acts begins in Jerusalem; it ends in Rome. Acts begins with Peter, one of Jesus' inner circle, in the foreground; it ends with Paul, a former persecutor of the church, in the foreground.

¹³⁵ Joshua 24:31

¹³⁶ Judges 2:7-11

¹³⁷ Acts 1:7-8; 28:30-31

The World of the Early Church

Lesson 1 presented an overview of the world of the New Testament. A review of that lesson will refresh your memory for the study of Acts. Some additional facts are important for understanding the spread of the early church through the Roman Empire.

Geography

The focus of Acts moves from Palestine to the broader world of the Roman Empire. Please take some time to look at a map in your Bible or a Bible atlas.¹³⁸ Notice the following places that are important in Acts:

- **Antioch** in the province of Syria: the center of Christian outreach beyond Judea.
- **Philippi** in the province of Macedonia: the first church planted on European soil.
- **Ephesus** in the province of Asia: the capital of the province. Paul's strategy was to plant churches in the leading cities of the Roman Empire. From an initial church at a central location, the gospel would spread throughout the province.
- **Corinth** in the province of Achaia: Corinth's location as a port on the Mediterranean Sea made it an important city for evangelism because people from many nations visited there.
- **Rome**: Paul's goal was to visit Rome to help evangelize the empire. He planned to go from Rome to Spain late in his ministry.

History

Two Roman emperors are important in Acts and the Epistles:

- **Nero** was emperor from A.D. 54-68. Nero blamed Christians for a major fire that destroyed much of Rome. This false accusation led to widespread persecution of Christians. Peter and Paul were among the many Christians killed by Nero.
- **Domitian** was emperor from A.D. 81-96. He claimed the title "Lord and God" and persecuted Christians who refused to swear loyalty to him. It is likely that the Book of Revelation comes from this period.

Background to the Book of Acts

Author and Date

In Acts, Luke continues the narrative he began in his gospel. "The former treatise have I made, O Theophilus..."¹³⁹

¹³⁸ Online Bible maps are available at <http://www.openbible.info/geo/>.

¹³⁹ Acts 1:1

At the end of the book of Acts, Paul is under house arrest in Rome.¹⁴⁰ This indicates a likely date in the late 50s or early 60s.

Purpose

The Gospel of Luke shows Jesus training the disciples to lead the church. Acts shows the disciples taking the gospel to the world. Acts shows the spread of the gospel from Jerusalem and Judea to Samaria and to the uttermost parts of the earth.

Important Themes

Historical detail

Like the Gospel of Luke, Acts gives careful attention to historical details. Acts mentions over thirty countries, more than fifty towns, and nearly one hundred individuals.¹⁴¹

Evangelism and mission

At the beginning of Acts, Jesus commissions his disciples to take the gospel to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost ends of the earth. At the end of Acts, the gospel is being preached to the Roman Empire.

The work of the Holy Spirit

Luke's Gospel paid attention to the role of the Holy Spirit in the earthly ministry of Jesus. In Acts, Luke shows the role of the Holy Spirit in the early church. The Holy Spirit is the central character in Acts. It is through the Spirit that the disciples are empowered for ministry.

The gospel message

The Gospel of Luke is written to confirm the accuracy of the things that Theophilus had been taught as a new convert. Acts shares the same interest in teaching the gospel to new converts. Nearly one-fourth of the book consists of sermons. Important sermons in Acts include:

- Peter's sermon at Pentecost (Acts 2)
- Stephen's defense before the Sanhedrin (Acts 7)
- Peter's sermon at the house of Cornelius (Acts 10)
- Paul's sermon on Mars Hill in Athens (Acts 17)

¹⁴⁰ Acts 28:30

¹⁴¹ Walter A. Elwell and Robert W. Yarbrough. *Encountering the New Testament*. (Ada: Baker Academic, 2005), 211.

These sermons show the core message preached by the apostles:¹⁴²

- The lordship of Jesus Christ
- The historical truth of the gospel
- Salvation by grace through faith

Content of the Book of Acts

Acts begins with the disciples in a state of confusion. Following his entrance into Jerusalem, the disciples expected Jesus to set up his earthly kingdom. Instead, he was arrested, put on trial, and crucified. With his resurrection, they again were excited by the prospect of a messianic kingdom.

At the beginning of Acts, Jesus told the disciples to stay in Jerusalem to wait for the promise of the Father. They asked, "Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?" They would not understand his response until later.

It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power. But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.¹⁴³

This commission provides one way of viewing the structure of Acts: the gospel in Jerusalem (1-7); the gospel in Judea and Samaria (8-12); the gospel to the uttermost part of the earth (13-28).

The Gospel in Jerusalem (Acts 1-7)

The center of activity in Acts 1-7 is Jerusalem. The narrative includes the story of Pentecost, a picture of life in the early church, and the martyrdom of Stephen.

Pentecost: The Birthday of the Church

Following the Ascension, the disciples returned to Jerusalem and continued with one accord in prayer and supplication.¹⁴⁴ They were there on Pentecost, the Feast of Weeks observed seven weeks after Passover.¹⁴⁵ Pentecost celebrated the gift of the Law. Today, Pentecost celebrates the gift of the Holy Spirit. In his Pentecost sermon explaining the miraculous signs of that day, Peter reminded his audience that Joel had prophesied a day when God would pour out his Spirit on all flesh. This promise was fulfilled at Pentecost.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴² Theologians call this core message the *kerygma*, the preached gospel.

¹⁴³ Acts 1:4-8

¹⁴⁴ Acts 1:14

¹⁴⁵ Deuteronomy 16:16

¹⁴⁶ Joel 2:28; Acts 2:16

Life in the Early Church

► How is the early church a model for today's church? What aspects of Pentecost should we experience today?

The picture of life in the early church raises an important question for interpreting the book of Acts. Acts is a book of history, not a theological epistle such as Romans. A historical book includes both **description** ("this is what they did") and **prescription** ("this is what you should do"). When reading about life in the early church, the reader should ask, "Is Acts telling us that this characteristic should be a part of today's church life?" or "Is Acts simply describing one period in church history?" One way to determine the answer is to ask, "How does this fit with the rest of biblical teaching? Is this commanded elsewhere in Scripture?"

Two examples demonstrate the difference between prescription and description in Acts.

- According to Acts 2:42, first century Christians devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to fellowship with other Christians, and to prayer. Bible study, assembly for worship, and prayer are commanded throughout Paul's epistles. We can determine from this that those activities are commanded for us today; they are not simply a description of an historical period.
- According to Acts 2:45, the early Christians sold their belongings and had all things in common. Since this practice is not commanded elsewhere in Scripture, we can infer that this is a description of life at that time, rather than a prescription for today.¹⁴⁷

► Before going further in this lesson, consider some activities of the early church. For each item, consider, "Is this activity commanded for today or is it a description of life in the early church only?" Your answer should be determined by looking at all of Scripture, not by asking, "What do I like?"

- Study of the apostles' teaching
- Daily worship at the temple
- Selling their possessions
- On-going evangelism
- Fellowship with other believers
- Signs and miracles to authenticate the Spirit's work
- Praise to God
- Speaking in other languages

¹⁴⁷ Most scholars believe that this practice was related to (1) the need to assist Christians who lost their jobs and homes because of their faith and (2) the early church's belief in the imminent return of Jesus.

Stephen: The First Christian Martyr

After Pentecost, the church continued to grow rapidly. Many people were converted, including a great company of the priests.¹⁴⁸ In spite of efforts by the Jewish leaders to hide the truth of the resurrection, these priests knew the facts: the tearing of the Temple veil, the missing body at the tomb, and the conspiracy to hide the truth. Signs and miracles continued throughout the early days of the church, authenticating the ministry of the apostles as a continuation of Jesus' ministry.

In such a setting, opposition was inevitable. After false witnesses accused Stephen of blasphemy, he was stoned to death. Facing martyrdom, Stephen preached a powerful sermon in which he traced God's activity from Abraham through Jesus. Acts introduces Saul with this sentence, "And Saul was consenting unto his death."¹⁴⁹ Paul, who will become the church's greatest missionary, is first seen as Saul, making havoc of the church by delivering believers to prison.¹⁵⁰

The Gospel in Judea and Samaria (Acts 8-12)

In Acts 8-12, the gospel moves beyond Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria. Persecution was a prod that pushed the early believers out of Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria. As they fled, they carried the gospel. God used persecution to accomplish the command of Acts 1:8. In Acts 8-12

- Philip, a Greek-speaking Jew, preaches in Samaria with great results (Acts 8:4-25).
- Philip preaches to an Ethiopian official who had traveled to worship (Acts 8:26-40).
- Saul, traveling to arrest believers in Damascus, is converted (Acts 9:1-22).
- Peter preaches to Cornelius, a Roman military commander (Acts 10:1—Acts 11:18).
- Barnabas ministers in Antioch, the capital of the Roman province of Syria (Acts 11:22-30). This ministry is important for two reasons:
 - Barnabas introduces Saul to the church at Antioch. Saul's ministry there plays an important role in his development.
 - Antioch becomes the primary missionary-sending church of the mid-first century. Each of Paul's missionary journeys starts from Antioch.

The Gospel to the Uttermost Parts of the Earth (Acts 13-28)

The First Missionary Journey (Acts 13-14)

The last half of Acts records the ministry of the Apostle Paul. Following his conversion, Paul spent time in Arabia, Damascus, and Cilicia. He was then recruited by Barnabas to teach at

¹⁴⁸ Acts 6:7

¹⁴⁹ Acts 8:1

¹⁵⁰ Acts 8:3

the church in Antioch, a church started by Christians driven from Jerusalem by the persecution of Saul.

From A.D. 47-49, Paul and Barnabas, with Barnabas' cousin John Mark, traveled to Cyprus (Barnabas' home) and Asia Minor. Much of this trip was devoted to planting churches in Galatia, a Roman province in Asia Minor. From this journey forward, Saul was known as Paul. Saul was a Hebrew name; Paul was a Roman name. This change of name signifies Paul's special calling to the Gentiles.

While they were at Perga of Pamphylia, John Mark left the team and returned home.¹⁵¹ After traveling as far as Derbe, Paul and Barnabas retraced their steps, revisiting churches they had planted before returning to their home base at Antioch.

The Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:1-35)

The conversion of Gentiles through the ministry of Paul raised a difficult issue in the church. There was division between Jewish Christians who insisted that Gentile Christians observe all aspects of the Mosaic law¹⁵² and those who insisted that the Mosaic law was not binding on Gentile Christians.

In A.D. 49, church leaders gathered in Jerusalem to settle the dispute. Those who wanted to require circumcision for the Gentiles spoke first. Peter then spoke regarding his experience at the house of Cornelius where God "put no difference between us (Jews) and them (Gentiles), purifying their hearts by faith."¹⁵³ Paul and Barnabas pointed to evidences of God's work among the Gentiles.

James, the leader of the Jerusalem church, concluded with the council's judgment that Gentiles would be required to avoid four things:

- Meat offered to idols
- Meat that has been strangled
- Meat with the blood in it
- Sexual immorality

This was not a list of rules by which Gentiles earned salvation. Instead, it was a model for unity among Christians of vastly different backgrounds. The requirements related to food allowed Jews and Gentiles to eat together, an important symbol of unity in the early church. The emphasis on sexual morality was necessary because of the promiscuous background of many new Gentile converts.

The Jerusalem council sought to balance two principles. The principle of freedom prohibited Jewish Christians from putting a yoke upon the neck of the disciples with unnecessary

¹⁵¹ Acts 13:13

¹⁵² These Christians were from the "sect of the Pharisees" (Acts 15:5). The issue was not a universal "Jew versus Gentile" debate. James, for instance, led in finding a resolution to the problem.

¹⁵³ Acts 15:9

stipulations.¹⁵⁴ The principle of fellowship required that Gentiles abstain from practices that were unnecessarily offensive to their Jewish brothers.

► How should we apply these two principles today? How can we allow freedom of conscience in areas where Scripture does not give clear commands? How can we avoid offending those who have convictions that are different than our own?

The Second Missionary Journey (Acts 15:36–Acts 18:22)

Not every conflict in the early church involved theological principles. Paul and Barnabas parted ways over a personal disagreement regarding John Mark.¹⁵⁵ This disagreement shows God at work even through difficult personal circumstances. Silas became a valuable worker; the efforts of Paul and Barnabas were doubled by their separate work; and Paul was later reconciled with John Mark.¹⁵⁶

Paul and Silas began this second missionary journey by revisiting churches planted by Paul and Barnabas on the first missionary journey. Paul and Silas also ministered in Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, and Corinth. On this journey, the gospel was preached on European soil after Paul saw a vision of a man from Macedonia pleading for help.¹⁵⁷ Young Timothy joined Paul's team at Lystra; and Luke joined Paul at Troas.¹⁵⁸ Paul spent about eighteen months planting a church in Corinth. The team returned to Antioch after more than three years of travel (A.D. 50-53).

The second missionary journey shows the opposition Paul faced in preaching. They were jailed in Philippi; the home where they were staying in Thessalonica was attacked by a mob; enemies from Thessalonica followed them to Berea; and Paul was put on trial in Corinth.¹⁵⁹

The growth of the church came at great cost. Satan does not yield territory without a fight. However, Acts shows the power of the Holy Spirit and the triumph of the gospel as churches were planted throughout Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Achaia.

The Third Missionary Journey (Acts 18:23–Acts 21:15)

Paul spent only a short time in Antioch before leaving to revisit churches in the region of Galatia and Phrygia. The first part of this journey was devoted to strengthening believers in churches planted on earlier journeys.¹⁶⁰ The third missionary journey lasted from A.D. 53-57. The longest period of time (three years) was spent in Ephesus. While in Ephesus Paul wrote both Corinthian letters, addressing problems in this difficult church.

¹⁵⁴ Acts 15:10

¹⁵⁵ Acts 15:36-41

¹⁵⁶ 2 Timothy 4:11

¹⁵⁷ Acts 16:6-10

¹⁵⁸ At Acts 16:10, Luke begins using the pronoun "we" instead of "they."

¹⁵⁹ Acts 16:23-39; 17:5-7; 17:13; and 18:12-17

¹⁶⁰ Acts 18:23

After leaving Ephesus due to opposition from enemies, Paul traveled to Macedonia and Achaia. He raised a collection from the predominantly Gentile churches in this region to support needy Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. This demonstration of the unity of the church showed that Jews and Gentiles were fellow members of Christ's church.

Arrest and Imprisonment (Acts 21:15—Acts 28:31)

Returning from the third missionary journey, Paul stopped in Caesarea where the prophet Agabus warned Paul that he would be arrested in Jerusalem.¹⁶¹ The last section of Acts tells of Paul's arrest, his imprisonment at Caesarea, his appeal to Rome (the right of a Roman citizen), the dangerous voyage to Rome (including a shipwreck on the island of Malta), and two years ministry of Rome while under house arrest.

The ending of Acts shows that Jesus' commission to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the earth was being fulfilled. While under house arrest, Paul was able to minister freely, "Preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching those things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ, with all confidence, no man forbidding him" (Acts 28:31). Regardless of the opposition of Jewish leaders (in the first part of Acts) or the Roman government (in the latter part of Acts), the Holy Spirit was empowering the church to fulfill Christ's commission.

¹⁶¹ Acts 21:10-11

Timeline of Paul's Ministry (dates are approximate)	
Date	Event
c. A.D. 33	Paul's conversion
c. A.D. 35-46	Paul in Arabia, Damascus, and Cilicia
c. A.D. 47-49	1 st journey (with Barnabas)
	<i>Galatians</i> written
c. A.D. 49	Jerusalem Council
c. A.D. 50-53	2 nd journey (with Silas)
	<i>1 & 2 Thessalonians</i> written
c. A.D. 53-57	3rd journey (with Silas)
	<i>Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians</i> written
c. A.D. 57-59	Paul imprisoned at Caesarea
	Paul sent to Rome
c. A.D. 60-62	Paul under house arrest in Rome
	Prison Epistles written
c. A.D. 64-65	Paul's release from prison
	4 th journey
	<i>1 Timothy, Titus</i> written
c. A.D. 66-67	Paul's final imprisonment
	<i>2 Timothy</i> written
	Paul executed by Nero

The Book of Acts in the Church Today

The Gospel of Luke showed the importance of the Holy Spirit in the earthly ministry of Jesus; the Book of Acts shows the **importance of the Holy Spirit** in the ministry of the church. Some aspects of the early church experience might be duplicated without the presence of the Holy Spirit. We can study the Bible in our own power; we can maintain some level of church fellowship in our own power; we might even duplicate some signs and wonders in

our own power. But short of the presence of the Holy Spirit in our midst, we will never have the reality pictured in Acts.

The **cross-cultural growth of the church** in Acts provides a model for today's church. Pentecost brought new believers from Europe (Rome), Asia (Parthia and Media), and Africa (Egypt and Libya) into the young church. Acts shows a church that included contrasting cultures working in one accord. When conflict arose, the church learned to find resolution through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Our goal for evangelism today must be the same, to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ across cultural borders. Acts provides a model for a church that integrates all true believers into the body of Christ.

The **principles of freedom and fellowship** outlined at the Jerusalem Council provide a model for dealing with issues of conscience in today's church. As Paul reiterates in Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8, Christians must avoid two errors.

- The **principle of freedom** requires that we avoid imposing our personal convictions on other believers.
- The **principle of fellowship** requires that we avoid exercising our freedom at the expense of a weaker brother. Such mutual humility will go far in removing barriers between Christian brothers and sisters.

For churches facing persecution, **the growth of the early church in the face of opposition** is an inspiration to faithfulness. More than simply helping the church survive, God used persecution to push the disciples out of Jerusalem and to accomplish His mission for the church. As we allow God to work through us, He will build His church in the face of opposition from our world.

Conclusion

In Acts we see the transformation of a hesitant band of disciples huddled in Jerusalem into a confident group of evangelists preaching the gospel to Rome and beyond. Acts shows the power of the Holy Spirit working in and through the church.

One of the great evidences for the transforming power of the Holy Spirit is the life of the Twelve Apostles. From men who fled the scene of Jesus' arrest, these disciples became men willing to die for the risen Lord. A brief summary of tradition concerning the death of the apostles testifies to the transformation at Pentecost. The disciples sealed their testimony in blood:

- **James** was killed by Herod Agrippa only 12 years after Pentecost.
- **Simon Peter** was crucified. Because he felt unworthy to die the death of his Master, he asked to be crucified upside down.
- **Andrew**, Peter's brother, was crucified in Achaia, near Corinth.

- **Thomas** was transformed from “Doubting Thomas” to a man of such commitment that he went to India as a missionary where he died as a martyr, perhaps by spearing.
- **Philip** was tortured and crucified in Phrygia.
- **Matthew** was beheaded at Nad-Davar in Ethiopia.
- **Nathanael (Bartholomew)** was flayed and then crucified.
- **James the Lesser** was taken to the top of the temple to deny Jesus. When he refused, he was cast down from the temple.
- **Simon the Zealot** was crucified in Syria after preaching in Egypt and Persia.
- **Judas Thaddeus** was beaten to death while preaching to pagan priests in Mesopotamia.
- **Matthias** was selected to replace Judas Iscariot. He preached in Ethiopia and was later stoned while hanging on a cross.
- **John** is the only apostle to die a natural death. However, he spent years in exile on the Island of Patmos.

In conclusion, please consider, “What does God want to do through the church today?” There were 120 disciples at Pentecost; at that time, approximately 45 million people lived in the Roman Empire. From a human perspective, the task of evangelizing this world was impossible. Amazingly, by the end of the first century, the gospel had spread from 120 Spirit-filled believers to every corner of the Roman Empire. What does God want to do through His church today?

Lesson 4 Assignments

Demonstrate your understanding of this lesson with the following assignments:

(1) Choose **one** of the following assignments:

- Earlier in this lesson you were asked to consider a list of activities in the early church. You were asked to decide if each activity was a description of the early church or a prescription for the present day. For each item that you consider a prescription, find at least one Scripture reference that clearly commands the activity.
- Using Peter’s sermon in Acts 2 or Paul’s sermon in Acts 17, write a one page essay in which you summarize the primary themes of apostolic preaching.

(2) At the beginning of the next lesson, take a test based on this lesson. Study the test questions carefully in preparation.

Lesson 4 Test

- (1) Why was Ephesus important for Paul's evangelism strategy?
- (2) Why was Rome important for Paul's evangelism strategy?
- (3) Which Roman emperors are associated with persecution of the early church?
- (4) Why is a date of the late 50s or early 60s most likely for Acts?
- (5) List three aspects of the *kerygma*, the core message preached by the apostles.
- (6) Who was the first Christian martyr?
- (7) What was the role of persecution in the evangelistic outreach of the early church?
- (8) What was the primary multi-cultural and missionary-sending church of the first century?
- (9) List the four requirements that the Jerusalem Council placed on Gentile converts.
- (10) What positive results came from the division between Paul and Barnabas?
- (11) Write Acts 1:7-8 from memory.

Lesson 5

Romans

Lesson Objectives

- (1) Know the date and purposes of Romans.
- (2) Summarize primary doctrinal teachings of Romans.
- (3) Understand the relationship between condemnation and the gospel.
- (4) Apply Paul's teaching about the Christian's freedom from willful sin.
- (5) Relate the message of Romans to the needs of today's world.

Preparation for this Lesson

- Read the book of Romans.
- Memorize Romans 1:16-17.

Introduction

No other book of the Bible has had a greater impact on the church than Paul's Epistle to the Romans. Three great revivals have begun with a study of Romans.

In the dark days surrounding the fall of the Roman Empire, a revival in the Christian church was led by Augustine. Augustine attributed his deliverance from bondage to sin to his reading of Romans. Romans taught Augustine the power of God to deliver from sin.

In a time when Roman Catholicism held the church in bondage to ritual and false doctrine, Martin Luther learned from Romans 1:17 that "the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith.... This passage of Paul became to me a gate to heaven."¹⁶² Romans taught Martin Luther of the power of God to justify through faith.

In 18th century England, few professing Christians believed that it was possible to have a personal assurance of salvation. John Wesley gained the assurance of faith through his study of Romans and began a revival that affects the world down to our present day. Romans taught John Wesley the power of God unto salvation.

"[Romans] is purest gospel. It is well worth a Christian's while not only to memorize it word for word but also to occupy himself with it daily, as though it were the daily bread of the soul. It is impossible to read or to meditate on this letter too much or too well. The more one deals with it, the more precious it becomes and the better it tastes."

