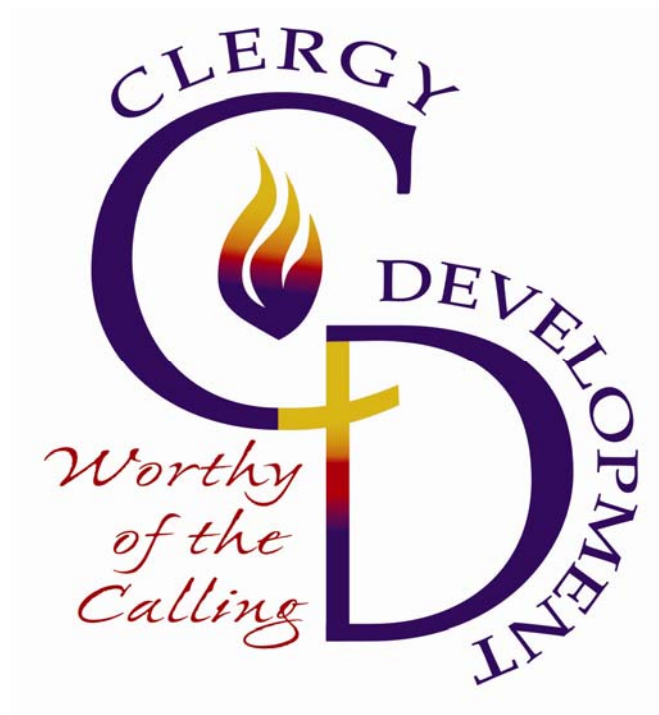


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Student Guide

# Tracing the Story of God in the Bible



Clergy Development  
Church of the Nazarene  
Kansas City, Missouri  
816-333-7000 ext. 2468; 800-306-7651 (USA)  
2005

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The **Modular Course of Study** is an outcome-based curriculum designed to implement the educational paradigm defined by the Breckenridge Consultations. Clergy Development is responsible for maintaining and distributing the Modular Course of Study for the Church of the Nazarene.

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**GL:** Translated by George Lyons

## Series Foreword

### **A Vision for Christian Ministry: Clergy Education in the Church of the Nazarene**

The chief purpose of all persons—indeed, all of the creation—is to worship, love, and serve God. God has made himself known in His deeds of creation and redemption. As the Redeemer, God has called into existence a people, the Church, who embody, celebrate, and declare His name and His ways. The life of God with His people and the world constitutes the Story of God. That story is recorded principally in the Old and New Testaments, and continues to be told by the resurrected Christ who lives and reigns as Head of His Church. The Church lives to declare the whole Story of God. This it does in many ways—in the lives of its members who are even now being transformed by Christ, through preaching, the sacraments, in oral testimony, and in mission. All members of the Body of Christ are called to exercise a ministry of witness and service. No one is excluded.

In God's own wisdom He calls some persons to fulfill the ministry of proclaiming the gospel and caring for God's people in a form that is referred to as the ordained ministry. God is the initial actor in this call, not humans. In the Church of the Nazarene we believe that God calls and that persons respond. They do not elect the Christian ministry. All persons whom God calls to the ordained ministry continue to be amazed that He would call them. They should continue to be humbled and amazed by God's call. The *Manual* of the Church of the Nazarene states, "we recognize and hold that the Head of the Church calls some men and women to the more official and public work of the ministry." It adds, "The church, illuminated by the Holy Spirit, will recognize the Lord's call" (*Manual*, Church of the Nazarene, paragraph 400).

An ordained Christian minister has as his or her chief responsibility to declare in many ways the whole Story of God as fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth. His or her charge is to "tend the flock of God. . . not by constraint but willingly, not for shameful gain but eagerly, not as domineering over those in their charge but being examples to the flock" (1 Pet 5:2-3, RSV). The minister fulfills this charge under the supervision of Christ, the chief Shepherd (1 Pet 5:4). Such ministry can be fulfilled only after a period of careful preparation. Indeed, given the ever-changing demands placed upon the minister, "preparation" never ceases.

A person who enters the Christian ministry becomes in a distinct sense a steward of the gospel of God (Titus 1:7, RSV). A steward is one who is entrusted to care for what belongs to another. A steward may be one who takes care of another person or who manages the property of someone else. All Christians are stewards of the grace of God. But in addition, in a peculiar sense a Christian minister is a steward of the "mystery of God," which is Christ, the Redeemer, the Messiah of God. In all faithfulness, the minister is called to "make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel" (Eph 6:19, NRSV). Like Paul, he or she must faithfully preach "the boundless riches of Christ, and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places" (Eph 3:8-10, NRSV).

In fulfilling this commission, there is plenty of room for diligence and alertness, but no room for laziness or privilege (Titus 1:5-9). Good stewards recognize that they are

stewards only, not the owners, and that they will give an account of their stewardship to the master. Faithfulness to one's charge and to the Lord who issued it is the steward's principal passion. When properly understood, the Christian ministry should never be thought of as a "job." It is ministry—uniquely Christian ministry. No higher responsibility or joy can be known than to become a steward of the Story of God in Christ's Church. The person who embraces God's call to the ordained ministry will stand in the company of the Apostles, the Early Fathers of the Church, the Reformers of the Middle Ages, the Protestant Reformers, and many persons around the world today who joyfully serve as stewards of the gospel of God.

Obviously, one who does not recognize, or who understands but rejects, just how complete and inclusive a minister's stewardship must be should not start down the path that leads to ordination. In a peculiar sense, a Christian minister must in all respects model the gospel of God. He or she is to "shun" the love of money. Instead, the minister must "aim at righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness and gentleness." He or she must "fight the good fight of the faith" and "take hold of the eternal life to which you were called" (1 Tim 6:11-12, NRSV).

Hence, the Church of the Nazarene believes that "the minister of Christ is to be in all things a pattern to the flock—in punctuality, discretion, diligence, earnestness; in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left" (2 Cor 6:6-7)" (*Manual*, Church of the Nazarene, paragraph 401.1). The minister of Christ "must be above reproach as God's steward, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not addicted to wine, not pugnacious, not fond of sordid gain, but hospitable, loving what is good, sensible, just, devout, self-controlled, holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching . . . able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict" (Titus 1:7-9, NASB).

In order to be a good steward of God's Story one must, among other things, give oneself to careful and systematic study, both before and after ordination. This will occur not because he or she is forced to do so, but out of a love for God and His people, the world that He is working to redeem, and out of an inescapable sense of responsibility. It cannot be too strongly emphasized that the attitude one brings to preparation for the ministry reveals much about what he or she thinks of God, the gospel, and Christ's Church. The God who became incarnate in Jesus and who made a way of salvation for all gave His very best in the life, death, and resurrection of His Son. In order to be a good steward, a Christian minister must respond in kind. Jesus told numerous parables about stewards who did not recognize the importance of what had been entrusted to them (Mt 21:33-44; 25:14-30; Mk 13:34-37; Lk 12:35-40; 19:11-27; 20:9-18).

Preparation—one's education in all its dimensions—for ministry in Christ's Church should be pursued in full light of the responsibility before God and His people that the ministry involves. This requires that one take advantage of the best educational resources at his or her disposal.

The Church of the Nazarene recognizes how large is the responsibility associated with the ordained Christian ministry and accepts it fully. Part of the way we recognize our responsibility before God is seen in the requirements we make for ordination and the practice of ministry. We believe that the call to and practice of Christian ministry is a gift, not a right or privilege. We believe that God holds a minister to the highest of religious, moral, personal, and professional standards. We are not reluctant to expect

that those standards be observed from the time of one's call until his or her death. We believe that Christian ministry should first be a form of worship. The practice of ministry is both an offering to God and a service to His Church. By the miracle of grace, the work of the ministry can become a means of grace for God's people (Rom 12:1-3). One's education for ministry is also a form of worship.

The modules that comprise the Course of Study that may lead a person to candidacy for ordination have been carefully designed to prepare one for the kind of ministry we have described. Their common purpose is to provide a holistic preparation for entrance into the ordained Christian ministry. They reflect the Church's wisdom, experience, and responsibility before God. The modules show how highly the Church of the Nazarene regards the gospel, the people of God, the world for which Christ gave His life, and Christian ministry. Completing the modules will normally take three or four years. But no one should feel pressured to meet this schedule.

The careful study for which the modules call should show that before God and His Church one accepts the stewardly responsibility associated with ordained ministry.

## Acknowledgments

Every module is the accumulation of effort by many people. Someone writes the original manuscript, others offer suggestions to strengthen the content and make the material more easily understood, and finally an editor formats the module for publication. This module is not different. Many people have contributed to this module.

### Principal Contributor

The principal contributors for this module are George Lyons and Ted Esselstyn.

**George Lyons** is professor of New Testament at Northwest Nazarene University. He has been a professor at Olivet Nazarene University, visiting professor at Nazarene Theological Seminary and other Nazarene institutions in the USA and in world mission regions.

Dr. Lyons holds academic degrees from Olivet Nazarene University (AB), Nazarene Theological Seminary (MDiv), and Emory University (PhD, New Testament Studies). He is a past president of the Wesleyan Theological Society and a member of the Society of Biblical Literature.

Dr. Lyons has served as an associate pastor, supply preacher, Sunday School teacher, and member of several denominational committees and commissions. He is a prolific writer of books and articles and has been named the Pauline Epistles editor of the newly proposed Beacon Hill Press commentary series.

George and Terre, his wife, enjoy travel and have visited over 20 countries of the world. His hobbies include travel, photography, and computers.

Dr. Lyons is the major contributor for Lessons 1, 6, 7, 9, 12, 13, 14, 16, 17, 19, 21, and 23.

**Ted Esselstyn** is adjunct professor at Mount Vernon Nazarene University. Dr. and Mrs. Esselstyn retired from service as missionaries to Africa in March 2002 after serving on that continent for 34 years.

Ted was born in Swaziland, Africa, and grew up in the Johannesburg area of South Africa. He is a graduate of Eastern Nazarene College. Further preparation took him to Nazarene Seminary in Kansas City; Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, and service as pastor of the Wallingford Church of the Nazarene in Connecticut.

Ted and Joan were assigned to Africa in 1968. They taught and served as principal in Arthurseat, in the South African low veld. In 1975 they were reassigned to Johannesburg where Ted served as teacher and rector. In 1983 Ted became the first Regional Education Coordinator, a position he held until retirement. This assignment, supervising the starting and development of education institutions, took him to every country in Africa where the Church of the Nazarene had education work.

The major projects were the establishment of Africa Nazarene University in Kenya and the merger of the four segregated schools in South Africa into one Nazarene Theological College. Ministerial scholarships are the burden of their present ministry.

Dr. Esselstyn is the major contributor for Lessons 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 10, 11, 15, 18, 20, 22, and 24.

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# **Syllabus Biblical Theology**

**Educational Institution, Setting, or Educational Provider:**

**Location of the Course:**

**Course Dates:**

**Name of the Instructor:**

**Instructor's Address, Telephone, and E-mail Address:**

## **Module Vision Statement**

Biblical theology attempts to summarize and synthesize the main strands of the diverse theological assumptions and affirmations of the Bible. The Bible is not a systematic theology. Nevertheless, Wesleyans share the Protestant conviction that Scripture must provide the foundational source for all theological reflection that is truly Christian. Authentically Christian preaching must also arise responsibly from the biblical text.

The goal of this module is to help students think about the Bible as more than an anthology of the classic literature of ancient Israel and the Early Church. It is this. But it is also an essential resource for defining what should characterize contemporary Christian faith and practice.

How does one move from the Bible—with its exultant affirmations of faith alongside tiresome genealogies; strange levitical legislation; poetry, proverbs, and prophecy; patriarchal anecdotes; palace intrigues; stories of miracles, misunderstanding and miscarriage of justice; letters to confused and sometimes contrary churches; and grotesque visions of the future—to the Apostles' Creed. And much less to a fully developed theological system like Wesleyanism?

How does one preach from the Bible in a way that takes with equal seriousness its origins thousands of years ago in a cultural, social, economic, and political environment dramatically different from ours, and the pressing needs of those who gather from week to week in our churches expecting to hear an edifying message from this book?

It is the daunting task of biblical theology to sort through the Bible's witness to God's involvement in the lives of people long dead to discern the timeless truths that should shape our understanding of God and life as his people in the present and our aspirations for the future.

## **Purpose**

The function of this course is to enable the learner to discover the varied ways in which the Bible instructs today's Christians in their life of faith and faithful walk as God's people, renewed in Jesus Christ and empowered by the sanctifying Holy Spirit. God is the central character of both the Old and the New Testaments. The whole Bible expresses his instruction of and interaction with his people, culminating in the revelation of himself in and through Jesus Christ, and made personal and real by the universal gift of the Holy Spirit.

The approach this module takes to the biblical material is primarily thematic, recognizing the intertwining of themes and the richness of the instruction they express. At the same time it works from the canonical foundations of Scripture—the Torah, the history and prophets of Israel, the diverse collection of other writings in the Hebrew Bible, the Gospels, the community letters of Paul, and other early Christian writings. These provide the basis for understanding God's gracious revelation of himself and his intentions for his people.

## **Methodological Presuppositions**

The perspective from which we approach the written word of God is unapologetically Christian. We understand the Old Testament through the instruction of the New Testament, of the Christian Church, and of the Wesleyan-Holiness movement. The context of the writer and of the canon informs the instruction that we receive and appropriate. The divine origin and human expression of the written word—the Bible—and of the living Word—Jesus Christ—must both be understood and appreciated.

## **Note on Methodology from the Series Editor**

In his book *The Courage to Teach*,<sup>1</sup> Parker Palmer describes an alternative teaching-learning strategy to the dichotomy of teacher-centered and student-centered classroom models. The alternative he suggests is a subject-centered model. In a subject-centered classroom, the subject—in this case the Bible—not the teacher or the student holds the center of attention. The subject provides a plumbline, a standard that holds both teacher and student accountable for what they say and do.

"In a subject-centered classroom, the teacher's central task is to give the great thing [subject] an independent voice—a capacity to speak its truth quite apart from the teacher's voice in terms that students can hear and understand."<sup>2</sup> The teacher then models for the student ways of approaching, interpreting, and understanding the subject. The teacher does not deliver conclusions of his or her study to the student but demonstrates the methods a professional uses to draw meaning from the subject.

The Bible narrative contains many theological truths, and an exhaustive study of them would require many lifetimes. This module cannot hope to deal with the whole scope of biblical theology but through the examples presented in its lessons, the student should seek to grasp the methods of study that will allow him or her to explore the richness of the Bible narrative for personal growth, guidance, teaching, and preaching.

Rather than filling the class time by telling students everything practitioners know about the subject, the instructor should "present small but critical samples of the data of [biblical theology] to help students understand how a practitioner in [biblical

theology] generates data, checks and corrects data, thinks about data, uses and applies data, and shares data with others."<sup>3</sup>

To that end, lessons contain many examples of "doing" biblical theology. The instructor may need to select specific examples for classroom activities that are particularly relevant to the students, their culture, and their needs. The other examples within a lesson can be assigned as reading/homework assignments or students may take-away the additional examples in the Student Guide for future reference.

Like John Wesley, the student should strive to be a person "of one book."

## **Educational Assumptions**

1. The work of the Holy Spirit is essential to any process of Christian education at any level. We will consistently request and expect the Spirit's presence within and among us.
2. Christian teaching and learning is best done in the context of community (people being and working together). Community is the gift of the Spirit but may be enhanced or hindered by human effort. Communities have common values, stories, practices, and goals. Explicit effort will be invested to enhance community within the class. Group work will take place in every lesson.
3. Every adult student has knowledge and experiences to contribute to the class. We learn not only from the instructor and the reading assignments but also from each other. Each student is valued not only as a learner but also as a teacher. That is one reason that so many exercises in this course are cooperative and collaborative in nature.
4. Journaling is an ideal way to bring theory and practice together as students synthesize the principles and content of the lessons with their own experiences, preferences, and ideas.

## **Outcome Statements**

This module contributes to the development of the following abilities as defined in the *U.S. Sourcebook for Ministerial Development*.

### **PROGRAM OUTCOMES**

The Primary COSAC outcomes which will be met as a result of the satisfactory completion of this module are:

- CN7: The ability to describe major theological concepts of the Old Testament
- CN14: The ability to identify and describe the major theological concepts of the New Testament

To a more limited extent the following are also addressed:

- CH2: Ability to discern and make theologically based ethical decisions in the midst of a complex and/or paradoxical context
- CH4: Ability to understand and apply the unique ethical dimensions of spiritual leadership in the church

- CH5: Ability to apply Christian ethics to the issues of integrity, specifically as they relate to ministers and laity for authentic Christian faithfulness and public witness
- CH6: Ability to pursue holy character (Christlikeness) by practicing faith formation and the classic Christian disciplines as a means of grace
- CH8: Ability to take responsibility for his or her own continuing spiritual development
- CN3: Ability to identify the basic thrust of each major section of the Old Testament
- CN11: Ability to identify the significant elements of the message of Jesus and Paul
- CN16: Ability to identify the steps of historical, literary, and theological analysis used in exegesis
- CN23: Ability to identify and explain the doctrine of holiness from a Wesleyan perspective
- CP7: Ability to conceive and articulate purpose, mission, vision and to develop strategic plans that strengthen a unified vision
- CP21: Ability to envision, order, participate in contextualized theologically grounded worship and to develop and lead appropriate services for special occasions (i.e., wedding, funeral, baptism, and Lord's Supper)
- CP22: Ability to prepare, organize, and deliver biblically sound sermons using appropriate techniques and skills in culturally appropriate ways (see also: CP25, CP28, CP31, CP34)

#### OUTCOME STATEMENTS

- The learner should acquire the ability to understand and articulate the coherent story of God, his people, and the world as presented in the Scriptures.
- The learner should acquire an understanding of the exegetical bases for forming sound theological and ethical convictions.
- Learners should acquire a greater appreciation for the impact of contextual realities on the theological affirmations of the biblical authors and the need for an understanding of their own contexts to be able to appropriate biblical theology.
- The learner should acquire the ability to form appropriate theological and ethical convictions.

Upon the successful completion of this module, learners will have acquired the ability:

- To understand, accept, and explain the Bible as a living revelation of God to the believer in today's context.
- To discern and apply appropriately the theological concepts in the Bible to practical life situations in today's world.
- To delineate ways the Bible is a valued resource for critiquing culture, forming worldview, establishing theological convictions, directing spiritual formation as well as guidance for practical ministry to others and a thought seedbed for sermonic development.
- To know the theological thrust of the major components of the Bible together with the unifying themes of the whole and the distinctive contributions of the various authors.

#### Recommended Resources

A modern study Bible of the student's choice.

Alexander, T. Desmond, and others, eds. *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (NDBT). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000.

This resource is available in print form or as part of the CD *The Essential IVP Reference Collection*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001. The CD contains 13 IVP reference books.

## Course Requirements

### 1. Prerequisites

*Telling the Story of God in the Bible* should be taught only **after** students have taken the modules *Telling the Old Testament Story of God*, *Telling the New Testament Story of God*, and *Interpreting Scripture*.

- 2. Class attendance, attention, and participation** are especially important. Students are responsible for all assignments and in-class work. Much of the work in this course is small-group work. Cooperative, small-group work cannot be made up. That makes attendance imperative. Even if one does extra reading or writing, the values of discussion, dialogue, and learning from each other are thwarted. If one or two lessons are missed, the learning leader will require extra work before completion can be acknowledged. If three or more lessons are missed, the student will be required to repeat the whole module.

It should be noted that in this module failure to do the required assignment in preparation for the class means that the unprepared student cannot be counted as present for the class. The preparation of assignments is essential to the learning process. Students are encouraged to consult with others in the preparation of their homework.

**Small-Group Work.** Small group participation is important in this course. The class members will be assigned to groups of two to four students each. The group members will serve as study partners for explorations and discussion.

### 3. Assignments

**Journaling:** An on-going assignment for this module is your journal. It is to be used regularly, if not daily. On at least one occasion during the term, the instructor will check the journals. In each lesson a journal assignment is included.

The journal should become the student's friend and treasury of insights, devotions, and ideas. Here the integration of theory and practice occurs. The spiritual life nature of the journal helps guard against the course of study being merely academic as you are repeatedly called upon to apply the principles studied to your own heart and your own ministry situation.

This journal is not a diary, not a catchall. It is, rather, a guided journal or a focused journal in which the educational experience and its implications are selected for reflection and writing.

The framers of this curriculum are concerned about the way students fall into learning "about" the Bible or "about" the spiritual life rather than learning—that is, coming to know and internalize the Bible and spiritual principles. The journaling experience ensures that the "Be" component of "Be, Know, and Do" is present in the course of study. Be faithful with all journaling assignments.

**Daily Work:** This module has regular homework assignments. It is called daily work because even though the class may only meet once a week, the student should be working on the module on a "daily" basis. Sometimes the homework assignments are quite heavy. The assignments are important. Even if homework is not discussed in class every session, the work is to be handed in. This gives the instructor regular information about the student's progress in the course. The normal time for homework to be handed in is at the beginning of each class session. **All** assignments are to be completed.

