

The Bible Part 3:

The New Testament

The New Testament is very different both in focus and formation from the Old Testament. The events and ideas of the Old Testament encompass around 1200 years of Israelite history and the primary focus of it is to show the formation of the People of Israel and to come to understand their God. The Old Testament reads more like a story or a series of reflections on the God of Israel. In contrast to the Old Testament, the event of the New Testament cover roughly 50 years. The New Testament reads more like a theological textbook. Each book is intended to bring out the theme and reflections on the life and ministry of Jesus and the early Church. Even from the start of the New Testament we have a sharp change in the way the books are read and the way we are supposed to understand this next section of the Bible: “the Book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham” (Matthew 1:1). With this new style in mind, this part will explore the main themes and books of the New Testament to more fully understand its focus.

The Gospels

No one particular text of the Bible has a greater weight or supremacy than the Gospels. These four books contain almost all the information we have regarding the life and ministry of Jesus. Yet, even for the level and gravity to which we give these texts, they say very little about Jesus. Is this odd? Its odd if we forget or don't quite understand the authors' intent in writing these books.

What is a gospel? A gospel is the proclamation of the good news. The original Greek word, εὐαγγέλιον (euangelion), comes from two Greek words eu – good and angelion – messenger. The “good news” is the proclamation of victory that a runner gives to the king after returning from the battle. After the battle in concluded, a runner is sent from the battlefield to the king or nation announcing the victory of their armies. Thus the good news is synonymous with military victory, freedom from our enemies, and the victory of the kingdom over that of another. The word gospel comes from a degradation of its translation into the Germanic languages. Originally the Greek word was simply translated “good news.” Over time the idea of God speaking though the “gospels” became known as God-speech or God-spell, which got simplified to gospel. The same idea still applies. The good news proclaimed by the Gospel writers all have the same focus and intent. The Good news is that Jesus is victorious over sin and death, the great serpent is slain, we are free, and the new reign of God has begun again. This point is the central proclamation of Christianity and the central proclamation of the New Testament. The whole point of the Gospels is to make this point clear to us: Jesus is victorious, he is the Messiah, he has ushered in the New Kingdom and we are part of it.

Why 4 Gospels? This question is far more interesting than the previous points. We could have easily chosen only one Gospel for the New Testament. One Gospel means one perspective. Historically speaking, every heretic of the first six centuries of the Church wanted one Gospel for through that one Gospel they made their incorrect theological claims. Having four Gospels versus one softens the perspective of one writer and gives us a broader picture of Jesus and his

ministry. Any one writer is truly not sufficient for capturing the full perspective on what Jesus did. Matthew's Gospel focuses on the fulfillment of the prophecies leading up to the Messiah showing to us in explicit ways that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah. Mark's Gospel focused on the proclamation of Jesus to the world showing both his humanity and divinity in very explicit ways uncommon for the other Gospel writers. Luke emphasizes the sacrifice Jesus went through to save the entire world focusing on the universal mission of Jesus. John's Gospel is something very different. Unlike the other three Gospels who try to maintain a more biographical approach to the life and ministry of Jesus, John does his own thing. After years of reflection and thought, John wrote his Gospel to be a theological text. A masterwork in showing in explicit terms the very nature and purpose of Jesus, the Son of God. John is the one Gospel to see Jesus' passion and death in terms of victory and triumph as opposed to ridicule and degradation. He also emphasizes the purpose of Jesus' life much more than any other Gospel writer.

The central message of the Gospels is to answer the question: who is Jesus? We could easily interpret the Gospels and the history of 1st century Palestine in the light of Jesus as a Jewish man. Or as some scholars call him: the historical Jesus. But if Jesus was only a man, the Gospel writers would have written a biography of his life and there would probably be only one account. Something was different about Jesus. It wasn't just his words or his actions. The thing that really separated Jesus from the rest of the people of the world and warranted four books in holy Scripture devoted to him was that he is God and rose from the dead. For this reason the Gospels center on the events of Jesus' life that prove that he is God and that he rose from the dead.

The Acts of the Apostles

The Acts of the Apostles, aka the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, is the strangest book in the New Testament in that it truly is a biography. Luke began his great work in the Gospel of Luke by chronicling the life and ministry of Jesus and attempting a pseudobiography of Jesus' life. But his work has two parts: the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts. The Book of Acts chronicles the life of the early Church from the Resurrection of Jesus until the death of Paul the Apostle. All the events contained in the Book of Acts point to the power of Jesus' Resurrection. Without the Holy Spirit coming down upon the Apostles, nothing would have happened. They prove this point in this book.

The Letters

The remainder of the New Testament is letters. The bulk of these letters were written by St. Paul. Most of the time we hear chunks of these letters out of context and struggle to understand what is happening in each of the letters. For that reason, I am going to give a slight overview of the letters. The purpose of all these letters is to write to a specific Christian community to address a problem or to tell them something. The fact that they are part of Scripture means that their exhortation or teaching is good not only for that community but for all of us at all times and places. If we really want to grasp the meaning of each letter, we will need to work at understanding the context and the purpose of the letter and the reason why the person is writing that letter.