- Martin Luther
Preface to Romans

¹⁶² Quoted in Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther*. (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1950), 49-50

Background to Romans

Date

Romans was written during Paul's third missionary journey, around A.D. 57. Paul was probably in Corinth. Though Paul had not yet visited Rome, the conclusion of the letter shows that Paul knew many members of the Roman church. He hoped to visit Rome, but he would first travel to Jerusalem to deliver a relief offering given by the churches of Asia Minor.¹⁶³ While in Jerusalem, Paul was arrested and eventually taken to Rome as a prisoner.

Purposes

Paul's purpose for writing the Epistle to the Romans includes three motivations: immediate concerns related to the church of Rome, a personal concern related to Paul's future ministry, and an ultimate purpose to teach how we are made right with God.

1. The **immediate purpose** was to address the concerns of a church that included both Jewish and Gentile Christians. The church in Rome was founded by Jews, perhaps converts returning from Jerusalem after Pentecost. In A.D. 49, the emperor Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome.¹⁶⁴ When the Jews returned to Rome a few years later, the church consisted of two groups: Jewish Christians who observed the Mosaic law and Gentile Christians who were accustomed to living free of Mosaic restrictions. Paul addressed questions that concerned a church made up of both Jews and Gentiles:
 - Does salvation come through obedience to the law?
 - What is the future of Israel as God's people?
 - How should Christians handle differing convictions on issues such as food laws?
2. The end of Romans shows Paul's **personal motivation** for writing. As an increasingly important part of the Roman empire, Spain fit into Paul's passion for reaching the strategic centers of the Roman world. This letter presented Paul's plan to use Rome as the base of operations for an evangelistic campaign to Spain.¹⁶⁵
3. Paul's **ultimate purpose** was to teach how we are made right with God. Jewish Christians learned that justification does not come through obedience to the law; it is by grace through faith alone. Gentile Christians were reminded that God has chosen to work through the Jewish race; they must not look down on their Jewish brothers and sisters. All believers, Jew or Gentile, are right with God because of grace alone.

¹⁶³ Romans 15:25-27

¹⁶⁴ Acts 18:2. The historian Suetonius wrote that this decree was issued because of riots that broke out between the Jews over "Christos." Since "Christos" is the Latin spelling of Christ, it is likely that the fracas was between Jews and Christians.

¹⁶⁵ Romans 15:22-29

Content of Romans

Introduction: The Power of the Gospel unto Salvation (Romans 1:1-17)

Readers sometimes skip the introduction to get to the main part of a book. However, in the Bible, even the introduction is important. It is the inspired Word of God and is "profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness."¹⁶⁶ Paul's introductions often give information that is central to his purpose. In the introduction to Romans, we learn that:

- The gospel was prophesied in the Old Testament.
- The gospel proclaims Jesus as the Messiah. He was:
 - The Son of David.
 - The Son of God.
 - Raised from the dead.
- The gospel is the power of salvation to all who believe, both Jew and Gentile.
- The gospel reveals the righteousness of God to all who believe.

The Righteousness of God Revealed in Judgment (Romans 1:17-3:20)

► Why is the fact of judgment necessary to the good news of the gospel?

Paul begins with the bad news of condemnation; all humanity stands condemned before a righteous God.

In Romans 1:17-32, Paul writes about the **sin of the Gentile**, particularly the pagan who has "changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man."¹⁶⁷ In this section, he addresses sins that his Jewish readers would see as Gentile sins: idolatry, homosexuality, murder, cruelty, etc. Paul warns that these sins are worthy of death.

"They will never accept grace until they tremble before a just and holy Law."
- Charles Spurgeon

"We cannot come to Christ to be justified until we have first been to Moses to be condemned."
- John Stott

In 2:1-16, Paul moves to the **moralist**. This is the good person who condemns the Gentile pagan of chapter 1, but is also guilty of sin.

In 2:17-3:8, Paul speaks to his **Jewish audience**. Through a series of rhetorical questions, Paul defends God's righteousness in judging the Jew who has sinned under the law.

¹⁶⁶ 2 Timothy 3:16

¹⁶⁷ Romans 1:23

In 3:9-20, Paul concludes, "There is none righteous, no, not one."¹⁶⁸ **All humankind** stands condemned before a holy God.

The Righteousness of God Revealed in Salvation (Romans 3:21-8:39)

Following the bad news of condemnation, Paul moves to the good news (gospel) that we are made right before God not through works, but through "the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe."¹⁶⁹ Paul shows how God's righteousness is revealed in the salvation and transformation of the believer.

Justification through faith alone (Romans 3:21-5:21)

Just as Abraham was justified through faith alone, we are justified through faith not works. We have peace with God through the atonement provided by the death of Jesus Christ. Through him, we rejoice in the hope of glory. Through him, we have life. Paul shows that neither Jew nor Gentile have any reason for boasting except in the free grace offered by God through Jesus Christ. The righteousness of God is revealed in his free grace given to mankind.

Justification and sin (Romans 6:1-23)

Hearing Paul's joyous testimony to the power of grace, a reader might ask, "Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound?" Someone might attack Paul's doctrine of grace by arguing that it will lead a person to continue living in willful sin. Paul responds with an emphatic, "God forbid! How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?" When we were baptized into Christ, we died to sin. Because of grace, we no longer live under the power of sin. Our bodies are no longer instruments of unrighteousness; through the power of salvation, our bodies have been given to God as instruments of righteousness. "Being then made free from sin, ye became the servants of righteousness." The righteousness of God is revealed in his power to free us from sin.

Sin and the law (Romans 7:1-25)

► Read Romans 7. Who is described in this chapter?

Because we have been justified freely through God's grace, we now "serve in newness of spirit, and not in the oldness of the letter."¹⁷⁰ A Jewish reader might ask Paul, "What are you saying? Is the law sin?" Paul responds, "God forbid!" The law defines sin. In doing so, it awakens us to the reality of sin and awakens in our rebellious hearts a desire for sin. The law, which God gave for our good, becomes an instrument for evil.

Paul illustrates this principle in a passage that has become one of the most debated sections of Romans. There are three basic approaches to interpreting Romans 7:7-25.

¹⁶⁸ Romans 3:10

¹⁶⁹ Romans 3:22

¹⁷⁰ Romans 7:6

- 1. A picture of the normal Christian life.** Many in the Reformed tradition argue that Paul is portraying the life of a believer who desires to keep God's law but is unable to do so. It is difficult, however, to reconcile the glorious picture of the justified life given in Romans 4-6 ("we have peace with God...."; "being then made free from sin...") with the bondage of Romans 7 ("O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?").
- 2. A picture of an unsanctified believer.** Some in the Wesleyan tradition have suggested that Paul is portraying the life of a believer who is justified but not entirely sanctified. Again, there are difficulties in reconciling this with Paul's picture of a victorious believer living at peace with God.
- 3. A picture of the awakened sinner.** The early church fathers saw this chapter as a picture of Paul's pre-conversion condition, when he attempted to keep the law in his own power. It is a picture of a sinner who has been awakened to his need, but who is not yet justified by grace through faith. This person seeks righteousness in some way, but has not yet experienced the joy of Romans 8:1, "There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit."

Sanctification: Life in the Spirit (Romans 8:1-17)

The answer to the struggles of Romans 7 is the power of the Spirit. "For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death."¹⁷¹ Instead of frustrated attempts to keep the law in our own power, we are empowered by the Spirit to "put to death the deeds of the body."¹⁷² The victorious tone of Romans 8 is a marked contrast to the struggles of Romans 7. Why? "The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God." This victorious life, not Romans 7, is Paul's model for Christian experience.

A victorious life is lived not in our power, but in the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit frees us from slavery to sin¹⁷³; the Holy Spirit gives assurance of salvation¹⁷⁴; the Holy Spirit guides our prayers¹⁷⁵; the life of the believer is lived entirely in the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Assurance of Hope (Romans 8:18-39)

The climax of Paul's teaching on salvation is his celebration of the glory that awaits all believers. Paul writes "that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us." He encourages his readers with the promise

¹⁷¹ Romans 8:2

¹⁷² Romans 8:13, *English Standard Version*

¹⁷³ Romans 8:2

¹⁷⁴ Romans 8:15-16

¹⁷⁵ Romans 8:26

that God is working all things together “for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.” And he reminds us that our hope comes from the God who made our salvation possible. “If God be for us, who can be against us?”

It is God who justifies us; it is God who keeps us. Paul celebrates our confidence as the children of God:

For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The Righteousness of God Revealed in Election (Romans 9:1-11:36)

Another question that might be raised by a person hearing Paul teach is, “What about Israel? Has God failed in His promises to his chosen people?” In Romans 9-11, Paul explains that descent from Abraham is based on faith, not ethnic origin.¹⁷⁶ God has not abandoned Israel; instead God is working through Israel to bless all nations. The blessing of the nations was promised to Abraham¹⁷⁷; it was announced by Israel’s prophets¹⁷⁸; it is now being accomplished among the Gentiles.¹⁷⁹ God’s blessing of the Gentiles is not a final rejection of Israel. His purpose for Israel will be accomplished.

Romans 9-11 addresses the problem of Israel’s unbelief with three truths:¹⁸⁰

- God’s promises were always addressed to believers. Promises to Israel **in the past** were to all who believe – both Gentiles and a faithful remnant in Israel (9:6-29).
- Israel has been rejected for her unbelief. **In the present**, Gentiles have attained the righteousness which is of faith while Israel has not attained righteousness because they sought it by the works of the law (9:30-10:21).
- Israel’s rejection is temporary, not final. God has not forgotten His promises. **In the future**, all Israel will be saved as they turn in faith to God (11:1-36).

Paul ends this section of Romans with a doxology in which he praises God for his unsearchable wisdom, knowledge, judgments, and ways.¹⁸¹ While we may not fully understand God’s ways, we praise him because we trust his goodness and righteousness. We know that “of him, and through him, and to him, are all things.”¹⁸² His ways are worthy of our praise.

¹⁷⁶ Romans 9:6-8

¹⁷⁷ Genesis 12:3

¹⁷⁸ Isaiah 56:1-8 is one example among many.

¹⁷⁹ Romans 11:11

¹⁸⁰ Adapted from William M. Greathouse and George Lyons, *Romans: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*. (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2008).

¹⁸¹ Romans 11:33-36

¹⁸² Romans 11:36

The Righteousness of God Seen in the Life of the Believer (Romans 12:1-15:13)

Paul's theology is always practical. Several of Paul's letters break down into two large sections. In the first section, Paul teaches what we believe; in the second section he teaches how we should live. This pattern can be seen in Romans.

1. Doctrine. Paul teaches how a person is made right before God (Romans 1-11).

2. Application. Paul teaches how a righteous person will live (Romans 12-16).

Romans 12-15 shows how the principles of Romans 1-11 are lived in daily life. In Romans 12, Paul calls his readers to give themselves as living, holy sacrifices to God. The righteousness of God seen in justification and sanctification transforms all areas of life. One who walks in the Spirit rather than the flesh will show the righteousness of God in daily life. Paul identifies some practical aspects of this new way of living:

- We use our spiritual gifts to serve others (Romans 12:3-8).
- We treat others in ways that show true Christianity (Romans 12:9-21).
- We submit to the governing authorities (Romans 13:1-7).
- We fulfill the law through love (Romans 13:8-14).
- We practice the principle of liberty by not judging our brother (Romans 14:1-12).
- We practice the principle of love by not exercising our freedom in a way that causes a weaker brother to stumble (Romans 14:13-14:23).
- We follow the example of Christ so that we "may abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Ghost" (Romans 15:1-13).

Conclusion (Romans 15:14-16:27)

In his conclusion, Paul shares his plan to visit Rome on the way to Spain. He hopes that Rome will become the base for his campaign to Spain. He sends greetings to coworkers and, as is common in Paul's letters, he concludes with a doxology. This doxology praises God for the revelation of the mystery which now is made manifest.¹⁸³ The mystery that has been revealed is the joyous news that the gospel is for all people. The righteousness of God has been revealed from faith to faith; all who believe are saved.

Romans in the Church Today

Romans teaches the church today about the **importance of clear doctrine**. Remember that Paul wrote this epistle to ordinary Christians. In an age when Christians are sometimes treated as spiritual infants incapable of digesting the meat of biblical truth, Romans shows that believers can be taught deep doctrine.

¹⁸³ Romans 16:25-26

Romans teaches the church today about the **importance of applying doctrine in daily life**. Paul shows no interest in doctrine for intellectual debate alone. He teaches doctrine in order to transform the life of the believer.

After the great truths of Romans 1-11, Paul continues "I beseech you therefore..."¹⁸⁴ "Therefore" connects what he is preparing to say with what he has already said. We could paraphrase, "Because of these truths (justification, sanctification, and election), I call you to present yourselves as a living sacrifice to the God who has given you these blessings.This is how this transformation will look in your daily life." Paul then continues with the practical application of this transformation of Romans 12-15. It is not enough to have right doctrine; we must live out that doctrine on a daily basis.

Conclusion

On Wednesday May 24, 1738, John Wesley attended a Moravian meeting on Aldersgate Street, London. Wesley had struggled for years seeking an assurance of salvation. Like many in that time, he believed that justification was based on one's ability to live a righteous life. Listening to William Holland read from Martin Luther's preface to Romans, Wesley was transformed. Wesley later wrote:

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while the leader was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ alone for salvation; and **an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.**¹⁸⁵

That night, John Wesley understood the truth of Romans 1:17; "The just shall live by faith." This great truth inspired a revival that spread through England and eventually around the world.

¹⁸⁴ Romans 12:1

¹⁸⁵ John Wesley, *The Journal of John Wesley*, May 24, 1738.

Lesson 5 Assignments

Demonstrate your understanding of this lesson with the following assignments:

(1) Choose **one** of the following assignments:

- Prepare a sermon or Bible lesson on justification by faith from Romans. This can be a 5-6 page manuscript or a recorded sermon or Bible lesson.
- Write a one page outline of the book of Romans that shows both the doctrinal teachings of Romans 1-11 and the practical application of Romans 12-16. This should be your own personal outline, not drawn from a commentary or study Bible.

(2) At the beginning of the next lesson, take a test based on this lesson. Study the test questions carefully in preparation.

Lesson 5 Test

(1) List three purposes for Romans.

(2) List four truths about the gospel found in the introduction to Romans.

(3) List the three groups that stand condemned in Romans 1-3.

(4) In Romans 6, what is Paul's response to someone who asks if we can continue living in sin so that grace may abound?

(5) What are three interpretations of Romans 7:7-25?

(6) Paul responds to the problem of Israel's unbelief with three truths. List those truths.

(7) From Romans 12-15, list three ways of living out the righteousness of God.

(8) Write Romans 1:16-17 from memory.

Lesson 6

Corinthians and Galatians

Lesson Objectives

- (1) Know the date and purpose of 1 & 2 Corinthians and Galatians.
- (2) Outline the primary themes of 1 & 2 Corinthians and Galatians.
- (3) Understand important issues for interpreting 1 Corinthians.
- (4) Discuss the relationship between the Christian and law.
- (5) Recognize a biblical definition of legalism.
- (6) Identify areas of conflict and confusion in the early church.
- (7) Relate the message of these books to the needs of today's world.

Preparation for this Lesson

- Read 1 and 2 Corinthians and Galatians.
- Memorize 1 Corinthians 1:20-21 and Galatians 5:22-23.

Introduction

Modern readers sometimes assume that the early church was free of significant problems. We think, "It would have been wonderful to live in the early church when everything was unity and revival!" Paul's letters to Corinth and Galatia show a much different picture. First century churches struggled with false doctrine, sin among members, confusion about important biblical teachings, and questions regarding authority and church discipline. In other words, these books show a world very similar to today. Because of this, these letters to troubled churches of the first century have much to teach troubled churches of the twenty-first century.

1 Corinthians

Author and Date

Corinth was a seaport on an isthmus between the Aegean and Ionian Seas. Cargo was unloaded on one side of the isthmus, transported across the narrow strip of land, and loaded onto ships on the other side. Corinth's strategic location provided great opportunities for the gospel. Sailors waited in this city while their ships were loaded and unloaded. This provided an opportunity to evangelize people from around the Roman Empire.

Paul planted the church at Corinth during his second missionary journey, around A.D. 50.¹⁸⁶ With Aquila and Priscilla, two Christians from Rome, Paul spent eighteen months preaching in Corinth. He began by teaching at the synagogue. When he was driven out of the

¹⁸⁶ Acts 18:1-18

synagogue, he moved to a private home next door. Many Corinthians, including the ruler of the synagogue, responded to the preaching of the gospel.

Paul wrote 1 Corinthians about five years later. The letter was written during Paul's stay in Ephesus on his third missionary journey.¹⁸⁷ Paul wrote in response to problems that had arisen in the Corinthian church. Paul could not travel immediately to Corinth, so he wrote this letter and sent it with Timothy. Timothy was appointed to deliver the letter and to give further instruction during his visit.¹⁸⁸

Style

1 Corinthians is both simple and difficult to interpret! It is simple because 1 Corinthians is an occasional letter - a letter written in response to a particular situation (or occasion). In one sense, this makes the letter simple. Instead of a complicated doctrinal treatise, Paul is addressing straightforward problems.

However, this type of letter can be difficult because we have only one side of the correspondence between Paul and the church. Deducing the problems to which Paul was responding can make 1 Corinthians difficult to interpret.

Two examples show how Paul responds to the questions from Corinth. 1 Corinthians 7:1 begins, "Now concerning the things whereof ye wrote unto me...." Paul then writes a phrase that is probably a quotation from their letter, "It is good for a man not to touch a woman." Paul then responds to this idea that it was best for men and women to avoid all sexual relations: "Nevertheless, to avoid fornication, let every man have his own wife, and let every woman have her own husband."

Similarly 1 Corinthians 8:1 begins, "Now concerning food offered unto idols..." The next phrase is probably a quotation from their letter, "We know that 'all of us possess knowledge.'" Paul responds, "This 'knowledge' puffs up, but love builds up."¹⁸⁹ When we read the letters to Corinth, we are reading one side of the correspondence. At times, we must distinguish Paul's advice from a quotation from the Corinthian Christians.

Purpose

Paul's first letter to Corinth was motivated by a troubling report from three leaders of the church.¹⁹⁰ Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus reported that there was division in the church, that open sin was being tolerated, and that Paul's apostolic authority had been challenged. Paul wrote 1 Corinthians to respond to these problems and to answer questions from the Corinthian Christians.

¹⁸⁷ 1 Corinthians 16:8

¹⁸⁸ 1 Corinthians 4:17

¹⁸⁹ 1 Corinthians 8:1, *English Standard Version*

¹⁹⁰ 1 Corinthians 16:17

Content of 1 Corinthians

In the introduction, Paul states his authority as an apostle of Jesus Christ and reminds the Corinthian believers that they are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints.¹⁹¹ He then addresses a series of problems that illustrate the Corinthians' failure to live according to God's call for His people.

Division (1 Corinthians 1-4)

Paul had planted the church in Corinth. The gifted orator Apollos had preached there after being instructed by Aquila and Priscilla.¹⁹² It is possible that Peter had visited Corinth.¹⁹³ The church at Corinth had divided into factions, with each group claiming one of these teachers as their leader. Some professed to be above all this division, claiming, "I follow Christ." However, even this group was motivated by a prideful spirit, not humility.¹⁹⁴

Issues discussed later in 1 Corinthians show that this division affected the weekly worship and celebration of the Lord's Supper at Corinth. In addition, this division may have been a factor in the church's unwillingness to address sin among their members.

Paul begins with a defense of his ministry. Those who claimed Apollos as their patron rejected Paul's apostolic authority and mocked his unimpressive appearance and speech. Paul defends his apostolic authority in order to have a platform for addressing problems in the church. As their spiritual father, Paul loves his beloved sons¹⁹⁵ too much to leave them to their own way. So, Paul begins with a vigorous defense of his ministry; "Paul, called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God..."¹⁹⁶

Since some members compared Paul's simple speech with the lofty oratory of Apollos, Paul explains that he came "not with excellency of speech or of wisdom." "My speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power...."¹⁹⁷ Paul does not attack Apollos,¹⁹⁸ but shows that his own ministry in Corinth was based on the power of the Holy Spirit working through his message. The Corinthians are glorying in human wisdom; Paul calls them to return to the gospel.

Immorality (1 Corinthians 5-6)

► How should church leaders deal with open sin among church members?

¹⁹¹ 1 Corinthians 1:1-2

¹⁹² Acts 18:27

¹⁹³ 1 Corinthians 9:5

¹⁹⁴ 1 Corinthians 1:10-12

¹⁹⁵ 1 Corinthians 4:14-15

¹⁹⁶ 1 Corinthians 1:1

¹⁹⁷ 1 Corinthians 2:1-4

¹⁹⁸ 1 Corinthians 16:12 shows that Paul and Apollos were united in working for God's Kingdom.

As a Roman port city and a city dotted with pagan temples that included prostitution as part of their idol worship, Corinth was known for its sexual depravity. The word *Corinthianize* meant to corrupt a person's morals.

The Corinthian church refused to discipline one of its members who was living in an immoral relationship with his stepmother, behavior rejected even by pagans.¹⁹⁹ However, the Corinthian church had become so arrogant that it refused to address the problem.

Paul's instruction is important for understanding proper church discipline. Paul demands that they expel the offender in the hope that he will repent.²⁰⁰ The church is to judge sin among its members for two reasons: to bring the sinner to repentance and to avoid reproach on the gospel. Paul is not addressing the actions of unbelievers, or even a repentant backslider. He is addressing willful ongoing sin by an active member of the church.

Related to this, Paul addresses lawsuits among believers. While the Corinthians refuse to judge open sin in the church, they are quick to take personal grievances to the public courts. Paul asks how they can judge the world if they are not wise enough to settle disputes between Christian brothers.

Questions from the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 7:1-16:9)

Paul now addresses a series of questions that the Corinthians asked in a letter they sent to Paul.²⁰¹ Each topic is introduced with the phrase, "Now concerning...." Paul quotes their question and then responds to the issue that is raised.

Celibacy and Marriage (1 Corinthians 7:1-23)

Some were teaching that "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman."²⁰² Paul responds that marriage is the proper context for sexual expression. In this section, he also addresses the problem of divorce, an issue that was particularly difficult for new believers who were married to non-Christians.

The Unmarried and Widowed (1 Corinthians 7:25-40)

Because of the present distress, Paul believed that it was best for those who were unmarried to remain unmarried. However, he made clear that this was his personal judgment, not a commandment of the Lord. The "present distress" refers to the persecution of believers by the Roman government. It may also refer to the possibility of increased persecution as the appointed time of the Lord's return grows nears.²⁰³

¹⁹⁹ 1 Corinthians 5:1

²⁰⁰ To "deliver such an one unto Satan" likely refers to expelling him from the church. Outside the church, he is in the world, Satan's realm.