**Catechism:** Students will prepare a catechism for the instruction of children, teens, new believers, and a refresher class based on the *Manual* principle that beliefs are to be drawn from the Bible (*Manual* Article 4).

In preparation for the catechism you will be required to write formulation statements at the end of each lesson pertaining to the study/topic of the lesson. These will be theological statements that you consider important and valuable.

Lesson 23 and 24 will devote time to the development of the catechism based on the formulation statements prepared throughout the course.

## Course Outline and Schedule

The class will meet for 48 hours according to the following schedule:

Session Date	Session Time	
		<b>Unit 1: Introductory Lessons</b>
		1. Introduction to the Module
		2. Discovering Theology in the Bible
		<b>Unit 2: Overview of the Bible</b>
		3. The Torah
		4. The Prophets
		5. The Writings
		6. The Christ
		7. Life in the Spirit
		<b>Unit 3: Unifying Theological Concepts</b>
		8. The Creator God
		9. Sin and Salvation
		10. The Covenant Relationship
		11. Law, Security, and Authority
		12. Holiness, Peace, and Love
		<b>Unit 4: The Concepts of Warning, Evangelism, and Discipline</b>
		13. Discipline and Discipleship
		14. When Humans Go Too Far
		15. Forgive and Forgiven
		16. Freely Received and Freely Given
		<b>Unit 5: Practical Relationships</b>
		17. Biblical Ethics
		18. Wisdom and the Secret of Time
		19. Future Hope
		20. The Way to Perfect Life and True Greatness

		21. Commitment to Compassion
		22. Overcoming Evil
		<b>Unit 6: Review and Conclusion</b>
		23. Review
		24. Catechism

## Course Evaluation

The instructor, the course itself, and the student's progress will be evaluated. These evaluations will be made in several ways.

The progress of students will be evaluated with an eye for enhancing the learning experience by:

1. Carefully observing the small-group work, noting the competence of reports, the balance of discussion, the quality of the relationships, the cooperation level, and the achievement of assigned tasks
2. Careful reading of homework assignments
3. Journal checks

A letter grade is not the measure of completion. Completion of the module is based on attendance, participation, completion of all homework, and showing competence in the ability statements.

The evaluation of the course materials and the teacher will be evaluated by frequently asking and discussing the effectiveness and relevance of a certain method, experience, story, lecture, or other activity.

Some evaluation cannot be made during the class itself. Some objectives will not be measurable for years to come. If students encounter the transforming power of God at deeper levels than ever before, learn devotional skills and practice them with discipline, and incorporate the best of this course into their own ministries, the fruit of this educational endeavor could go on for a long time. In truth, that is what we expect.

## Additional Information

A reasonable effort to assist every student will be made. Any student who has handicaps, learning disabilities, or other conditions that make the achievement of the class requirements exceedingly difficult should make an appointment with the instructor as soon as possible to see what special arrangements can be made. Any student who is having trouble understanding the assignments, lectures, or other learning activities should talk to the instructor to see what can be done to help.

## Instructor's Availability

Good faith efforts to serve the students both in and beyond the classroom will be made.

## **Journaling: A Tool for Personal Reflection and Integration**

Participating in the course of study is the heart of your preparation for ministry. To complete each course you will be required to listen to lectures, read several books, participate in discussions, write papers, and take exams. Content mastery is the goal.

An equally important part of ministerial preparation is spiritual formation. Some might choose to call spiritual formation devotions, while others might refer to it as growth in grace. Whichever title you place on the process, it is the intentional cultivation of your relationship with God. The course work will be helpful in adding to your knowledge, your skills, and your ability to do ministry. The spiritually formative work will weave all you learn into the fabric of your being, allowing your education to flow freely from your head to your heart to those you serve.

Although there are many spiritual disciplines to help you cultivate your relationship with God, journaling is the critical skill that ties them all together. Journaling simply means keeping a record of your experiences and the insights you have gained along the way. It is a discipline because it does require a good deal of work to faithfully spend time daily in your journal. Many people confess that this is a practice they tend to push aside when pressed by their many other responsibilities. Even five minutes a day spent journaling can make a major difference in your education and your spiritual development. Let me explain.

Consider journaling as time spent with your best friend. Onto the pages of a journal you will pour out your candid responses to the events of the day, the insights you gained from class, a quote gleaned from a book, an ah-ha that came to you as two ideas connected. This is not the same as keeping a diary, since a diary seems to be a chronicle of events without the personal dialogue. The journal is the repository for all of your thoughts, reactions, prayers, insights, visions, and plans. Though some people like to keep complex journals with sections for each type of reflection, others find a simple running commentary more helpful. In either case, record the date and the location at the beginning of every journal entry. It will help you when it comes time to review your thoughts.

It is important to chat briefly about the logistics of journaling. All you will need is a pen and paper to begin. Some folks prefer loose-leaf paper that can be placed in a three-ring binder, others like spiral-bound notebooks, while others enjoy using composition books. Whichever style you choose, it is important to develop a pattern that works for you.

Establishing a time and a place for writing in your journal is essential. If there is no space etched out for journaling, it will not happen with the regularity needed to make it valuable. It seems natural to spend time journaling after the day is over and you can sift through all that has transpired. Yet, family commitments, evening activities, and fatigue militate against this time slot. Morning offers another possibility. Sleep filters much of the previous day's experiences, and processes deep insights, that can be recorded first thing in the morning. In conjunction with devotions, journaling enables you to begin to weave your experiences with the Word, and also with course material that has been steeping on the back burner of your mind. You will probably find that carrying your journal will allow you to jot down ideas that come to you at odd times throughout the day.



It seems that we have been suggesting that journaling is a handwritten exercise. Some may be wondering about doing their work on a computer. Traditionally, there is a special bond between hand, pen, and paper. It is more personal, direct, aesthetic. And it is flexible, portable, and available. However, as computers become more and more an integral part of our lives, the use of a computer for journaling may take on that special bond.

With regular use, your journal is the repository of your journey. As important as it is to make daily entries, it is equally important to review your work. Read over each week's record at the end of the week. Make a summary statement and note movements of the Holy Spirit or your own growth. Do a monthly review of your journal every 30 days. This might best be done on a half-day retreat where you can prayerfully focus on your thoughts in solitude and silence. As you do this, you will begin to see the accumulated value of the Word, your course work, and your experience in ministry all coming together in ways you had not considered possible. This is integration, weaving together faith development with learning. Integration moves information from your head to your heart so that ministry is a matter of being rather than doing. Journaling will help you answer the central question of education: "Why do I do what I do when I do it?"

Journaling really is the linchpin in ministerial preparation. Your journal is the chronicle of your journey into spiritual maturity as well as content mastery. These volumes will hold the rich insights that will pull your education together. A journal is the tool for integration. May you treasure the journaling process!

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## Unit 1: Introductory Lessons

### Lesson 1: Introduction to the Module

#### Due This Lesson

None

#### Learner Objectives

By the end of this lesson, participants should

- begin to formulate a definition of biblical theology
- understand some of the methodology of biblical theology
- describe several perspectives and theological presuppositions for approaching biblical study
- describe how the Nazarene Article of Faith (4) on the Bible informs how we study and interpret the Bible

#### Homework Assignments

- Read: Genesis 1—5 and prepare a list of at least 10 theological concepts these chapters seem to support or presume.
- Read: Exodus 20; Deuteronomy 5—6; Matthew 5:21-29.
- Explore some other passages you find that address the nature of or use of the word “sin” or related words like “iniquity,” “trespass,” “transgression,” etc.
- Look up “Cain,” “Abel,” and “Lamech” in your concordance; note and read each of the passages that contain those names.
- Look up “murder,” “crouch/ing,” and “kill” in your concordance—words chosen are from the NIV translation, you may need to look up corresponding words if you are using a different translation. Read a selection of these passages and note the issues that are raised.
- Read the essays on “Sin” and “Murder” in the NDBT (*New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*).
- Organize the results of your reading and study so that you can participate in the class discussions with other students.

Write in your journal. Reflect on your past experience/method of Bible reading and study. How do you anticipate improving during this module?

## Small Groups

In your group find other biblical examples of your assigned presupposition. Select a group recorder/reporter who will report to the class.

The perspective from which we approach this inspired word of God is a Christian perspective. This means:

1. That we choose to understand the Old Testament through the instruction of the New Testament. For example: we understand from the instruction of the Book of Hebrews that the work of the high priest was symbolic of the work done for us by Jesus Christ, and from the instruction of the Gospels and Acts that the Isaiah image of the Suffering Servant is a foretelling of the saving work of Jesus.
2. That we approach the whole Bible from the perspective of the Christian Church and especially of the Wesleyan-Holiness movement. For example: Canticles is understood to describe not simply a loving relationship between a man and a woman, but primarily provides an example of issues in building a relationship between Christ and his Church, his Bride.
3. That the context of the writer and the canon needs to inform the instruction that we receive. For example, some of the laws listed in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy deal specifically with the culture of the writer's day. Deuteronomy 22:8 instructs that a parapet must be built around the roof of every house. This application of responsible living is properly applicable to the flat roofs and balconies of the Middle East and is certainly irrelevant to the thatched roofs of much of the world. Again, the canon has placed the story of Jonah among the Prophets, and therefore it must be considered as a message from God to his people.
4. The divinity and the humanity of the Bible must be understood. For example, Exodus 14 and 15 each record Israel's exodus from Egypt across the sea and the destruction of the army of Egypt. The descriptions are quite different, and the human use of narrative and poetry must be understood. It is essential not only to recognize the miracle of God's grace to Israel reflected in these accounts, but to look at the literary fact that chapter 14 is a narrative relating the events of the miraculous crossing, while chapter 15 is a poem expressing the emotional exuberance of a free Israel as the result of the crossing.

## Theological Presuppositions

The *Manual* of the Church of the Nazarene, Article IV reads:

**4.** We believe in the plenary inspiration of the Holy Scriptures, by which we understand the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments, given by divine inspiration, inerrantly revealing the will of God concerning us in all things necessary to our salvation, so that whatever is not contained therein is not to be enjoined as an article of faith. (Luke 24:44-47; John 10:35; 1 Corinthians 15:3-4; 2 Timothy 3:15-17; 1 Peter 1:10-12; 2 Peter 1:20-21)

- The word “plenary” refers to the wholeness of Scripture.
- By “inspiration” we emphasize the divine origin and authority of the Bible.
- By “66 books” we mean the Protestant canon.
- By “inerrantly revealing the will of God” we mean: The Bible is a fully adequate expression of what God wants in everything relating to our salvation.
- Note that Nazarenes do not insist that “the Bible is inerrant.”
- Scripture is the foundational source of all Christian doctrine.



## Nature of the Bible

The oldest of these sacred groupings was the Torah. These were also called The Law, the books of Moses or just Moses, and later as the Pentateuch.

The second grouping was known as The Prophets.

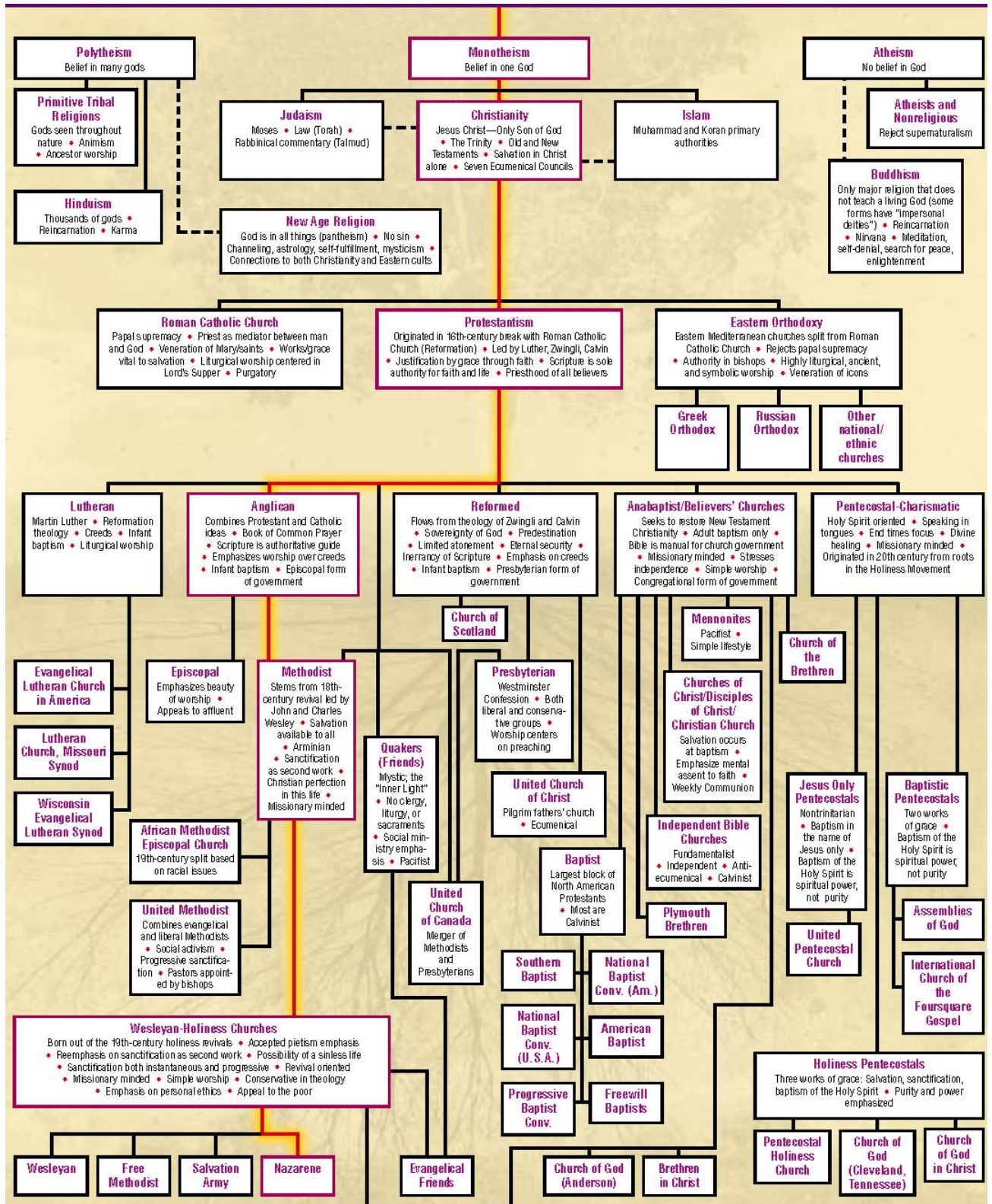
The 21 books were divided into two groups

- The Former Prophets: Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings
- The Latter Prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi

The third group was known as the Writings and included a great variety of materials. The 13 books that formed this group were Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and 1 & 2 Chronicles.

The fourth group of books in the Bible is the New Testament—a collection of 27 writings.

# A Family Tree of Religious Groups<sup>4</sup>



## **The Bible and Christian Faith: Wesleyans, the Authority of the Bible, and Post-modernity<sup>5</sup>**

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One would suppose that the relationship between the Bible and Christian faith (understood as reasoned articulation of the faith or Christian theology) would be straightforward and simple. There ought to be an axiomatic statement that would summarize the relationship succinctly. However, the matter is not as simple as one might suppose. From a Wesleyan perspective one might think that the so-called Wesleyan Quadrilateral of Scripture, Reason, Tradition, and Experience would explain the relationship of Scripture and Christian faith. But once again the matter is not that simple. The Wesleyan Quadrilateral is more affirmation of faith that these sources contribute to the construction of theology than an explanation how Scripture (or Reason or Tradition or Experience) actually functions as a source for Theology.

This difficulty in articulating the relationship between the Bible and Christian Faith is not solely a phenomenon of Modernity, though Modernity has exacerbated the problem. One might trace the history of biblical exegesis as a narrative of the varying ways in which the Bible and Christian Faith have been understood in relationship to each other. It is beyond the purview of this paper to give detailed attention to that history, but I want to begin with selected soundings in the history of biblical interpretation and Christian faith.

### **“The Bible” and “Theology” in the New Testament**

To begin in the so-called New Testament church creates certain immediate risks. The church of the first century obviously possessed nothing like the Bible we know. Individual writings that eventually would become the New Testament were being written, but there is little evidence that those writings were even in the process of being collected in the first century, though many scholars believe the epistles of Paul and perhaps the four gospels had been collected and were seen as a type of “canonical” collections by the beginning of the second century. Further, what we call the “canon of the Old Testament” was by no means clearly closed during the first Christian century. However, there is a general commonality between what we call the Old Testament and what New Testament writers called “the Scripture(s).” The way in which “the Scriptures” functioned with reference to what we might call Theology on the pages of the New Testament is open to our examination.

The relationship of Scripture and Theology is dialectical in the New Testament. There are passages that seem to grant the priority to Scriptures. Jesus traveling incognito on the road of Emmaus on the first Easter opened the Scriptures to two of his unsuspecting disciples. On the basis of the Scriptures he states that it was, “necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory.” (Luke 24:26, NRSV) On the other hand there is clear indication that theological reflection on the meaning of Christ quickly became determinative for early Christian interpretation of Scripture. The Melchizedek Christology of Hebrews is just one example among many that could

be given. The relationship between the Scriptures and theology was dialectical in the New Testament. They clearly did not exist independently of each other. If one has priority it would be Theology – not as we know it today, but as expressed (in the New Testament Scripture) in terms of the kerygma, fundamental creeds, and what we might just call “the gospel.”

### **The Patristic Period**

The second and third century church continued this relationship. This can be seen in Ignatius’ *Letter to the Philadelphians* where he wrote, “As for me, Jesus Christ is the scripture, the inviolable scriptures are his cross, death, and resurrection, and faith through him.”<sup>6</sup> Clearly theological reflection on the meaning of Christ’s death and resurrection are foundational for the faith. But by calling them “scriptures” Ignatius acknowledges a authoritative voice for “the Scriptures.” The church considered “the Scriptures” of the Old Testament as a thoroughly Christian book, a perspective accomplished by reading “through Christian spectacles.”<sup>7</sup> The use of typology and allegory provided a method of reading Scripture that enabled “spiritual” or theological agendas to drive interpretation. The resulting picture is that the Scriptures are authoritative for the church as it constructs and defends its Theology, but theological concerns shape Scriptural interpretation. Further Scripture is not the only influence shaping the developing theology of the church. Worship, reason, and a sense of apostolic tradition also played significant roles.

This is more apparent when viewed from the perspective of the developing New Testament canon. As early as Polycarp we find the apostles and the gospel they preached functioning alongside the prophets of the Old Testament as the authorizing warrants for the practice of Christian faith. In mid-second century Justin declared that the prophets and “the memoirs of the apostles” were read at the worship services of the church. These “memoirs” would surely have included the gospels and perhaps Paul’s letters. By the end of the second century about 20 of the eventual 27 books of the New Testament had achieved widespread authoritative status. The Muratorian fragment from late second century and Origen’s third-century list of books received to be read in the churches are in substantial agreement. Origen also identifies 10 books that were disputed because they were read in some churches but not in others. He also lists books commonly rejected by the churches. The very fact that there were discussions of which New Testament books should be read in the churches demonstrates the assumption that accepted books possessed a particular authority for the formation of the Christian faith. It is also significant that the context of this discussion was which books were acceptable for reading in the public worship of the church. Theology did not exist in abstraction from the liturgical life of the church. The operating assumption appears to have been that the reading of Scripture in worship had the ability in itself to influence significantly both the life and faith of the church.

On the other hand the discussion that surrounded the “disputed” books makes it clear that theological considerations played an important role in whether a particular book would be recognized as Scripture. The arguments regarding apostolic authorship of the disputed books were not pursued disinterestedly. The issue being debated in these discussions had to do with the doctrinal consistency between the disputed books and the other writings of the apostles.

The development of the allegorical method as the primary approach to Scripture in the so-called Alexandrian School could be taken as evidence of Theology taking precedence over Scripture. Clearly the allegorical method supported a theological

interpretation of Scripture as opposed to a literal or historical interpretation. The malleability of the allegorical method suggests that its preeminence in the church came about because of its ability to provide Scriptural warrant for Theology. While this implies that Theology had become the source of meaning for Scripture rather than Scripture being the source of truth for Theology, the fact remains that the church felt it important to seek Scriptural warrant for its Faith.

It is easy for heirs of the Protestant Reformation to reject the use of the allegorical method for this reason. However, the Protestant tendency is to judge the allegorical era by its worst abusers. Origen clearly argued that the literal or historical meaning of the text was the first level of meaning to be pursued and that it was to be understood by every believer. It was also to provide the foundation for theological or allegorical interpretations that would follow among the "spiritual." It is hard to argue that a man who wrote out by hand a six column parallel edition of the Old Testament giving the Hebrew text and the major Greek versions had no regard for the literal meaning of Scripture.