The letters of St. Paul

St. Paul wrote the bulk of the letters of the New Testament. Scholars debate which of these letters are authentically his and which are most likely written by someone else. If you would like to read more on this topic, by all means go for it. I am not going into that complicated discussion. The following letters are generally understood to be authentically Paul's writing: Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Philemon, 1 and 2 Timothy, and Philippians. As St. Paul writes, his theology and understanding of what Jesus did becomes clearer. Each letter has a very specific structure and style. Every letter begins with a greeting to the church or people to whom he is writing. Then he includes a section offering thanksgiving for those people or their faith, with the exception of the Letter to the Galatians. After his period of thanksgiving, he exhorts them or addresses a concern for which he is writing the letter, except the first Letter to the Thessalonians. After his exhortation, he concludes the letter with a final greeting. This process may repeat a few times in the letter or just one cycle depending on the letter.

The Letter to the Romans is St. Paul's most theologically rich letter. He is writing to the Church of Rome who are a combination of Jews and Gentiles but highly educated and know well the Jewish tradition and prophecies. For this reason, he can write more explicitly on topics of faith and Scripture than he could to other communities. This letter focuses on the theme of redemption and sacrifice. He starts by explaining the entire Jewish tradition leading up to Jesus. Then he reaches the climax of his argument by stating that redemption can only come through Jesus who is the fulfillment of the prophecies of the old covenant. Unlike the other places that St. Paul wrote to, he never visited the people of Rome. He was asked to write to them and, as the letter states, he knows that he is coming to Rome for martyrdom.

The letters to the Corinthians are written to the Greek speaking, Gentile church in Corinth, which is a Greek city-state. These people are largely unfamiliar with the Jewish tradition and are far more interested in how to live the Christian life. The letters focus on the recognition that we are all one in Christ, since many divisions have occurred between those of Gentile origin and those of Jewish origin. Likewise he outlines the structure and life of the early church and how a Christian is to behave in the "modern" world of 1st century Greece.

By far the oddest of the letters that St. Paul wrote is to the Galatians. The church of Galatia was St. Paul's second stop on his missionary journey. Upon leaving Galatia, he was really excited about their faith and hopeful for their continued conversion. That could not be further from the truth. Shortly after he left, a rival "Christian" group arrived on the scene claiming that you need to be Jewish before being Christian and convinced everyone to follow the Mosaic code. St. Paul is peeved. This letter is known as his "angry letter" as he chastises the Galatians for defecting from the true faith.

In contrast to the Letter to the Galatians, the Letter to the Thessalonians is St. Paul's happy letter. The people of Thessalonica were the first stop on his missionary journey and the people he was most proud of. His letter is one of encouragement and joy as he is watching their faith flourish.

The Letter to the Ephesians is stylistically different from the other letters. It reads like a reflection. This letter focuses on the theology of the church and how one is to be in the church. A

lot of people struggle with this letter because it's way of understanding society strongly contrasts with our modern understanding. Even though we do not follow the letter to the exact level of its teachings, the spirit of its teachings is still valid and useful in our modern society.

St. Paul wrote a few other letters which are much shorter Philemon and Titus. Both of these letters were written to specific people and not to churches. Those who read St Paul's writing are usually confused by some of the themes that seem so contradictory to the Christian message: downplaying women, endorsing slavery, encouraging a submissiveness to the government. All of these ideas were critical for the time, and somewhat important today. St. Paul is criticized for having not condemned slavery in the Letter to Philemon. Although he didn't condemn slavery, he also didn't support it. Condemning slavery would have put him in the place of a rebellion to the Roman authorities, something he did not want. If you wish to call him a coward, remember: Jesus is his aim and goal. The government and politics will be there, but once everyone converts, then it won't matter. His goal is the salvation of people, not the overturning of the social order. So, keep everything the same until Jesus' new way permeates the society.

The other letters

The other letters – 1, 2, and 3 John, 1 and 2 Peter, Jude – are all stylistically different from St. Paul's letters. The letters of Peter contain some of the most beautiful Greek writing in the New Testament. The letters of John are very similar to the Gospel of John, indicating that they were probably written by the same group of people. These letters focus on explaining the central mystery of Jesus and helping people to live out that reality. Their style is simple and practical. Like the Gospel of John, the letters of John have the theme of light and dark: those who are in the light are Christian and those who are in the dark are not. This dualism seems harsh and strong, but when things challenge us, we should pay attention.

The Letter to the Hebrews is an odd letter. Unlike all the other letters, this letter has no specific audience to which the letter was written. Similarly, it assumes a Jewish audience both from its title but also its themes. This letter overviews the entire Old Testament and connects those themes to Jesus the high priest. This letter is the only one that focuses on the priesthood of Jesus and his self-giving offering on the Cross.

The New Testament closes with the final book: The Book of Revelation. This decision was intentional by the Council of Nicaea who chose this book as a way of recognizing the importance of Jesus' second coming. Its apocalyptic nature and strange ideas and images propel the reader to wonder about the end times and what they will be like. The book is meant to showcase who God is not to predict the events of the end times. The book is shrouded in historical allusions and biblical references. Only one who is well versed in 1st century history and the biblical themes and events will understand its depths.