²⁰¹ 1 Corinthians 7:1

²⁰² 1 Corinthians 7:1, *English Standard Version*

²⁰³ 1 Corinthians 7:29, *English Standard Version*

Food Offered to Idols (1 Corinthians 8:1-11:1)

► In your ministry context, what cultural practices equate with the Corinthian issue of food offered to idols?

Paul's longest discussion is in answer to the difficult question of food offered to idols. The Corinthians based their decision on their superior knowledge, "We know that we all have knowledge." Paul responds that, instead of basing our decision purely on knowledge (which puffs up), we should act out of love (which builds up).

Paul makes a distinction between eating in the dining areas of pagan temples and shopping in the public marketplace. By eating in the temple banquet hall, a knowledgeable believer might destroy a weaker brother who would be tempted to violate their conscience. As an example of the spirit that the Corinthians should show, Paul reminds them that he gave up his right to expect financial support as their pastor in order to evangelize their city.

Further, eating at the pagan temple was participation in idolatrous practice.²⁰⁴ Paul concludes, "Ye cannot be partakers of the Lord's table, and of the table of devils."

While believers must not eat in a pagan religious context, Paul treats differently the issue of shopping in a public market that sells meat that has been offered to idols. Because there is no direct association with idolatry, Paul suggests that Christians ask no questions and purchase what is available. The exception to this freedom is when someone who might be offended is present. A weaker brother might associate even the purchase of this meat with idol worship. In this case, Paul reminds the Corinthians of the Christian's responsibility to seek not "his own good, but the good of his neighbor."

The key principle is love. Love for God prevents a believer from participating in an idol feast offered in a pagan temple. Love for our fellow Christian prevents a believer from eating meat that might destroy the faith of a weaker brother.

Worship and Gifts (1 Corinthians 11:2-14:40)

Paul next addresses matters of authority, observance of the Lord's Supper, and spiritual gifts. These issues grew out of the pride and division that was tearing apart the church at Corinth. Instead of seeing themselves as fellow members of one body, the Corinthians were using spiritual gifts as a means of self-promotion. The proper response to this attitude is to remember that love is greater than spiritual gifts.

The Resurrection of Christ and of the Dead (1 Corinthians 15)

Responding to questions about the future of deceased believers, Paul begins by establishing the historical truth of the resurrection of Christ. He then argues that the resurrection of

²⁰⁴ 1 Corinthians 10:1-22 uses the story of Israel's faithlessness as a warning against participation in idol practice.

Jesus is the “firstfruits of them that slept.” Because Christ conquered death, the believer has the promise of resurrection.

The Collection for the Jerusalem Saints (1 Corinthians 16:1-4)

On his third missionary journey, Paul collected an offering from Gentile churches in support of believers in Jerusalem who were suffering because of the opposition of the Jewish leaders. This offering was important to Paul as a practical expression of the doctrine of the unity of the church. With this offering, Gentile Christians showed that their membership in the church included an obligation to support their fellow (Jewish) Christians.

Farewell (1 Corinthians 16:5-24)

Paul concludes his letter with an outline of his plans for a future visit to Corinth, greetings in his own hand, and a farewell.

2 Corinthians

Setting and Purpose of 2 Corinthians

2 Corinthians was written a year after 1 Corinthians. It appears that Timothy’s visit did not bring a solution to the problems at Corinth. Paul then visited the church himself. It was a painful visit during which the church resisted his authority.²⁰⁵ Paul returned to Ephesus, from where he wrote another letter (now lost) and sent it with Titus.²⁰⁶

From Ephesus, Paul traveled to Macedonia where he awaited news from Corinth. Titus reported that most of the Corinthians had repented of their rebellion.²⁰⁷ However, a small group continued to reject Paul’s authority. The last part of 2 Corinthians addresses this group and prepares the way for Paul’s third visit.

The purposes for 2 Corinthians are:

- To praise the Corinthians for the repentance reported by Titus (1-7)
- To complete the collection of the Jerusalem offering (8-9)
- To address the continued rebellion of some members (10-13)

The following chart shows a timeline for 1 and 2 Corinthians. While some dates are uncertain, this is the most likely timetable for Paul’s involvement with the church at Corinth.

²⁰⁵ 2 Corinthians 2:1

²⁰⁶ 2 Corinthians 2:3-9

²⁰⁷ 2 Corinthians 7:5-16

Paul and the Church at Corinth		
Year	Paul's Visits	Paul's Letters
A.D. 50	Church planted on Paul's 2 nd missionary journey	
		An unknown letter (1 Corinthians 5:9)
A.D. 55		<i>1 Corinthians</i> , written from Ephesus and delivered by Timothy
	A painful visit during which Paul's authority was rejected (2 Corinthians 2:1)	
		An unknown severe letter, sent with Titus from Ephesus, that brought repentance (2 Corinthians 7:8-16)
A.D. 56		<i>2 Corinthians</i> , written from Macedonia and delivered by Titus
A.D. 57	Paul's final visit to Corinth (2 Corinthians 12:14)	

Content of 2 Corinthians

The style of 2 Corinthians shows its varied purposes. It reads like an anthology, giving Paul's response to many different issues. Like 1 Corinthians, it is an occasional letter, dealing with specific issues related to the situation at Corinth. Rather than an outline of this diffuse letter, it is more useful to identify some themes that are addressed in the course of the letter.

Defense of Paul's Apostleship

With some apparent embarrassment, Paul defends his apostleship in an extensive passage. His enemies have used Paul's sufferings and weakness as evidence against his authority as an apostle. These enemies glory in success and power; Paul glories in his infirmities, "that the power of Christ may rest upon me."²⁰⁸ His authority comes from God, who has chosen to work through Paul's weakness as a means of revealing God's glory.

Defense of Paul's Integrity

Paul had intended to visit Corinth earlier, but delayed his visit to allow the wounds of his previous visit to heal. For this reason, he traveled to Macedonia rather than directly to Corinth. This change of plans became grounds for an attack by Paul's enemies; they accused

²⁰⁸ 2 Corinthians 12:9

him of unreliability. Paul explains his change of plans in light of God's leadership of his ministry.²⁰⁹

Plans for Paul's Third Visit

There are some who continue to reject his authority and say that Paul is weak. Paul writes that he is returning to Corinth, and pleads with them to repent before his arrival. In spite of the turmoil caused by these opponents, Paul's goal is reconciliation. Early in the letter, he assures a repentant offender of forgiveness.²¹⁰ At the end of the letter, he pleads once more for restoration. Paul's goal is reconciliation, not revenge.

Galatians

Date

The most likely date for Galatians is around A.D. 48. Paul and Barnabas evangelized the south part of Galatia on the first missionary journey, beginning in A.D. 47. It is likely that Paul wrote Galatians in response to problems that arose among these new converts soon after his departure.

One of the arguments in favor of this date is the fact that Paul does not mention the Jerusalem Council in this letter. Since the letter addresses the issue of Gentiles and the Law (the issue decided at the Jerusalem Council in A.D. 49), it is likely that Paul would have mentioned this council if he were writing after A.D. 49. A date of A.D. 48 makes Galatians the first of Paul's epistles.

Purpose

The purpose of Galatians is clear from the opening paragraph. After coming to Christ as a result of Paul's ministry, the Galatian believers have abandoned the gospel. Paul writes to call them back to the gospel of Jesus Christ, the good news of the law of love lived in the power of the Spirit.

Soon after Paul and Barnabas left Galatia, false teachers visited the church. They preached that Gentile Christians must be circumcised and follow the Jewish law. These teachers did not completely reject the saving work of Jesus. However, they insisted that we are justified by faith in Christ plus obedience to the Law. Paul writes to remind his converts that we are justified through grace by faith alone.

Content

Galatians is Paul's most strongly worded letter. He rebukes the Galatians for their foolishness in turning to another gospel and calls them to return to the true gospel of Christ.

²⁰⁹ 2 Corinthians 1:15-2:4; 2:12-17

²¹⁰ 2 Corinthians 2:5-11

He does this through a series of contrasting choices. The letter to the Galatians is a call to a dramatic choice: freedom in Christ or bondage in the flesh.

The True Gospel versus a False Gospel

Unlike later letters in which Paul often identifies himself both as an apostle and as a servant of Jesus Christ, in Galatians he identifies himself only with words of authority. "Paul, an apostle, (not of men, neither by man, but by Jesus Christ, and God the Father, who raised him from the dead)...."²¹¹ This is the language of apostolic authority.

Paul's message is being challenged by Judaizers in Galatia. Part of this challenge is likely to have been, "Paul wasn't a disciple of Jesus. In fact, he persecuted the church! Why should you listen to his message? He isn't a real apostle." Paul responds, "I wasn't chosen by men or through man's efforts. I am an apostle called by Jesus himself and by God the Father, who raised him from the dead."

Paul wants the Galatian believers to know that the gospel he preached to them was the true gospel of Jesus Christ. One of Paul's sermons in Galatia is recorded in Acts 13:16-41.

► Read Paul's sermon in Acts 13:16-41. What topics are included in the sermon?

Notice the content of this summary of the gospel:

- God worked through Israel's history to raise up a Savior.
- Jesus is the Savior, announced by John the Baptist.
- Jesus was rejected by "they that dwell at Jerusalem, and their rulers."²¹²
- They crucified Jesus, but God raised him from the dead.²¹³
- Jesus was seen by many witnesses after his resurrection.
- "All that believe are justified from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses."²¹⁴ This is a crucial message for Gentile converts. From his first message Paul preached that we are justified by faith ("all that believe"), not by the law of Moses.

This is the true gospel, the message of justification by faith alone. By the time Paul writes Galatians, these new converts have turned to a different gospel, a gospel that is not even a gospel.²¹⁵ The bondage of justification by works of the Law is far from the good news of justification by faith preached by Paul.

²¹¹ Galatians 1:1

²¹² Acts 13:27

²¹³ Acts 13:30

²¹⁴ Acts 13:39

²¹⁵ Galatians 1:6-7

Justification by Faith	
The gospel says	We are saved by faith.
Judaizers said	We are saved by faith + Law.
Wrong theology today says	We are saved by faith + _____.

Grace versus Legalism

What was the false gospel of the legalists? *Judaizers*²¹⁶ taught that Gentile believers earn salvation through obedience to all aspects of the Mosaic Law. Instead, Paul taught that we are justified by grace, not works. He based this on four arguments:

- **Paul's experience.** Paul points to the gospel revealed on the road to Damascus. Paul had been an enemy of the gospel, persecuting the church. He was "advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers."²¹⁷ If salvation comes by obedience to the law, Paul did not need the gospel; he was faithful to obey the law. God was pleased to reveal his Son, and to bring Paul to the truth that "a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ."²¹⁸
- **The experience of the Galatians.** The Galatians received the Spirit by hearing with faith, not by works of the law. They cannot perfect by the flesh the work that was begun by the Spirit.²¹⁹
- **The experience of Abraham.** "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness." Now, all who believe are the children of Abraham.²²⁰ As Abraham was justified by faith, Christians are justified by faith, not works.
- **The law itself.** Paul shows that all who rely on works of the law stand under God's curse, but the just shall live by faith.²²¹ Paul challenges the Galatians converts to "Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage."²²²

²¹⁶ *Judaizer* is the term used to describe teachers in the early church who attempted to blend Jewish practice with Christian doctrine. They professed to be Christian, but they insisted that Gentile believers must also follow the Jewish Law.

²¹⁷ Galatians 1:14, *English Standard Version*

²¹⁸ Galatians 1:16; 2:16

²¹⁹ Galatians 3:3

²²⁰ Galatians 3:6-7

²²¹ Galatians 3:11-12

²²² Galatians 5:1

Who Is a Legalist?

Is a person who carefully obeys God a legalist? No! God expects his children to obey. A legalist is a person who obeys God's law in order to earn salvation.

The issue is the heart. **Externally, a legalist and a person of faith may look the same.** The person of faith obeys God because he loves God and wants to please him. A legalist obeys God in order to earn God's favor. A person's motivation for obedience (not his obedience itself), is what determines whether or not he is a legalist.

The Fruit of the Spirit versus the Bondage of the Flesh

► Does freedom from the works of the Law give us license to follow fleshly desires?

Paul recognized the danger that the message of justification by faith alone could be wrongly applied. A reader of Paul's letter might decide, "This is wonderful news! I am justified by grace through faith. The law doesn't matter. I can do whatever I want to do! I can live according to my fleshly desires." Both in Romans and Galatians, Paul responds to this false teaching. In Romans, he reminds his readers that those who die to sin cannot continue to live in sin.²²³ In Galatians, Paul's commands, "Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh."²²⁴

Paul warns his readers that we must "use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another."²²⁵ Paul never teaches that the law is useless; he teaches that the law is fulfilled (brought to completion) by love. Paul's answer to legalism is not license to willful sin. The answer to legalism is love. The law is fulfilled in love. If we love God, we will obey God's law willingly; through the law we will know how to live in a manner that pleases God. We will obey not out of bondage, but out of love. Love fulfills the law.

Three Views of Works		
Legalism	License	Love
"I'm saved by works."	"I'm saved by grace; works do not matter."	"I'm saved by grace; I obey God out of love for the one who saved me by his grace!"

Paul contrasts the works of the flesh with the fruit of the Spirit.²²⁶ He teaches that if we live in the Spirit, we will walk in the Spirit; we will show his fruit in our life. If we sow to the

²²³ Romans 6:2

²²⁴ Galatians 5:16

²²⁵ Galatians 5:13

²²⁶ Galatians 5:19-23

flesh, we will reap corruption. If we sow to the Spirit, we will reap life everlasting.²²⁷ The law of love is not license to sin. Instead, love empowers us to walk in obedience to God.

The law of love has great practical implications for the believer. Living in this way, we will restore those who fall to temptation; we will bear one another's burdens; we will think properly of ourselves; we will reap life everlasting.²²⁸ This is true Christian liberty.

Corinthians and Galatians in the Church Today

When we face trouble in the church, we are sometimes tempted to think, "It was never this bad in the past!" Corinthians and Galatians remind us that, "Today's problems are not new." These letters speak directly to the 21st century church.

1 Corinthians reminds us of the **unity of the church**. Although we differ in many areas, the body of Christ is one body. That truth must guide us in handling differences within the church; it must guide us in addressing conflicts between Christians; and, it must guide us in using our gifts to build up the body of Christ.

These letters remind us that we are called to the **ministry of reconciliation**. In Corinthians, Paul shows that forgiveness should be freely offered when there has been division in the church. Similarly, in Galatians Paul shows that we should seek to restore those who fall.

Galatians reminds us of the great **doctrine of justification by grace through faith**. Paul warns against any effort to teach "justification by faith plus...." Nothing (Mosaic law, works, or anything else) can be added to faith in the work of Christ as the ground for our justification before God.

Galatians reminds us of the **life implications of the law of love**. The law of love transforms our lives as believers.

Conclusion

In early May, 1738, William Holland testified to the assurance of faith after listening to Charles Wesley read from Luther's *Commentary on Galatians*. Charles Wesley wrote in his journal, "I spent some hours this evening in private with Martin Luther, who was greatly blessed to me..... I labored, waited and prayed to feel 'who loved me, and gave himself for me.'"

Just a few days later, on Pentecost Sunday, Charles himself testified to assurance. Four days later, while listening to William Holland read from Martin Luther's *Preface to Romans*, John Wesley came to an assurance of faith.

²²⁷ Galatians 6:8

²²⁸ Galatians 6:1-8

The message of justification by faith transformed Luther, the Wesleys, and millions of other believers. This message is as important today as it was in the 17th century.²²⁹

Lesson 6 Assignments

Demonstrate your understanding of this lesson with the following assignments:

(1) Choose **one** of the following assignments:

- As a study guide for 1 Corinthians, prepare a one page outline identifying each of the issues that Paul addresses in this letter. Your outline should include three items:
 - The question or problem
 - A short summary of Paul's answer
 - The Scripture reference in 1 Corinthians in which the question is discussed
- Write a one page essay on modern challenges to the doctrine of justification by grace through faith alone. While we no longer face the Judaizers and their attempts to require circumcision, what other things are sometimes added by Christians to grace through faith as the basis for justification?

(2) At the beginning of the next lesson, take a test based on this lesson. Study the test questions carefully in preparation.

Lesson 6 Test

- (1) Why was Corinth an important city for Paul's evangelism strategy?
- (2) Who worked with Paul in planting the church in Corinth?
- (3) What problems at Corinth motivated 1 Corinthians?
- (4) What phrase introduces each question that Paul answers in 1 Corinthians?
- (5) List three themes addressed by Paul in 2 Corinthians.
- (6) What is the purpose for Paul's letter to the Galatians?
- (7) What was the false teaching of the Judaizers?
- (8) What is the choice offered in Galatians?
- (9) Define *legalist*.
- (10) In his argument against legalism, Paul pointed to four things. What are they?
- (11) Write 1 Corinthians 1:20-21 and Galatians 5:22-23 from memory.

²²⁹ From J. I. Packer's "Introduction" to Luther's *Commentary on Galatians*. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Classic Commentaries, 1998).

Lesson 7

Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon

Lesson Objectives

- (1) Know the likely date and historical setting of the Prison Epistles.
- (2) Outline the primary themes and purposes of the Prison Epistles.
- (3) Understand the biblical meaning of predestination.
- (4) Appreciate the importance of biblical teaching in areas such as the church, the doctrine of Christ, and spiritual warfare.
- (5) Summarize practical principles for the Christian life from the Prison Epistles.
- (6) Relate the message of these books to the needs of today's world.

Preparation for this Lesson

- Read Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon.
- Memorize Ephesians 4:11-16 and Colossians 3:1-4.

Introduction

In the early A.D. 60s, Paul was held under house arrest in Rome for two years. Although a prisoner, he had relative freedom. He lived in a rented house and was allowed to receive visitors.²³⁰ During this imprisonment, Paul wrote four letters (also called epistles). Three of the letters are addressed to churches; the fourth is addressed to a man converted under Paul's ministry.

These letters are some of Paul's most joyful letters. They show his victory over the difficult circumstances of his life, and they encourage us to maintain a spirit of joy during our struggles.

These letters are immensely practical. They address such issues as family relationships and spiritual warfare (Ephesians), humility and unity (Philippians), the preeminence of Christ (Colossians), and forgiveness and restoration (Philemon).

Ephesians

Historical Setting

The church at Ephesus was planted on Paul's third missionary journey. The orator Apollos preached in Ephesus; Priscilla and Aquila worked there; Paul spent three years preaching and teaching in Ephesus. This city became the center of evangelistic outreach to the

²³⁰ Acts 28:30-31

surrounding province; from Ephesus all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus.²³¹

Ephesus was the home of a famous temple to the goddess Diana (also called Artemis). Occult practices were common, and the town economy revolved around the sale of objects related to the temple. Paul's ministry disrupted both of these interests. As much as \$6 million in books of magical arts were burned by new believers.²³² As a result, Demetrius and other craftsmen who made their living from selling objects honoring Diana started a riot opposing Paul's ministry. Spiritual warfare is an important theme in Ephesians.

One additional factor should be mentioned regarding Ephesians. It is unusual for Paul's letters not to include personal greetings to people in the church. Even the letter to Rome, where Paul had not yet visited, included greetings to church members known by Paul. Writing to Ephesus, a church where Paul had preached for three years, one would expect a long list of names. Instead, Ephesians contains no personal greetings. The most likely reason is that Ephesians and Colossians were circular letters intended to be shared among several churches in Asia Minor. Tychicus was appointed to deliver Ephesians and Colossians and to bring greetings to these churches.²³³

Content

An overview of Ephesians shows two large sections:

1. **Doctrine:** What God has done for the Church (Ephesians 1-3)
2. **Application:** What God is doing in the Church (Ephesians 4-6)²³⁴

In the first section, Paul addresses the doctrines of election and the church. In the second section, Paul exhorts his readers to live in a manner worthy of their position as the elect church of God.

Doctrine: What God Has Done for the Church (Ephesians 1-3)

The Salvation of Believers (Ephesians 1:3-2:10)

After a short greeting, Paul begins with a prayer in which he lists the blessings we have received in Christ. Ephesians 1:3-14 is a beautiful doxology in which Paul reminds his readers of the spiritual benefits we receive through our position in Christ.

► Read Ephesians 1:3-14. What are the spiritual blessings we receive in Christ?

Our salvation involves all three persons of the Trinity. In 1:3-6, Paul shows the **Father's role in our election**. God has chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we

²³¹ Acts 18:24-19:10

²³² *English Standard Version Study Bible*

²³³ Ephesians 6:21 and Colossians 4:7

²³⁴ Adapted from Walter A. Elwell and Robert W. Yarbrough, *Encountering the New Testament*. (Ada: Baker Academic, 2005).

should be holy and without blame before him in love. We are chosen in him (in Christ) to be holy and without blame. The plan of salvation was the Father's design.

In 1:7-12, Paul shows the **Son's role in our redemption**. Because of the atoning death of Jesus, we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace. To redeem someone means to ransom them from captivity. The great Old Testament example was the redemption of Israel from slavery in Egypt. In the New Testament, all who believe in Jesus are redeemed from slavery to Satan.

In 1:13-14, Paul shows the **Spirit's role in our preservation**. Through the Spirit we are sealed. In a beautiful image, Paul says that the Spirit provides the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession. He provides the down payment on our inheritance in God's eternal kingdom. Because of the Spirit, we are God's purchased possession and have the promise of heaven.

The doctrine of redemption continues in Ephesians 2 where Paul reminds us that we were dead in trespasses and sins. Our salvation is not based on any merit of our own; instead, "God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved)."²³⁵ "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast."²³⁶ The entire process is the gift of God. We have nothing of which to boast.

Special Topic: Election

Paul writes that we are **predestined** unto adoption by Jesus Christ. We were chosen in him before the foundation of the world.

Some people use the word **election** to mean that before the foundation of the world, God chose each individual who would be saved. The elect are predestined to salvation. Logically, this implies that all other persons are predestined to damnation and cannot be saved. This seems to contradict the message of the Bible that God loves all mankind.

Some people use election to mean **no more** than God's foreknowledge of those who will choose to be saved. They argue that predestination is simply God's foreknowledge of man's choice. In this view, salvation is based on our choice. This understanding seems to contradict the Bible's emphasis on God's sovereignty.

These two principles (God's sovereignty and God's universal love) are resolved in two central passages on predestination: Romans 9-11 and Ephesians 1. Romans 9-11 shows God's justice in determining the way of salvation. God is sovereign. No one will be saved except through faith in Jesus Christ, the path which God has eternally decreed as the way of salvation.