Similarly it would be a mistake to assume that the rise of the so-called Antiochian School of Exegesis developed as a rejection of theological exegesis of Scripture. The Antiochenes addressed the matter of the spiritual or theological truths of Scripture through a construct they called *theoria*. In many instances it is hard to distinguish their use of *theoria* from the theologically motivated exegesis of the allegorizers. Further, the distinction between the use of Scripture by the Alexandrians and the Antiochenes is much clearer in surveys of the history of exegesis than it is when one actually reads the writings of Origen and Chrysostom. The Antiochenes wanted a more historical reading of Scripture than they thought came from the Alexandrians, but they had no interest in an atheological exegesis. The dialectic between Scripture and Theology remained. Various individuals might skew the balance of influence between the two, but no one in the Patristic period thought to construe Theology apart from the interpretation of Scripture nor to read Scripture apart from the lens of orthodox faith.

### **The Medieval Period**

An earlier generation of surveys of the history of exegesis tended to portray the period from A.D. 500 or 600 to 1500 as a black hole of allegorical exegesis in which the doctrines of the church determined a simplistic and flat interpretation of Scripture. Recent studies provide a much more balanced perspective.<sup>8</sup> The radically changed cultural context that occurred when the church moved the classical antiquity of Greek and Roman civilizations to the Dark and Medieval Ages of central Europe significantly impacted the church's resources for theological reflection. Without a "secular" educational system to develop highly skilled thinkers and communicators the church was forced to develop its own resources for education and for preserving the faith. The results of this period should not be compared with the eras preceding and following it. Judged in light of the era and culture in which the church operated between A.D. 500 and 1500 significant study of Scripture did take place. Those efforts arose from the understanding that Scripture is a primary source for understanding the Christian Faith. Theological reflection that attempted to connect the Faith to the audience of that era still looked to Scripture for authorizing warrants. Nevertheless, the strong impulse to preserve the Faith often led to an allegorical interpretation in which Theology predetermined meaning for the Bible.

The renewed emphasis on the Bible over against the theological Tradition of the church that appeared in the Protestant Reformation did not suddenly materialize out

of the blue. As early as Aquinas the pendulum was beginning to swing toward more literal and historical understandings of Scripture. The appropriation of Aristotelian philosophy instead of Platonic as the intellectual framework of the times also contributed to the renewal of the Bible as a resource for Theology. The Renaissance and the rise of Christian Humanism created both a climate and resources for listening to the Bible on its own terms rather than only being viewed through the lens of dogma. The centuries just before the Reformation cannot be characterized as a time of Roman Catholics rejecting the authority of the Bible in favor of church tradition. Rather it was a period of lively debate as the [Roman Catholic] Church tried to find a relationship between the authority of Scripture and the authority of Church dogma that would enable the gospel to be communicated in the rapidly changing era of the Renaissance. The fact that the Bible was the first book to be printed on the Gutenberg press and that textual criticism was beginning to develop with Erasmus makes clear that the Scripture played a significant role in the understanding and authorizing of the Christian Faith in the years just before the Reformation.

### **The Protestant Reformation**

Protestants are often attracted to Luther's *sola scriptura* principle as evidence that the Reformation restored the Bible to its rightful position of authority over doctrine. However, the fact that Luther practiced *sola scriptura* through another hermeneutical principle, *Was Christum treibet*, shows that the relationship of Scripture and Theology for Luther was not so simple. *Was Christum treibet* made Christology as inherited through the traditional teaching channels of the church the primary interpretive principle for evaluating and understanding Scripture. From one angle *Was Christum treibet* became the theological vehicle by which Luther created a *de facto* canon within the canon. One might cynically argue that Luther made no progress at all toward *sola scriptura*. However, he was a product of his times and could be regarded as simply participating in that ongoing discussion within the Church as to the way in which the Faith authorized by Scripture could function meaningfully in the emerging new post medieval world. Change was in the air, but why the change that took place took the shape of the Protestant Reformation offers fascinating opportunities for speculation. The political circumstances in Germany and the financial pressures on the Vatican played important roles, but so did the personality and passion of Luther. However, it is clear that the dialectical relationship between the Bible and Christian Faith did not disappear but took on dimensions reflecting the concerns of the times.

The differences between Calvin and Luther in the way the Bible operated in the formation of the Christian Faith reflects differences in their political circumstances and in their personalities. Calvin produced the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* early in his ministry while his commentaries on the Bible were the product of his later years. Within a century Arminius would attribute to Calvin's commentaries an almost inspired status.<sup>9</sup> Calvin developed a historical and grammatical approach to Scripture that contrasted with typical medieval exegesis much as the Antiochene approach contrasted with the Alexandrian exegesis. His historical interest was significant enough that his critics accused him of being "Jewish" in his interpretation. However, a modern exegete trained in the historical critical method would find Calvin's theological exegesis far more noticeable than his historical and literary comments. For Calvin, as for Luther, the Scriptures existed to nourish the Faith of the church. For both the most important context in which that Faith was articulated and in which it functioned was the worship of the church. Scripture both produced and served the theological identity of the church.

## **The Era of Scholasticism**

The era of Scholasticism in the late 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century represents both a reaction against and a radicalizing of the Reformation. In a time of major wars in which doctrine played a significant part the allegorical method of interpretation was again called into service to provide branches of the church theological validation against each other. At one level this era seems to be a return to medieval style exegesis. However, as a result of the Reformation the doctrine of Scripture itself has become an object of theological reflection and the roots of the modern inerrantists began to flower. This is a fascinating and historically unusual configuration of the relationship between theology and the Bible. However, the two did not part ways, but traveled together yoked by theological reflections on Scripture that seem pedantic and irksome to most of us.

## **The Enlightenment and the Rise of Biblical Theology**

The odd bedfellows of pietism and the Enlightenment produced a new academic discipline called Biblical Theology. This discipline has significantly shaped the way many of us conceptualize and use the Bible in Theology. Most histories of Biblical Theology credit Johann Philip Gabler with being the father of that discipline because of his address when he was installed as professor at Altdorf in 1787. Gabler proposed Biblical Theology as a discipline distinct from Dogmatic or Systematic Theology. He described Biblical Theology as historical and descriptive while Dogmatic Theology was didactic and contextualized to a particular era, theologian, and sect. He suggested that Biblical Theology would proceed without taking the Inspiration of Scripture into account. This did not necessarily mean that Gabler rejected the idea of the inspiration of Scripture. However, he wanted a place in which the Bible could be studied scientifically without being trumped by the claims of inspiration on the part of the church. Gabler's lecture significantly set the direction of Biblical Theology as many of its characteristics and battles for the next two centuries were described in his presentation. He developed three steps for the practice of Biblical Theology. It would begin with close historical and linguistic analysis. From that work the biblical theologian would identify the ideas that were shared by the biblical writers. Finally, the process should articulate the transcendent (timeless and universal) principles of the Bible. Dogmatic Theology would take the materials thus derived by the biblical theologian and contextualize them according to the time, sect, and presuppositions of the theologian. This placed the Bible and especially the New Testament in a role of providing some of the raw materials for the work of Systematic Theology. But this perspective actually separates the Bible from Theology by viewing Scripture as something that can be studied in itself and for itself in historical and literary.<sup>10</sup> Gabler tried to create a method of studying the Scripture that would be free from the perceived (and real) oppression of the Church in the era of Scholasticism. Modern biblical scholarship has assumed (at least until recently) that Gabler's goal was inevitable, necessary, and good.<sup>11</sup>

It is fascinating that within the Church Pietism arose also struggling to find a way to study the Bible on its own merit apart from the increasingly abstract formulations of the Scholastic era of the Church. Pietism's desire for simple, heart-felt religion was far from the intellectual concerns of the Enlightenment to promote the autonomy of man, but the reaction of both to Scripture as it was being treated clearly showed that Scholasticism's peculiar configuration of Scripture and Faith was not adequate for the Modernity that was coming onto the stage of human history. The idea that Scripture

could be studied separately from Theology fit well with the Rationalism and Scientism of the emerging Modern era.

The development of what Green has recently called Gabler's "linear hermeneutics" from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century did not occur in a straight line. The nineteenth century eagerly pursued a historical hermeneutic with no reflection on the role that one's philosophy of history would play in determining the contribution of the Bible to Systematic Theology's resource room. The early twentieth century and especially Albert Schweitzer in the area of Jesus Studies finally recognized the impact of the philosophical assumptions of nineteenth century Biblical Scholarship. Generally, the early twentieth century (and Schweitzer particularly) remained blind to the impact of their own philosophical presuppositions. Among 20<sup>th</sup> century New Testament theologians Rudolf Bultmann seems the most aware of and intentional about his assumptions regarding the Bible, philosophy and theology.

### **Twentieth Century Attempts to Regain Theology in Biblical Theology**

Biblical studies in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries impaled itself on the stick of positivistic history. The connection between the Bible and Theology as reasoned Christian Faith may have reached its lowest point at that time. A secular approach to comparative religious studies had taken over biblical studies and biblical theology was understood only in these History of Religions terms. Following World War I, Eissfeldt in the Old Testament and Karl Barth in the New Testament called biblical theology back to "theology." However, Eissfeldt's argument that the shape of one's Old Testament Theology would depend on one's theological presuppositions was generally rejected. The pursuit of an "objective" Old Testament Theology produced the golden age of Old Testament theology with significant titles appearing almost every year from the mid-30's to the mid-60's.

New Testament Theology also flowered in the same era though methodological and presuppositional disagreements yielded fewer results than in the Old Testament field. Also, in retrospect it is significant that Barth, whose *Commentary on the Letter to the Romans* began the 20<sup>th</sup> century return to biblical theology, especially in the New Testament, eventually wrote a dogmatic theology rather than what 20<sup>th</sup> century scholars called a biblical theology. Bultmann worked toward his *Theology of the New Testament* using three filters. First, he screened the biblical material through the filter of the radical History of Religions approach popular at the turn of the century. This had the effect of reducing the amount of material in the New Testament he considered historically true. Second, Bultmann turned to the existentialist philosophy of Martin Heidegger to establish the purpose to which New Testament interpretation should lead. Our encounter with the New Testament must ultimately lead us to choose authentic existence as understood by Bultmann and Heidegger. Third, Bultmann also expected the New Testament to function theologically along the lines Barth had suggested. This meant that one should expect to find himself or herself "addressed" by God through the reading and preaching of the New Testament.

Though the European contributions to Old and New Testament Theology maintained a distinctive tone reflecting especially the tumultuous history of Germany through the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, these efforts at Old and New Testament Theologies were profoundly influenced by the Biblical Theology Movement that was centered in America in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Though the name biblical theology was associated with these efforts, history was queen. The quest was for an objective theology arising from historical analysis of Scripture. The usually unspoken assumption was that biblical



theology should eventually lead to a theological interpretation of Scripture shared by any unbiased scholar regardless of their dogmatic faith commitments. The article on "Biblical Theology" in the *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* by Krister Stendahl provided, perhaps unintentionally, a jingle to articulate the vision of Gabler almost two hundred years earlier. From Stendahl mid-20<sup>th</sup> century biblical theology tried to describe "what the text meant" in its original context. Homiletics and Systematic Theology would be concerned with "what it means now." Stendahl's vision of this division of labor profoundly influenced virtually every biblical scholar trained from the 1940's into the 1970's. What biblical scholars were not taught was how "what the text meant" in terms of its original historical and literary context would or could contribute to the way the Bible could meaningfully speak today to the concerns of Christian Faith. Major developments in Biblical Studies have occurred in the past twenty-five years. Perhaps the most notable result has been further fragmentation within the whole area of Biblical Studies. Another reality is that Biblical Studies in all its diversity is tending to move further and further from Theology, as witnessed by the shift of the main centers of Bible Study from the seminaries and divinity schools to the university graduate religion departments.

### **Dissatisfaction with "Modern" Biblical Theology**

Even the brief survey of the history of the relationship of the Bible and Theology should make it clear that the "iron curtain" separating biblical studies and systematic theology cannot be a satisfactory state of affairs for the Christian Faith. Among the expressions of concern a generation ago was James Smart's, *The Strange Silence of the Bible in the Church*, published in 1970.<sup>12</sup> Smart was perplexed that with all the advances of biblical theology in the twentieth century there was no appreciable impact from Biblical Studies on the actual life of the church. In the same year Brevard Childs published *Biblical Theology in Crisis*, in which he both announced the "death of biblical theology" and proposed a new method for its resurrection.<sup>13</sup> The details of the new method were rather sparse in Childs' 1970 publication but have been explicated in great length in subsequent publications so much that he is considered the father of one of the main branches of canonical criticism. One of Childs' primary concerns has been to overcome the "iron curtain" separating biblical studies and systematic theology. The efforts calling for the end of this great gulf between the Bible and Theology are growing and there is significant reflection on this problem from a variety of perspectives in contemporary biblical studies and theology.

Though two recent significant treatments of New Testament Theology have sought to continue the Gabler-Stendahl tradition, developments in Biblical Studies are making such an effort increasingly untenable. Heikki Raisanen and Peter Balla have both argued that Gabler's distinction between the historical and theological tasks of New Testament interpretation remain valid.<sup>14</sup> One of the significant voices arguing otherwise is that of Joel Green, Professor of New Testament Interpretation at Asbury Theological Seminary. In 2000, Green edited with systematic theologian, Max Turner, *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology*.<sup>15</sup> Green has also contributed the lead article for the January, 2002, issue of *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology*.<sup>16</sup> In that article Green argues that the "linear hermeneutic" that radically separates "what the text meant" from "what it means" is a "failed experiment" and that a new direction must be found for those who wish to link seriously the Bible and Christian Faith. Green describes three developments in Biblical Studies and four issues in Theology that make perpetuating the Gabler-Stendahl approach unacceptable.

## **Problems with the Gabler-Stendahl Approach**

### Violation of the Nature of Texts

The Gabler-Stendahl approach is built on the assumption that texts are containers of information and/or meaning. This approach views the content of Scripture as ideas and the resultant biblical theology has been primarily concerned with principles or propositions. This view assumes that meaning is put into the text container at the point of writing. Thus the search for the "original meaning" is the primary task of the Gabler-Stendahl approach. In contrast, the most recent application of literary theory by biblical studies has focused on the vitality of texts and texts' ability to influence and shape the worlds they encounter. Texts are capable of a range of valid meanings according to who reads them and the ways in which they are read. This range of meanings is not infinite for the text itself provides a framework that limits which meanings can emerge. This changing understanding of the nature of texts will make it difficult for the Gabler-Stendahl understanding of the relationship between the Bible and Theology to be sustained in the future.

### Violation of the Nature of Readers

The sharp separation between the Bible and Theology espoused by Modernity will also find it difficult to survive the changed understanding of the nature of readers. The Modern experiment in Biblical Studies assumed a position of objective neutrality on the part of the interpreter of Scripture. Though this positivistic assumption has been rejected frequently in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the agenda of biblical studies and biblical theology have proceeded as if the assumption were both possible and true. It is increasingly recognized that readers cannot remove their own perspectives and interests as they approach any text, including a biblical text. The so-called hermeneutics of suspicion has failed to examine itself with suspicion. Everyone reads the biblical text with a certain set of presuppositions which we may partially transcend, but we can never escape the limitations they place on our ability to read or hear the text. To even ask a reader to try is increasingly regarded as either naïve or oppressive. Clearly, the approach separating biblical studies and Theology envisioned by Gabler and Stendahl cannot function when the reader is understood to be inevitably theologically engaged in the biblical text regardless of the particular theological stance the reader assumes.

### Violation of the Diversity of the Bible

A third issue that has fractured Gabler's and Stendahl's linear hermeneutics is that of unity and diversity in the biblical texts. Gabler assumed that there was a theological unity that could be found when the historical analysis of biblical theology had completed its work of describing ideas of the individual authors of the Scriptures. 20<sup>th</sup> century Old and New Testament Theology pursued this theological unity under the rubric of the search for the center. During the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century one of the primary goals of both Old and New Testament Theologies was to define the unifying central concept to which all the individual witnesses of the said testament contributed. As Hasel demonstrated the many contradictory claims to have found the "center" of a testament contributed to the "crisis" in biblical theology described by Childs.<sup>17</sup> The Gabler-

Stendahl approach to biblical theology has not been able to solve the problem created by an assumption of unity with ample evidence of diversity in the biblical texts. Thus

far every attempt to articulate a unity of Scripture has ended up silencing some part of the biblical witness. And as long as the assumption of unity is maintained, failure to move past diversity has been seen as undermining the Bible's ability to speak authoritatively to Theology.

A further problem of the unity/diversity issue is that it has led to increasingly narrow areas of specialization in biblical studies. The process began with division of biblical theology into Old Testament and New Testament Theology. A bible scholar who tries to speak of the Bible as whole is regarded as foolhardy in the world of Modern Biblical Studies. The tendency has accelerated so that scholars rarely refer to themselves as New Testament or Old Testament scholars. Rather, they are Matthean scholars, Pauline scholars, or specialists in the Prophets or in Wisdom literature. The degree to which specialization has undermined the theological enterprise is especially evident in the past twenty years in which biblical scholars not only identify themselves by a specialization in a small portion of Scripture, they also identify themselves by methodological approaches such as social-scientific critics, narrative critics, historical critics, etc. Strangely missing in these methods is theological exegesis. Green draws the inevitable conclusion to this process, "Commitment to a linear methodology that prioritizes historical meaning has pushed the Humpty Dumpty of biblical theology off the wall, with no means in sight for putting the pieces back together again."<sup>18</sup>

#### Christian Belief in One Church

The nature of texts, the nature of readers, and the problem of unity and diversity represent developments from within biblical studies itself that make the division of interpretation into "what it meant" and "what it means" increasingly untenable. Green also identifies four theological issues that become problematic when the Gabler-Stendahl approach is maintained. The first of these is the Christian belief in one church. It has been widely acknowledged for some time that the historical-critical method of interpreting Scripture creates a great historical gap between the text and the reader. The more recent recognition is that this historical gap is not a theologically neutral issue. If the biblical meaning of the text is so separated from the theological need of the church now as Stendahl assumed, then the unity of the ancient church and the modern church has been lost. The unacceptable result of that loss is that the Scriptures can no longer speak to us unless we are professional bible scholars. We are not allowed to enter the Biblical world and live both in and out of the biblical story. The church prior to Gabler and the church since Gabler are no longer the same church because they are not formed by the same vision of Scripture. Robert Jenson accuses the modern separation between "what the text meant" and "what it means" as presuming "a sectarian ecclesiology."<sup>19</sup> The Christian belief in one church contradicts the Gabler-Stendahl assumption of the division between the Bible and Theology.

#### Christian Belief in One Canon

A second theological assumption undermined by the Modern disjuncture between Bible and Theology is the Christian belief in one canon. Historic Christian faith has identified the Scriptures as a single volume comprised of both the Old and New Testaments. The approach of Gabler led quickly to the splintering of the Old and New Testaments from each other. Twentieth century biblical studies has seen further fragmentation so that many scholars working in the New Testament speak of New Testament theologies rather than New Testament Theology. The prioritizing of historical concerns against theological concerns has led to the widespread adoption of the phrase, "the Hebrew Bible," to replace the "Old Testament." The once salutary desire to read these books

as authentic witnesses to God in their own right rather than reading them through New Testament colored glasses has led to the unfortunate result of robbing the Old Testament of its ability to give canonical witness to the Christian faith. The issue of how to understand the Old Testament as a Christian book has been problematic since Marcion, but historical interpretation of the Old Testament that is set against a canonically theological interpretation ultimately leads once again to the destruction of the unity of the Christian church across Christian history. The wide gulf between modern and pre-modern interpretations of the Old Testament has been destructive of a Christian understanding of Scripture.

### Christian Belief in the Inspiration of Scripture

A third problematic theological issue that arises if we continue to pursue the Gabler-Stendahl approach is the Christian belief in inspiration of Scripture. Gabler specifically declared that biblical theology should leave inspiration out of consideration. While his concerns in the context of Scholasticism's imperial use of the Bible may have been valid, the results of his approach are now theologically unsatisfactory. Two aspects of this issue are important for us. Inspiration is intrinsically tied to the doctrine of Revelation. Inspiration affirms that the Scriptures are the Word of God. The historical-critical approach has sometimes denied that affirmation of faith and sometimes simply ignored it. But the exclusive focus on the historical and thus the human dimension of the Scriptures has led in practice to a *de facto* removal of God from the Bible. This means biblical theology can only work with "what the text meant" rather than affirming it as a word from God in what the text means now. We will not be able to come to an understanding of the Bible and Christian Faith consistent with the any of the pre-modern ways of construing this relationship if God is left out of the picture. Further, an important part of the doctrine of inspiration means that Scripture has significance for people beyond the original audience and context. Part of the claim of inspiration for Scripture has been its ability to speak a Word from God to a multiplicity of contexts, cultures, and peoples. If biblical meaning is restricted only to "what the text meant" the Bible is stripped of capacity to function as Scripture. If inspiration is left out of consideration as Gabler demanded then ultimately the Bible is no longer Scripture but only a collection of ancient texts. At that point the Christian belief in one canon is again under threat, which undermines the Christian belief in one church. From the perspective of Theology the Gabler-Stendahl approach effectively contradicts an essential Christian understanding of inspiration.

### The Connection Between Scripture and Theology

Green's fourth theological objection to the Gabler-Stendahl approach is found in the way it connects Scripture and Theology. The line of connection is usually drawn from exegesis to biblical theology understood descriptively and historically. The line then continues to systematic theology and on to ethics. This construal of the relationship between Scripture and Theology is both historically and hermeneutically untenable. As the historical review in the first half of this paper has made clear the Bible never existed in a linear relationship with Theology. The relationship between the two has always been dialectical. The kerygma and the creeds developed before and alongside as well as after the New Testament canon. Hermeneutically, the Bible has never "stood on its own" without Theology. Scripture has always been interpreted within a theological community. Gabler's approach tried to capture *sola scriptura* with no mediation from *Was Christum treibet* or any other theological constraints. The relationship of Scripture and Christian Theology cannot be described in a chronological progression that moves from Scripture to Theology.

The objections both from developments in biblical studies and fundamental issues in theology make an impressive argument that it is time to surrender the Gabler-Stendahl separation between Scripture and Theology. What is it that continues to give strength to that approach? The linear hermeneutic grounded in a historical approach to the biblical text arose in reaction to Scholasticism's abusive use of Scripture to push people into submission to the doctrines of competing Protestant visions of Christian faith. No one wants to return to such a relationship of Scripture and Theology. Historical-critical exegesis is the "historical" alternative. As we look to the future the historical method appears as the alternative to blatantly subjective methods that accept no interpretive restraints from the intention of the author, nor the historical context of the original text, nor the structure of the text itself. The historical-descriptive approach of Gabler offers a semblance of predictable meanings from texts instead of post-modern subjectivity. The historical-critical method is defended as the only alternative between doctrinal imperialism on the one hand and unbridled subjectivity on the other. However, the objections already raised to this method require us to seek another alternative.

### **A Team Approach to Biblical and Systematic Theology**

Not being a prophet nor a son of a prophet I am not capable to telling you exactly what that new alternative will look like, nor exactly how it will come. My academic training has been so steeped in the Gabler-Stendahl model that it is hard for me to imagine a future in which there is no place for the descriptive work of traditional biblical theology. What I suspect needs to change is the fiction that we "objectively" distance ourselves from the biblical text and describe its theology primarily in terms of the historical, sociological, and literary contexts of the texts. The Bible is profoundly theological and the descriptive task dare not avoid engaging directly the theological dimensions of texts considered both individually and collectively. While it might be possible for secular scholars to perform such a task and then "hand it off" to systematic theologians with no further concern, this kind of disconnectedness between description and interpretative application can not be the norm for Christian scholars serving faithfully in the Church. Part of the difficulty in envisioning connectedness between Biblical and Systematic Theology is the lack of models that are successfully accomplishing this. There may be instruction – if not a model – in the way in which Biblical Studies and Homiletics are now working.

There is a sense in which Systematic Theology and Homiletics share a basic purpose of making the faith intelligible to the present generation. The past twenty-five years have seen a fascinating and healthy linking of Biblical Studies and Homiletics. Even Bible scholars with little understanding or appreciation of the new directions in both Biblical Studies and Homiletics have always had an interest in how their exegetical work shows up in preaching. Bible scholars still listen to sermons with significant personal involvement in whether the sermon treats the text "right." In a similar fashion a new engagement between Biblical Studies and Systematic Theology needs to develop in which Bible scholars give significant attention to how their work in Scripture appears in Systematic Theology. The kind of discussion found in the work edited by Green and Turner, *Between the Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology*, must be continued and extended. The old linear hermeneutic envisioned Bible scholars as quarterbacks who hand off the description of biblical theology to Systematic theologians as running backs headed for the goal of application, while the quarterback turns to the bench for the next play. Instead biblical and systematic theologians should be envisioned as basketball teammates on a fast break unselfishly

passing the ball of meaning back and forth to each other with no idea which one will have the best opportunity for the slam-dunk at the end of the play.

### **Critical Issues In Reconfiguring the Relationship Between Scripture and Theology**

For such teamwork to develop there are many critical issues in the relationship between Scripture and Christian Faith that must be addressed. I want to briefly raise three of those issues. First, we must rediscover the place of the Old Testament as Christian Scripture. Gabler's agenda for biblical theology included evaluation of what parts of the Bible were still valuable for the modern world. If we review the subsequent developments it is hard not to see thinly veiled anti-Semitism in that agenda. The line from Gabler to the Holocaust is straighter than we realize. But the cause must be as great a concern for us as the result. The Modern agenda for Biblical Studies distanced all the Bible and especially the Old Testament from the contemporary life of the Church. The door is open in post-modernity to return the Old Testament to its historic Christian role as part of Scripture. Christopher Seitz observes the obvious but often neglected truth that Christian faith has always understood that it is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob whom we confess as the father of our Lord Jesus Christ. The testaments are not joined by an abstract principle but the person of God.<sup>20</sup> The loss of the Old Testament makes the New Testament unintelligible. It cuts us off from necessary background, but more importantly the loss of the Old Testament robs us of the full biblical revelation of God. The subtitle of Seitz's book, *The Old Testament as Abiding Theological Witness*, sends us on a different path from the approach of Gabler and Stendahl with its emphasis on the history and literary forms of the Old Testament. We must hear the Old Testament telling the story of God.

This brings us to another fundamental issue. For the Bible to relate appropriately to Christian Faith we must continue to learn the significance of the biblical genre. Progress has been made in this regard in the past twenty-five years especially as biblical studies have related to preaching.<sup>21</sup> Of particular importance has been the rediscovery of narrative. Roughly half of both testaments come to us as narrative and one can easily argue that the whole of Scripture is to be understood narratively. Narrative is profoundly theological, but does not express that theology in terms of ideas or propositions. Perhaps the most helpful aspect of narrative for our present dilemma is that narrative has no place for distance and objectivity. Narrative draws one into the story and makes it possible for a 21<sup>st</sup> century post modern person to be present on the Sea of Galilee as Jesus walked upon it and to sit in the tent with Abraham while simultaneously bringing Jesus and Abraham into the life story of 21<sup>st</sup> century persons.

A narrative understanding of Scripture has led to calls to understand Biblical Interpretation as performance.<sup>22</sup> Using the analogy of classical music this proposal declares that simply knowing the historical background, the musical context, and the social forces at work in the life of Beethoven is not the point of the compositions of the great musician. They were composed to be performed which requires interpretation. That interpretation may well be informed by the historical background and the musical context but only the performance of the piece brings interpretation. Likewise the biblical scholar does not provide raw material for the systematic theologian to cook to his or her taste. Rather, interpretation is the work of whole community of Christian faith functioning as a team to bring to life in our times and places the realities of relationship with God to which the text bears witness.

To understand biblical interpretation as performance, however, requires an awareness that while the Scripture as a whole may be understood narratively, many texts within it are not of narrative genre. As different movements of the symphony are interpreted differently so different genre call for different modes of performance. The performance of *Torah* or wisdom or letter or sermon will be rendered differently than the performance of narrative. The whole team of Christian faith – bible teachers, systematic theologians, preachers, lay worshippers and witnesses - must learn to perform Scripture within the guidelines laid down by the genre and forms of the biblical text.<sup>23</sup>

This leads the third and final issue I wish to raise today which is the purpose and function of the Bible in the Church. If one were to imagine the purpose of Scripture from the writings of bible scholars of modernity one would likely come to conclusion that information – usually historical information – is the purpose of Scripture. Its function is a historical and literary function to provide us data. Whether one investigates liberal or fundamentalist bible scholars their assumption is that the purpose of Scripture is to provide information that can be put into a theology machine as part of the production of theology. At this point in particular, a Wesleyan understanding of the Bible can make a useful contribution to the new mode of relating the Bible and Theology that must soon emerge. Wesleyans understand the Bible's purpose to be soteriological. Its function is, in the broadest sense of the word, evangelistic. When Wesleyans have been true to their heritage they have always understood the Bible's purpose and function in this way. The "fit" between this understanding of biblical purpose and function and the two points mentioned above should be obvious. The grand narrative of Scripture that is to be performed is a saving narrative. Its subject is the triune God revealed in both the Old and New Testaments to be a seeking and relational God of love. The performance of such a narrative is much more difficult if one understand the purpose of Scripture as information. To return to the athletic image that would be like trying to play basketball with a football. Historically Wesleyans have generally been a closer working team of bible teachers, systematic theologians, pastors, and lay worshippers and witnesses than many other theological traditions. Now, when believers across the theological board are struggling to reunite Bible and Christian Faith, is no time for us to separate. Rather, it is time for us to draw upon our historical and heart resources to interpret Scripture soteriologically with an evangelistic understanding that arises from our sense of the optimism of grace.

### **The Authority of the Bible in a Reconfiguration of Scripture and Theology**

In conclusion what does all this have to do with the authority of the Bible and with post modernity? The great fear of post modernity in some Christian circles is that it has no place for absolute truth. This perspective cannot conceptualize the authority of the Bible in a relativistic world. I believe such fears are based on a misunderstanding of authority generally and the authority of the Bible specifically. In 1979, just as the new trends in biblical studies and narrative theology and homiletics were beginning Robert Bratcher wrote an article on the authority of the Bible in which he discussed the nature of authority under four headings. He first described "coercive authority" as authority exercised by the state or the police. Such authority exists when a person or group or text has the power to enforce its will on others. Second, "compelling authority" is the authority that arises from superior knowledge or experience. Such authority is rarely challenged because its resources have proven to be beneficial to a group. Bratcher's third category was "persuasive authority" which is exhibited in the logical arguments of abstract disciplines. Its goal is to gain agreement by convincing

argument. The final category was "authentic authority" which simply arises naturally from the nature of the person or group or text exercising it.<sup>24</sup>

Some have called the Enlightenment when Modernity arose the Age of Reason. The Enlightenment was a significant reaction against the imperialistic exercise of power over thinking in the era of Scholasticism. It should not surprise us that Modernity's approach to the authority of the Bible is in terms of persuasive authority and coercive authority. When the authority of the Bible is conceived in terms of its being able to persuade non-believers that believers are right and to force them to agreement with the epistemological claims of Dogmatic Theology, then post modernity poses a significant threat to Biblical Authority. However, if the authority of the Bible is understood as authentic authority and compelling authority such authority arises from the very nature and purpose of Scripture and the way in which Scripture has demonstrated again and again that God speaks meaningfully to people through its texts. Such authority is not argued; it is experienced. Its result is not intellectual agreement but Christian life and Christian faith formed by Scripture. If the Bible's authority is authentic and compelling authority Christians do not need to worry about biblical authority in the postmodern world. The Bible will simply function authoritatively in Christian lives and that will become a significant mode of evangelism.

Part of the purpose of reviewing the history of the relationship of the Bible and Theology is to demonstrate that they have always existed in a dialectical relationship with each other. However, that relationship has never been static. It has constantly re-configured itself to address the changing cultures in which the Church has lived. We should not be intimidated that we are asked to participate in that process for our times. The authority of Scripture and the Christian Faith have always survived and found ways to communicate the gospel. Sometimes that survival has been barely surviving. Other times the authority of Scripture and the Christian Faith have thrived both in their relationship with each other and with the world. Wesleyans are particularly well suited to contribute to the reconfiguration and its articulation in the emerging postmodern world. We are not the only players on the Christian team, but God has graced us with resources and understanding that can help the Church in this transition to the postmodern world. May we be faithful to God's calling to serve in this capacity.



## Lesson 2: Discovering Theology in the Bible

### Due This Lesson

Bible readings  
Word studies  
*NDBT* reading  
Organizational notes  
Journaling

### Learner Objectives

By the end of this lesson, participants should

- understand a method that can be used to reveal biblical concerns that should influence the formation of our statements of belief and our way of life
- recognize various concepts of sin that occur in Scripture
- formulate a statement or statements that express biblical views of sin, and use these to formulate a definition of sin—your definitions should be reexamined as the course continues

### Homework Assignments

Review: Genesis 6–9; 12; 15–19; 22; 24; 27–29; 32; 37–39; 50  
Exodus 1–4; 12–15; 18–21; 32  
Leviticus 15; 16; 19  
Numbers 6; 12; 13  
Deuteronomy 1; 6–8; 12; 17; 34  
Prepare a list of at least 10 theological concepts these chapters seem to support or presume.

Read: Part Two: Biblical Corpora and Books: “Genesis to Kings” *NDBT*

Read: The essays in *NDBT* entitled:

Abraham	Evil	Israel	Leviticus
Atonement	Exodus	Jacob	Numbers
Blessing	Faithful	Joseph	Obedience
Covenant	Genesis	Joshua	Seed
Creation	God	Land	Serpent
Deuteronomy	Humanity	Law	

Write in your journal. How has your understanding of the stories in Genesis changed from when you were a child?

## People/Facts Only in Genesis 1—11

- Adam is referred to only in the genealogy of 1 Chronicles and in Hosea 6:7 where it is noted that Adam broke his covenant with God. It is noteworthy that God's relationship to the family of Abraham, to the Church, and to humankind after the Flood, is established as a covenant. The prophet Hosea applies this covenant concept to the relationship between the newly created humankind and God. This will be examined when we consider the covenant concept.
- Noah<sup>25</sup> is mentioned in the genealogies of Chronicles; and in Isaiah 54:9 when the prophet reminds Israel of God's promise; and in peculiar references in Ezekiel 14 where reference is made to three good men, Noah, Danel, and Job.<sup>26</sup>
- Terah is mentioned only in the genealogies of Chronicles.
- Eve, Seth, Cain, Abel, and Lamech<sup>27</sup>—the descendant of Cain; do not get a single reference in the rest of the Old Testament.
- Cities are mentioned that may have been named for Cain, Abel, Adam, and Terah but there is no definitive evidence to associate these cities with these individuals. The cities could have been named for other persons who had these names.

## Small Groups

In your group exchange and compare your lists of theological concepts from Genesis 1–5. Justify claims that you have made.

Select a recorder/reporter to report to the class.

Consider these questions:

- If chapter 4 was removed from the Old Testament, the only biblical reference to Cain and Abel would be in the New Testament. What does this mean? How does the New Testament make use of the story?
- The penalty for murder here was expulsion from society into the wilderness, the loss of stable farm life loved by Cain, and the taking up of a wandering pastoral or hunting style of life.
- When was the death penalty first instituted? How did it become so widespread that it included not only murder but sexual offenses like adultery, homosexuality, intercourse with animals, and even such acts as striking a parent and breaking the Sabbath?
- The mark on Cain was to prevent his death. Does this imply that execution for murder is wrong? Who enforces the vengeance penalty if Cain is killed?
- Is Lamech entitled to claim the vengeance penalty for his protection or is his claim to protection an attempt to avoid the death penalty?
- To what extent are we responsible for each other?
- What is the relationship of failure to sin? Did Cain sin by failing to make a proper sacrifice? How could Cain determine the nature of a proper sacrifice? What does it mean that sin crouched like a lion ready to attack when he failed?

# Genesis 1—11

## Textual Context of Genesis 4

### Creation—Story One

1. He calls light into being. Good.
2. His word creates the earth in the heavens. Good.
3. He speaks the seas and land and vegetation into being, giving the vegetation ability to propagate. Good.
4. He sets the earth and moon spinning into the cycle of night and day,<sup>28</sup> rest and work, light and dark, summer and winter. Good. Light on day one, lights on day four.
5. He fills the seas and sky with life that can reproduce, and feed upon the bounty provided. Good. Earth and heavens on day two, fills each with life on day five.
6. In the final stage he turns his attention to the land and speaks into being the multitude of reproductive creatures. God then created a caretaker, mankind—male and female—to take responsibility for the management of the world he had brought into being. He made them to be like himself, in his own image, both male and female. Very good! Dry land and vegetation on day three, living creatures on day six.
7. God's universe now has sequential time; order; light; life forms for air, water, and land; sustenance; reproductive ability; and a caretaker. It was time to rest, so God rested.

### The Fall—Story Two

- This unique story form, full of symbolic figures, seems unrelated to the dignified poem of good and orderly creation that we have just examined.
- Focus of this story is on created humankind, its relationship to the personal God, Yahweh.

### The First Children

- Cain, the farmer, brings an offering to Yahweh from the fruit of his fields.
- Abel, the shepherd, brings the firstlings from his flock with their fat.<sup>29</sup>
- God accepts Abel's offering but rejects Cain's offering as inappropriate. The text states that God does not know or recognize his offering.<sup>30</sup>

### Genealogies

### God Repents

### God Says "Enough!"

### A New Beginning and New Rules

## Origin of the Nations

### Questions to Keep in Mind

Common symbolic meanings are: 3—God, divine; 4—man, world; 6—evil; 7—perfection; 10—complete; 12—religious or social structure; 40—complete time of man; 666—ultimate evil; 70—perfect period; 1000—absolutely complete; 144000—absolutely complete church.

### Tower of Babel

### Shem to Terah

### Summary of Genesis 4

## Small Groups

### Issues of Genesis 4

In your group read the assigned topic. Prepare a statement to bring to the whole class. This will be used when it is time to formulate theological statements arising from this chapter.

#### Topic 1

##### Part 1—Social and personal responsibility

This chapter indicates that God held Cain responsible for his actions toward Abel. Cain's response is an evasion of responsibility for his brother. To what extent does Scripture indicate that we have a responsibility not only for our own actions but also for what is happening to other people? Discuss and compare the following passages related to responsibility: (This discussion will be expanded when we consider community)

- Treatment of aliens, widows, and orphans: Deuteronomy 14:29; Isaiah 10:2; Luke 7:12ff; Acts 4:34ff.
- Levirate marriage: Deuteronomy 25:5-10; Ruth 3
- Tenth commandment: Exodus 20:17; Mark 7:11
- A good person's self-identification with sinful Israel: Daniel 9:4-6; Nehemiah 1:6-7; 2 Corinthians 5:21
- Jesus' comments: Matthew 5:23-24; 18:15; 22:39.
- Apostles comments: Galatians 2:11-12; James 5:19-20

*Note: A key issue here is the acceptance of responsibility for actions taken or witnessed, and even for the perceptions others have of us. If I am directly disobedient, then I have sinned. If I refuse to accept responsibility for my actions then I have sinned. Looking back at Adam and Eve we see both of these aspects in Genesis 3. They were not only disobedient but also tried to pass the responsibility for their actions to others.*

##### Part 2—Punishment, consequences, and vengeance

God punishes Cain by sending him into exile, but extends mercy with a mark to provide him protection from death. The law of blood for blood is not given until after the Flood. Discuss and compare the following passages. See what connections you can find between them and note any progression of understanding or correction of earlier understandings:

- Adam and Even expelled from the garden of Eden: Genesis 3:23,24
- Cain is sent into the wilderness: Genesis 4:11ff
- Cain is marked for protection: Genesis 4:15
- God destroys the world in the Flood (Genesis 6—9), breaks up humankind with language (Genesis 11), destroys Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19), sends Israel and Judah into Exile (2 Kings 17:22,23; 24:13,14), kills Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-10), starts the judgment at the house of God (Ezekiel 9:6; 1 Peter 4:17).

- Vengeance: Genesis 9:5-6; Numbers 35:11-15 (This will be studied in relation to forgiveness later.)
- Discipline: Proverbs 3:12
- Consequence of sin: Genesis 50:19-20; Numbers 15:28; Job 4:7-8; Ezekiel 18:4ff; John 9:2
- Overcome evil: Proverbs 15:1; Luke 6:29; Romans 12:21
- Ownership of vengeance: Deuteronomy 32:35; Psalm 94:1; Isaiah 34:8; 59:17; 61:2 (cf Luke 4:18); Ezekiel 25:17; Romans 12:19; Hebrews 10:30

*Note: The complicated issue of the relationship of consequences and discipline to punishment and vengeance runs throughout Scripture and was a major issue in the Old Testament. Part of the issue is the question of when God sends destruction. To what extent is punishment simply the consequence of our actions? To what extent are the difficulties and hardships we face simply the necessary discipline to mold character? Does God cause or allow pain and suffering so that a greater good may be accomplished? How do we understand Job and John 9:2ff? In Ezekiel 9 and 1 Peter 4 we have examples of God starting judgment with those who should know Him best. This is asserted several times in Scripture. Does it imply that God has a sliding scale of responsibility?*

## Topic 2

### The difference between sin and mistakes

The Eden story in Genesis 2 and 3 established clearly that sin occurs as unbelief that leads to disobedience. Hosea understands it as breaking a covenant with Yahweh—Hosea 6:7. The consequence is the contamination or damage of not just Adam and Eve, but of everything—relationships, physical and spiritual life, and even the ecology of the world in which we live. The “original sin” has brought about a universe in which “inherited depravity” is the condition of all humankind. As Paul puts it, the sin of the first Adam brought death to all—Rom 5:12—and all have further contributed to that sin making the world an ever more difficult place in which to live. Sin in this case was clearly the “willful disobedience of the known law of God.” The act of disobedience, whether it is the deliberate doing of wrong as in Genesis 3, or the deliberate refusal to do right as in Leviticus 5:1, and James 4:27 is readily recognized as sin. The story of the first two brothers introduces a different and crucial aspect.