²³⁵ Ephesians 2:4-5

²³⁶ Ephesians 2:8-9

In Ephesians 1, Paul shows that salvation belongs to individuals **because of our place in Christ**. Before the foundation of the world, Christ was chosen as the one through whom salvation comes. All who believe are elect “in him.” Because of God’s universal love, the way of salvation is open to all who believe.

This same balance is seen in the Old Testament. Israel was the elect nation, the chosen people of God. However, they are not all Israel, which are of Israel.²³⁷ God’s election of Israel as a nation did not mean that every Israelite was saved. Through disobedience, some (like Achan) forfeited the promises. Others who were not born of Israel (like Rahab) believed God’s promises and inherited the promises made to Israel. Salvation required that individuals believe and participate in God’s promises to elect Israel.

In the same way, Christ was chosen before the foundation of the world as the one through whom salvation is given. When we are “in Christ” through faith, we receive the blessings of salvation that are his. We are elect in Christ.

Election is God’s sovereign choice of faith in Christ as the only way to salvation. “For there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.”²³⁸ This same idea is seen in 1 Peter 1:18-20. We are redeemed, not with corruptible things, but with the precious blood of Christ. Christ, Peter says, was foreordained before the foundation of the world.²³⁹ Election is in Christ alone and through Christ alone.

Ephesians (Continued)

Doctrine: What God Has Done for the Church (Ephesians 1-3) (Continued)

The Unity of the Church (Ephesians 2:11-3:21)

► What is the “mystery of the gospel” in Ephesians?

In Ephesians 1, Paul rejoices in the salvation of believers. In Ephesians 2-3, he rejoices in God’s creation, the church. An important theme of Ephesians is the unity of the church, one body formed of both Jew and Gentile. Gentiles who were once strangers from the covenants of promise are now made nigh by the blood of Christ.²⁴⁰ From the beginning, God’s plan was to include Gentiles in his family. To Paul’s Jewish brothers, this was the shocking aspect of the gospel; the church is made up of both Jews and Gentiles in Christ.

In the Bible, a mystery is not something that cannot be known; a mystery is something that was unknown but is now revealed. In Ephesians 3, Paul explains the mystery that has now been revealed: “the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel.”²⁴¹ In a sign of the power of God’s grace, Paul - less

²³⁷ Romans 9:6

²³⁸ Acts 4:12

²³⁹ 1 Peter 1:19-20

²⁴⁰ Ephesians 2:12-13

²⁴¹ Ephesians 3:6

than the least of all saints and one who persecuted Christ and his church - has been chosen to preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ.²⁴²

Paul concludes the doctrinal section with a prayer that the Ephesian believers, already saints and faithful in Christ Jesus will be filled with all the fullness of God.

Application: What God is Doing in the Church (Ephesians 4-6)

In the second half of this letter, Paul challenges believers to walk “worthy of the calling to which you have been called.”²⁴³ A life worthy of our calling:

- Brings unity to the church (Ephesians 4:1-16)
- Results in ethical conduct (Ephesians 4:17-5:21)
- Affects family and work relationships (Ephesians 5:21-6:9)
- Is lived only in the strength of the Lord’s might (Ephesians 6:10-18)

Christian doctrine cannot be separated from Christian life. The doctrine of the church must be seen in the life of a church in which each part is working properly, a church that is building itself up in love.²⁴⁴ The doctrine of salvation by grace is seen in the behavior of the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness.²⁴⁵

Paul ends this letter with encouragement that the church is able to accomplish its mission and defeat the powers of darkness. He concludes with a request for prayer for his continuing proclamation of the gospel and with a benediction.

Philippians

Historical Setting

The church at Philippi was planted on Paul’s second missionary journey. It was the first church planted in Europe. Paul and Silas traveled to Philippi after Paul’s vision of a man from Macedonia calling for help.²⁴⁶ Although Philippi was the chief city of that part of Macedonia, it did not have a significant Jewish population. Prayers were made by the riverside because there was no synagogue.²⁴⁷

One of the first converts at Philippi was Lydia, a woman of wealth. After her baptism, Lydia’s home became the gathering place for believers. In cities with large Jewish populations, opposition to the gospel usually came from religious leaders; but in Philippi, opposition arose after Paul and Silas disrupted the income of men who controlled a spirit-possessed slave girl. Paul and Silas were arrested, beaten, and cast into prison. That night, an

²⁴² Ephesians 3:8, *English Standard Version*

²⁴³ Ephesians 4:1, *English Standard Version*

²⁴⁴ Ephesians 4:16, *English Standard Version*

²⁴⁵ Ephesians 4:24

²⁴⁶ Acts 16:8-40

²⁴⁷ Any city in which ten Jewish men lived had a synagogue.

earthquake opened the doors of the prison, and the prisoners were loosed from their chains. Rather than escaping, Paul and Silas preached the gospel to the jailer.

In Acts, Luke includes the detail that Philippi was a colony.²⁴⁸ This simple statement carried great meaning for early readers of Acts. Philippi was founded as a Roman colony in 42 B.C. by the Roman general Antony. Many soldiers retired to this city, and the citizens received exemption from many Roman taxes. Philippi's status as a colony was a point of pride to its citizens. Paul alludes to this mindset when he challenges the Philippian Christians to live as citizens of heaven.²⁴⁹

Purposes

Philippians is one of Paul's most positive letters showing few of the problems that he addresses in his letters to Corinth and Galatia. There are two reasons for this letter.

A personal purpose is to bring news of Paul's imprisonment and to express appreciation for the church's financial support of his ministry.²⁵⁰ Paul rejoices in their faithfulness and encourages them to live joyful lives.

An instructional purpose is to address two dangers for the Philippian church: external danger comes from false teachers while an internal threat comes from division between two members of the church.

Content

Joy in Spite of Circumstances (Philippians 1)

Although Paul is in prison, he is confident that God is working His purposes. Because of Paul's arrest, he has the opportunity to preach the gospel to the palace guard. Paul does not know if his imprisonment will end in release or death. But regardless of the outcome, he rejoices because to live is Christ, and to die is gain.²⁵¹

Another circumstance that could threaten Paul's joy is the jealousy of fellow believers. A group in Rome is preaching Christ of contention, adding to Paul's suffering. However, regardless of their motive, Paul rejoices because the gospel is being preached. Paul is confident that good will come from the gospel, regardless of the wrong motives of these people. Paul's personal situation is less important than God's Kingdom.²⁵²

²⁴⁸ Acts 16:12

²⁴⁹ Philippians 3:20, *English Standard Version*: "But our citizenship is in heaven...." The same Greek word is used in Philippians 1:27: "Only let your **manner of life** be worthy of the gospel of Christ...."

²⁵⁰ Philippians 4:15-18

²⁵¹ Philippians 1:12-14, 19-25

²⁵² Philippians 1:15-18

Humility as a Key to Unity (Philippians 2)

Later in the letter, Paul will address a division between two sisters in the Philippian church.²⁵³ They are good Christians who have labored with Paul for the sake of the gospel. Unfortunately, personal conflict between these sisters threatens the unity of the church. Laying a groundwork for dealing with this division, Paul points to the example of Christ as a model for Christian unity.

What Does It Mean That Jesus “Humbled Himself”?

Philippians 2:5-11 is called a “Hymn of Christ” because of its summary of Jesus’ life, death, resurrection, and ascension. Many people have debated the meaning of 2:8 in which Paul speaks of Jesus “humbling himself.” Jesus did not give up his deity. Instead, he gave up the privileges that belonged to him as king of the universe. Christ humbled himself by taking on humanity; he did not give up his divine nature.

Many conflicts are inspired by the desire to protect our rights. Paul points to the example of Christ who gave up the privileges that belonged to him as God in order to serve mankind. Jesus did not cling to the privileges of deity, but became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. He suffered every humiliation - even the shameful death of crucifixion - to provide salvation. As a result, God has exalted Jesus to his rightful place of universal authority.²⁵⁴

Every Christian should have this same attitude of humility, looking out for the needs of fellow believers. “Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others.”²⁵⁵

Warnings Against Enemies of the Gospel (Philippians 3)

Although Philippians is largely positive, Paul writes a strong warning against a group of troublemakers who threaten the church. These are the Judaizers seen earlier in the letter to Galatia. They insist that Christians must practice circumcision and the Jewish law. Paul calls them “dogs,” “evil workers,” and “mutilators.”

Paul responds to the Judaizers’ insistence on observing the rituals of the Law by pointing to his own life as an example. If observance of the law brings salvation, Paul would have confidence in the flesh. He was circumcised according to the Law; he was of the favored tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; he was a Pharisee who carefully obeyed the Law; he was zealous for the Jewish faith, even to the point of persecuting Christians; regarding the Law, Paul was blameless. However, all these things count as dung in the pursuit of the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. Paul was saved, the Philippians

²⁵³ Philippians 4:2-3

²⁵⁴ Philippians 2:5-11

²⁵⁵ Philippians 2:4

were saved, and we are saved, not by observance of the law, but by an experiential knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord.²⁵⁶

Concluding Exhortations (Philippians 4)

In the final chapter, Paul exhorts Euodias and Syntyche to show the unity that Paul taught in chapter 2. If these ladies have the mind of Christ, they will resolve their conflicts. He exhorts the church to rejoice in all circumstances and to maintain God's peace in their hearts and minds. He concludes with thanks for the church's support of his ministry.

Colossians

Historical Setting

Colossians was written during Paul's imprisonment in Rome. Timothy is also named as author,²⁵⁷ perhaps serving as Paul's secretary.

There is no evidence that Paul had visited the church at Colossae. The most likely connection between Paul and the church is Epaphras. Epaphras, a native of Colossae, may have been converted during Paul's ministry in Ephesus, about 160 kilometers away. Epaphras returned to plant a church in Colossae, as well as in the nearby towns of Laodicea and Hierapolis. Paul wrote letters to both Laodicea and Colossae, instructing the groups to exchange letters.²⁵⁸

Purpose

During Paul's imprisonment, Epaphras reported on a heresy that threatened the church in Colossae. Paul wrote Colossians to address this dangerous teaching. In addition, Paul wrote to encourage the Colossian Christians to press to maturity in Christ. The book includes both warnings against false doctrine and exhortations to spiritual growth.

Content

Colossians shares many themes with Ephesians: the unity of the church, the reality of spiritual warfare, and the necessity of living in a manner worthy of our calling as Christians. This similarity is not surprising. Paul is writing the letters at about the same time and the letters address similar needs.

While the details of the heresy taught in Colossae may differ from false teachings that threaten today's church, Paul's message is important for the church today:

- Christ is preeminent over creation.
- Christ is the head of the church.
- We are to live in a manner worthy of our calling as children of God.

²⁵⁶ Philippians 3:4-8

²⁵⁷ Colossians 1:1

²⁵⁸ Colossians 4:16

The Supremacy of Christ (Colossians 1)

The central theme of Colossians is the supremacy of the risen Christ. In a beautiful statement, Paul shows Christ's preeminence over nature, his authority over the church, and his role in redemption. Christ was both the agent of creation (all things were created by him) and the goal of creation (all things were created for him). Christ is the head of the body, the church. And, through Christ and the blood of his cross we who were sometimes alienated and enemies in our mind by wicked works have been reconciled. Christ is the center of creation, the head of the church, and the Lord of redemption.²⁵⁹

The Colossian Heresy (Colossians 2)

After this positive statement on the nature of Christ, Paul moves to a negative warning against the false teaching that threatens the church at Colossae. The exact nature of the Colossian heresy is not clear. However, Paul's responses reveal some characteristics of the heresy. The Colossian church faced a combination of orthodox Judaism, Jewish mysticism, and pagan teachings. The Colossian heresy included a mixture of these false ideas:

- Orthodox Jews urged the Colossian Christians to observe Jewish festivals, food laws, and circumcision.²⁶⁰
- Jewish mystics asked the Colossian Christians to fast in order to join in the exalted angelic worship of God.²⁶¹
- Pagans encouraged the Colossian Christians to practice rituals for protection from evil spirits. Paul does not deny the power of evil spirits, but he makes clear that the answer is found not in pagan rituals, but in the victory that Christ has already won over the powers of darkness.²⁶²

► How does the Colossian heresy relate to us today?

Syncretism refers to the blending of more than one religion. In Colossae, this syncretism blended Judaism, mysticism, paganism, and Christianity. Today, churches in pagan cultures are sometimes faced with the temptation to blend Christian doctrine with the practices of the surrounding culture (ancestor worship, pagan holy days, rituals to ward off ghosts and spirits, etc.). Both in the first century and the twenty-first century, the answer to all such teaching is the same: Jesus is Lord. He has defeated the powers of darkness, and we have victory through Christ alone. No other rituals or practices have a place in Christian practice.

²⁵⁹ Colossians 1:15-23

²⁶⁰ Colossians 2:16 and 3:11

²⁶¹ Colossians 2:18. The "worshipping of angels" probably does not mean that they were worshiping angels (which would go against all Jewish teaching). Instead, this phrase probably refers to a Jewish mystical idea that through ascetic practices, such as extended fasts, worshipers could mystically join the angels around the heavenly throne of God. The false teachers at Colossae were inviting these Christians to follow these practices.

²⁶² Colossians 2:15

As stated earlier, Paul does not give a complete description of the Colossian heresy. He is less interested in the precise nature of false teaching than in the true gospel of Christ, Lord of creation, and of the church.

Growth in Christian Maturity (Colossians 3-4)

As in Ephesians, Paul moves from doctrine to practice. Since Christ sits on the right hand of God, we who are risen with Christ should set our minds on heavenly things. Rather than an unhealthy focus on false teachings, we should remember that we have died to such things and now live with Christ in God.²⁶³

What does a life hidden with Christ in God look like? Paul describes this new life in practical terms. This life includes two aspects:

- 1. We are to put off old practices.** We are to put to death that which is earthly: sexual impurity, covetousness, anger, obscene talk, dishonesty, etc. These practices deserve the wrath of God.²⁶⁴
- 2. We are to put on the new man that is in the image of Christ.** This includes mercy, kindness, humility, patience, forgiveness, and above all love. As we develop these qualities, the peace of God will rule in our hearts and the word of Christ will dwell in us.²⁶⁵ This new life transforms family relationships (3:18-4:1) and makes the gospel attractive to unbelievers (4:5-6).

Philemon

Historical Setting

Paul's shortest letter is addressed to Philemon, a wealthy Christian from Colossae. It appears that Philemon was converted during Paul's ministry in Ephesus. His home became the meeting place for the Colossian church.

As was common in the first century, Philemon was a slave owner. Onesimus, a slave of Philemon, ran away to Rome. Rome was the most heavily populated city in the Empire, the safest place for a fugitive to hide. (A runaway today might travel to New York City, Mexico City, Lagos, or some other major city to disappear.)

However, Onesimus could not hide from God! In this huge city, God brought Paul and the runaway slave together. Onesimus was converted and began to assist Paul.

At some point, this new Christian was forced to confront his past. It is possible that he had stolen money from his master before running away.²⁶⁶ Onesimus faced the possibility of severe punishment; a runaway slave could be branded on his forehead as a fugitive or even

²⁶³ Paraphrase of Colossians 3:1-3

²⁶⁴ Colossians 3:5-10

²⁶⁵ Colossians 3:12-17

²⁶⁶ Philemon 1:18

killed. Knowing this, Paul wrote a letter of appeal which Onesimus could take with him when he returned to face Philemon.

Purpose

The purpose for Paul's letter is simple: an appeal for reconciliation. Onesimus has been reconciled to God; Paul asks Philemon to be reconciled with his runaway slave.

Content

Paul begins by thanking Philemon for his past generosity to fellow Christians. Philemon's love for fellow believers will be the basis of Paul's appeal on behalf of Onesimus, who is now a fellow believer.

Paul makes his appeal not on his apostolic authority (as in Galatians), but on the basis of love. He is almost halfway through the letter before he states his reason for writing; "I beseech thee for my son Onesimus."²⁶⁷ Philemon is Paul's son in the faith; now he has begotten another son, Philemon's runaway slave.

The name Onesimus means "useful" or "profitable"; it was a common name for slaves. Paul writes, "Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me."²⁶⁸ Onesimus will now live up to his name; through the power of Christ he is now useful.

Paul hints that Philemon could release Onesimus, but does not command it.²⁶⁹ He asks Philemon to receive Onesimus in the same spirit that Philemon would receive Paul.²⁷⁰

Paul concludes by asking Philemon to pray for Paul's release. He writes that he hopes to visit Philemon upon being released from prison. Do you suppose that this is a gentle reminder that Paul will soon see how Philemon treats Onesimus?

"We are all the Lord's *Onesimi*. The unprofitable becomes profitable. It is the perpetual picture of Christ dealing with men. We were all runaway slaves to sin."
- Martin Luther

Many people have complained because Paul did not condemn slavery. However, Paul's commands to masters create an environment in which slavery cannot endure.²⁷¹ It is not possible to enslave a person whom you truly see as a brother or sister in Christ.

Historical Epilogue

Scripture does not say what happened after Onesimus returned to Philemon. History gives two hints that suggest that Philemon released Onesimus.

²⁶⁷ Philemon 1:10

²⁶⁸ Philemon 1:11, *English Standard Version*

²⁶⁹ Philemon 1:13

²⁷⁰ Philemon 1:17

²⁷¹ Galatians 3:28; Ephesians 6:9; Colossians 4:1; Philemon 1:16

- An ancient inscription at Laodicea (located near Colossae) is dedicated by a slave to the master who freed him. The name of the master is Marcus Sestius Philemon.
- A few years after this letter, a man by the name of Onesimus became bishop of the church at Ephesus.

It is possible that Philemon released Onesimus to return to Paul, who then trained Onesimus as a pastor. If so, Paul's ministry at Ephesus may have continued through the preaching of Onesimus, the former slave of Philemon, who was first converted under Paul's preaching at Ephesus. God's purposes are far beyond what we can see!

The Prison Epistles in the Church Today

The Prison Epistles remind us that our **doctrine must be applied in daily life**. In these epistles, Paul challenges his readers to live worthy of their calling as believers. It is not enough to profess right doctrine; our beliefs must be lived out in daily life.

Ephesians and Colossians teach **the reality of spiritual warfare**. "For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places."²⁷² Spiritual warfare is real. But, these letters also teach that this war has already been won in Christ. We fight in confidence because he has already won the battle. Our primary attention must be on Christ who won the victory, not on our enemy who is fighting a losing battle.

Philemon reminds us that the **gospel of reconciliation must be lived in the real world**. Paul was not satisfied with a message that does not work in real life. He insisted that the same gospel that reconciled God and a runaway sinner will reconcile Philemon and a runaway slave. In a world of conflict and broken relationships, we must show the power of the gospel to bring reconciliation.

Conclusion

Christians in the Roman Empire learned what it meant to live the gospel in a fallen world. Paul wrote that the Philippians should live as "sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world."²⁷³ Paul knew that the church's light shines with increasing brightness as our world grows darker.

In the dark days of the Roman Empire, some Christians became known by the name "Gamblers for Christ" because they risked their lives to save others. Paul uses this same term when he says that Priscilla and Aquila "have for my life laid down their own necks."²⁷⁴ They risked their lives for Paul.

²⁷² Ephesians 6:12

²⁷³ Philippians 2:15

²⁷⁴ Romans 16:4

In the first century, Roman Christians risked the wrath of the community to rescue unwanted infants who were abandoned on the city's garbage heaps. In the third century, the bishop of Carthage called his congregation together during a plague, asking them to care for the dying and bury the dead, gambling their lives to save the city.

The early church knew that putting off the old man and putting on the new man means more than going to church. It means living a new life that belongs to God and his purposes. It may mean gambling our life in order to allow the gospel to shine as lights in the world.

Lesson 7 Assignments

Demonstrate your understanding of this lesson with the following assignments:

(1) Choose **one** of the following assignments:

- Prepare a sermon or Bible lesson from Ephesians on the family. You can write this as a 5-6 page manuscript or record a sermon or Bible lesson.
- Prepare a sermon or Bible lesson from Ephesians on the church. You can write this as a 5-6 page manuscript or record a sermon or Bible lesson.
- Prepare a sermon or Bible lesson from Philippians on joy in the Christian life. You can write this as a 5-6 page manuscript or record a sermon or Bible lesson.
- Prepare a sermon or Bible lesson from Colossians on our new life in Christ. You can write this as a 5-6 page manuscript or record a sermon or Bible lesson.

(2) At the beginning of the next lesson, take a test based on this lesson. Study the test questions carefully in preparation.

Lesson 7 Test

- (1) When and from where were the Prison Epistles written?
- (2) Why does Ephesians contain no personal greetings?
- (3) List the two large divisions of Ephesians.
- (4) From Ephesians 1, list the role in our salvation of each member of the Trinity.
- (5) According to Ephesians 3, what is the mystery of the gospel?
- (6) List two dangers facing the Philippian church.
- (7) In Philippians 2, what does it mean that Christ “humbled himself”?
- (8) What three influences made up the Colossian heresy?
- (9) Define *syncretism*.
- (10) List three ways in which the Prison Epistles speak to the church today.
- (11) Write Ephesians 4:11-16 and Colossians 3:1-4 from memory.

Lesson 8

Thessalonians

Lesson Objectives

- (1) Know the likely date and historical setting for 1 & 2 Thessalonians.
- (2) Outline the primary themes and purpose of 1 & 2 Thessalonians.
- (3) Gain encouragement to faithfulness in the face of opposition from unbelievers.
- (4) Show a deeper understanding of the doctrine of Christ's return.
- (5) Live today in light of Christ's return.
- (6) Relate the message of these books to the needs of today's world.

Preparation for this Lesson

- ▶ Read 1 & 2 Thessalonians.
- ▶ Memorize 1 Thessalonians 4:23-24.

Introduction

The church at Thessalonica was born in the midst of persecution. These believers knew what it meant to suffer for the name of Christ. They became Christians because they believed the truth of Paul's preaching, "that this Jesus, whom I preach unto you, is Christ."²⁷⁵ These were courageous Christians willing to suffer for their faith.

Due to opposition, Paul was able to spend only a short time in Thessalonica. Because of this, Paul was unable to instruct them fully in Christian doctrine. After Paul's departure from Thessalonica, questions arose regarding the return of Christ. In light of persecution, these young believers had questions about their future hope.

Paul writes these two letters to encourage them to faithfulness. He assures them that Jesus will return and that they should live today in light of that return.

Background to 1 & 2 Thessalonians

Historical Background

The church at Thessalonica was planted during Paul's second missionary journey. After leaving Philippi, Paul traveled through Amphipolis and Apollonia to Thessalonica, about 160 kilometers from Philippi.