Consider the following passages and note their inference about sin and mistakes:

- Leviticus 4 addresses ignorance. Note when sacrifice needs to be made and forgiveness sought.
  - In verse 13 the sacrifice of a bull is required if the whole community has done wrong.
  - In verse 22 the sacrifice of a male goat is required if a leader has done wrong.
  - In verse 27 the sacrifice of a female goat or lamb is required if a member has done wrong.

Does failure to bring what is now recognized as sin under the blood of the sacrifice mean that those involved reject the redemption and forgiveness offered?
- Exodus 21 addresses several aspects of responsibility due to accident or neglect. Two are listed here. When is there action in need of sacrifice and restitution? What is the underlying issue?



- Verse 22: Fighting men are held responsible for accidentally hitting and injuring a pregnant woman while they are fighting.
- Verse 33: If you neglect to cover a hole you have dug, then you become responsible for any injury that occurs.
- Ezekiel 3:17-21: What is the consequence if the prophet fails to live up to his responsibilities? Does the prophet's failure absolve the sinful (or mistaken?) person from the consequences of their action?
- Romans 1: Examine the various aspects of Paul's argument. On what basis does he call the wrongdoing of humankind that does not have the law "sin"? What is the difference between such persons and those who have the law and are subject to "judgment"? Where do conscience and natural revelation fit into these concepts? Can the consequences of wrongdoing be evaded?
- Matthew 5:23ff: How does this passage on the maintenance of right relationships relate to the issue of sin? Is Jesus putting the responsibility on the person who comes to God to rectify problems we have that are caused by another person?
- Look up the various words that are used to present the concepts of sin, mistakes, and errors in your Bible dictionary. How do these words relate to the passages you have examined?

*Note: In our story Abel did well and was accepted, while Cain did not present an acceptable sacrifice. Failure to do well results in an emotional response, anger, and a distinction is drawn between failure and sin. Failure and the resulting emotional upset opens the way for sin to take hold. The response to failure can be to accept that I failed, master my anger, and try again, or to lash out and allow sin to become my master. Cain let his anger lead to murder. Failure has consequences—in this case anger and lack of achieving acceptance—but was not of itself sin. It became sin with the willful response to the consequences.*

*Mistakes can occur for a great variety of reasons: ignorance, accident, neglect, inability, etc. What to do about them is the topic of a great number of laws in the Torah, and a reason for humility in our walk with God. The question of how error relates to sin recurs many times in both the Old and New Testaments. The focus of these laws is on the point at which they become sin—and that always comes at the point where the damage caused is recognized. When the individual understands that wrong has been done then responsibility must be taken and the mistake is treated as sin for which the person seeks forgiveness.*

*Paul starts his letter to the Romans with an argument that makes clear that sin, whether done without knowledge of the law of God or with knowledge of the law of God, has the consequence of death, but sin under the law brings judgment—Rom 1:12. His point is that you are held responsible for what you do with what you know—Rom 1:6. All people have creation to study (natural revelation) and that alone should make them aware of the basic laws of relationships for which all are held responsible—Rom 1:20ff. They were created with a conscience that should guide them—Rom 1:14-15.*

*One of the great spiritual dangers for those who have allowed the Holy Spirit to cleanse their lives is the temptation to treat every act that is not willfully disobedient to God as of little or no importance. It is just a mistake. They therefore arrogantly fail to accept responsibility and plead the sacrificial blood of Christ. Such an attitude is sin. Our walk with God must always be one of justice, mercy, and humility—Micah 6:8. Spirit-cleansed people of God, empowered by the Holy Spirit, must recognize that they*

*must own up to mistakes, seek to rectify what was done, and find the forgiveness and restoration that is offered through the cross of Jesus our Lord.*

## Topic 3

### Murder and its consequences

The major issue of chapter 4 is murder. Abel's blood was spilled upon the ground. Cain not only became a murderer but also sought to evade his responsibility for the act. "Am I my brother's keeper?" It is very clear that the murder is brought about by hatred. Hatred arose out of his anger that his brother was accepted and he was not. This was the first murder on record but certainly not the last. Another follows—the death of a young fighter who hit Lamech. The penalty for the first murder is banishment, not death. The second murderer seems to claim exemption for himself on the grounds of self-defense. Killing and murder are addressed many times in Scripture. As you examine these note the progression of understanding regarding how to deal with killing and murder, and the correction of previous understandings:

- Genesis 9:6ff: Note the new commands that are given in the establishment of God's covenant with Noah.
- Exodus 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:17: The Ten Commandments state simply, "You shall not murder."
- Numbers 35:15ff. Note the various distinctions that are made regarding murder and accidental death. Note the consequences and responsibility even in accidental death.
- Killing in time of war was not considered murder. It was considered normal for war. Praise, not penalty, was the usual result. Note the following passages: Judges 4:22: Jael drives a tent peg through the skull of Sisera while he sleeps and that made her a hero. 2 Samuel 11: Why did not Nathan denounce David as a murderer in the matter of Bathsheba, but only accused him of wife stealing? 2 Samuel 3:27-37: Joab excuses his murder of Abner by saying that Abner had murdered his brother Asahel. Abner had killed Asahel when he refused to stop chasing him when fleeing from the battlefield. 1 Kings 1:5ff; 2:28ff: Belatedly David charged Solomon with responsibility to deal with Joab because of his murders, some of which were to David's advantage.
- Matthew 5:21ff: How does this statement of Jesus relate to Genesis 4? Is this a corrective to the Jewish understanding of the sixth commandment?
- Is Paul in Ephesians 4 also going back to Genesis 4 when he advises not to let your anger end up as sin—bring it under control before the going down of the sun?

*Note: Be sure that the following are observed: In the Noahic covenant: Meat, which requires killing, was added to the diet of humankind. Eating blood is prohibited. Execution is required for murderers. God required an accounting for all blood shed, that of humans and of animals.*

*The word given to Moses on Mount Sinai included many laws about murder. All recent translations use "murder" in both Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 although the King James Version used "kill." The Hebrew in Deuteronomy is clearer as "murder" than that in Exodus. There was recognition that not all killing is murder—it can happen accidentally. A number of laws set out different scenarios in which death is viewed as accidental or deliberate. Two factors were primary—responsibility and intention. Cities*

*of refuge were established where a person involved in accidental killing could go for protection, but if found guilty of murder the person was handed over to the executioner—Num 35: 15ff. There was also a penalty for the person who killed accidentally. That person had to remain in the city of refuge until the death of the high priest.*

*Jesus declared that if you are angry with your brother then you are liable before the court. Sin has to be dealt with where it originates—in the attitude of the heart. It is in this context that he warns of the need to set things right with your brother before you try to bring gifts to God. Jesus' word to us is to get your anger under control because anger without real cause endangers your own life.*

## Small Groups

Take the information in today's lesson, both from in class and your preparation, and formulate at least two theological statements that you consider important today. Briefly outline what these statements say and then tell us about the character of God and his requirements for humankind.

When you have completed this task, move into your small group to discuss and evaluate your statements.

Compare your statements to any similar issues in the *Manual* of the Church of the Nazarene, especially the Articles of Faith (§1-22), the Covenant of Christian Character (§27) and the Covenant of Christian Conduct (§33-38) and the Current Moral and Social Issues (§904).

Are any of the statements you have formulated important enough to be included in a catechism—the instrument for informing new believers of the faith? Raise this question in your small groups and record any such statements in your catechism file.

It is best if this is kept on a computer so that you are able to amend it, and not only add to it but also move statements around for better organization and instruction. If you do not have a computer, you can accomplish the same level of flexibility by writing each statement—with supporting scripture references—on a 3 X 5 index card. Cards can be re-ordered to create your structured catechism. It is valuable to keep a copy of the catechism at each stage so that you are aware of the way in which your own understanding of the faith is developing.

## Unit 2: Overview of the Bible

### Lesson 3: The Torah

#### Due This Lesson

Bible review  
Theological concepts  
NDBT reading  
Journaling

#### Learner Objectives

By the end of this lesson, participants should

- be able to explain the theological foundations for the biblical theology of:
  - creation
  - covenant
  - community

#### Homework Assignments

Review:

- Former Prophets: Joshua 1–7; 24; Judges 1–9; 19–21; 1 Samuel 1–3; 8–13; 15–17; 2 Samuel 5–7; 11–19; 1 Kings 1–4; 12; 15–19; 21; 2 Kings 1; 2; 5; 17–20
- Latter Prophets: Isaiah 1; 2; 4–7; 9; 11; 20; 36–40; 41; 53; 55; 58; 60; Jeremiah 1–4; 16–18; 23; 27–29; 32; 42; Ezekiel 1–3; 10; 11; 16; 18; 24; 36; 37; 43; Hosea 1; 14; Joel 2; Amos 1; 3; 7; Micah 5; Habakkuk 1; 2; Zechariah 1; 6; 9; Malachi 3
- Prepare a list of at least 10 theological concepts these chapters seem to support or presume.

Read Part Two: Biblical Corpora and Books: “Prophetic Books” (NDBT)

Read your assigned section of the essays in NDBT and write out the 2-3 main points of each. Make a copy for each of your classmates (or send by email).

Section 1	Section 2	Section 3	Section 4
Isaiah	Isaiah	Isaiah	Isaiah
Jeremiah	Jeremiah	Jeremiah	Jeremiah
Ezekiel	Ezekiel	Ezekiel	Ezekiel
Hosea	Joel	Amos	Obadiah
Jonah	Micah	Nahum	Habakkuk
Zephaniah	Haggai	Zechariah	Malachi
Elijah	Elisha	prophecy	Elisha
exile	love	righteousness	repentance
nations	justice	forgive	poor
eschatological	hope	judgment	human

Read your assigned narrative from below. You are to play the role of the character, acting him out in such a way as to highlight the theological assumptions and assertions of the passage. (3 minutes)

Joshua 6–7	1 Samuel 15	Jeremiah 27–28
Joshua 24	2 Samuel 11–13	Amos 7
Judges 6–8	Isaiah 36–39	

Write in your journal. Evaluate your covenant relationship with God. How would you like it to improve?

## Scripture

The three sections of the Jewish organization of scripture

- Torah was perceived as the foundation upon which all the rest of the canon rested. It provided the roots of Israel
- Prophets recorded the observance, and more often the non-observance of the law by the people of God and the effort of God through his prophets to bring his people back into line.
- Writings are the assorted collection of practical records—teaching tools, hymnbook, discussions of difficult topics, instructive stories and alternative historical records—that brought guidance and understanding

One of the simplest ways to view Scripture is to see it as a record of three things:

1. Creation, formation, and development of the nations. This is the primary statement upon which all else rests. It asserts belief in God and God's involvement with humankind without which there is no coming to God, no theology. Genesis 1—11.
2. The scene shifts to the formation, development, and life of Israel, who are called to be the people of God. About 3500 years ago a man living in the cradle of civilization began to realize that God was giving him directions for his life.

The purpose of the covenant was to bring transformation and blessing to the tormented, dying world in which humankind now lives. All the rest of the 39 books of the Old Testament relate this story.

3. Then comes the new covenant, the New Testament, which records the formation of the Church, the new, the spiritual Israel, and brings to the fore the mission of the people of God—the salvation of humankind from sin.

## Small Groups

In your group share the theological concepts that you recorded from your reading assignments. Sort these into four categories: Creation, Covenant, Community, and Other.

Discuss, develop, and organize the statements in each of the first three categories so that you can make a report on the understanding that your group has of each theological category.

## Creation Reveals the Character of God

The creation poem that opens the book of Genesis is rich in theological truth.

The Glory of God

*kabod*

The Power of the Word

*bara*

God Brings Order Out of Chaos

*tohu and vohu*

God Gives Purpose

God Is Good

God Rests



## **Creation Reveals the Nature and Purpose of Humanity**

Humankind Is Created in the Image of God

*adam*  
*ruach*  
*chesed*

Humankind Lives and Is Empowered Because of the Gift of  
God's Spirit

Humankind Has a Purpose

*adam*

Humankind Is Intended to Fellowship with God

*shalom*

Humankind Introduces Sin into the World

## **Covenant**

### Covenants of the Old Testament

Adam

Noah

Abraham

Isaac and Jacob

Sinai

Covenant Renewal

New Covenant

Other Covenants

### Covenant Formats and Functions

### Maintenance of the Covenant

### The Church and the New Covenant

## **Community**

Corporate Versus Individual Personality

Adam the Human Community

The Name—Family and Tribal Identity  
1 Corinthians 7:14

Israel and National Solidarity

Responsibility to Educate

The Church—the Body of Christ

## Small Groups

In your groups draw up a list of statements regarding the issues we have examined. Be sure to include the issues raised by the following questions.

- *Creation*: What are the most important theological issues raised by creation?
- *Covenant*: How is the covenant revealed in the Church today? Why do some passages in the New Testament discuss only two covenants?
- *Community*: What are the aspects of community most neglected in the Church today?

Add the perceptions of other groups to the list that you have made in your group. Each student should retain a copy of the list.

## Lesson 4: The Prophets

### Due This Lesson

Bible reading  
Theological concepts  
NDBT reading  
Biblical character assessment  
Journaling

### Learner Objectives

By the end of this lesson, participants should

- be able to explain the theological foundations for the biblical theology of blessing, judgment, discipline, and salvation and the development of the concept of monotheism

### Homework Assignments

Review:

- 2 Chronicles 7; 36; Lamentations 1; 3; Esther 2; 9; Ezra 1; 4; 9; 10; Nehemiah 1; 9; Daniel 1; 2; 7; 12; Job 1–4; 28; 31; 38–42; Psalms 1; 8; 14; 18–24; 27; 32; 34; 37; 40; 42; 46; 48; 51; 66; 72; 82; 90; 91; 96; 100; 103; 105–107; 119; 121; 125; 137; 139; 148; 150; Proverbs 1; 3; 8; 10; 16; 23; 29; 31; Ecclesiastes 1–3; 12; Song of Songs 1; 7; 8
- Prepare a list of at least 10 theological concepts these chapters seem to support or presume.

Read Part Two: Biblical Corpora and Books: “Wisdom Books” (NDBT)

Read the essays in NDBT on your assigned section and note 2 to 3 main points. Give copies to each of the other students. This can be done by email.

Section 1	Section 2	Section 3
Job	Job	Job
Psalms	Psalms	Psalms
David	David	David
Proverbs	Solomon	Suffering
Ecclesiastes	Life	Vanity
Wisdom	Truth	Worship
Lament	World	Praise
Apocalyptic	Apocalyptic	Apocalyptic

Write a 2-page essay on the view of God reflected in the Writings, with particular attention to the Psalms, explaining any novel or emphasized perspectives not found in Israel’s earlier literature. Be prepared to read your essay aloud in class.

Write in your journal. Reflect on the difference between the character of disobedience of many of the leaders of the Children of Israel and the character of obedience of the prophets.

## Divisions of the Old Testament Hebrew Canon

### The Law (Torah)

- Genesis
- Exodus
- Leviticus
- Numbers
- Deuteronomy

### The Prophets

#### Former Prophets

- Joshua
- Judges
- 1 and 2 Samuel
- 1 and 2 Kings

#### Latter Prophets

- Isaiah
- Jeremiah
- Ezekiel
- Hosea
- Joel
- Amos
- Obadiah
- Jonah
- Micah
- Nahum
- Habakkuk
- Zephaniah
- Haggai
- Zechariah
- Malachi

### The Writings

- Psalms
- Job
- Proverbs
- Ruth
- Song of Songs
- Ecclesiastes
- Lamentations
- Esther
- Daniel
- Ezra
- Nehemiah
- 1 and 2 Chronicles

## David's Submission to Yahweh

- Yahweh got credit for the lion and the bear (1 Sam 17:34ff).
- Yahweh was his confidence in the conflict with Goliath (1 Sam 17:37).
- Yahweh was the subject of his many songs and hymns.
- Yahweh was his refuge when he fled from Saul (1 Sam 19ff).
- He refused to kill Saul because Saul was the anointed of the Lord (1 Sam 24:6).
- He brought the ark of God to the capital of the kingdom (2 Sam 6).
- He, the king, repented when confronted with his sin by Nathan the prophet (2 Sam 12:5ff).
- He threw himself on the mercy of God when he sinned by taking a census (2 Sam 24:1ff).

## Small Groups

In your group pool and organize the theological concepts that you noted in your homework.

Write your agreed statements on the board for the other groups to see and copy. You will also need to copy the other groups' statements for later discussion.



## **Eighth-Century Prophets to Israel**

Hosea

Amos

Jonah

## **Eighth Century Prophets to Judah**

### **Isaiah**

Power and Knowledge of God

The One and Only God

The God of Justice

The Holy God

The God of Hope

The Servant of God

Messianic Prophecies

Isaiah's Specific Prophecies

### **Micah**

## **Sixth Century Prophets to Judah and the Exiles**

### **Jeremiah**

False Trust in the Temple

The Call of a Prophet

A Message of Condemnation

The God of Destiny

The Hope of the New Covenant

Message to the Exiles

Exile to Egypt

### **Ezekiel**

God Can Be Anywhere

God Will Not Live Where There Is Evil

God Holds Individuals Accountable

God Acts in Character

God Can Do Anything

God Will Make a New Covenant

God Will Bless Through His People

Habakkuk

Zephaniah

Nahum

Obadiah

## **Prophets of the Return**

Haggai

Zechariah

Malachi

Joel

## **Special Notes**

The Role of the Prophets

Justice

Sign Acts and Miracles

Apocalyptic and Eschatology

The Day of the LORD

## Small Groups

In your group take the information in today's lesson, both from in class and your preparation and formulate at least two theological statements that you consider most important today. Outline what these statements tell us about blessing, discipline, judgment, salvation, or monotheism.

Write your statements on a board for the class to see. Compare your statements to those of the other groups.

Compare your statements to any similar issues in the *Manual* of the Church of the Nazarene, especially the Articles of Faith (§1-22), the Covenant of Christian Character (§27) and Covenant of Christian Conduct (§33-38) and the Current Moral and Social Issues (§903).

Add to your catechism any statements that you consider essential for the instruction of Christians. Re-evaluate your previous entries and modify them where necessary in the light of your added information.

## Lesson 5: The Writings

### Due This Lesson

Bible reading  
Theological concepts  
NDBT reading  
2-page essay  
Journaling

### Learner Objectives

By the end of this lesson, participants should

- explain the theological foundations for the biblical theology of worship, wisdom, and apocalyptic
- give an overview of the theological issues related to the suffering endured by good people

### Homework Assignments

Review the following books: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John

- Prepare 6 to 10 theological concepts these books seem to support or presume.

Read the following sections in NDBT: Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Jesus Christ, Incarnation, Kingdom of God

Read Resource 5-8.

- Prepare 4 to 6 key ideas that you gained from the reading.

Bring colored pencils or highlighter markers to class—blue, yellow, green, red.

Write in your journal. What is your favorite Psalm? Why? How have the books from today's lesson made an impression on your life?



## The Writings—Historical Collection

Common theological objective—elevate the Temple and the Scriptures  
The reform of Josiah, based on the discovery of a manuscript buried in the wall of the Temple, is the first instance of the written word taking priority over the word as interpreted by the priests and prophets.

### 1 and 2 Chronicles

These books are a rewriting of the history of Israel and Judah from the time of Samuel until the destruction of Jerusalem.

### Ezra

- Ezra and Nehemiah are treated as one book in the Hebrew manuscripts
- These two books pick up the history where Chronicles ends.
- They focus on the Temple and the rebuilding of Jerusalem.
  - First group* led by Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel—encouraged by the prophets Haggai and Zechariah
  - Second group* led by the priest Ezra
  - Third group* led by a layman, Nehemiah
- Ezra called the people to repentance and obedience. It is noteworthy that the people no longer knew Hebrew.
- The mother is of prime influence in the development of the religion in the home.

### Nehemiah

- Insisted on the observation of the Law and the purity of the nation of Israel
- Had a burden for Jerusalem—Nehemiah 1:6
- Reliance on God through prayer—Nehemiah 1:5-6; 4:9; 6:9
- Careful planning—Nehemiah 1; 2:5-9; 2:11-18
- External opposition—Nehemiah 6:11
- Internal opposition—Nehemiah 5
- Establishment of law and order
  - Rebuilding—chapters 1–7
  - Reestablishment of Torah—chapters 8–10
  - Reformation of lifestyle—chapters 11–13

## The Writings—Apocalyptic

Apocalyptic was a form of literature about end times that thrived in Persia. The period between 200 BC and AD 200 was the time when apocalyptic literature flourished in Judaism and sparked an interest in apocalyptic that became a part of Christian writings even into the Middle Ages.

- Daniel
- Elements in Zechariah and Ezekiel
- Matthew 24
- Revelation
- Characterized by visions and heavy use of symbols

## The Writings—Stories

### Ruth

It is a gem that reveals that not everything that happened during the time of the judges was a headlong dash toward evil. Here are lives lived in harmony with the covenant, with integrity and loyalty, responsibility and love.

### Esther

- Esther is unique in that God is not mentioned at all in the story.
- The setting is the Persian court during the reign of Ahasuerus—Hebrew version of Khshayarsha. Greek version is Xerxes.
- Act 1—Esther becomes queen, does not reveal her nationality
- Act 2—Haman plots to kill the Jews
- Act 3—The Triumph of Mordecai
- In this book God is depicted as acting in much the same way that we see Him acting today. God works through a faithful old man who refuses to surrender his beliefs, and through a courageous young woman who is deeply committed to her people.

## The Writings—Hymnal

### Psalms

- Five collections make up the Book of Psalms.
- It is important to note what type a psalm is, whether it is the word of an individual or of the community, whether or not it is antiphonal, and what function it serves—praise, complaint, penitence, worship, instruction, etc.
- The psalms are an expression of theology.
- For the psalmists there is no God like Yahweh.
- The psalmist understood Yahweh to be in charge of all history.
- The psalmist believed that everything Yahweh does is right.
- Blessedness is being where all is right and God's favor can rest upon you.
- It is in this context of worship and blessing that the psalmist writes the Songs of Ascent.
- Two words are very important to the psalmists:
  1. *Qadosh*—Yahweh is holy and everything about him is holy.
  2. *Chesed*—God is merciful.

## Class Activity

Read Psalm 107.

Each group is to work on your assigned verses. Write a modern version of the verses based on incidents or experiences familiar to today's culture in today's language.

Group 1—Psalm 107:4-9

Group 2—Psalm 107:10-16

Group 3—Psalm 107:17-22

Group 4—Psalm 107:23-32

If you have time, suggest phrases or language that could be used in the first 3 verses and the last 11 verses that would make the psalm more modern.

Be prepared to share your work with the class.

## The Writings—Books of Wisdom

They are practical advice on how to live out the Torah day by day.

### Job

- Job is a complex book that has elicited a wide variety of interpretations regarding its meaning.
- It struggles with the age-old questions regarding suffering and evil.
- Its literary structure is a set of poetic dialogues with a narrative prologue and epilogue.
- Ultimately the Book of Job does not tell us why good men suffer.
- Job served Yahweh because Job wanted to know God himself.

### Proverbs

- Four collections of proverbs make up this book:
  - Proverbs of Solomon 1—24
  - Solomon’s proverbs copied by the men of Hezekiah 25—29
  - Sayings of Agur 30
  - The Sayings of King Lemuel 31
- They are the practical application of the Torah to everyday life.
- Their purpose is to teach righteous living.
- Wisdom
  - Value of wisdom—Proverbs 4:7-9
  - Origin of wisdom—Proverbs 1:7
  - Wisdom as creator—Proverbs 3:19-20
  - Wisdom of humankind—Proverbs 30
  - Wisdom through discipline—Proverbs 4:5-7
- Dangers of Immorality—Proverbs 29:3
- Appropriate Time—Proverbs 25:11
- King’s Rules—Proverbs 25
- Family Relations—Proverbs 17—19
- Building Wealth—Proverbs 6:6-11
- Control of the Tongue—Proverbs 6:16-19

## **Ecclesiastes**

- Ecclesiastes has much in common with Proverbs, although it is rather pessimistic in its worldview—Ecclesiastes 3:15-17.
- Wealth is perceived as empty when pursued for its own sake—Ecclesiastes 2:1-11.
- Wisdom is also empty if pursued for its own sake—Ecclesiastes 2:12-17.
- There are cycles in life that must be allowed to function, and success is living in harmony with those cycles that are a part of creation.
- The conclusion is that each person should live in harmony with his or her Creator from the time of youth.

## **Song of Songs—Song of Solomon**

- “Song of Songs, which is Solomon’s” means “Solomon’s best song.”
- This delightful set of poems has caused a great deal of controversy regarding its meaning. For centuries the Church interpreted it allegorically as a picture of the relationship between Christ and his Church.
- It is full of symbolic and euphemistic language.
- Question—is it a drama of 2 or 3 persons, or is it a wedding ceremony? More acceptable view is that the songs are wedding songs, not ceremony, sung by the bride, the groom, and a chorus.
- What is clear is that this book deals with the love relationship between a man and a woman.

## **Lamentations**

These laments are attached to the Book of Jeremiah in the Septuagint and reflect the cries of desperation of the prophet for his wayward people.

## Formulation of Statements

Take the information in today's lesson, both from in class and your preparation, and formulate at least two theological statements that you consider most important today.

Write your statements on a board for the class to see. Compare your statements to those of the other groups.

Compare your statements to any similar issues in the *Manual* of the Church of the Nazarene, especially the Articles of Faith (§1-22), the Covenant of Christian Character (§27) and the Covenant of Christian Conduct (§33-38) and the Current Moral and Social Issues (§903).

Add to your catechism any statements that you consider essential for the instruction of Christians. Re-evaluate your previous entries and modify them where necessary in the light of your added information.



## The Christ

The Death and Resurrection of the Christ: Matthew 27; 1 Corinthians 1; 2 Corinthians 5; Galatians 2

We all know the Cross is not the end of Jesus' story. But we dare not rush too quickly to Easter Sunday morning. Let us not forget: The marks of the nails remain even then. The risen Christ is the Crucified One. Sunday morning's main event does not undo Friday's. It affirms it. The Resurrection is God's vindication of all that Jesus said and did; and this includes his acceptance of the Cross.

The Cross is not a sign of the failure of Jesus' mission. It was the fulfillment of that mission—Jesus' hour of glory. God's battle against evil's wrongful and lying claim to this world was fought—and won—at the Cross. True, it didn't look like much of a victory at the time. For those who first stood at the foot of Jesus' cross, it was only "an ugly, brutal, bloody, revolting spectacle." At that precise moment it was not seen as an act of revelation. "On the contrary Jesus' death on the cross meant to the disciples a denial of everything they had thought He might mean" (Ladd).

Like the earthquake Matthew reports, the grotesque reality of the Crucifixion rocked their world and shattered their hopes. They "had hoped that he [Jesus] was the one to redeem Israel" (Lk 24:21). But *he could not even save himself* (emphasis added).

Those who watched Jesus die did NOT throw themselves to the ground in thankfulness and cry out, "I never knew how much God loved me." To them the Cross was a senseless tragedy. It took the Resurrection, serious reflection, and retrospective insight to make sense of it all.

From this distance, we know that Easter Sunday is God's stamp of approval on the Cross. The resurrection of Jesus reveals the events of that awful Friday for what they really are. "God proves His love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8, GL). "The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Cor 1:18). This is why *we* call the day he was crucified Good Friday.

The apostle Paul had once been a zealous persecutor of the Christian faith. He had seen the Cross as proof that Jesus was under the curse of God (Gal 3:13). But when he met the Risen Lord on the road to Damascus, the persecutor became a preacher of the faith he had once tried to destroy (1:23). He came to see the Cross in an entirely new light. He wrote: "I will boast only about the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ; for by means of his cross the world is dead to me, and I am dead to the world" (6:14, TEV).

For Paul, the Cross was not merely the instrument of death upon which Jesus died one dark April afternoon. The Cross became the focal point of Paul's life—so much so that he closes his letter to the Galatians with these words: "I bear on my body the marks of Jesus" (6:17).

Near the beginning of the letter he writes: "Through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the

Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing" (2:19-21, NRSV).

When Paul writes, "I died to the law" (v 19), he is certainly not speaking literally. Dead men don't write letters. So, what does he mean? Simply this: If salvation were possible on the basis of human effort, then Good Friday was just an awful nightmare. "If justification were through the law, then Christ died to no purpose" (2:21).

Paul was not opposed to the law as the revealed will of God. Human schemes of self-salvation, not law, were the real threat. But law is powerless to give life (3:21). Law can *diagnose* the human problem; it can even *prescribe* a cure; but it cannot *empower* us to obey its commands. Only divine love can do that! To imagine that we can save ourselves, or that we don't need saving, is to suggest that Christ died for nothing, that new life in Christ is worthless (5:1-12; 6:11-16). It is to reject God's grace.

This is why Paul says, "Through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God" (v. 19, NRSV). He'd tried living on his own. And it didn't work. Yet Paul didn't become a Christian because he failed at law-keeping, but because his successes were so shallow. His own accomplishments were sewage compared to the surpassing significance of Christ's (Phil 3:2-17).

The real tragedy of sin is not violating the law, but rejecting Christ and denying that his death is the saving act of God. Sin is not just failure, or disobedience; it is seeking right standing with God on our own terms.

Just as death is the prerequisite of resurrection, an end of schemes of self-salvation is the prerequisite of righteousness, of justification. God cannot justify those who insist on justifying themselves. One cannot be made right with God who imagines that everything is already all right.

In Galatians 2:19-21 Paul briefly summarizes the Christian faith and experience using the metaphors of life and death to highlight the stark contrasts. "I . . . *no longer* . . . live, . . . Christ lives in me. . . . I *now* live . . . by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

At the very heart of the Christian faith is the conviction: "The Son of God . . . loved me and gave himself for me" (v 20). Christ's love and the gift of himself for us meant his death. For Christ, LOVE meant the gift of his life. To save us, he could not save himself.

The death of Christ on the Cross as the only means of salvation was for most of those who first heard the message a scandal, a stumbling block, total foolishness. Far from the demonstration of God's power; it seemed the proof of his weakness. *What a strange way to save the world!*

Why was Christ's death necessary? How could the death of one man, even Jesus Christ, provide life for all people? If it is merely God's will that makes the act effective, could he not have chosen some other means of salvation than death? Or, could some other means of death have been just as effective as crucifixion? Consider these "what if" questions.

What if Jesus had died as a fetus? Would his death still have been saving? Would it have made any difference if this death had been the result of a spontaneous miscarriage or the work of a well-meaning abortionist, intent on sparing an unfortunate teenager the embarrassment of an unplanned pregnancy? Would the death of Jesus have provided salvation had he died as a child in Herod's slaughter of the innocents in Bethlehem (see Mt 2:16-23)?

Would we still look to Jesus as the Author of Life had he died in a chariot accident? or had he been killed as a hostage of those first-century terrorists, the Zealots? or, What if he had expired of natural causes in the geriatric ward of a hospital on the Mount of Olives?

How decisive was the motive of Jesus' death—as *voluntary self-sacrifice*—for its saving significance? "The Son of God . . . gave himself for me." Jesus even refused the narcotic drink offered to ease the pain of the Cross as he faced the final ordeal. The Crucifixion was not an accident nor was it imposed on him by anyone, human or divine.

So we must ask: Was Jesus' death, which could have been avoided by calling upon ten thousand angels (see Mt 26:47-56), a kind of suicide? What if he had died of starvation during his 40-day fast in the wilderness? What if he had yielded to the devil's temptation, thrown himself down from the pinnacle of the Temple, and angels did not intervene (see Mt 4:5-7)?

Christians know that Jesus died "for our sins" (Gal 1:4). His death was not a suicide; our sins sent him to the Cross. One of us betrayed him to his executioners. Our perverse illusion that we could save ourselves, that we didn't need a Savior, was the occasion for his crucifixion.

If his death was not suicidal, was it rather the heroic and tragic act of a martyr placing principles and the interests of others above survival? Did he die like a patriot fighting for a noble cause? Does Jesus' death glamorize the fanatical aspirations of revolutionaries like Barabbas? No, but Jesus was far more dangerous to the status quo than any terrorist could ever have been. His refusal to grant the Roman governor or the Jewish high priest the allegiance due God alone fundamentally challenges all petty authorities like Pilate and Caiaphas: "My kingdom is not from this world" (Jn 18:36, NRSV).

Was the manner of Jesus' *death* by execution, as a victim of sinister human scheming, specifically *on a cross*, the decisive factor in salvation? What if the angry mob in Nazareth had thrown him over the cliff to his death (see Luke 4:16-30)? or if he had succumbed in the abusive mockery and scourging administered by the Roman soldiers during his trial?

Thousands of men were crucified during the brutal years when Rome ruled Palestine. What makes Jesus' crucifixion alone saving? Why did his death, which was no less repulsive or infamous than theirs, come to be understood as a representative, atoning, sacrificial, saving death?

Was the nature of *Jesus' person* as the God-man or the long-awaited Messiah decisive? What if he had chosen to live differently than he did? For example, what if he had not chosen his Father's will above his own (see Mt 26:36-46)? What if he had prayed, "Not your will but mine be done"? To imagine that he could not have chosen

to save himself is to discount the reality of his struggle with temptation in the garden and in the wilderness. He did not surrender to the universal human preoccupation with self-preservation, but what if he had? Would his death still have been saving?

The words of the tempter in the wilderness, the words of Peter at Caesarea Philippi, and the words of the spectators at the Cross sound the same theme: "If you are the Son of God . . ." feed yourself, show off, take the easy way, save yourself! Jesus refused. But what if he had not?

For reasons that make no sense to sniveling humans, the all-powerful, creator God has chosen to act most of the time in subtle—not stupendous—ways. He sometimes teases us to believe with awe-inspiring interventions in the ordinary course of events. But he never acts in ways that render unbelief impossible. He always leaves room for alternative explanations.

The Jewish religious authorities, who explained away Jesus' miracles as due to the power of Satan (Mk 3:20-30), insisted that if he saved himself, then they would believe. Would they really? And if he had done so, would he still have been the Savior? What more could Jesus have done that he had not already done? Can faith be coerced by just one more miracle?

In the final analysis, faith is a choice about how we will see, how we will hear, how we will respond to Jesus. God does not violate our freedom to remain in unbelief, if we choose. And so, I propose, Jesus could not save himself precisely because he was almighty God, not just some power-hungry human out to make a name for himself. He had nothing to prove, no reputation to protect. So in an awesome display of incredible power, he chose to respect their unbelief, and to die, in apparent weakness, suspended on a cross. What a strange way to save the world!

The Gospels report that it was a pagan soldier, not the religious elite, who was the first to get it. Do you get it? It is not that Jesus could not save himself, but that he would not. But what if he had?

Was it the *innocence* of Jesus' death that made it life-giving? What if he had deserved to die? How decisive was the specific character and content of Jesus' ministry and message? What if he had made it his mission to immortalize himself? What if he had lived immorally? What if he had frequented prostitutes rather than forgiving them and charging them to go and sin no more? What if Jesus had deserved to die?

Why was Christ's death necessary? How does his death provide life for all who will receive it? Although much remains a mystery, this much is certain. Jesus was crucified, as were many other men. Although he failed to fulfill the popular expectations concerning the Messiah, early Christians persisted in their remarkable claim that Jesus was the Christ.

This conviction was sustained by their unshakable faith that God had raised him from the dead. His resurrection vindicated all he was, said, and did. And it announced God's judgment on those who put him to death. Jesus was right and the guardians of the law were wrong. Self-salvation was a fraud! Jesus abandoned himself to God, even when God seemed to have abandoned him: "My God, my God! Why have you forsaken me?" Even then, he refused to forsake God. "Father, into [your] hands I commit my Spirit" (Lk 23:46).

Remember this: God *vindicated* Jesus *specifically through resurrection*. The Father did not erect a cosmic monument to his Son's memory. He did not zap his executioners. The Resurrection marks the beginning of the final age of salvation. This is the point of the Gospels' mention of darkness at midday and of earthquakes tearing open rocks and Temple veils and tombs. The Cross marked the end of the world as they knew it. That awful Friday was the great and terrible day of the Lord threatened by Old Testament prophets. Cosmic disaster. Judgment. Punishment. Darkness and gloom. While the mockers at the Cross demand of Jesus a sign—to come down from the Cross—God gives them a sign of judgment [Raymond Brown]. And God himself took the full brunt of his wrath against sin! The Cross marks the end of the old order; the Resurrection begins the new!

The Resurrection gives Jesus' death once-for-all significance. The Gospels report that others were resuscitated—Jairus' daughter, the son of the widow of Nain, Lazarus—but only to die again. Jesus alone was raised never to die again. As the "first-born from the dead," he became the Author of Life. As the "first fruits" of them that sleep, he is God's assurance that the full "harvest" will come. Because he lives, all who are his shall live.

As *Messiah*, Jesus was the one uniquely anointed by God to act in God's behalf to inaugurate God's kingdom and the new age. He was a deliverer, but not from Roman domination, as his disciples had hoped. The real enemy was sin. By refusing to save himself, he conquered sin and death.

When we trust him alone for salvation, his victory is ours! He "gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age" (Gal 1:4). "In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them," but instead taking the consequences of their sins upon himself (2 Cor 5:19, NRSV).

As *Lord* and Christ, Jesus became the leader of a new people, the founder of a new family. He became the firstborn of many brothers and sisters. He became the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. His destiny is our destiny. Jesus died and was raised as a representative of all humanity, reconciling God to us and us to God (2 Cor 5:14-21).

As the great *High Priest*, the perfect mediator, the unique God-man, Jesus not only perfectly represented God to humans and humans to God but offered himself as the perfect sacrifice. Thus, he provided the basis for a new covenant between God and his creatures. Christ's death not only demonstrated the inadequacy of the law as a means of salvation (Gal 3:21-22), but also it made the Temple and its sacrifices obsolete.

Hear Galatians 3:13-14, 21-22:

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree." He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit. . . . Is the law, therefore, opposed to the promises of God? Absolutely not! For if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law. But the Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin, so that [the life] promised, . . . through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe (*emphasis added*).

*The Son of God . . . gave his life as a gift. Nothing we can do will earn it. Paul opposes the law because he is convinced that salvation-life comes exclusively by God's gift in Jesus Christ.*

And it is received *by faith*. The life-gift provided by the death of Christ is not automatic. The offer must be received by faith. "The life I now live . . . I live by faith." But faith must not be misunderstood.

Faith in faith is not saving. This is to confuse faith with optimism. Although little can be said for pessimism, it is not a positive mental attitude that gives us life. It is "the Son of God."

But faith is not "a possession" we can have to guarantee our "status, like a membership card or even a birth certificate." Faith, like salvation itself, is and forever remains God's gift. Faith is not correct opinions that somehow put God "in our debt, as if God owes a special blessing . . . to those who believe" (Cousar).

Faith is not a work that succeeds in winning salvation—the ultimate form of self-justification! On the contrary, faith is the abandonment of all efforts at self-salvation. Faith is staking your life and eternal salvation that God is as Jesus revealed him to be—holy love.

Faith is not an achievement that contributes to your salvation. Faith is not a reliance on your accomplishments—or lack of accomplishments. It is a single-minded trust in the accomplishment of God in Christ. Faith is the standing ovation we give God with our lives when we are gripped by the fact that "the Son of God . . . loved me and gave himself for me." When the Cross finally makes sense, we realize that "the cross and the resurrection are not only Jesus' but also ours. Faith becomes obedience" as we find ourselves conformed to the likeness of our Lord (Cousar). And so, *Christ lives in me*.

Paul's statement (in Gal 2:20), "Christ lives in me," should not be misunderstood as a personality invasion. Christians are not zombies. Christian life is neither automatic nor magic. If the crucified and risen Christ is your Lord and rules your life, the ascended, and invisible, Christ is visible and active in your life.

He lives in me as I live no longer for myself but for him. "I have been crucified with Christ; [I] . . . no longer . . . live, . . . Christ . . . lives in me. . . . I live by faith in the Son of God . . . I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing" (vv 19-21, NRSV).

Christ did not die for *no* purpose; he died *on* purpose. Yes, he died "to rescue us from the present evil age" (1:4). But salvation-life is not escape from this world. "The life I live . . . by faith in the Son of God," I live "in the flesh," "in the body"—in the here and now. The Christian life is to be lived in this world, not just in "the sweet by and by." Christian existence is this worldly—on earth, not just in heaven—present, not just future. Christ's purposes for Christians are not reserved for the age to come.

The verb tense Paul uses in 2:19-20 describes an event in the past that shapes the present. "I have been and continue to be crucified with Christ." Dying with Christ is not primarily history. Christ died once-for-all. But I remain on the cross. To be crucified with Christ is to live forever out of the resources of grace and to live always

for this new Lord. Like Christ on the Cross, I live with the constant awareness, "I cannot save myself!"

Being crucified with Christ is not a temporary stage quickly passed through on the way to resurrection. To live the Christian life is to remain with Jesus on the cross. Here alone I enjoy his life. I enjoy the benefits of Christ's resurrection, but for the time being, he alone has been resurrected. The life I now live by faith, I live in the flesh. I continue to be human. I may expect pain, anguish, and struggle. I will know trials and temptations. I will feel suffering and eventually die. If the Risen Christ bears the marks of the nails and the spear, so must I.

Only as we live under the Lordship of the Crucified and Risen Christ may we participate in his ongoing mission to save the world. He gave his life so that we might live—but not to live for ourselves, but for him. Not to live as we choose, but to live as he lived; and not to save ourselves, but to give ourselves for the salvation of others.