²⁷⁵ Acts 17:3

Paul taught in the synagogue at Thessalonica for three Sabbaths. Some of the Jews and many of the devout Greeks were converted.²⁷⁶ In response, a group of unbelieving Jews started a riot, attacking the house of Jason where Paul and Silas were staying.

Because of the danger, Paul and Silas slipped out of the city at night and traveled to Berea, about 80 kilometers from Thessalonica. When the Jews in Thessalonica heard that Paul was in Berea, they followed him and stirred up trouble there. Apparently the opposition was focused on Paul, because he was able to leave Silas and Timothy in Berea while he went on to Athens.

From Athens, Paul traveled west to Corinth, where he ministered for eighteen months. Silas and Timothy caught up with Paul in Corinth and gave him news of the young church in Thessalonica.

Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians in response to the reports of Silas and Timothy. He probably sent Timothy to carry the letter to Thessalonica. A few months later, in response to further news, he wrote 2 Thessalonians. These two letters date from Paul's stay in Corinth in A.D. 50-51. They are among his earliest letters, preceded only by Galatians.

Paul and the Church at Thessalonica	
c. A.D. 50	Paul, Silas, and Timothy preach in Thessalonica (Acts 17:1-4)
	After a few weeks, they flee to Berea (Acts 17:5-10)
	Paul leaves Silas and Timothy in Berea while he travels to Athens (Acts 17:14-15)
	Silas and Timothy join Paul in Athens (Acts 18:16)
	Paul sends Timothy to visit Thessalonica (1 Thessalonians 3:1)
	Paul leaves Athens and travels to Corinth (Acts 18:1)
	Silas and Timothy join Paul in Corinth, bringing news from Thessalonica (Acts 18:5; 1 Thessalonians 3:6)
c. A.D. 50-51	Paul writes 1 Thessalonians in response to Timothy's report
	Paul writes 2 Thessalonians in response to further questions (2 Thessalonians 2:15)

²⁷⁶ In Acts, the phrase "devout Greeks" refers to Gentiles who came to the synagogue to worship Jehovah, even though they had not fully converted to Judaism.

1 Thessalonians: Christ Will Return

Purpose

When Timothy arrived in Corinth, his report about the church in Thessalonica was positive; these young believers were remaining faithful to the gospel. Paul writes to encourage them in their faith and also to address a question that has arisen among the church. Some members of the church have died, which caused questions about the Lord's return. Some Christians fear that those who died have missed out on the promise of Christ's return. For Christians enduring persecution, it is disheartening to think their faithfulness may be in vain. Paul writes to encourage the Thessalonians to remain faithful in the face of opposition and to assure them that Christ will return both for those who die in the faith and for those who remain alive at his coming.

Content

► Does the thought of the Second Coming bring fear or hope? How does the doctrine of the Second Coming affect your daily life?

Written soon after Paul's ministry in Thessalonica, this letter is very personal. While Paul does not name individuals, he includes details of his ministry in Thessalonica. He is writing to believers who were converted under his ministry; his letter shows his deep compassion for his children in the faith.

Encouragement in the Face of Opposition

While preaching in Thessalonica, Paul warned the church to expect persecution.²⁷⁷ Now, Paul writes to encourage them in the face of this persecution. His message includes:

- **An assurance of Paul's prayers** (1 Thessalonians 1:2; 1 Thessalonians 3:17–4:5). He wants them to know that he has not forgotten them. He continues to pray for them as they face opposition.
- **A reminder of Paul's example of suffering** (1 Thessalonians 1:4–2:12). Paul points to the fruit of his own willingness to persevere: the conversion of the Thessalonians. His ministry in Thessalonica came at a personal cost: persecution from his enemies and the necessity of doing manual labor to support himself.²⁷⁸ However, the rewards are worth the cost. These new converts are his glory and joy.²⁷⁹ This should encourage the Thessalonian Christians that their sufferings too will bring God's reward.
- **Thanksgiving for their faithfulness** (1 Thessalonians 1:6-10; 1 Thessalonians 3:6-10). Paul is encouraged by the report he has received and, in turn, he encourages

²⁷⁷ 1 Thessalonians 3:3-4

²⁷⁸ Acts 17; 1 Thessalonians 2:2, 9, 16

²⁷⁹ 1 Thessalonians 2:20

the Thessalonians. Their conversion and their faithfulness in suffering has become a testimony “to all that believe in Macedonia and Achaia.”²⁸⁰

The Return of Jesus Christ

Paul was forced to leave Thessalonica before finishing his teaching. Because of this, the new converts were not fully instructed concerning the death of believers. Paul writes to give further teaching regarding the return of Christ and the last days (1 Thessalonians 4:13-1 Thessalonians 5:11).

The promise of Christ’s return is an encouragement to the Thessalonians, but now they face a perplexing problem. Some of their members have died before seeing the fulfillment of this promise. Paul assures them that even those have fallen asleep will see the return of the Lord.

Instead of grieving without hope, Christians must remember that when the Lord descends from heaven with a shout, the dead in Christ shall rise first. Those which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them and together we will ever be with the Lord.²⁸¹

Although the Thessalonians want details regarding the times and the seasons of Christ’s return, Paul assures them that they have no need for him to write them about that. Instead, they should face the future with confidence because of their faith in Christ.

When the day of the Lord comes as a thief in the night, destruction will come upon the children of the night. But for children of light, the day of the Lord will be a day of salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ.²⁸² For believers, the return of Jesus is a message of encouragement, not fear.

Living Today in Light of Christ’s Return

Paul’s teaching is always directed to practical application. This guides Paul’s teaching on eschatology.²⁸³ Paul is not interested in empty speculation about the date of Christ’s return.

After showing that Christ will return for both the living and the dead, Paul speaks to the importance of living today in readiness for Christ’s coming (1 Thessalonians 4:1-12 and 1 Thessalonians 5:1-24). Paul calls his readers to live as children of the light, not as the children of darkness. He gives specific instructions to prepare us today for Christ’s return tomorrow:

- Continue to walk carefully in a way that pleases God (1 Thessalonians 4:1-2).
- Live sexually pure lives (1 Thessalonians 4:3-8).

²⁸⁰ 1 Thessalonians 1:7

²⁸¹ 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17

²⁸² 1 Thessalonians 5:1-5, 9

²⁸³ *Eschatology* refers to the doctrine or study of the last days.

- Continue to increase in brotherly love (1 Thessalonians 4:9-10).
- Take care of your own business (1 Thessalonians 4:11).
- Work to support yourself, avoiding shame in the eyes of unbelievers (1 Thessalonians 4:11-12).
- Be watchful and sober (1 Thessalonians 5:6-8).
- Encourage and edify one another regarding the Lord's return (1 Thessalonians 5:9-11).
- Respect those who have leadership responsibilities in the church (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13).
- Maintain peace among believers (1 Thessalonians 5:13).
- Correct those who do not live properly: the lazy, fainthearted, and weak (1 Thessalonians 5:14).
- Do good, both to other believers and to people in the surrounding world (1 Thessalonians 5:15).
- Live lives of rejoicing (1 Thessalonians 5:16).
- Live lives of continual prayer (1 Thessalonians 5:17).
- Live lives of thanksgiving (1 Thessalonians 5:18).
- Do not quench the Holy Spirit's work (1 Thessalonians 5:19).
- Do not reject what is spoken in the name of the Lord. Instead, test all teaching and then hold fast to the good. (1 Thessalonians 5:20-21).
- Stay away from all forms of evil (1 Thessalonians 5:22).

Paul does more than give instructions; he prays for these converts, with whom he feels such a close relationship. Two prayers in 1 Thessalonians relate to his concern that they live carefully in light of Christ's coming. In 1 Thessalonians 3:11-13, Paul prays that these believers will grow in love and holiness in preparation for the coming of Jesus.

Then in 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24, Paul prays that the God who has reconciled these believers to himself (the God of peace) will sanctify you wholly (or completely). This ensures that their entire being (spirit and soul and body) will be ready for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. In a final encouragement, Paul assures his readers that this sanctification happens through the work of God, not through our own power. The one who calls us to holiness is the one who makes us holy.

2 Thessalonians: Misunderstandings About Christ's Return

Content and Purpose

Shortly after sending 1 Thessalonians, Paul learned of further questions about the Second Coming. In 2 Thessalonians, Paul answers these questions and again encourages the Thessalonians to faithfulness in preparation for Christ's return. 2 Thessalonians further clarifies Paul's teaching in 1 Thessalonians. Paul addresses confusion about the Lord's return and wrong behavior among believers.

1 Thessalonians	2 Thessalonians
Christ will return.	Christ has not yet returned.

Understanding the Day of the Lord (2 Thessalonians 1-2)

In 1 Thessalonians, Paul taught that we need not despair over the death of believers; Christ will return for both the living and the dead. After a short greeting and expression of thanks for their growing faith and love, 2 Thessalonians gives further instruction regarding the return of Christ. Paul writes that the Second Coming will lead to a time of judgment and everlasting destruction. However, believers need not fear; the day of judgment will also be the day when Christ is "glorified in his saints."²⁸⁴

In 1 Thessalonians, Paul responds to the mistaken idea that believers who died have missed the Lord's return. In 2 Thessalonians, he responds to the mistaken idea that the Lord has already returned. In 1 Thessalonians, Paul teaches that Christ will return; in 2 Thessalonians, Paul teaches that Christ has not yet returned.

"John Wesley was asked what he would do if he knew His Lord would come the next day. He said, 'Tonight I would go to bed and go to sleep. In the morning, I would wake up and go on with my work, for I would want Him to find me doing what He had appointed.'"
- Quoted by G.Campbell Morgan

Someone falsely claimed that the Day of the Lord has already come. Paul does not know the source of this report: someone claiming a gift of prophecy ("a spirit"), a preached word, or a forged letter claiming Paul as the author.²⁸⁵ Regardless of the source, Paul assures his readers that the Day has not come. Two events must occur before the Day of the Lord: a falling away and the revelation of the man of sin.²⁸⁶ These events have not yet occurred. Paul assures them that Christ's return is still future, and he expresses surprise that they have forgotten his earlier teaching on this subject.²⁸⁷

²⁸⁴ 2 Thessalonians 1:9-10

²⁸⁵ 2 Thessalonians 2:2

²⁸⁶ 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4

²⁸⁷ 2 Thessalonians 2:5

Living in Preparation for the Day of the Lord (2 Thessalonians 3)

As in 1 Thessalonians, Paul's primary concern in 2 Thessalonians is how Christians live today in light of Christ's future return. In 1 Thessalonians, Paul taught, "Since Christ is coming, live like this...." In 2 Thessalonians, Paul teaches, "Since Christ has not yet come, continue to live like this...."

As we wait for Christ's return, we should:

- Stand firm in what we have been taught (2 Thessalonians 2:15)
- Avoid laziness (2 Thessalonians 3:6-12)
- Avoid meddling in others' affairs (2 Thessalonians 3:11-12)²⁸⁸
- Keep doing good to others (2 Thessalonians 3:13)
- Admonish those who stubbornly refuse to submit to Paul's instructions (2 Thessalonians 3:14-15)

1 & 2 Thessalonians in the Church Today

There is great interest today in the subject of eschatology and the return of Jesus. Prophecy teachers attempt to predict the timing of the Lord's return. Books on so-called "Bible codes" attempt to uncover secret truths in Scripture. Christian authors publish popular novels based on what they imagine will happen after Jesus' return.

1 and 2 Thessalonians show a much different emphasis. These letters show that we should be more concerned about living faithfully until Christ's return than about uncovering hidden details of his return. Paul spends no time discussing the times and seasons. Instead, he says, "Christ will return. Make sure that you live in the way you want to be found when he returns." This should be the model for our preaching regarding the Lord's return.

Conclusion

In 1998, a cult in Taiwan predicted that Jesus would return on March 31. Some Christians sold their homes and quit their jobs. They met together on a mountain to wait for Christ's return. Newspapers in Taiwan published reports about this group and popularized their teaching. When Jesus did not return at the expected time, churches were mocked by their unbelieving neighbors.

This was not the first time that false predictions of Jesus' return have brought shame on the church. In America, a book predicting Jesus' return in 1988 sold nearly 5 million copies. Some religious radio and television stations broadcast special instructions for preparing for the Rapture.

²⁸⁸ 2 Thessalonians 3:6-12 deals with two related problems. Those who were not busy at work were busy meddling in the affairs of other believers. Paul tells them to do their work and to stay out of the affairs of others. If they obey the first instruction, they will have no time to interfere with others.

More recently, Harold Camping predicted the Rapture in 2011. The prediction was proven false. Again, unbelievers mocked Christians for believing this prediction.

People make predictions of the Rapture repeatedly - and repeatedly the predictions are proved false. Jesus himself warned against trying to determine the date of his return.²⁸⁹ Instead of trying to predict the date of Jesus' return, we should be busy doing the work of our Master. Like the believers at Thessalonica, we should devote ourselves to living in a way that leaves us prepared for Jesus' return at any moment.

Lesson 8 Assignments

Demonstrate your understanding of this lesson with the following assignments:

(1) Choose **one** of the following assignments:

- After reading 1 & 2 Thessalonians, write a one page essay on "Living Today in Light of Christ's Return." This should be a practical essay that shows how the return of Christ affects our life today.
- Prepare a sermon or Bible lesson on the Second Coming based on 1 & 2 Thessalonians. This can be a 5-6 page manuscript or a recorded sermon or Bible lesson.

(2) At the beginning of the next lesson, take a test based on this lesson. Study the test questions carefully in preparation.

Lesson 8 Test

- (1) Describe the circumstances in which the church was planted at Thessalonica.
- (2) List three ways in which Paul encourages the church at Thessalonica in the face of opposition.
- (3) What does Paul tell the Thessalonians about the times and seasons of Christ's return?
- (4) Paul gives these Christians specific encouragement about sanctification. What does he tell them?
- (5) If a primary message of 1 Thessalonians is "Christ will return," what is the primary message of 2 Thessalonians?
- (6) If we follow Paul's example, what will be our primary emphasis when preaching about the Second Coming?
- (7) Write 1 Thessalonians 4:23-24 from memory.

²⁸⁹ Matthew 24:36

Lesson 9

Timothy and Titus

Lesson Objectives

- (1) Know the likely date and historical setting of the Pastoral Epistles.
- (2) Outline the primary themes and purposes of the Pastoral Epistles.
- (3) Develop biblical qualifications for church leaders.
- (4) Gain increased respect for a pastor's responsibilities in areas such as doctrinal instruction, church organization, and spiritual leadership.
- (5) Be challenged to a lifetime of faithfulness to God's calling.
- (6) Summarize practical principles for Christian ministry from the Pastoral Epistles.
- (7) Relate the message of these books to the needs of today's world.

Preparation for this Lesson

- List some issues of concern to a young pastor. Then, find which of your issues are addressed in 1 Timothy and Titus. Read 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus.
- Memorize 2 Timothy 4:7-8 and Titus 2:11-14.

Introduction

Titus and 1 & 2 Timothy are known as the Pastoral Epistles, or Pastoral Letters. 1 Timothy and Titus were probably written between A.D. 64 and 65. 2 Timothy is Paul's final letter, written shortly before his martyrdom in A.D. 66 or 67.

These letters were written to younger men who Paul had trained. They were now pastors who were leading churches. Paul writes to address problems that have arisen in their churches.

In contrast to the letters to churches, these are personal letters. They are letters from a respected teacher to students who face challenges in their first appointment. Because of this background, these books are valued resources for new pastors who seek biblical counsel in leading the church.²⁹⁰

²⁹⁰ Image: "Titus Map," by Paul J. Bucknell, retrieved from <https://wwwFOUNDATIONSforfreedom.net/References/NT/Pauline/Titus/index.html>

1 Timothy

Purpose

On his journey following release from prison, Paul left Timothy to pastor the church in Ephesus while Paul continued on to Macedonia.²⁹¹ This young church had been started five to eight years previously by Paul. Paul writes this letter to give instructions regarding false teachers, to encourage young Timothy in his position as pastor, and to give specific instruction regarding matters of church policy and the appointment of church officers.

Content

False Teachers in the Church

Paul's first concern in this letter is to help Timothy deal with false teachers who are troubling the church at Ephesus. Rather than address the details of this teaching, Paul warns of the effects of the teaching. The false teaching resulted in argumentative questions and discussion.²⁹² These teachers want to be seen as teachers, but they do not understand the things they teach.²⁹³ Instead of empty arguments and speculations, God wants his church to build each other up to love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and sincere faith.²⁹⁴

It appears that part of the message of the false teachers related to the misuse of the law. Paul affirms the value of the law if a man use it lawfully and shows the sins that result from disobedience to the principles taught in the law.²⁹⁵ While Galatians shows that Christians are justified by grace, not law; 1 Timothy shows that the law plays an important role in warning against conduct that displeases God.

Paul gives three responses to these false teachers:

- **Encouragement to Timothy.** Paul gives his own testimony as someone who had been an enemy of Christ but who received mercy. Because of this, Timothy can wage "a good warfare" with confidence in the power of Christ to change lives.²⁹⁶
- **An emphasis on true teaching.** Paul responds to false doctrine with true doctrine. In 1 Timothy 4, Paul prescribes correct doctrine as an antidote to the poison of false doctrine.
- **Warning against wrong motivation.** Late in the letter, Paul looks at the motivation of the false teachers. In 1 Timothy 6, Paul warns that their teaching comes out of pride, corrupt minds, and greed. The answer to this is contentment with what we

²⁹¹ 1 Timothy 1:3

²⁹² 1 Timothy 1:4, 6

²⁹³ 1 Timothy 1:7

²⁹⁴ 1 Timothy 1:5

²⁹⁵ 1 Timothy 1:8-10

²⁹⁶ 1 Timothy 1:12-20

have. The love of money has caused some to err from the faith. Instead, true Christians are to follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, and meekness.²⁹⁷

Instruction for the Church

► What are the qualifications for leaders in your congregation? Make a list and compare your list to 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1.

Much of 1 Timothy consists of Paul's advice to Timothy. Paul gives guidance to young Timothy in issues such as:

Corporate prayer and public worship (1 Timothy 2).

Issues of worship and behavior in public worship were important for a young pastor like Timothy.

Qualifications for church leaders (1 Timothy 3).

There were two offices in the early church. Bishops (overseers) taught and preached; they were responsible to care for the flock and to guard members from spiritual harm.²⁹⁸ Deacons also had spiritual responsibilities, but were specifically responsible for areas of physical service.²⁹⁹ Paul's qualifications for both offices focus more on character than on duties. Paul's primary concern was that church leaders have a character that qualifies them to lead God's church.

The needs of special groups within the church (1 Timothy 5:1–1 Timothy 6:2).

Another issue for a young pastor is how to deal with the needs of a variety of groups in the church. Paul gives instruction for helping widows, church elders, and even slaves.

Conclusion

Paul concludes his letter to Timothy with a charge to faithfulness in the good fight of faith and a reminder that he must not be distracted by vain babblings and false knowledge.³⁰⁰ Timothy has been entrusted with the gospel. That must be his primary concern - and it must be the primary concern of every pastor who follows in Timothy's footsteps.

Titus

Historical Setting

Titus was a Gentile Christian, probably converted under Paul's ministry.³⁰¹ He was with Paul at the Jerusalem Council and represented Paul in Corinth during Paul's struggles with that

²⁹⁷ 1 Timothy 6:11-12

²⁹⁸ Acts 20:28-31

²⁹⁹ The Greek word for deacon, *diakonos*, means "servant."

³⁰⁰ 1 Timothy 6:12-21

³⁰¹ Galatians 2:1-4 and Titus 1:4

troubled church. At the time of this letter, Titus was serving on the mountainous island of Crete. Following Paul's visit to Crete, Titus was left to supervise churches in the heavily populated cities along the coast.

At the end of the letter, Paul asks Titus to join him in Nicopolis.³⁰² From 2 Timothy 4:10, it appears that Titus was later sent from Nicopolis to the nearby town of Dalmatia. By this time, Paul had been arrested and sent to Rome where he suffered martyrdom.

Purpose

Like 1 Timothy, Titus was written to guide a young pastor in building up the local church. Paul addresses false teachers, church leadership, and Christian behavior. A central theme of the letter is the importance of a Christian lifestyle as a demonstration of saving faith.

Content

The Danger of False Teachers

False teaching was a constant danger in the early church. Paul responds in three ways:

1. He calls for sound leadership in the church (Titus 1:5-9).
2. He argues that the lifestyle of these false teachers proves the error of their message (Titus 1:10-16 and Titus 3:9-11).
3. He provides a picture of right living (Titus 2:1-3:9). As always, Paul's approach is to emphasize truth, not simply to attack error.

The Importance of Good Works

False teachers were known by the wicked lifestyle their teaching produced. Those who followed the false teachers in Crete were abominable, disobedient, and reprobate.³⁰³ In the same way, true teaching should be known for the lifestyle that it encourages. After warning against false teaching, Paul devotes much of his letter to a picture of true Christian living. Paul insists that right doctrine will lead to right behavior.

Paul challenges Titus to teach what accords with sound doctrine.³⁰⁴ If the members of the Cretian church live as they should, their lives will match the doctrine taught by Paul and by Titus. Paul gives specific instructions for aged men, aged women, young women, young men, and servants. Paul reminds Titus that a leader must provide a model both of good works and of sound doctrine.

A careful lifestyle is a valuable testimony to the truth of the gospel. Paul gives two motivations for good works:

³⁰² Titus 3:12

³⁰³ Titus 1:16

³⁰⁴ Titus 2:1, *English Standard Version*

- *A negative motivation:* "that the word of God be not blasphemed."³⁰⁵
- *A positive motivation:* to "adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour in all things."³⁰⁶

"The grace of God hath appeared to all men...'
As freely as the sun shines on every man, so the spiritual Sun appears to all. In both cases, only those who willfully shut their eyes are deprived of the gracious benefit."
- Adapted from Adam Clarke
Commentary on the New Testament

Our lifestyle should reflect the model of Jesus "who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works."³⁰⁷ Unbelievers are attracted to the gospel by the life of godly people.

Paul's teaching in Titus is an important companion to his teaching in Galatians. In Galatians, Paul warns against those who believe that good works will earn justification. In Titus, Paul warns against those who teach that justification does not yield good works.

When we are truly justified by grace through faith, we will live a changed life. Paul makes clear in Titus as in Galatians that we are saved "not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy."³⁰⁸ Although we are not saved by our good works, salvation changes every aspect of our life. Before we were justified, we were "foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving divers lusts and pleasures..."³⁰⁹ Now that we have been made new, we must "be careful to maintain good works."³¹⁰

Paul concludes with personal instructions. He is sending Artemas or Tychicus to replace Titus on Crete. When this replacement arrives, Titus is to bring Zenas and Apollos and join Paul in Nicopolis.