## The Ministry of Jesus: Mark 6

Most of us can identify all too well with Jesus' experience of being misunderstood and underestimated by those who should have known him best. We understand the experience of rejection well enough for ourselves. But this story is about Jesus!

Hadn't any of these folks heard about the Virgin Birth? or about the angels' announcement to the shepherds? or about the visit of the magi? True, these events happened in Bethlehem, and not Nazareth.

But surely Mary and his brothers James and Joses and Judas and Simon and his sisters knew about these special signs of supernatural status! And yet, you may recall that it was precisely his own family who, according to Mark 3, tried to get him to abandon his ministry, because they thought he had gone out of his mind (see 3:21).

And, if we were to take seriously the apocryphal Gospels—the books that didn't make the canonical cut, unlike Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—we would be even more nonplused. They tell fanciful stories about the boy Jesus growing up in Nazareth.

One such tale reports that Jesus was playing near a stream on a Sabbath afternoon. He took a stick and diverted some of the water into little canals in the dust. From the resulting mud, he formed small clay birds. When his little friends observed this violation of two commandments—making images and working on the Sabbath, they ran and told their parents. When the adults arrived on the scene and began to scold him, Jesus merely clapped his hands and the clay birds turned into real sparrows and flew away. And immediately thereafter, the tattletales dropped dead.

On another occasion, the same apocryphal Gospel reports that a reckless child ran into Jesus and hurt his shoulder. When Jesus announced, "You shall go no farther," he, too, fell dead. Understandably, a committee of Nazareth's concerned parents soon formed a delegation and paid a visit to Joseph's carpenter shop. Joseph cautiously reminded Jesus that his behavior was making it difficult for the family to maintain normal relations with their neighbors. So Jesus graciously agreed to raise all of the dead children and restore them to their parents.

Our passage in Mark 6 makes it difficult to imagine that the youthful Jesus did anything of sort. In fact, the remarkable silence of all four canonical Gospels about

Jesus' childhood and youth suggests that there was nothing extraordinary about Jesus that would have led anyone to expect him to grow up and become a prophet—much less who Christians have come to believe him to be.

True, there is one story in Luke 2 about Jesus' visit to the Temple at age 12. But most people tend to read far too much into that account, or they simply misread it. Nowhere does Luke tell us that Jesus was teaching the leaders in the Temple. He was simply listening to them and asking them questions—precisely what a boy who had recently become bar mitzvah might be expected to do. As a “son of the commandment,” Jesus was, of course, eager to please his Heavenly Father—“to be about his Father’s business.”

Bar mitzvah—a religious and cultural rite of passage in Judaism—probably explains how Jesus got left behind in Jerusalem. Jews traveled to and from their annual festivals in large groups—for safety and for company on the journey. The men and older boys—those who had been through the rite of bar mitzvah—traveled together in one group. The girls and women and younger boys traveled in another group.

As Jesus' family joined their neighbors heading back to Nazareth from Jerusalem, his absence went unnoticed, at first. Mary must have felt a mixture of pride and pain as she thought, “My little boy has become a man. He must be traveling with Joseph and the other men.”

And Joseph must have thought, “Well, he must be with his mother and his little friends. Old habits die hard. Nothing to worry about!”

Only after traveling all day and preparing to set up camp for the night did the couple compare notes. “You mean he’s not with you either? Oh, no!” It was growing dark—too late for just the two of them to return to Jerusalem until morning. Then, they had to spend another full day walking back to Jerusalem to get there by nightfall. And so it was the third day before they found Jesus, exactly where they had left him—in the Temple.

Isn't that exactly what your parents told you to do should you ever get lost at the mall? “Stay where you were with me last. Don't wander off looking for me. I'll come and find you.”

And so, we return to our story in Mark 6. Apparently, nothing in Jesus' childhood or youth led anyone to expect him to be anything other than a carpenter. His adoptive father, Joseph, was a carpenter. And so it was natural in the ancient world that he should be one too. The modern notion that children of humble origins might go away to college and become whatever their hearts desire was entirely alien to the world of Jesus' day.

Perhaps, we also need to be reminded that carpenters in Jesus' day were not armed with a collection of power tools. In fact, the word translated “carpenter” in our text was used to refer to craftsmen who worked with wood, stone, and metal. Since lumberyards, much less Home Depot, did not yet exist, carpenters were compelled to go to the forest, cut their own trees, and convert them to lumber. Or they went to the stone quarry and cut the pieces of limestone or basalt they needed for their construction projects. No chain saws! No dynamite! Just primitive tools and muscle power.



Prophets are supposed to be bony and emaciated from spending all their time in fasting and prayer. But with experience as a carpenter on his résumé, Jesus must have been a fine specimen of a man. Calluses and bulging muscles were hardly expected of a prophet.

Now, John the Baptist! There was a prophet! The son of a priest! Raised in the desert on a diet of locusts and wild honey! A dour, gaunt look, and long bony fingers to point accusingly at his audience—"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?" A rustic garment made of camel's hair and a simple leather belt—just like Elijah of old (Mk 1:4-6; see 2 Kings 1:5-8). Now there was a prophet!

Jesus just did not fit the mold. Well-tanned and brawny from working as a carpenter, none of those in his hometown took seriously the stories that reached them. They knew him as one who could eat and drink with the best of them—he was hardly an ascetic. In fact, Matthew and Luke report Jesus' own admission about his reputation: "John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon'; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds" (Mt 11:18-19, NRSV; cf. Lk 7:33-34). We too may have been scandalized by Jesus.

The company he kept—fishermen, publicans, revolutionaries, demon-possessed people, ritually unclean women, maybe even prostitutes, maybe even Gentiles—Jesus' friends did not enhance his reputation as a religious authority. And his lack of care about observing the law—supposed healings on the Sabbath day, harvesting grain on the Sabbath, eating without the customary ritual washings, refusing to fast and preferring to feast—such behavior only made matters worse.

It is true that the first five chapters of Mark report that Jesus had been God's instrument in performing some astounding deeds of power in other Galilean villages:

- teaching with unprecedented authority
- exorcizing demons
- instantly healing a woman with a fever
- cleansing a leper
- offering forgiveness and healing to a paralyzed man
- restoring a man's withered hand to full use
- telling captivating stories that gave even ordinary folks a glimpse of God's rule
- calming a raging storm at sea
- bringing sanity to a man tormented by a legion of demons
- restoring life to a dead 12-year-old girl and
- bringing release from 12 years of the living death of perpetual social and religious isolation suffered by a woman with a chronic menstrual disorder

Such stories most certainly had reached Jesus' hometown before he returned. Mark reports the Nazarenes' astonished questions when Jesus began to teach in their synagogue:

They said, "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him (Mk 6:2b-3, NRSV).

What would we have done under the circumstances, if we were Jesus? Why, we'd have preached the fieriest sermon they'd ever heard. We'd have shown them wisdom and

oratorical power like they'd never seen! We'd have wowed them! And then, we'd have had them bring in the village idiot and have bestowed on him an honorary doctorate and the intelligence to deserve it. We'd have sought out some poor woman wasting away with cancer and cured her in a moment. We'd have put all of the doctors in the area out of business. We'd have shown them a thing or two. That's what we would have done!

"But Jesus would hear nothing of such human schemes to prove his prowess. Instead, Jesus said to them, 'Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.' And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them" (Mk 6:4-5, NRSV).

We are most certainly mistaken if we imagine that Jesus "could do no" miracles because the necessary faith was lacking. Mark certainly does not say that! In fact, he has already told us several stories of miracles in the absence of faith.

- The disciples had "no faith" and certainly the sea did not exercise faith before Jesus calmed it (Mk 4:35-41).
- The demoniac Legion exercised no faith when Jesus freed him. On the contrary, he had asked Jesus to leave him alone (Mk 5:1-20).
- Jairus' dead daughter could not believe for her resuscitation. The mourners mocked at his suggestion that she was only sleeping. Even her parents believed she was dead and beyond hope of healing.
- Even the woman with the menstrual disorder who touched Jesus in the crowd demonstrates my point. Jesus did not know that she cherished the superstitious hope that merely touching the tassels on the fringe of his garment would bring her healing. He did not even know who had been healed until she fearfully stepped forward and confessed her offense.

It is only a modern notion, perpetuated by so-called faith-healers, which suggests that our subjective exercise of what we call "faith" somehow triggers an automatic divine response, and that, without it, healing is impossible. Jesus was not rendered powerless by the puny faith of the citizens of his hometown. In fact, Mark tells us as much. He did cure a few sick people in Nazareth after all (Mk 6:5).

Perhaps, the point here is similar to the one Jesus makes in Mark 4. Some people have ears to hear, but they cannot hear. Some people have eyes to see, but they cannot see. Oh, their auditory and visual equipment are in perfect working order. But they miss the obvious. Jesus tells a story about a farmer planting seeds and even his disciples don't get it. But he condescends to explain the parables for those too dull to hear and see the kingdom of God in tales of the ordinary.

Some people would not recognize a miracle if it happened under their very noses. They are so scandalized by a Jesus who does not meet their expectations that even Jesus is amazed at their unbelief (Mk 6:3, 5).

Perhaps Jesus could not perform the miracles the hometown crowd expected to validate his authority because he would not stoop to their level. You will recall that Matthew and Luke tell us that Jesus had refused to perform a miracle at Satan's behest, either to satisfy his own hunger or to coerce belief (Matthew 4 and Luke 4).

For reasons that don't make perfect sense to sniveling weaklings like us, the all-powerful, creator God has chosen to act most of the time in subtle, not stupendous,

ways. He sometimes teases us to believe with an awe-inspiring intervention in the ordinary course of events. But he never acts in such a way as to render unbelief impossible. He always leaves room for an alternative, natural or supernatural, explanation.

Even the Bible admits that Israel's miraculous crossing of the Red Sea could be explained as only a convenient coincidence—a strong east wind blowing all night (Ex 14:21), seaweed clogging the spoked wheels of the Egyptians' chariots trapping them when the wind died down (14:25). Only those who choose to believe can confess that it was Yahweh, Israel's God, who was ultimately responsible for the victory at the sea.

Recall that the Jewish religious authorities explained away Jesus' exorcisms as due to the power of Satan (Mk 3:20-30). And even his family explained his newly acquired reputation as a miracle-worker as due to insanity (5:21). In the final analysis, faith is a choice about how we will see, how we will hear, how we will respond to Jesus. God has chosen not to act in such a way as to violate our freedom to remain in unbelief, if we choose to do so.

Was Jesus' lack of miracles in his hometown a sign of his strength or weakness? Despite my human inclinations and personal preferences, I am inclined to believe that "he could do no deed of power there," precisely because he was the Almighty God, not just some power-hungry human out to make a name for himself. He had nothing to prove, no reputation to protect, and so in a spectacular display of power, he chose to respect their amazing unbelief.

Is there more to this story of rejection and amazing unbelief? Is this the story only of Jesus' rejection by those from his home village? Is it not also a story about how we ignore and reject God? Is it also a story about our unwillingness to be helped by God or by anybody else? Is Jesus still amazed by our unwillingness, which comes from our own imagined certainties, our own knowledge, our own strength?

## The Miracles of Jesus: John 9

At the heart of the controversy in John 9 is the question, *Who is Jesus?* Despite the overwhelming evidence, the religious leaders refused to believe he was the Revealer of God. While they became hardened in their unbelief, the healed blind man grew in his faith.

The blind man's replies to those who doubted the miracle demonstrate that he not only gained his sight but also grew in insight into the identity of Jesus.

Can the same be said of us? Perhaps the reason we stagger in the face of enormous and apparently insoluble human problems is that we do not really know who saved us from our spiritual blindness.

When he was first asked, "Who healed you?" the former blind man identified his benefactor as simply, "The man they call Jesus" (9:11).

Because Jesus had restored his sight on the Sabbath, some Pharisees insisted, "This man is not from God" (v 16a). But others asked, "How can a sinner do such miraculous signs?" (v 16b). So they turned again to the once-blind man, "What have you to say about [Jesus]?" (v 17a).

This time the man replied, "He is a prophet" (v 17b). What prompted the former blind man's heightened assessment of Jesus? That he was a FORMER blind man explains it all. His inescapable experience of being changed from darkness to light by Jesus made it impossible for him to believe that Jesus was just an ordinary man, or that he was not sent by God, much less that he was a sinner.

No amount of evidence is enough to persuade those who refuse to believe. Unable to dissuade the miracle-man, the doubters tried to deny the miracle. Thus, they challenged the man's parents, "Is this [really] your son?" (v 19, NRSV).

Although the parents agreed that this was their son and that he had been born blind, they insisted that they didn't know who had healed him. In fact, they knew it was Jesus. And they even suspected that he was the Messiah. But they also knew that anyone who acknowledged Jesus' miracles would be expelled from the synagogue (vv 21-22). Too afraid to confess what they knew in their hearts, they protected themselves and put their son at risk. "He is of age; ask him" (v 23).

Was it not enough that their son had been blind his entire miserable life? These wretched parents were ready to betray their own son to protect their security. They knew that his honest testimony would cause him to lose his religious home, to forfeit any hope of maintaining close friendships with his former associates.

Expulsion from the synagogue would not allow him simply to go to church down the street. Excommunication meant the end of religious life as he knew it. It was to wrest from him his spiritual identity. If he was to be no longer a Jew, who was he, what was he? Healed of his blindness, the miracle man faced a new challenge.

Unable to deny the miracle, the doubters now set out to discredit the miracle-worker. Summoning the once-blind man, they said, "Give glory to God. . . We know this man is a sinner" (v 24).

Still uncertain about the precise identity of Jesus, the once-blind man could not deny his own experience. "Whether he is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!" (v 25). Whoever Jesus might be, the man was ready to become his disciple, to take this prophet Jesus as his Master (vv 27-28).

While the doubters conceded, "We don't. . . know where [this fellow] comes from" (v 29), the blind man concluded that the miracle of sight proved that Jesus was surely "from God" (v 33). Jesus had opened his eyes. HIS eyes. Eyes that had been blind from birth. Nothing like this had ever happened before in the history of the world! The finger prints of God were all over this event.

In response to the once-blind man's confession of faith in Jesus, the doubters expelled him from the synagogue (v 34), just as his parents had feared they would.

In this most uncharacteristic scene in all four Gospels, Jesus has move off center stage for more than 25 verses. The blind man alone is in the spotlight. Betrayed by his parents and abandoned by the leaders of the faith that sustained him in his years of darkness, he stands totally alone. But Jesus, the Good Shepherd, whose face the once-blind man had never seen till this moment, sought him out. And he asked the man a strange question, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" (v 35).

'Who is he, sir?' the man asked. 'Tell me so that I may believe in him.'

Jesus said, "You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you" (v 37). That is, "I am the one who brings heaven and earth together. I am the revealer of God. Do you believe that?"

Tutored in the school of isolation and persecution, the miracle-man had no difficulty confessing, "Lord, I believe." He even worshiped Jesus (vv 36-38).

Immediately the blind man disappears from the stage. And Jesus addresses the fearful and the doubters. "For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind" (v 39).

The Pharisees who heard him say this asked, "What? Are we blind too?" (v 40).

Jesus said, "If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains" (v 41). The blind receive sight and believe while those who claim to see, refuse to believe and are confirmed in their blindness. When Jesus acts, neutrality is not an option.

We will confess him as the Mediator between God and humanity. Or we will demonize him and eventually try to destroy him, as we see in John 10. Do you see Jesus as he is? Have you submitted to his authority in your life? Or are you still trying to explain away what doesn't fit your preconceived ideas?

John chapter 9 is more than a simple story of how faith in Christ is born and grows and is tested. It is not simply a remarkable tale about how a poor, unfortunate, blind man in Palestine, long ago and far away, finally got lucky. On the contrary, it raises the question: If we really know who Jesus is, if we really believe he is the Revealer of God, what difference should it make in our lives? What difference should it make in the way we see "blind men"?

Are we too much like the disciples who saw suffering humanity as an occasion for a theological discussion—"Who sinned?" Or will we respond to Jesus' call to serve. "As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work" (9:4) But what are these works?

John 6:27-29 gives Jesus' own answer: "Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life" (NKJV). Then they asked, "What must we do, to be doing the works of God?" Jesus replied, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent" (NRVS). We must first see Jesus as he is—the Revealer of God.

Really believing in Jesus involves behaving like Jesus. In John 14:12, Jesus says, "He who believes in me will do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I go to the Father."

Believing in Jesus not only changes our opinions but also changes our occupation. It not only alters our theology but also redefines our task. If we truly receive the gift of sight, it transforms our mission in life.

In John 17:17-18, Jesus defines sanctification as accepting his mission as our mission as well—"Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world" (NRSV).

When we accept the gift of salvation, we become God's people; but we are not translated immediately to heaven. We continue to live in this world. The Christian life is lived out in a human body, not in some disembodied spiritual existence, but in this world.

As Jesus prepared to leave this world and to return to His Father, he prayed for his disciples, and for us (17:4, 11, 13, 14, 16). We are to remain in the world, but not to be "of the world." We are to live on this earth as human beings, but not to live according to the values and standards of the people who have rejected God.

Jesus' final words of commission to his disciples according to John were these: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you" (20:21, NRSV). Our mission is to complete his mission in the power of the Spirit. It is not enough to see Jesus as he is, we must see the world through his eyes and be moved with compassion as he was. And if we see, we will act accordingly.

The good news is that the salvation Jesus came to bring is as comprehensive in its scope as is the human condition. For the blind salvation is sight—Jesus is the light of the world (8:12; 9:5; 12:46). For the hungry salvation is food—Jesus is the bread of life (6:33, 35, 48). For the thirsty, Jesus is living water (4:10), so he invites all who will, "Come to me and drink" (7:37). To those in need of guidance, he says, "I am the good shepherd" (10:11, 14). To those who have been pushed aside, Jesus says, "I am the gate for the sheep" (v 7). To those bound by addictions, salvation is freedom; so Jesus says, "I am . . . the truth" (14:6), and "you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (8:32).

A serious reading of the Gospels will cure us of the notion that Jesus spoke only of spiritual blindness or spiritual hunger or spiritual thirst or spiritual slavery.

A proper Christian understanding of vocation will cause us to see that whatever our job, our true vocation is to serve God and all those for whom Christ died. The vocation of every follower of Jesus is to cooperate with the works of God. That is, every believer is called to be the agent of God in doing his work on this planet. We have not received the Holy Spirit so that we can wave our hands in worship. We have been given the Spirit so that we can apply our hands to completing the mission of Jesus.

Never mind why starvation, injustice, loneliness, homelessness, disasters, broken homes, violence, ignorance, and incurable diseases exist in our world. Never mind all the reasons to wring our hands in despair. Never mind the unanswerable "Whys?"

The question Jesus longs for us to ponder is this: Will we do what we can with what we have while there is time? Will we work the works of God while it is day?

## The Birth of Jesus: Luke 2 and Matthew 1

Luke's version of the Christmas story describes the surprising events surrounding the birth of the Christ child through whom God came to an encounter with the world and the world with God, but not as they expected to find him.

When God came close, there was rejoicing in heaven, and *humans*—but not the expected kind of humans—were given the possibility of experiencing God's peace.

Although the first chapter of Luke gives us the necessary background, the story itself begins in verse 1, showing how God's supreme act of self-disclosure took place in an earthly event. God's revelation seldom invades history like a meteor shower, in handwriting on the wall, or in a booming bass voice from a thunder cloud.

Here it begins in the context of a totally secular event, a new tax law. The significance of such an event can be seen only from the perspective of what emerged from it. "There are no angels, no signs of glory, only Roman officials and more or less unhappy taxpayers—but God is nonetheless the agent of an earthshaking event."<sup>31</sup>

Caesar only seems to be in charge. Luke, through eyes of faith, is convinced that God was acting in faithfulness to the long-awaited promise of Micah 5:1 concerning the birthplace of the Messiah in Bethlehem. There are no accidents in God's timetable. As Galatians 4:4-5 puts it, "When the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman . . . to redeem."

So Mary and Joseph "went up from Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem" (Lk 2:4, NRSV). It was a distance of just 75 miles. But on foot it required four days of steady walking under ideal conditions. And Mary was pregnant, perhaps nine months pregnant, depending on how long the couple came to Bethlehem before the birth.

We really can't be certain whether Mary and Joseph's journey took place in the rainy season of Palestine's winter or in the oppressive heat and humidity of its summer. The Gospels never bother to tell us such comparatively irrelevant facts. The date we celebrate—December 25—is only a guess.

Once in Bethlehem, the couple found the country town, about 5 miles southeast of Jerusalem, already filled to capacity with other travelers compelled to return to their ancestral homes by Caesar's decree. Weary, road-worn, bone-tired, dirty, ready for baths and a good night's sleep, they were greeted instead by a "No Vacancy" sign (v 7c). So this is how God acts in history, taking care of his special people!