2 Timothy

Purpose

2 Timothy, Paul's last letter, was written in A.D. 65-67 as he awaited his death sentence. Some companions have abandoned him, and others are away on assignments; so he is alone. He writes Timothy to request his help. Paul is cold; so he asks Timothy to bring a cloak. He needs helpers; so he asks Timothy to bring John Mark. He wants to continue his work until the end; so he asks for his books, "especially the parchments."³¹¹

³⁰⁵ Titus 2:5

³⁰⁶ Titus 2:10

³⁰⁷ Titus 2:14, *English Standard Version*

³⁰⁸ Titus 3:5

³⁰⁹ Titus 3:3

³¹⁰ Titus 3:8

³¹¹ 2 Timothy 4:9-13

Paul's Two Imprisonments	
First Imprisonment	Second Imprisonment
Accused by the Jews	Arrested by Rome
Paul has relative freedom to welcome visitors	Paul is mostly alone
In a rented house	In a cold prison cell
Ends with Paul's release	Ends with Paul's execution

Content

Faithfulness

At the end of his life, Paul looks back on a life that has been lived in faithful obedience to God's call. He also looks forward to those, like Timothy, who will carry on the ministry in the future. Faithfulness is an important concern for Paul at this point in his life. He challenges Timothy to continue faithful in ministry.

As examples of unfaithfulness, Paul points to some in Asia province who have abandoned him, specifically Phygellus and Hermogenes.³¹² Paul suffers disappointment with coworkers who have fallen by the wayside. Later, he mentions Demas, another former coworker who has abandoned him.³¹³ Faithfulness to God does not ensure a life free of disappointment. Perhaps more than the physical sufferings of shipwreck, beatings, and imprisonment, more than the mental pressures of dealing with problem churches such as Galatia and Corinth, Paul suffered from the emotional hurt of abandonment at this critical time.

Thankfully, Paul can rejoice in examples of faithfulness. He remembers Onesiphorus, an example of service both in Ephesus and in Rome.³¹⁴ He points to coworkers such as Crescens, Titus, and Tychicus who are serving faithfully.³¹⁵ In a wonderful demonstration of God's grace, Paul asks that Mark accompany Timothy to Rome. John Mark was the one who quit partway through Paul's first missionary journey and who was the cause of division between Paul and Barnabas.³¹⁶ Fifteen years later, Mark has shown his dependability; Paul asks for Mark's help "for he is profitable to me for the ministry."³¹⁷

These are more than personal recollections; Paul wants to inspire faithfulness in Timothy. With a series of metaphors, Paul shows what it means to be faithful.

³¹² 2 Timothy 1:15

³¹³ 2 Timothy 4:10

³¹⁴ 2 Timothy 1:16-18

³¹⁵ 2 Timothy 4:10-12

³¹⁶ Acts 15:36-39

³¹⁷ 2 Timothy 4:11

- A soldier is faithful to the one who enlists him (2 Timothy 2:3-4).
- An athlete competes according to the rules (2 Timothy 2:5).
- A farmer shows that faithfulness will result in future rewards (2 Timothy 2:6).

False Teachers

The threat of false teaching continues to be a real concern for Paul. He challenges Timothy to remain faithful and to refuse to be distracted by foolish and unlearned questions. These come from evil men and seducers who are deceiving, and being deceived.³¹⁸ Instead, Timothy should continue "in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of...."³¹⁹ He should preach the word; he should reprove, rebuke, and exhort; he should watch in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist; in short, he must make full proof of his ministry.³²⁰ Here, as in 1 Timothy and Titus, the answer to false teaching is faithfulness to the truth.

Farewell

2 Timothy is Paul's farewell to earthly life and ministry. However, Paul faces the future with confidence; he is looking forward to the reward for faithfulness.

Years before, Paul testified, "But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God."³²¹ Now, facing death, he testifies, "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing."³²²

The Pastoral Epistles in the Church Today

The Pastoral Epistles teach the **importance of right doctrine**. The most effective answer to false teaching is truth. In these letters, Paul gives more attention to right doctrine than to false teaching. In the same way, our most effective response to false doctrine today is the gospel which was once delivered unto the saints.³²³

In an age when moral failure and heretical teaching has destroyed some church leaders, the Pastoral Epistles are valuable for teaching the **qualifications for church leaders**. No church can afford to ignore these standards. Wise churches will select leaders who are committed to the qualities Paul identifies in 1 Timothy and Titus.

³¹⁸ 2 Timothy 2:23, 3:13-14

³¹⁹ 2 Timothy 3:14

³²⁰ 2 Timothy 4:2, 5

³²¹ Acts 20:24, *English Standard Version*

³²² 2 Timothy 4:7-8

³²³ Jude 3

Titus teaches the **importance of good works as a demonstration of the gospel**. The life of professed Christians has sometimes damaged the church's witness. Believers must make the gospel attractive to unbelievers. Right doctrine must result in right behavior.

Paul's closing words issue a **call to lifelong faithfulness**. Students, as you continue in ministry, you face a life of challenges. Like Paul, you may be abandoned by coworkers. Like Timothy and Titus, you may face false teachers. And, like believers in all ages, you will face temptation and opposition. Paul's closing words remind you, the prize is worth the cost. Don't give up; a crown is waiting for you.

Conclusion

William Borden was born into a wealthy family in 1887. Borden attended Yale University to prepare for a business career, but God called him to be a missionary to the Muslims of Northern China. On his way to China, while studying Arabic in Egypt, Borden contracted meningitis and died at the age of 25. He never saw China.

After his death, William's Bible was given to his parents. In the Bible they found a note from the date on which he said yes to God's call to China. Borden had written the words, "No Reserve." He was committed to give himself fully to God's call. When his family opposed his call and pressed William to join the family business, he wrote "No Retreat." Borden was committed to continuing the race without turning back. Only a few days before his death, Borden added a final note, "No Regrets." Borden could face the future confident that he had lived in obedience to God's call.

William Borden understood Paul's final testimony. For the person who gives himself without reserve and who follows God without retreat, there is a crown of righteousness. On that day, we will say with Paul and with William Borden, "I have no regrets." That is a worthy goal for every believer.

Lesson 9 Assignments

Demonstrate your understanding of this lesson with the following assignments:

(1) Do **both** of the following assignments:

- Prepare a list of qualifications for church leaders in your setting. You should apply the biblical standards of 1 Timothy and Titus to the cultural setting in which you minister.
- After reading 2 Timothy, write a one page farewell letter. If you were facing death, what testimony would you leave behind? This assignment may help you to evaluate your present life and ministry and to shape your future ministry as you become more aware of your legacy to those who follow you.

(2) At the beginning of the next lesson, take a test based on this lesson. Study the test questions carefully in preparation.

Lesson 9 Test

- (1) What is the most likely date for the Pastoral Letters?
- (2) Identify one way in which the content of 2 Timothy and Titus shows Paul as the author.
- (3) What was Paul's purpose for writing 1 Timothy?
- (4) How is Paul's testimony an encouragement to Timothy when facing false teachers?
- (5) List and define the two offices in the early church.
- (6) What was Titus's relationship with Paul?
- (7) What was Paul's purpose for writing the Epistle to Titus?
- (8) What are the two motivations for good works that Paul gives in Titus?
- (9) How does John Mark's experience fit Paul's message of faithfulness in 2 Timothy?
- (10) List four ways in which the Pastoral Letters speak to the church today.
- (11) Write 2 Timothy 4:7-8 and Titus 2:11-14 from memory.

Lesson 10

Hebrews and James

Lesson Objectives

- (1) Know the likely date and historical setting of Hebrews and James.
- (2) Outline the primary themes and purposes of Hebrews and James.
- (3) Heed biblical warnings against apostasy.
- (4) Appreciate our privileges and responsibilities under the new covenant.
- (5) Understand the relationship between faith and works in the Christian life.
- (6) Apply practical principles for the Christian life from Hebrews and James.
- (7) Relate the message of these books to the needs of today's world.

Preparation for this Lesson

- ▶ Read Hebrews and James.
- ▶ Memorize Hebrews 4:14-16 and James 2:17-18.

Introduction

The New Testament books from Hebrews through Jude are called the General Epistles.³²⁴ Unlike most of Paul's letters, these letters are addressed either to no specific audience or to someone about whom we know very little.

These letters range from a long epistle to the Hebrews to a short letter from the Apostle John to Gaius. The General Epistles address a variety of concerns, but common through all the books is an emphasis on practical Christian living. These books teach us how to live as Christians in a non-Christian world. First century Christians faced challenges similar to the challenges we face today: false doctrine, temptation, and opposition from unbelievers. Each of these issues is addressed in these letters. Although these letters are small in size, they are important for believers who face challenges to our faith.

The Letter to the Hebrews: A Better Way

Author

The book of Hebrews does not identify its author. Paul is often assumed as the author.

³²⁴ These letters are sometimes called the "catholic Epistles." In this context, "catholic" is another word for "general"; it does not refer to the Roman Catholic Church. This is the same use as in the Apostles Creed: "We believe in the holy catholic church, the communion of saints...."

Arguments in favor of Paul's authorship include:

1. Hebrews' emphasis on the person and work of Christ is common in Paul.
2. The author is associated with Timothy.³²⁵
3. The benediction in the final chapter is similar to Paul.³²⁶

Arguments against Paul's authorship include several differences of style between Hebrews and other letters:

1. Hebrews never uses the phrase "Christ Jesus," a phrase used more than fifty times in Paul's letters.
2. In Hebrews 2:3, the author says that he heard the gospel from the apostles. In Galatians 1:12, Paul emphasizes that he heard the gospel directly from a revelation of Jesus Christ.
3. Unlike other Pauline letters, Hebrews does not begin with a greeting and does not end with a list of personal greetings.

Throughout church history, a number of other authors have been proposed. Most proposed authors are associates of Paul, such as Barnabas, Luke, or Apollos. This might account for the similarities with Paul's style. Ultimately, the author is unknown.

Purpose

The book of Hebrews combines elements of a letter (personal greetings at the end) with characteristics of a sermon (exposition of Old Testament texts). The author refers to his letter as a "word of exhortation,"³²⁷ a phrase used in Acts 13:15 to describe a sermon. The best description of Hebrews is a sermon in the form of a letter.

The first recipients of this epistle are Jewish Christians who are tempted to turn from faith in Christ to their former practices. Their Jewish background is seen in their familiarity with the Old Testament sacrifices and rituals.

These Christians have endured persecution with faithfulness, but are in danger of becoming wearied and faint.³²⁸ The author of Hebrews writes to warn these believers against apostasy and to encourage them to faithfulness. Repeatedly, he reminds them that the person and work of Jesus is superior to the Old Testament system of priests and sacrifices.

³²⁵ Hebrews 13:23

³²⁶ Hebrews 13:18-25

³²⁷ Hebrews 13:22

³²⁸ Hebrews 10:32-34; 12:3

Date

The letter to the Hebrews was probably written before A.D. 70. The letter speaks of the Jewish sacrificial system as a present reality.³²⁹ This implies that the letter was written before the destruction of the temple by the Romans in A.D. 70.

The Old Testament in Hebrews

► What is the relationship between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant?

Before looking at the content of Hebrews, it is important to respond to a common misunderstanding about the book. Many readers have interpreted Hebrews as an attack on the Old Testament. Because Hebrews teaches that the new covenant is a better covenant, some assume that the old covenant failed in its purpose.

However, Hebrews shows great respect for the Old Testament.

- The heroes in Hebrews 11 are Old Testament characters.
- The lessons that Hebrews teaches are based on texts from the Old Testament.³³⁰ For example, Hebrews 1 has fourteen verses. Of those, nine verses are direct quotations from the Old Testament, including Psalm 2; 2 Samuel 7:14; Deuteronomy 32:43; Psalm 104:4; Psalm 45:6, 7; Isaiah 61:1, 3; Psalm 102:25-27; and Psalm 110:1.

Hebrews does not teach that God was forced to change his plan by the failure of the old covenant. Instead, salvation through faith in Christ was foreordained before the foundation of the world.³³¹ Even in the Old Testament, salvation was given by God's grace through faith, not by external rituals. This is seen in Hebrews 11, where it is by faith that each of these Old Testament heroes pleased God.

There is a clear continuity between the Old Testament and New Testament. Christ is the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises and laws. The problem in the Old Testament was a failure of Israel, not a failure of God's purpose. Israel failed to observe the covenant from the heart.³³² She turned a sacrificial system based on faith into empty rituals. Both the Old Testament prophets and Jesus condemned Israel's corruption of God's purpose.

From the foundation of the world, the old covenant pointed to the coming of Christ. The old covenant was never intended to be complete in itself; it pointed to a future fulfillment. This fulfillment is seen in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The new covenant is better because it fulfills the promise of the incomplete old covenant.

³²⁹ Hebrews 8:3-5; 9:7-8; 10:1-3

³³⁰ You will benefit by reading Hebrews in a study Bible that shows the Old Testament Scriptures that are quoted in Hebrews.

³³¹ 1 Peter 1:20

³³² Hebrews 8:8

Content

The book of Hebrews traces two parallel themes. One theme (*A Better Way*) compares the privileges of life in Christ with the lesser privileges available under the old covenant.

A second theme (*Beware*) is seen in a series of five warnings to those who are tempted to leave the faith and return to their old life. In each warning section, Hebrews gives the warning and then gives encouragement to the reader.

A Better Way

In a series of comparisons, Hebrews shows that:

- Christ is superior to the Old Testament prophets (1:1-3).
- Christ is superior to the angels because he is God's Son (1:4-14).
- Christ is superior to the angels because he is the Son of Man to whom the world has been made subject (2:4-18).
- Christ is superior to Moses, God's faithful servant and Israel's leader (3:1-6).
- Christ is superior to Aaron and the high priesthood (4:14-7:28).
- Christ has provided a superior covenant (8:1-13).
- Christ has made a superior sacrifice (9:1-18).

Hebrews shows a series of contrasts between the *good* promises of the Old Testament and the better fulfillment that is ours through Christ. For Jewish Christians to return to the old covenant would be folly! After tasting the fulfillment and partaking of the Holy Ghost, the Hebrew Christians will crucify the Son of God afresh if they return to their old forms.³³³

Beware

► What is apostasy? Is it possible for a truly converted person to leave the faith?

Alongside testimonies to the better way provided through Christ, Hebrews gives warnings to those who are tempted to leave the faith. Increased privilege gives increased responsibility. In light of this responsibility, Hebrews gives five serious warnings to believers who have tasted the good things of the new covenant and are tempted to return to the old.

Each warning is accompanied by an encouragement to faithfulness. While Hebrews teaches that apostasy is possible, it never suggests that apostasy is inevitable! God's plan for every believer is a life of faithfulness. Hebrews shows that a victorious life is available to every Christian.

³³³ Hebrews 6:4-6

Warning 1 - Hebrews 2:1-18³³⁴

- We are warned against drifting from the message we have heard (Hebrews 2:1).
- The warning is serious because of the great privileges we have received (Hebrews 2:2-3).
- We are encouraged by the example of Jesus, who was tempted and who gives strength to all who are tempted (Hebrews 2:18).

Warning 2 - Hebrews 3:12-4:16

- We are warned not to become hardened through the deceitfulness of sin (Hebrews 3:12-13).
- The warning is serious because it is possible to depart from the living God. We share in Christ if we hold steadfast unto the end (Hebrews 3:12-14).
- We are encouraged by the promise that Jesus is our high priest through whom we can find grace to help in time of need (Hebrews 4:14-16).

Warning 3 - Hebrews 5:11-6:12

- We are warned against going back to dead works (Hebrews 5:11-6:6).
- The warning is serious because of the impossibility of reversing apostasy (Hebrews 6:4-6).
- We are encouraged to know that all who are faithful will inherit the promises (Hebrews 6:9-12).

Warning 4 - Hebrews 10:26-39

- We are warned that if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth there is only judgment (Hebrews 10:26-27).
- The warning is serious because of the privileges of the new covenant. If those who ignored the law of Moses were judged severely, how much worse punishment we deserve if we have trampled underfoot the Son of God. This warning must not be ignored, because it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (Hebrews 10:28-31).
- We are encouraged because we believe to the saving of the soul. It is possible to turn back, but it is possible to persevere. We have confidence in the power of God to hold the believer firm. The possibility of faithfulness is seen in Hebrews 11 (Hebrews 10:32-39).

³³⁴ This outline is adapted from Walter Elwell and Robert Yarbrough, *Encountering the New Testament*, (Ada: Baker Academic, 2005).

Warning 5- Hebrews 12:25-29

- We are warned that we must not refuse the message we have received (Hebrews 12:25).
- The warning is serious because of the privileges of the new covenant (Hebrews 12:25-27).
- We are encouraged because “we may serve God acceptably” because of his grace (Hebrews 12:28-29).

Special Topic: Apostasy

What is Apostasy?

Apostasy is defined as “a deliberate repudiation and abandonment of the faith that one has professed.”³³⁵ This definition emphasizes three elements of apostasy:

- 1. It is deliberate.** Doubt regarding doctrine, uncertainty about one’s salvation, or even falling into sin does not constitute apostasy. Apostasy is a deliberate rejection of the Christian faith.
- 2. It is repudiation and abandonment of the faith.** It is more than sin; it is rejection of the truth of the Christian faith. For Hebrews, this was a denial of Jesus’ atoning work and a return to pre-Christian rituals.³³⁶ Judaizers added requirements to the atoning work of Christ; apostates rejected Christ’s atoning work entirely.
- 3. It is rejection of the faith that one has professed.** Apostasy is different than the unbelief of a person who has never known Christ. It is rejection of the faith by a person who has tasted the good word of God and the powers of the world to come.³³⁷

What Is the Difference between Apostasy and Backsliding?

Apostasy in Hebrews is a more permanent and conscious rejection of the faith than backsliding. Peter denied Jesus, but then repented of his sin. Peter’s courage failed; he did not reject the Christian faith. His backsliding was the result of fear, not rejection of Christ.

A backslider who falls into sin may still accept the truth of the Christian faith. By contrast, apostasy involves denial of the truth of the Christian faith.

Some of the warnings in Hebrews relate to backsliding and carelessness. However, complete rejection of the Christian faith seems to be the idea behind Hebrews 6:4-6. When the apostate rejects the saving death of Jesus, he cuts off the path to restoration. A repentant backslider, however, can be restored through Jesus’ atoning death.

³³⁵ L.G. Whitlock, “Apostasy” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*. Edited by Walter Elwell. (Ada: Baker Books, 1984).

³³⁶ Hebrews 6:6

³³⁷ Hebrews 6:5

Is It Possible for a True Christian to Commit Apostasy?

Some evangelicals argue that it is impossible for a true Christian to commit apostasy. However, the warnings of Hebrews make sense only if the writer is addressing a genuine danger. Hebrews 6:4-6 strongly implies that permanent and total apostasy is possible.

Hebrews in the Church Today

Hebrews warns against the real **danger of apostasy**. A common theme in the General Epistles is threats to the church. Often the warning is against heresies which distort Christian doctrine. In Hebrews, the warning is against complete abandonment of the Christian faith. This danger is as real today as it was in the first century.

Yes, Hebrews teaches, it is possible to leave the faith. But even more importantly, Hebrews teaches the **possibility of faithfulness**. We have the benefit of Christ's intercession on our behalf. By holding fast to the profession of our faith, by stirring up one another to love and good works, and by encouraging one another through faithful assembly together for worship, we can be faithful.³³⁸ The climax of Hebrews is chapter 11 with its testimony of those who were faithful through faith and who now provide a cloud of witnesses to all who "run with patience the race that is set before us."³³⁹

James: Faith That Works

Author and Date

The author of this letter was James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.³⁴⁰ James, the half-brother of Jesus, was a skeptic during Jesus' lifetime but was convinced by the resurrection.³⁴¹ He died as a martyr for the faith in A.D. 62.

This letter was probably written in the early to mid-40s. Since James was a leader at the Jerusalem Council which debated the issue of faith and works, it is likely that James would have mentioned the Council if the letter was written after A.D. 49.³⁴²

Audience and Purpose

James wrote to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad.³⁴³ This term (*diaspora*) first referred to the scattering of the Jews following the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. James used the term to refer to Jewish Christians who lived outside Jerusalem. James' frequent references to the Old Testament show that his audience was persecuted Jewish Christians. They faced temptations to conflict and to a worldly lifestyle. James wrote to remind believers that their faith must be seen in their works. Believers must put faith in practice.

³³⁸ Hebrews 10:23-25

³³⁹ Hebrews 12:1

³⁴⁰ James 1:1

³⁴¹ Matthew 13:55; John 7:3-5; 1 Corinthians 15:7

³⁴² Acts 15

³⁴³ James 1:1

Content

James and the Old Testament

Like the prophet Amos, James shows that our professed faith must affect our daily life. Both Amos and James insist that true religion will be seen in our treatment of others. In 108 verses, James gives more than fifty commands. This is a practical letter.

► Read James 5:1-5 with Amos 4:1-2 and 5:21-24. How do the messages compare?

Like Proverbs, James uses short sayings that summarize important truths. Many topics in James parallel themes in the Book of Proverbs: the tongue, wealth, anger, and wisdom.

Like the Old Testament law, James shows how a holy person reflects the character of a holy God. The holiness code of Leviticus 19 shows how a holy people will live in obedience to a holy God. Similarly, James shows how New Testament believers are to live in obedience to God. Both show that the belief we profess must be seen in the life we live.

The Holiness Code and James	
Leviticus	James
19:13 "the wages of him that is hired shall not abide with thee all night"	5:4 "the hire of the labourers who have reaped down your fields, which is of you kept back by fraud, crieth"
19:15 "thou shalt not respect the person of the poor, nor honour the person of the mighty"	2:9 "But if ye have respect to persons, ye commit sin"
19:18a "Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge"	5:9 "Grudge not one against another, brethren"
19:18b "thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself"	2:8 "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself"

Faith and Works

Martin Luther called James an "epistle of straw" because of its emphasis on works. He believed that the letter contradicted Paul's teaching on justification by faith alone. On the surface, there seems to be a conflict between James 2:24 ("by works a man is justified, and not by faith only") and Romans 3:28 ("Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law"). However, these statements are addressed to two very different audiences facing different temptations. Given this context, the conflict between the verses is resolved.

Paul addresses people who attempt to earn salvation by works (obedience to the Law). Paul responds that salvation comes through God's grace received by faith.

James addresses people who view faith as no more than mental assent to the truth of the gospel. Their lives are not changed, because their faith is not true faith. James insists that true faith is life-changing. James does not question the centrality of faith, but he shows that true faith is seen in actions. James shows that the faith of Abraham and Rahab is seen in their actions.³⁴⁴

James' message does not contradict Paul's message; it is a valuable companion to Paul's message of justification by grace through faith. Paul shows that we are justified (made right) with God by faith alone. James shows that this righteousness (justification before other people) is seen by our actions. James is not teaching how we are saved; he is teaching how our life will change because we are saved.

Faith in Action

Our faith is seen in our actions. James shows how our faith will affect the Christian's behavior in areas such as:

- Steadfastness in trials and temptation (James 1:2-18)
- Hearing and doing the Word (James 1:19-27)
- Partiality (James 2:1-13)
- The tongue (James 3:1-13)
- Worldliness (James 3:14-4:4)
- Pride (James 4:5-11)
- Temptations for the wealthy (James 4:13-5:6)
- Patience in suffering (James 5:7-11)
- Dealing with those who fall into sin (James 5:19-20)

"The problem of problems is to get Christianity put into practice."
- Attributed to John Wesley

With these admonitions, James shows that true faith will change how we live. Faith is more than agreeing to truth; faith transforms our entire being.

The Epistle of James in the Church Today

Although the letter of James was addressed to persecuted Jewish Christians in the first century, its emphasis on practical Christianity speaks profoundly to the modern world. Practical teaching on the tongue, wealth, anger, and relationships in the church is never out of date. James is a useful book for every generation.

Antinomianism refers to the false teaching that Christians are released from obedience to ethical or moral law. This doctrine suggests that believers who are justified by grace through faith are free from all restraint. In every generation, the church is tempted by the pull of antinomianism. James stands as a powerful reminder that the life of the Christian will be

³⁴⁴ James 2:14-26

markedly different than the life of the unbeliever. Through our works, the world sees the transformation that results from saving faith in Christ.

Conclusion

Both Hebrews and the Epistle of James point to Abraham as a model of faith in action. Hebrews 11 lists Abraham as one of the heroes of faith; James 2 shows that it is through his actions that we see Abraham's faith.

Abraham's faith is seen in his obedience to God's call; "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going."³⁴⁵ Faith is more than saying, "I believe God's promises"; faith says, "I will go where you lead me."

Abraham's faith is seen again in his obedience to God's call to offer Isaac as a sacrifice.³⁴⁶ Again, faith was more than saying, "I believe God." Faith said, "I will obey your command, even when I don't understand." This is true faith.

James warned readers not to claim faith if their lives were not changed by this faith. James pointed to Abraham as an example of what happens as a result of true faith. Abraham's faith was seen in his obedience to God's command to offer Isaac on the altar. James concludes, "You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works."³⁴⁷

The example of Abraham shows the proper relationship between faith and works. If we truly believe (faith), it will transform how we live (works). A profession of faith without a change in how we live is dead; an attempt to change how we live apart from true faith is useless. Romans, Galatians, Hebrews, and James agree: true faith will result in a changed life.

³⁴⁵ Hebrews 11:8, *English Standard Version*

³⁴⁶ Hebrews 11:17-19; Genesis 22

³⁴⁷ James 2:22, *English Standard Version*

Lesson 10 Assignments

Demonstrate your understanding of this lesson with the following assignments:

(1) Prepare a sermon or Bible lesson on **one** of the following topics. You can write this as a 5-6 page manuscript or record a sermon or Bible lesson for a church or small group.

- "Examples of Faith." Use examples of faith from Hebrews 11 as well as from church history. Look for examples from your country or cultural setting that will inspire faithfulness in your congregation.
- "Apostasy." Like Hebrews, the sermon should include both a warning against apostasy and an encouragement to faithfulness.
- A sermon or Bible lesson from James on one issue of Christian living: the tongue, conflict, wealth, prayer, etc.

(2) At the beginning of the next lesson, take a test based on this lesson. Study the test questions carefully in preparation.

Lesson 10 Test

- (1) Why are the books from Hebrews through Jude called "General Epistles"?
- (2) List two arguments in favor of Paul as the author of Hebrews.
- (3) List two arguments against Paul as the author of Hebrews.
- (4) List two ways in which the Book of Hebrews shows great respect for the Old Testament.
- (5) How is the new covenant better than the old covenant?
- (6) What is the difference between backsliding and apostasy?
- (7) When did James the brother of Jesus come to believe in Jesus as Messiah?
- (8) Based on the greeting, who is the likely audience for the Epistle of James?
- (9) In one paragraph, show the relationship between James 2:24 (a man is justified by works, and not by faith alone) and Romans 3:28 (a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law).
- (10) Define *antinomianism*.
- (11) Write Hebrews 4:14-16 and James 2:17-18 from memory.

Lesson 11

Peter, John, and Jude

Lesson Objectives

- (1) Know the likely date and historical setting of the General Epistles.
- (2) Outline the primary themes and purposes of the General Epistles.
- (3) Understand the biblical doctrine of assurance.
- (4) Be aware of the danger of false teaching.
- (5) Relate the message of these books to the needs of today's world.

Preparation for this Lesson

- Read 1 & 2 Peter, 1, 2, 3 John, and Jude.
- Memorize 1 Peter 1:6-7, 1 John 1:6-7, and Jude 1:24-25.

Introduction

In every generation, the church faces challenges. By the last half of the first century, persecution from outside and false teachers from inside were serious dangers for the church. These threats have continued throughout church history. The letters of Peter, John, and Jude warn against these dangers. More importantly, they encourage us to faithfulness in the face of these dangers. These small letters carry a big message: the God who called us is able to give victory over anything that would separate us from him.

The Letters of Peter: Faithfulness in Difficult Times

Author

Simon Peter was one of the best-known leaders in the early church. After being introduced to Jesus by his brother Andrew, Peter became part of Jesus' inner circle. His original name was Simon ("He has heard"), but Jesus changed his name to Peter ("Rock").

Peter's quick tongue and over-confidence caused him repeated troubles during Jesus' earthly ministry, reaching a low point when Peter denied Jesus during his trial. After the resurrection, Peter was restored and became the primary voice of the early church. Three thousand people were converted under Peter's ministry at Pentecost. He traveled as a missionary and was crucified in Rome during the persecutions of Nero. According to church tradition, Peter requested that he be crucified upside down because he felt unworthy to die the same death as the Savior whom he had once denied.³⁴⁸

³⁴⁸ Eusebius, *Church History*, 2:25.5-8

► How would Peter's failures during Jesus' earthly ministry help him in writing these letters to encourage Christians to faithfulness in difficult times? What did he learn from his own experiences that affect his teaching in these letters?

Audience and Place of Writing

Peter sends greetings from "Babylon," a reference to Rome.³⁴⁹ Babylon represented forces opposed to God's people; the enemy of the church was now the Roman Empire.

In a parallel to the Babylon imagery, Peter addressed his first letter to the exiles of the dispersion in Asia Minor.³⁵⁰ Just as Israel was scattered during the exile, the church was scattered by persecution from Rome. Unlike Israel, Christians were suffering for their faithfulness rather than for disobedience; they were partakers in the sufferings of Christ.³⁵¹

The audience for these letters is primarily Gentile. These are converts who no longer live by "the former lusts in your ignorance."³⁵² 2 Peter does not identify an audience, but it is Peter's second letter to the same group of readers.³⁵³

Date

It is likely that Peter wrote these letters shortly before his death in the mid-60s A.D. The letters are usually dated to between 62 and 67 A.D.

Purpose

1 and 2 Peter encourage suffering Christians to faithfulness. Just as Christ suffered and then was exalted, Christians first suffer in this world and then enjoy eternal glory. They must be faithful in the face of both suffering (1 Peter) and false teaching (2 Peter). Peter assures his readers that God will reward those who endure.

Themes of 1 Peter

The Hope of the Christian

As the elect according to the knowledge of God the Father, believers are promised "an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you."³⁵⁴ Though there is suffering in this world, we are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.³⁵⁵ Regardless of the trial of our faith, we have the hope of eternal glory. This hope brings joy unspeakable to suffering believers.³⁵⁶

³⁴⁹ 1 Peter 5:13

³⁵⁰ 1 Peter 1:1, *English Standard Version*

³⁵¹ 1 Peter 4:12-13

³⁵² 1 Peter 1:14

³⁵³ 2 Peter 3:1

³⁵⁴ 1 Peter 1:2, 4

³⁵⁵ 1 Peter 1:5

³⁵⁶ 1 Peter 1:8

A Call to Holiness

Because we have the hope of eternal glory, we should be motivated to respond to God's call to holiness. Quoting Leviticus 19:2, Peter challenges his readers to be holy just as God is holy. This will be seen in love for our brothers,³⁵⁷ a thirst for spiritual truth,³⁵⁸ and a pure lifestyle.³⁵⁹

A surprising emphasis in a letter addressed to persecuted believers is Peter's teaching on submission to authority. Knowing that suffering might tempt Christians to reject all earthly authority, Peter writes that holy people must "submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake." This submission is for the sake of Christ, who submitted himself to earthly rulers. Believers must submit to political authorities as well as proper family authority.³⁶⁰ If we suffer, we must suffer as Christians, not because of wrongdoing.³⁶¹

Suffering on the Path to Glory

The Old Testament prophets predicted that Christ would suffer before receiving the glory that should follow.³⁶² Christ hath suffered for us in the flesh,³⁶³ and we too should expect suffering. Just as Christ was exalted to glory, we too will receive the glory that is promised to the children of God. Peter himself had witnessed the sufferings of Christ and had received the promise of "the glory that shall be revealed."³⁶⁴ That promise encourages every suffering believer.

"...kill us, torture us, condemn us, grind us to dust; your injustice is the proof that we are innocent. Therefore God allows that we thus suffer....The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is the seed of the church."
- Tertullian in 197 A.D.

Themes of 2 Peter

Growth in Godliness

In his second letter, Peter challenges Christians to continued growth in godliness. As partakers of the divine nature, "giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; and to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; and to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity."³⁶⁵

³⁵⁷ 1 Peter 1:22

³⁵⁸ 1 Peter 2:2

³⁵⁹ 1 Peter 2:11

³⁶⁰ 1 Peter 2:13-3:7

³⁶¹ 1 Peter 3:17, 4:12-19

³⁶² 1 Peter 1:11

³⁶³ 1 Peter 4:1

³⁶⁴ 1 Peter 5:1

³⁶⁵ 2 Peter 1:4-7

Warnings Against False Teaching

Persecution (the primary warning of 1 Peter) comes from outside the church; false teaching (the primary warning of 2 Peter) often arises from inside the church. Peter exposes the teachings of false prophets who are infiltrating the church. The danger of their teaching can be seen in their ungodly character, summarized in 2 Peter 2:10-16. The description concludes with a proverb, "The dog is turned to his own vomit again; and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire."³⁶⁶

Faithfulness in Light of the Lord's Return

Skeptics were attempting to discourage Christians by questioning the Lord's return. They insisted that all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation.³⁶⁷ Peter responds that the delay of Christ's return is because of God's patient mercy. God does not desire that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.³⁶⁸ His delay gives opportunity for repentance. However, this delay should not lead us to doubt the certainty of Christ's return. "The day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night."³⁶⁹ In light of his sure return, we must live as holy people; we must be found of him in peace, without spot, and blameless; and, we must continue to grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.³⁷⁰

A Comparison of 1 and 2 Peter³⁷¹	
1 Peter	2 Peter
External danger: persecution	Internal danger: false teachers
The suffering of Christ	The glory of the Lord
Comfort and encouragement	Warning
We have hope in the face of trials.	We have knowledge in the face of error.

The Letters of John: Fellowship with God

Author and Date

Early church fathers such as Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria all refer to the Apostle John as the author of these books. Like Peter, John was a fisherman and became one of Jesus' inner circle. He was present at the trial of Jesus and was with Mary at the crucifixion.

³⁶⁶ 2 Peter 2:22

³⁶⁷ 2 Peter 3:4

³⁶⁸ 2 Peter 3:9

³⁶⁹ 2 Peter 3:10

³⁷⁰ 2 Peter 3:11, 14, 18

³⁷¹ Adapted from Merrill F. Unger. *Unger's Bible Handbook* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1966)

With Peter, John was one of the first witnesses of the empty tomb. In his gospel, John refers to himself as “the other disciple” and the disciple “whom Jesus loved.”

According to Eusebius, John and other Christians fled from Jerusalem shortly before the city was destroyed by Rome in 70 A.D. The Christians fled to the town of Pella in Perea (on the east side of the Jordan River). John later ministered in Ephesus. The three letters from John were probably written from Ephesus during the last part of the first century.

Audience

1 John does not identify any specific audience. John refers to his readers as “my little children” and “brethren.” This suggests that he is addressing fellow believers with whom he had a close relationship.

2 John is addressed to “the elect lady and her children, whom I love in the truth.”³⁷² There are two possible interpretations of this phrase:

- This may have been an unnamed lady who allowed a church to meet in her house.
- “The elect lady” may refer to a local church known to John; “her children” would refer to the members of that church.

3 John is addressed to Gaius, a convert of John.

The Purpose and Content of 1 John

The first of the three letters is the longest. Instead of a traditional greeting, John begins with a statement supporting the authority of his letter. He is not writing about rumors or made up stories, but about things “which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled.”³⁷³ 1 John is similar to the Gospel of John in its emphasis on the factual truth of the life of Christ.

Conditions for Fellowship with God

John states his purpose for writing at the beginning of the letter; “these things write we unto you, that your joy may be full.”³⁷⁴ This joy is through fellowship with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ.³⁷⁵ Writing about our fellowship with God, John uses the term *know*. To know God is more than mental knowledge; it is an experiential relationship. John states the conditions for maintaining fellowship with God:

- We must walk in the light (1 John 1:6-7).
- We must not walk in sin (1 John 2:1-2).

³⁷² 2 John 1:1

³⁷³ 1 John 1:1

³⁷⁴ 1 John 1:4

³⁷⁵ 1 John 1:3

Sin and Fellowship with God

John's teaching regarding sin includes two important truths:³⁷⁶

- **God provides strength for a victorious life.** "These things write I unto you, that ye sin not." If we maintain fellowship with God, we will not maintain fellowship with sin (1 John 1:6–1 John 2:5; 1 John 3:6-9). As children of God, we will not continue to commit willful sin. We cannot walk with sin and walk with God at the same time.
- **God's provides grace for those who fall.** "If any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous." Though God intends a life of consistent victory, he also promises grace for the one who repents after falling (1 John 1:9; 1 John 2:1-2).

Love and Fellowship with God

Love for God

Continuing victory over sin is not based only on personal discipline or self-control; it is based on love for God. The controlling principle of the Christian life is love for God.³⁷⁷ It is through love for God that we keep his commands. If we love God, we will "love not the world, neither the things that are in the world."³⁷⁸

Love for Other Christians

A person who does not love his brother is not of God. If we love God, we will love God's children.³⁷⁹ The evidence that we have passed from death to life is our love for our Christian brothers. This love is more than empty words; it is seen in our actions.³⁸⁰

The Assurance of the Children of God

John wrote so that his readers "may know that ye have eternal life, and that ye may believe on the name of the Son of God."³⁸¹ Continuing assurance requires continuing obedience. We know that we are God's children if we show these characteristics:

1. **Obedience to truth (1 John 1:6-7).** This aspect of assurance parallels Jesus' words quoted in John 8:31; "If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed."

Our assurance as Jesus' disciples is based on continuing attention and obedience to his word.

³⁷⁶ 1 John 2:1

³⁷⁷ For more, see A. Philip Brown, II. *Loving God: The Primary Principle of the Christian Life*. (Cincinnati: Revivalist Press, 2005).

³⁷⁸ 1 John 2:5, 15

³⁷⁹ 1 John 3:10-11, 4:20-21

³⁸⁰ 1 John 3:14-18

³⁸¹ 1 John 5:13

2. **No willful sin (1 John 3:8-10).** Since we cannot have fellowship with God if we continue in willful rebellion against God, we clearly have no assurance if we continue in such rebellion.
3. **Love for other Christians (1 John 3:14-19).** Jesus told his disciples, "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another."³⁸² John repeated this emphasis in his epistle; "We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren."³⁸³

The Purpose and Content of 2 John

The message of 2 John is parallel to 1 John. Fellowship with God involves living in the love of God and walking in the truth of God. The love commanded in 2 John is not a new commandment; it was taught from the beginning.³⁸⁴

The love commanded in 2 John is a discerning love that holds to truth. Discernment is important because there are many deceivers who do not confess Christ. John warns the elect lady to hold to the truth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh.³⁸⁵ Fellowship with God requires that we reject false teaching.³⁸⁶

The Purpose and Content of 3 John

3 John is a personal letter about Christian hospitality. Christian hospitality is more than the friendliness that you show to other people; it is an expression of the unity of the church. 2 John warned against welcoming those who teach false doctrine. 3 John warns against rejecting those who teach true doctrine.

Gaius welcomes traveling evangelists in Christian hospitality and treats them as "fellow-helpers to the truth."³⁸⁷ By contrast, Diotrephes refuses to accept these brothers. Diotrephes seeks position for himself, rejects the apostolic authority of John, and expels true Christians who challenge him.³⁸⁸

3 John contrasts the behavior of Diotrephes with the Christian love shown by Demetrius. This short letter shows the practical application of the Christian love that is commanded in 1 John and the unity of the church in pursuit of truth that is commanded in 2 John.

³⁸² John 13:35

³⁸³ 1 John 3:14

³⁸⁴ 2 John 1:5-6

³⁸⁵ 2 John 1:7-8

³⁸⁶ 2 John 1:10-11

³⁸⁷ 3 John 1:5-8

³⁸⁸ 3 John 1:9-10

Jude: Warning Against False Teachers

Author and Date

Jude was a half-brother of Jesus. Like his brother James, Jude did not believe in Jesus until after the resurrection.³⁸⁹ In his letter, Jude identifies himself as “the servant of Jesus Christ, and brother of James.”³⁹⁰

The only evidence regarding the date of the Epistle of Jude is its similarity to 2 Peter. The fact that the letters address similar problems suggests that Jude may have been written at about the same time as 2 Peter, in the early to mid-60s.

Audience

Jude is addressed to “them that are sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in Jesus Christ, and called.”³⁹¹ References to Jewish themes suggest that the book was addressed to Jewish Christians.

Purpose and Content

Jude indicates that he had hoped to write a doctrinal letter on the theme of our salvation.³⁹² However, because false teachers were infiltrating the church, the Holy Spirit inspired Jude to warn his fellow believers against false teaching.

Jude’s message includes:

- A warning against the false teachers and their message
- A description of the judgment that will come on these teachers
- A call to perseverance
- A concluding doxology to the one who “is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy”³⁹³

The General Epistles in the Church Today

The General Epistles, particularly 1 Peter, encourage us to **faithfulness in suffering**. Peter challenged his readers to humble themselves today, so “that he may exalt you in due time.”³⁹⁴ Suffering is common to the Christian life, but the suffering will end in glory. This promise encouraged first century Christians and should encourage twenty-first century Christians.

Each of these books encourages **practical Christian living**. Whether it is Peter’s call to submission to authority, 1 John’s message of love to our brothers, 2 John’s admonition to

³⁸⁹ Matthew 13:55; Mark. 6:3; John 7:3-5; 1 Corinthians 15:7

³⁹⁰ Jude 1:1

³⁹¹ Jude 1:1

³⁹² Jude 1:3

³⁹³ Jude 1:24

³⁹⁴ 1 Peter 5:6

truth, 3 John's call to Christian hospitality, or Jude's warning against false teacher, the General Epistles teach that truth is more than mental knowledge. We are called to live out biblical truth in our daily life.

Conclusion

In the 1st century, many Christians (including most of the apostles) died for their faith. In the 2nd century, Polycarp was killed for refusing to burn incense to the Emperor. In the 4th century, Catherine of Alexandria was beheaded after testifying to the Emperor.

In the 14th century, John Wycliffe's body was burned because he translated the Bible into English. In the 15th century, John Huss was burned at the stake for rejecting the doctrines of Roman Catholicism. In the 16th century, twenty-six Christians were crucified in Nagasaki, Japan, during a time of persecution that drove the church underground.

In the 20th century, thousands of Christians died as martyrs in China, the Soviet Union, and other totalitarian countries. In the 21st century, Christians in Islamic countries face daily threats of persecution and death.

In every generation, Christians have died for their faith. But for the church, this is no cause for discouragement. Peter reminds persecuted believers that "the God of all grace, who hath called us unto his eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after that ye have suffered a while, make you perfect, stablish, strengthen, settle you."³⁹⁵ The church is triumphant! This is the promise of the General Epistles.

Lesson 11 Assignments

Demonstrate your understanding of this lesson with the following assignments:

(1) Prepare a sermon or Bible lesson on **one** of the following topics. You can write this as a 5-6 page manuscript or record a sermon or Bible lesson.

- "Suffering in the Christian life." Use the principles that are taught in 1 Peter and then illustrate them with examples from church history, particularly from the history of the church in your country.
- "Fellowship with God." Include criteria for fellowship with God drawn from 1 John.

(2) At the beginning of the next lesson, take a test based on this lesson. Study the test questions carefully in preparation.

³⁹⁵ 1 Peter 5:10

Lesson 11 Test

- (1) What is the likely meaning of "Babylon" in Peter's greeting?
- (2) What is the primary danger faced by the church in 1 Peter?
- (3) What is the primary danger faced by the church in 2 Peter?
- (4) What are the two possible interpretations of the phrase "the elect lady and her children" in 2 John?
- (5) What two truths are important in 1 John's teaching about sin?
- (6) According to 1 John, what three characteristics will be seen in any child of God?
- (7) What was the primary purpose of 3 John?
- (8) What was the relationship between Jude and Jesus?
- (9) Write 1 Peter 1:6-7, 1 John 1:6-7, and Jude 1:24-25 from memory.

Lesson 12

Revelation

Lesson Objectives

- (1) Know the author, date, and historical setting of Revelation.
- (2) Recognize important themes in Revelation.
- (3) Compare key theories used to interpret Revelation.
- (4) Relate the message of Revelation to the needs of today's world.

Preparation for this Lesson

- Read Revelation. Before you do, choose which of the two writing assignments you would like to do from the end of this lesson.
- Memorize Revelation 3:20-21.

Introduction

First century Christians were confronted by two competing truth claims. On one hand, they knew that Jesus Christ is Lord.³⁹⁶ A Christian is committed to the authority and lordship of Jesus Christ. On the other hand, Rome required everyone under the empire's authority to testify that the Caesar is *Dominus et deus noster* (our lord and god).

Rome tolerated many religions, as long as the emperor was recognized as the ultimate authority. Many historians argue that Rome did not persecute Christians for being Christian. Christians could worship Jesus as long as they swore ultimate allegiance to the emperor. However, a true Christian could never recognize the emperor as the final authority.

According to an eyewitness at Polycarp's martyrdom, the magistrate offered to release the aged saint if he would recognize Caesar as divine. He asked Polycarp, "What harm is there in saying, 'Caesar is lord,' and offering incense?"³⁹⁷ Polycarp knew that for the Christian there is only one Lord. The Christian cannot give ultimate allegiance to any man.

This was the root of conflict between Rome and the early church. Out of this conflict, the Book of Revelation said to early Christians, "Jesus is Lord." Even in a world that does not recognize his authority, Jesus is Lord. Revelation gives a dramatic picture of Paul's words:

Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven,

³⁹⁶ Philippians 2:11

³⁹⁷ *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, translated into English by J.B. Lightfoot

and things in earth, and things under the earth; And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.³⁹⁸

Jesus is Lord.

Background to Revelation

Author, Date, and Place

The author of Revelation identifies himself as John, “who also am your brother, and companion in tribulation.”³⁹⁹ Early church tradition identified John, the beloved disciple, as the author of the Gospel of John, three Epistles, and Revelation.

The date of this letter is a more difficult question. There are two possibilities, both fitting John’s lifetime and the persecution of the early church. A possible date is during Nero’s reign, a time of intense persecution. The more likely date is during the persecutions by the emperor Domitian (A.D. 81-96). In the second century, Irenaeus dated Revelation to late in Domitian’s reign.⁴⁰⁰ Most evangelicals accept this as the date for Revelation.

Revelation was written from Patmos, a small island in the Aegean Sea, where John was exiled for his faith. However, although the emperor may have been the one who authorized John’s exile, John makes clear that even in this circumstance, Jesus is Lord. He is on Patmos, for the word of God, and for the testimony of Jesus Christ.⁴⁰¹ Even on Patmos, God is in control.

Purpose

Revelation answers the question, “Who is Lord?” The answer is stated in the introduction, “Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth.”⁴⁰² To Christians suffering persecution, John writes, “Jesus Christ is ruler over the kings of the earth.” Regardless of external circumstances, God is in control.

John presents this truth in three ways:

1. Messages to the seven churches (Revelation 2-3). **Jesus is Lord over his church.**
2. Visions of God on his throne and of Christ as the triumphant lamb (Revelation 4-5). **Jesus is Lord in heaven.**
3. A view of history from heaven’s perspective (Revelation 6-22). **Jesus is Lord over all kingdoms of the earth.**

³⁹⁸ Philippians 2:9-11

³⁹⁹ Revelation 1:9

⁴⁰⁰ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.30.3.

⁴⁰¹ Revelation 1:9

⁴⁰² Revelation 1:5, *English Standard Version*

Reading the Book of Revelation

Apocalyptic Literature

As an apocalyptic book, Revelation is unique among New Testament books. An Old Testament example is the book of Daniel. Apocalyptic writing reveals or uncovers truth that has been hidden. Apocalyptic writing reveals God's purposes in human history.

Apocalyptic literature uses dramatic symbols to communicate. Revelation is filled with dragons, beasts, and natural disasters such as earthquakes and hailstorms. One difficulty in reading apocalyptic literature is that symbols change their meaning over time and in different cultural settings. For instance, the dragon is used in the west as a symbol of evil and danger; in many eastern cultures, the dragon is a symbol of power and success. Differences in how symbols are interpreted can make Revelation difficult for the reader.

One key to correctly interpreting the symbols in Revelation is to recognize that most of its symbols come from the Old Testament, particularly Exodus, Psalms, Daniel, Ezekiel, Isaiah, and Zechariah. More than half of the verses in Revelation include some allusion to an Old Testament theme or image. The careful reader of Revelation will look first to the Old Testament when studying a symbol.

Apocalyptic literature portrays historic or prophetic reality with visions. Revelation includes over sixty visions. These are often overlapping, so it is difficult to create an exact chronological sequence. Multiple visions may present overlapping views of the same event in order to expand details or present alternate perspectives on an event.

Perhaps the most important thing for a reader to remember in studying apocalyptic literature is to focus on the major themes without becoming overwhelmed by details. In Revelation, the large themes are Jesus' lordship, God's sovereignty, and the ultimate victory of the church. These themes unite the many contrasting strands that run through the book.

Theories of Interpretation

Because Revelation is such an unusual style of biblical literature, it has given rise to many different approaches to interpretation. There are four primary approaches to this book. Within each of these, there are varying emphases. For an introduction to Revelation, a survey of these four approaches will suffice. The bibliography at the end of the chapter gives resources for further study.

Preterist View

Preterists believe that Revelation is about events in the late first century. In this view, the events in Revelation occurred during John's lifetime or soon thereafter. This sees Revelation as a picture of the conflict between the church and the Roman Empire. This conflict ended with the victory of Christ's Kingdom as the church spread throughout the world. According to this view, the prophecies in Revelation were fulfilled in the first century.

Historicist View

Historicists read Revelation as a symbolic picture of church history from the time of the early church to the establishment of a new heaven and new earth at the return of Christ. In this view, Revelation 1-3 speaks to the churches of John's day. Revelation 4-19 gives a chronological picture of the church throughout history. Revelation 20-22 portrays the future coming of Christ. According to this view, only the prophecies in Revelation 20-22 remained to be fulfilled.

Idealist View

Idealists agree with historicists that Revelation gives a picture of the conflict between good (Christ and the church) and evil (Satan and his followers). However, idealists argue that this is a symbolic picture without any particular historical order. In this view, Revelation 4-19 does not correlate to any specific historical period. It is a symbol of the ongoing conflict between Christ and evil, a conflict that will end with the coming of Christ to establish the new heaven and new earth in Revelation 20-22. According to this view, Revelation does not predict specific events in the future, except for the coming of Christ.

Futurist View

Like historicists, futurists read Revelation as a picture of particular historical events. This interpretation sees Revelation 1-3 as the church of John's day. Unlike historicists, futurists view most of Revelation 4-22 as future. Within a futurist framework, there are four dominant interpretations of the future portrayed in Revelation.

Classical premillennialism (dating to at least the 2nd century) expects persecution of the church until the end of time. This persecution will culminate in a time of great tribulation just before Christ returns. When Christ returns, there will be a resurrection of believers, followed by a millennium during which Christ will reign on the earth.⁴⁰³ The millennium will be followed by the judgment of unbelievers at the great white throne.⁴⁰⁴ God will then institute a new heaven and a new earth, the eternal home of all whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.

Dispensational premillennialism is a younger variant of classical premillennial teaching. In this view, the church is removed from the earth in a rapture prior to a period of great tribulation. The turmoil of Revelation 4-19 is seen as a portrayal of Israel's tribulation on earth during a seven year period in which the church is in heaven with Jesus. Christ then returns and establishes his millennial rule on earth. Like classical premillennialism, this period is followed by a judgment and the creation of the new heaven and new earth.

Postmillennialism (popular in the 18th and 19th centuries) teaches that the gospel will spread throughout the world and transform society into an age of justice and peace. In this view,

⁴⁰³ "Millennium" refers to a period of 1,000 years.

⁴⁰⁴ Revelation 20:11-15

the millennium is the worldwide triumph of the gospel through the church. Christ returns after the millennium, defeats Satan permanently, and introduces the new heaven and new earth.

Amillennialism (dating to at least the 2nd century) agrees with postmillennialism that Christ will return after the thousand years of Revelation 20:1-6. Amillennialists differ with postmillennialists in that they see the millennium not as any historical period, but as a symbol of the entire church age. The promise of the millennium is fulfilled in a spiritual manner through the church's ministry. Revelation portrays the blessings and the struggles of the church in figurative ways. This ends with Christ's return, followed by a judgment, and the introduction of the new heaven and new earth for believers.

Readers of Revelation can become very dogmatic in their interpretation. We must not confuse our interpretation of Revelation with the authority of Scripture itself. Two people holding to the absolute truth of Scripture may have very different interpretations of this book. As you study Revelation you will (and should) arrive at conclusions that guide your interpretation. However, be careful that you do not reject fellow believers who may arrive at different conclusions. These are differences of biblical interpretation, not differences regarding biblical authority.

"In essentials, unity.
In non-essentials, liberty.
In all things, charity."
- Rupertus Meldenius, 1627

Themes in Revelation

Jesus is Lord

Apocalyptic literature reveals that which has been hidden. Revelation reveals Jesus in his fullest glory. During his earthly ministry, his glory was not fully seen. Paul promised that the day will come when every knee will bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth.⁴⁰⁵ Revelation unveils a picture of the glory of that day.

Many symbols in Revelation are drawn from the Old Testament. However, these symbols teach a distinctively Christian theology. The book is unified by a coherent Christian theology that ties together each aspect of God's activity in human history. From John's vision of the Son of Man to his picture of the triumphant Lamb, a central theme of Revelation is the lordship of Jesus Christ.⁴⁰⁶ Jesus is King of kings and Lord of lords.⁴⁰⁷

God is in Control

To a suffering church, the message of God's sovereignty was a great message of hope. John introduced God as the one which is, and which was, and which is to come⁴⁰⁸ The vision of God on his throne in Revelation 4-5 is reminiscent of Isaiah 6. John, like Isaiah, sees God

⁴⁰⁵ Philippians 2:10

⁴⁰⁶ Revelation 1:9-20 and 5:6-14

⁴⁰⁷ Revelation 19:16

⁴⁰⁸ Revelation 1:4

as holy, majestic, and sovereign. To a church opposed by Rome, it was inspiring to read in Revelation that a day is coming when “every creature which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them” will join in praise to God and to the Lamb.⁴⁰⁹

Victory for the People of God

As with most apocalyptic literature, Revelation reveals God’s purposes in human history. While there are many symbols which a modern reader may struggle to understand, the overall message of Revelation is clear: God’s people are assured of victory because Jesus is Lord. Revelation frequently shifts its perspective from earth to heaven, reminding us that we see only one side of history.⁴¹⁰ Unseen, God is working out his purposes in the world. As the people of God, we are assured ultimate victory. The message to the church at Laodicea concludes with this encouragement, “To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne.”⁴¹¹

Revelation in the Church Today

There are two dangers to avoid in reading Revelation. Some readers find Revelation so confusing that they simply avoid the book completely. Since they cannot be sure of the right interpretation, they do not study it at all.

The opposite danger is that some readers are so certain of their interpretation that they reject anyone who differs from them on interpretation. They become focused on minor details and lose the overall theme of the book. It is unfortunate that the larger message of Revelation has sometimes been lost in controversies over details of interpretation. The message of Revelation is vital for the church today.

In a time when thousands of Christians are martyred each year, the message that **Jesus is Lord** encourages suffering Christians to perseverance. Regardless of one’s approach to interpretation, Revelation encourages the church with the promise of ultimate victory.

Revelation reminds us **how believers should live today** in light of the end times. The study of last days (eschatology) is not primarily about predicting future events; the primary concern of eschatology is life today in light of God’s ultimate purposes. As believers, Revelation encourages us to trust God’s purposes. As ministers, we preach Revelation to encourage our congregations to faithfulness. Rather than reading Revelation as a book of coded messages about the future, we read Revelation as God’s Word for God’s people today.

Conclusion

John and Betty Stam were missionaries to China when Communist forces attacked their city in 1934. This young couple was captured, held for ransom, and marched under guard to the

⁴⁰⁹ Revelation 5:13

⁴¹⁰ For example: 6:1-7:8 are on earth; 7:9-8:6 are in heaven. 8:7-11:14 are on earth; 11:15-19 are in heaven.

⁴¹¹ Revelation 3:21

city of Miaosheo. A passerby asked, "Where are you going?" John Stam replied, "We do not know where they are going, but we are going to heaven."

The next day, John and Betty Stam were beheaded by a Communist executioner. John's last letter was written to his mission superiors and smuggled out in the clothes of their infant daughter. The letter closed with these words, "...as for us, may God be glorified whether by life or by death." John and Betty Stam knew firsthand the truth of Revelation: Jesus is Lord and will win the final victory. Whether through life or through death, God is in control and his ways are best.

Lesson 12 Assignments

Demonstrate your understanding of this lesson with the following assignments:

(1) Choose **one** of the following assignments:

- Prepare a sermon or Bible lesson in which you apply the message to one of the Seven Churches to the needs of your church. This can be a 5-6 page manuscript or a recorded sermon or Bible lesson.
- (This may be completed during preparation for Lesson 12.) As you read Revelation, notice which chapters provide a view of what is happening on earth and which chapters provide a view of heaven. Write a short essay in which you summarize what Revelation shows us about heaven's view of earthly events. How does the view from heaven differ from our limited view on earth?

(2) At the beginning of the next lesson, take a test based on this lesson. Study the test questions carefully in preparation.

Lesson 12 Test

- (1) What did the phrase "Caesar is *Dominus et deus noster*" mean in the first century?
- (2) Where is the Island of Patmos?
- (3) What is the most likely date for Revelation?
- (4) List three ways in which John presents the message that Jesus is Lord.
- (5) List two characteristics of apocalyptic literature.
- (6) Briefly define each of the four views of Revelation.
- (7) List four views of the future among futurists.
- (8) List the three major themes in Revelation.
- (9) Write Revelation 3:20-21 from memory.

Recommended Resources

To study more about the topics discussed in this text, please see the following resources.

The World of the New Testament

Books

Beitzel, Barry. *The Moody Atlas of the Bible*. Chicago: Moody Press, 2009.

Elwell, Walter A. and Robert W. Yarbrough. *Encountering the New Testament*. Ada: Baker Academic, 2013.

Ferguson, Everett. *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003.

Jensen, Irving. *Jensen's Survey of the New Testament*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1981.

McDowell, Josh. *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999.

Tenney, Merrill C. *New Testament Survey*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994.

Online Resources

McDowell, Josh. Bible: Fact, Fiction, or Fallacy. Online video series. At <https://www.josh.org/resources/apologetics/videos/>

Smith, Dr. Randall. "They Thought You Knew." At <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=phUhvp812Mo>

"Why Bible Background Matters." At <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-wiIK8A2EFk>

Wight, Fred H. *Manners and Customs of the Bible*. Moody Bible Institute, 1953. At <http://www.baptistbiblebelievers.com/OTStudies/MannersandCustomsInBibleLands1953/tabid/232/Default.aspx>

New Testament Gateway. At <http://www.ntgateway.com/tools-and-resources/maps/>

The Works of Josephus. At <http://www.ccel.org/j/josephus/works/JOSEPHUS.HTM>

The Reliability of the New Testament

Books

Bruce, F.F. *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* InterVarsity, 1988.

McDowell, Josh. *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict*. Thomas Nelson, 1999.

Online Resources

McDowell, Josh. Bible: Fact, Fiction, or Fallacy. Online Video Series.
<https://www.josh.org/resources/apologetics/videos/>

Orr-Ewing, Amy. Reliability of the Manuscripts. Online Video from RZIM HQ.
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dLI7W4bnVpA>

The Synoptic Gospels

Books

Bock, Darrell L. *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Luke*. Ada: Baker, 1996.

Garland, David E. *The NIV Application Commentary: Mark*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996.

France, R.T. *New International Commentary on the New Testament: Matthew*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007.

Robertson, A.T. *A Harmony of the Gospels*. New York City: Harper, 1922. Available online at <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/36264/36264-h/36264-h.htm>

Online Resources

"The Gospel of Mark." At https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8J2LP9_f3SY

"Matthew and the Great Commission." At <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6PiltJ0DDhI>

Smith, Dr. Randall. "Introduction to the Gospels." At <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LZ4uDfiQBc>

Wesley, John. *Wesley's Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*. At <https://studylight.org/commentaries/eng/wen.html>

The Gospel of John

Books

Bruce, F.F. *The Gospel of John*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994.

Morris, Leon. *New International Commentary on the New Testament: John*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995.

Robertson, A.T. *A Harmony of the Gospels*. New York City: Harper, 1932. Available online at <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/36264/36264-h/36264-h.htm>

Online Resource

Wesley, John. *Wesley's Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*. At <https://studylight.org/commentaries/eng/wen.html>

Acts

Books

Bence, Philip A. *Acts: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*. Fishers: Wesleyan Publishing House, 1998.

Marshall, I. Howard. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Acts*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980.

McCain, Danny. *Notes on Acts of the Apostles*. Nigeria: Africa Christian Textbooks, 2001.

Rasmussen, Carl. *Zondervan Atlas of the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010.

Stott, John R.W. *The Message of Acts*. Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1990.

Online Resource

Wesley, John. *Wesley's Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*. At <https://studylight.org/commentaries/eng/wen.html>

Romans

Books

Bray, Gerald, ed. *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Romans*. Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1998.

Clarke, Adam. *Commentary on the New Testament*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, n.d.

Greathouse, William M and George Lyons. *New Beacon Bible Commentary: Romans* (2 volumes). Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2008.

Online Resources

"Does Romans 7 Teach that Christians will Continue Sinning?" At <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aBXYp7cMbIM>

"Does Romans 9-11 Teach Calvinist Predestination?" At <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nCLtbVnOqq4>

"Romans." At <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OpBPE-dEVhQ>

Wesley, John. *Wesley's Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*. At <https://studylight.org/commentaries/eng/wen.html>

Corinthians and Galatians

Books

Clarke, Adam. *Commentary on the New Testament*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, n.d.

Gill, David. "1 Corinthians" in *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002.

Morris, Leon. *Galatians: Paul's Charter of Christian Freedom*. Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2003.

Stott, John. *The Message of Galatians*. Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1984.

Wilson, Earle L. *Galatians, Philippians, Colossians: A Commentary for Bible Students*. Fishers: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2007.

Online Resources

Paul's Leadership Challenges at Corinth." At https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gu_ELh_UXPg

Wesley, John. *Wesley's Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*. At <https://studylight.org/commentaries/eng/wen.html>

The Prison Epistles

Books

Beet, Joseph Agar. *A Commentary on St. Paul's Epistles to the Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and to Philemon*. Salem: Schmul Publishing, 1982.

Earle, Ralph, ed. *Beacon Bible Commentary, Vol. IX: Galatians through Philemon*. Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1965.

Holmes, Mark A. *Ephesians: A Bible Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*. Fishers: Wesleyan Publishing House, 1997.

Stott, John R.W. *The Message of Ephesians*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1979.

Wilson, Earle L. *Galatians, Philippians, Colossians: A Commentary for Bible Students*. Fishers: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2007.

Online Resources

"Church and Mission in Ephesians." At https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Fzjwcu_tUI

Wesley, John. *Wesley's Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*. At <https://studylight.org/commentaries/eng/wen.html>

Thessalonians

Books

Airhart, Arnold E. *Beacon Bible Commentary: I and II Thessalonians*. Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1965.

Clarke, Adam. *Commentary on the New Testament*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, n.d.

Klopfenstein, W.O. *Wesleyan Bible Commentary: I and II Thessalonians*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965.

Morris, Leon. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: 1 and 2 Thessalonians*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007.

Online Resource

Wesley, John. *Wesley's Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*. At <https://studylight.org/commentaries/eng/wen.html>

The Pastoral Epistles

Books

Gould, J. Glenn. *Beacon Bible Commentary: I and II Timothy, Titus*. Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1965.

Nicholson, Roy S. *Wesleyan Bible Commentary: The Pastoral Epistles*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965.

Oden, Thomas C. *Ministry through Word and Sacrament*. Crossroad, 1989.

Stott, John R.W. *The Message of 2 Timothy*. Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1973.

Online Resource

Wesley, John. *Wesley's Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*. At <https://studylight.org/commentaries/eng/wen.html>

Hebrews and James

Books

Cockerill, Gareth L. *Hebrews: A Bible Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*. Fishers: Wesleyan Publishing House, 1999.

Osborne, Grant. *James: Cornerstone Biblical Commentary*. Carol Stream: Tyndale House Publishers, 2011.

Turner, George Allen. *The New and Living Way*. Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1975.

Walters, John. *Hebrews: Asbury Bible Commentary*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992.

Earle, Ralph ed. *Beacon Bible Commentary, Vol. X: Hebrews through Revelation*. Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1965.

Online Resources

Cockerill, Gareth. "Hebrews and Contemporary Preaching." At <https://henrycenter.tiu.edu/resource/do-not-refuse-the-one-who-is-speaking-heb-1225-hebrews-and-contemporary-preaching/>

Wesley, John. *Wesley's Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*. At <https://studylight.org/commentaries/eng/wen.html>

The General Epistles

Books

Bray, Gerald. *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: James-Jude*. Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2000.

Brown, A. Philip, II. *Loving God: The Primary Principle of the Christian Life*. Cincinnati: Revivalist Press, 2005.

Maier, Paul L., trans. *Eusebius: The Church History*. Grand Rapids: Kregel Publishing, 2007. (An easy to read translation of this ancient source.)

Marshall, I. Howard. *1 Peter*. Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1991.

Marshall, I. Howard. *The Epistles of John (New International Commentary on the New Testament)*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978.

Wiersbe, Warren. *Be Alert: 2 Peter, 2 & 3 John, Jude*. Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2010.

Online Resources

"John Wesley and Christian Orthodoxy." At <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WJ93nzeFS8U>

Wesley, John. *Wesley's Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*. At <https://studylight.org/commentaries/eng/wen.html>

Revelation

Books

Gentry, Kenneth L., Sam Hamstra, C. Marvin Pate, and Robert L. Thomas. *Four Views on the Book of Revelation*. Edited by Stanley Gundry and C. Marvin Pate. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998.

Blaising, Craig A., Kenneth L. Gentry Jr., and Robert B. Strimple. *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*. Edited by Stanley N. Gundry and Darrell L. Bock. Zondervan, 1999.

Blaising, Craig, Alan Hultberg, and Douglas Moo. *Three Views on the Rapture: Pretribulation, Prewrath, or Posttribulation*. Edited by Stanley N. Gundry and Alan Hultberg. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010.

Osborne, Grant. *Revelation*. Ada: Baker, 2002.

Rotz, Carol. *New Beacon Bible Commentary: Revelation*. Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2012.

Online Resources

"Revelation and Apocalypticism." At <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D3CP4gE8Jt8>

Wesley, John. *Wesley's Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*. At <https://studylight.org/commentaries/eng/wen.html>

Record of Assignments

Student Name _____

Initial when each assignment has been completed. The tests are considered "complete" when the student achieves a score of 70% or higher. All assignments must be successfully completed to receive a certificate from Shepherds Global Classroom.

Lesson	Test	Assignment 1	Assignment 2
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			
7			
8			
9			
10			
11			
12			

Application for a Certificate of Completion from Shepherds Global Classroom may be completed on our webpage at www.shepherdsglobal.org. Certificates will be digitally transmitted from the president of SGC to instructors and facilitators who complete the application on behalf of their student(s).