Wood was scarce in southern Palestine, but there were lots of limestone caves. These, rather than wooden sheds, served as shelters for herdsmen and their flocks during foul weather. It was probably one such rather ordinary cave behind a noisy Bethlehem tavern that became the temporary home for Joseph and his young wife. Chances are—despite the famous carol—that it was not a "Silent Night," what with soldiers, occupying the village to keep the peace during the census, making their own entertainment; some irate taxpayers drowning their sorrows and others plotting armed tax revolt; shepherds shouting in the tavern; old drinkers staying up late; shearers telling wild tales and singing bawdy bush songs; and the ever-present sound—and smell—of sheep and cattle. "Silent Night"? Holy night? All is calm? All is bright?

And while they were there, "the time came for her to be delivered. And she gave birth to her first-born son" (vv 6-7, NRSV). Nothing is said here of their thoughts or emotions or words. The fact of the remarkable birth is presented in surprising simplicity.

Although the Bible doesn't say, I expect that Mary and Joseph may have been tempted to schedule a "pity party" that night. This was almost certainly not the way they'd imagined it would turn out. What a disappointment! After visions of angels announcing the birth, this was all so ordinary, so, so . . . depressing.

"And she gave birth to her firstborn, a son" (v 7a). The fact of the remarkable birth is presented in strange simplicity. It was just the ordinary birth of what appeared to be an ordinary baby. And despite the carol "Away in a Manger," I'm sure he must have cried. And probably so did Mary. This was no place for any baby, let alone *her* baby, let alone this *special* baby. Where was God now?

The fact that Mary wrapped her baby in swaddling bands marks nothing extraordinary, demonstrating only the total humanness of this birth. The child needed to be kept warm and dry. Here was a normal human birth in a totally unromantic and unappealing place. The parents put the baby in a safe place—in a cattle feeding trough, protected from the hooves of the animals with whom they shared their shelter. Even this was not particularly remarkable; poor people in Palestine, and in other parts of the world as well, still often spend the night in the same room with their animals. If the birth had taken place in some poor housing project, the child's cradle might well have been a partly opened dresser drawer.

The first truly remarkable event is reported in verses 8 through 14, when the announcement of this strange revelation of God is made by angelic messengers to shepherds. When the heavenly messenger appeared to them, their natural response was at first one of fear. And the angel's first word from God is intended to deliver them of this terror in the presence of the holy.

Now shepherds were the last ones to whom you might have expected such a revelation to be made.<sup>32</sup> To put it mildly, they were not highly regarded by the Jews of that day. They were considered hopeless reprobates by religious folk. Their life in the barren wilderness of southern Judea meant that they seldom frequented the Temple or the synagogues. Away from the conveniences of the city, they could not be bothered with the niceties of sanitation, much less the ritual law. They were not to be trusted. Their testimony was not even accepted in court. When they did come to the city they hung out in shady places and drank too much. Their manners were coarse. Their language, as rough as their scroungy appearance, could turn the air blue. It was hardly expected that God should reveal his glory to the likes of such men, whose reputations in their day were probably no better in the opinion of respectable people than those of Teamsters or truck drivers in our day.

When shepherds like these stare late into the fire at night and poke the smoking embers, they know no fear of the dark. They tell their tales of courage and crossing floods, defying storms, and fighting grass fires in the open range until their eyes are blind with smoke. They know no fear of humans or beasts. Yet the night the angels hit the camp, they were scared half to death. When heavenly messengers appeared to the likes of such shepherds, their natural response was at first one of terror. "This is judgment day for sure," they must have thought, as the once black sky was suddenly ablaze with angels, like a range fire roaring overhead.

The angel's first word from God was intended to deliver them from their terror in the presence of the holy. "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news" (v 10). God's word to them turned their great fear into great joy through the announcement of good news for all people—not just to the righteous but to ruffians, not just to saints but to sinners. "A Savior! Born for you! A Savior, Christ the Lord!"

"Today in the town of David" (v 11). The good news is that this long-awaited event of salvation has taken place *today*—not in the musty pages of ancient legends of the past



or in the fantastic dreams of the future, but in the midst of real, human history. The good news of salvation about which the angels sang was not to be found in the pious precincts of Jerusalem, not in its sacred sanctuary, but in a stable in the back streets of Bethlehem.

"This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger" (v 12). The sign of the dawning of the age of salvation was not to be seen in the appearance of angels—as awesome as that was—but in a baby in a manger. "Perhaps the point is the very discrepancy between what can be seen and what can be understood only on the basis of God's word."<sup>33</sup> When God chose to reveal himself definitively, the revelation concealed as much as it revealed—Almighty God disclosed as a vulnerable, defenseless human child. And Christian faith insists that this was no mere phantom—an appearance only. God actually became one of us.

Ponder the irony of it all—that they should find the Bread of Life asleep in a cattle feeding trough!—that they should witness the eternal Word of God unable to speak!—that humans such as these should gaze upon the face of God—tiny, wrinkled, and red, newborn red.

But first, for one brief moment, the curtain was pulled back so that the shepherds—and we—could see God's world from which all things come, as the transcendent glory of God was revealed. The revelation took the form of the first Christmas carol, a hymn sung by angels in praise of God, a hymn that promised salvation to humankind. "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace" (v 14).

"The angels represent the earthward movement of God." They assign credit to God for this unexpected, shocking revelation. They announce that in this birth God has made his peaceful movement toward all people.

"Peace to [those] on whom his favor rests" (v 14) does not limit salvation to a select few. We can't forget that the good news is to all people, as verse 10 emphasizes. Rather the point of the angel's message is to make it clear that real peace comes alone through the gracious will of God. The good news here is the same as that announced in John 3:16—"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever trusts in him might not perish, but have everlasting life" (NRSV).

God loved the world in such a way that he gave his most precious gift, a gift that, if received brings life, and peace, and salvation. They all amount to much the same thing. We think of peace as the absence of conflict and war. But after Jesus was born, Roman soldiers and Jewish revolutionaries continued their bitter rivalry. What kind of peace is this?

In the Bible, peace includes all that salvation means—freedom from care, rest, well-being, God's blessing and favor even in the midst of conflict; life even in the midst of death. Peace is a gift of grace, a fulfillment that transcends any success humanity alone, even under the best of circumstances, is able to attain.<sup>34</sup>

The good news to the shepherds—and to us—is, "God knows where you are and cares about you—where you are, as you are." And God is one of us, apparently weak, vulnerable, crying for his mother. What incredible news! Do we really believe it? Should we?

Matthew tells a somewhat different version of the Christmas story. He reports the visit of the wise men. Perhaps you've heard the pious saying, "Wise men still seek him." At least these are decent folks, we can identify with—smart enough to read their Bibles every day and attend church whenever the doors are open. *Wrong!*

The wise men are more accurately called magi, from which we get our word "magic." They were not practitioners of magic—not astronomers, but astrologers, adherents of the ancient religion of Persia—what we today called Iran—the religion known as Zoroastrianism. They were certainly Gentiles, pagans—heathen. They must have created quite a stir in Palestine with their strange accents, their unusual clothes, their foreign faces.

They knew little or nothing of the ancient faith of Israel and its holy Scriptures. They had no part in God's covenant with Abraham or its promises. They were led to Palestine not by Scripture but by a strange celestial phenomenon. Once in Palestine, they naturally went to its center of religion and politics—Jerusalem. There it was cynical, high-church theologians whose recollection of an obscure prophecy led them to Bethlehem.

We would never expect folks like the magi to be among the first to recognize the infant king of the Jews. In our day it would be as likely that God's special revelation of himself should come to a Buddhist or a Muslim, to a gambler at Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas, or to a hit-man for the Mafia. And how likely do you suppose it would be that their story would have been believed by religious types like us. Imagine how we would react today to the headlines, "Muslim Claims Jewish Hopes Fulfilled in Podunk" or, "Northside Gang Members Witness Newborn Savior in Harlem" or, "Gays Encounter Heir to the Throne in Emergency Shelter in San Francisco."

The first impulse of those who personally experienced these events was to witness: They were compelled to go and tell the story—"When [the shepherds] had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child" (v 17). Their second response was worship: "The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told" (v 20).

The response of those who heard the story was amazement: "And all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them" (v 18). We have heard the story so often we have been jaded. We are neither compelled to go tell nor to glorify God. We are not amazed!

Instead, when the Christmas season approaches each year, we seem driven to "shop till we drop." Would that we would imitate the shepherds' response of witness and worship. Or Mary's response of quiet meditation. "Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart" (v 19).

The Messiah came and Herod plotted to destroy him. The new age dawned and Augustus remained undisturbed on his throne in Rome. The good news of peace is not about politics. The good news to the shepherds, and to us, is "God knows where you are and cares about you—where you are, as you are, here and now!"

I suspect that most people in the first century who heard this story first found it quite offensive—irritating, if not infuriating. That the announcement of salvation should be made to sinners and nonbelievers was outrageous.

Why, this story is nearly as scandalous, as totally absurd, as the claim that God might choose to show his love in the death of an executed criminal! Who would think that God might be especially present in a dead man! Nonsense!

At this distance we fail to appreciate how offensive, how surprising, how unexpectedly gracious is the symbol of the Cross. Mindless of the true symbolism, people wear gold and silver crosses on chains around their necks. To appreciate the original impact, we need to imagine the symbolism of a noose or an electric chair suspended on a chain.

Likewise, the Nativity scene should remind us of the scandalous message of God's grace. Our sloppy sentimentalism about petty pink babies in cute little outfits cooing quietly in their cribs has taken all the scandal out of the Christmas story.

The Nativity scene is shocking and scandalous: Take Mary—a teenager, unmarried, and pregnant, spouting revolutionary slogans about God turning the world upside down, or rather, right side up. Or Joseph—middle-aged, respectable, pillar of the community, engaged to Mary, knowing the law's provisions for "situations" like hers, acting against his own moral principles and marrying her anyway, acknowledging the child as legally his.

We've already said enough about shepherds! And time does not permit us to say more about the magi—Zoroastrian astrologers: adherents of a strange, pagan religion—who were the first to worship the newborn King of the Jews! Riffraff and foreigners. And the angels—rejoicing in such goings-on! Such goings-on seem perplexingly surprising to religious folks like us!

Perhaps it's not the ceramic figurines around the crèche we need to protect from little children after all. Perhaps we need to drop our defenses and see the Nativity with new eyes, to see the surprising good news of the gospel in the manger scene, to see ourselves kneeling among the rowdy shepherds or among those heathen foreigners, the magi. Perhaps, then we could see how the Nativity presents a vision of a totally new order—a world radically transformed by grace—the message of surprising good news!

With such a beginning, we should not be surprised by the rest of the story. But perhaps it is a sign of hope that we have not yet come to take for granted that God should repeatedly act with such amazing grace.

Appearances are deceiving! A baby born to a peasant couple in an obscure village in an occupied third world country was God's means of saving the world. The most important thing happening in the world at that moment was not taking place in Jerusalem or Rome. None of the people the secular or religious world considered powerful or important were there in Bethlehem. But God was there, and that was all that mattered, even if only a few were in on the secret.

If we could only see the coming of Christ as God sees it, as the dawning of a totally new order—the possibility of a world radically transformed by grace—a message of surprising good news, it might just revolutionize us. And we might be surprised to find that there's a needy world out there, waiting for the good news we've had all along.

That first Christmas was just the beginning. Those who believe in Christmas today must continue to welcome Christ into our lives. Martin Luther preached many sermons about Christmas. He concludes one of them like this: There are many of you who have

said, "If I'd only been there in Bethlehem, I'd have given the baby a place in my warm house." You would because you know how great Christ is. But if you'd been there then, you would have done no better than the people of Bethlehem. "Childish and silly thoughts are these! Why don't you do it now! You have Christ [the baby] in your neighbor. You ought to serve him, for what you do to your neighbor in need you do to the Lord himself." If you truly believed in Christmas, you would not speak so unfeelingly of the poor, the outcasts, the reprobate, the heathen, the pagan, the enemy. After all it was for the likes of these that God sent a star and angel choirs.

## Lesson 6: The Christ

### Due This Lesson

Bible review  
Selections from NDBT  
Reading Resource 5-8  
Journaling

### Learner Objectives

At the end of this lesson, participants should

- explain some of the biblical foundations for New Testament Christology

### Homework Assignments

Review the following biblical passages: John 14–16; Acts; Romans 8; Galatians

- Prepare 6 to 10 theological statements these chapters/books support or presume.

Read the following sections in *NDBT*: Luke-Acts; Acts; Holy Spirit; Testimony/Witness

Read **1** of the following Resources:

- Resource 6-12, "Pentecost: the Coming of the Holy Spirit—Acts 2"
- Resource 6-13, "Spirit-Inspired Mission—Acts 10"
- Resource 6-14, "The Spirit of Unity—Ephesians 4"

Write a 2- to 3-page paper summarizing the key ideas and theological teachings you learned from the NDBT reading and the resource reading.

Write in your journal. Reflect on what it means personally to you that "the Word became flesh." How has this lesson broadened your concept of "the Son of God?"

## The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God the Father Almighty,  
Maker of heaven and earth;

And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord:  
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,  
born of the Virgin Mary,  
suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, dead, and buried;

He descended into hades;  
and the third day he rose again from the dead;  
he ascended into heaven,  
and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty;  
from thence he shall come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the holy Church universal,  
the communion of saints,  
the forgiveness of sins,  
the resurrection of the body,  
and the life everlasting.  
Amen.

## Nicene Creed

I believe in one God the Father Almighty,  
Maker of heaven and earth,  
and of all things visible and invisible;

And in one Lord Jesus Christ,  
the only-begotten Son of God,  
begotten of His Father before all worlds,  
God of God, Light of Light,  
very God of very God,  
begotten, not made,  
being of one substance with the Father,  
by whom all things were made;  
who for us and for our salvation came down from heaven,  
and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary,  
and was made man,  
and crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate;  
He suffered and was buried,  
and the third day He rose again according to the Scriptures,  
and ascended into heaven,  
and sitteth on the right hand of the Father,  
and He shall come again with glory to judge both the living and the  
dead;  
whose kingdom shall have no end.

And I believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the Lord and Giver of life,  
who proceedeth from the Father and the Son,  
who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified;  
who spoke by the prophets.

And I believe in one holy universal and apostolic church;  
I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins;  
and I look for the resurrection of the dead,  
and the life of the world to come.  
Amen.

## Chalcedonian Creed

The Chalcedonian definition of the faith set the boundaries in which Christians were to think about Jesus Christ.

*Following the holy Fathers we teach with one voice that the Son [of God] and our Lord Jesus Christ is to be confessed as one and the same [person], that he is perfect in Godhead and perfect in manhood, very God and very man, of a reasonable soul and [human] body consisting, consubstantial with the Father as touching his Godhead, and consubstantial with us as touching his manhood; made in all things like unto us, sin only excepted; begotten of his Father before the worlds according to his Godhead, but in these last days for us men and for our salvation born [into this world] of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God according to his manhood. This one and the same Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son [of God] must be confessed to be in two natures, unconfusedly, immutably, indivisibly, inseparably [united], and that without the distinction of natures being taken away by such union, but rather the peculiar property of each nature being preserved and being united in one Person and subsistence, not separated or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son and only-begotten, God the Word, our Lord Jesus Christ, as the Prophets of old time have spoken concerning him, and as the Lord Jesus Christ hath taught us, and as the Creed of the Fathers hath delivered to us.*

*These things, therefore, having been expressed by us with the greatest accuracy and attention, the holy Ecumenical Synod defines that no one shall be suffered to bring forward a different faith, nor to write, nor to put together, nor to excogitate, nor to teach it to others. But such as dare either to put together another faith, or to bring forward or to teach or to deliver a different Creed to such as wish to be converted to the knowledge of the truth from the Gentiles, or Jews or any heresy whatever, if they be Bishops or clerics let them be deposed, the Bishops from the Episcopate, and the clerics from the clergy; but if they be monks or laics: let them be anathematized.*



## How to Study Gospel Parallels

The easiest way to observe the similarities and differences between the Gospels is to print out the parallel passages and mark the agreements in the parallel passages using colored pencils or highlight markers. For the sake of consistency use the following arbitrary conventions, proceeding in this order. (Different fonts have been used in the following example for the colors for black/white print. If viewed on a computer the colors will show. This page can also be printed on a color printer.)

Underline in **Blue** agreements in the triple tradition  
(Matthew, Mark, and Luke).

Underline in **Yellow** agreements between Matthew and Mark only.

Underline in **Green** agreements between Mark and Luke only.

Underline in **Red** agreements in the double tradition (Matthew and Luke only).

Underline in **BLACK** agreements between John and any of the Synoptic Gospels (if there is a Johannine parallel).

- Use a SOLID LINE to indicate **exact** (word-for-word) agreements.
- Use a BROKEN LINE to indicate **inexact** but close agreements.

Examine the parallels carefully. Sometimes there are agreements that are in a different sequence. You may want to draw arrows connecting such agreements. Note agreements in omissions as well as inclusions.

Do the parallel accounts seem to narrate the same event?

How do you explain the similarities and differences?

Can you tell how the event actually happened?

Note the pericopes (discrete thought units) that precede and follow the parallels in each of the Gospels. (Please, note: You cannot do this by simply examining the pericopes. You must look in the Gospels to see whether their contexts are the same or different.)

- Are they the same?
- What rearrangements (if any) have occurred?
- Can you see any reason for these changes?
- How does the difference of context affect the meaning of the passage under study?
- Summarize what you learned from doing this assignment.
- Note the major points of agreement and disagreement.

## The Baptism of Jesus

*New American Standard Bible*  
(adapted slightly)

Matthew 3:13-17	Mark 1:9-11	Luke 3:21-22	John 1:31-34
<p>13 Then Jesus *arrived from Galilee at the Jordan <i>coming</i> to John, to be baptized by him.</p> <p>14 But John tried to prevent Him, saying, "I have need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?"</p> <p>15 But Jesus answering said to him, "Permit <i>it</i> at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he *permitted Him.</p> <p>16 And after being baptized, Jesus went up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove, <i>and</i> coming upon Him,</p> <p>17 and behold, a voice out of the heavens, saying,</p> <p>"This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased."</p>	<p>9 And it came about in those days that Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee, and was baptized by John in the Jordan.</p> <p>10 And immediately coming up out of the water, He saw the heavens opening, and the Spirit like a dove descending upon Him;</p> <p>11 and a voice came out of the heavens:</p> <p>"You are My beloved Son, in You I am well-pleased."</p>	<p>21 Now it came about when all the people were baptized, that Jesus also was baptized, and while He was praying,</p> <p>heaven was opened, 22 and the Holy Spirit descended upon Him in bodily form like a dove, and a voice came out of heaven,</p> <p>"You are My beloved Son, in You I am well-pleased."</p>	<p>31 "And I did not recognize Him, but in order that He might be manifested to Israel, I came baptizing in water."</p> <p>32 And John bore witness saying,</p> <p>"I have beheld the Spirit descending as a dove out of heaven, and He remained upon Him.</p> <p>33 "And I did not recognize Him, but He who sent me to baptize in water said to me, 'He upon whom you see the Spirit descending and remaining upon Him, this is the one who baptizes in the Holy Spirit.' 34 And I have seen, and have borne witness that this is the Son of God."</p>

## The Incarnation of the Eternal Word: John 1

Each of the four Gospels has a unique starting point.

- Mark begins with John the Baptist and OT prophecies.
- Matthew begins with Abraham and the people of Israel.
- Luke begins with birth narratives and the genealogy of Jesus traced all the way back to Adam.
- John begins with the words of Genesis 1:1.

John 1:1 could not say, "In the beginning was Jesus." Despite the eternity of the Word, there was a time when Jesus was not. . . . The profound, mind-boggling implication of this is that since the Incarnation God has not been the same. The changeless One changed.

John's concern was not to identify the Word as Jesus, but Jesus as the Word.

John 1:1 insists both "the Word was God" and that "the Word was with God"—identified with and distinguished from God.

The creation, created and sustained by the Word, is God's creation and his revelation. As the prologue continues it becomes perfectly clear that the Revealer-Creator is also the Redeemer (Jn 1:9-13).

## The Incarnation—John 1

John 1:4 insists that the Word is the “light of men.”

The Word “came to . . . his own” (Jn 1:11).

The relative pronoun “who”—in John 1:13—is plural. Therefore, this is not a reference to the miraculous birth of Jesus by the agency of the Spirit, but to the spiritual “new birth” of believers.

John 1:14 is the theme of the entire Gospel of John—“the Word became flesh.”

The Word’s rejection is explained in John 1:14. The revelation event offends some. Most of his own creation, his own people, refuse to recognize themselves as belonging to their Creator.

Because the Word became a human, the title “Word” never again appears in the Gospel as applied to Jesus.

Jesus Christ is the only one by whom God is known (Jn 5:18; 6:46; 7:29; 16:27; 17:8).

Jesus, as the founder of a new religious community, supersedes traditional Jewish worship (Jn 1:17).

The incarnate Word interprets God to humanity, making the invisible and obscure visible and intelligible (Jn 1:18).

## Small Groups

Write out a statement about each aspect of Christ that you have noted in today's study. Organize them into a structure that you believe makes them teachable.

Update your catechism notes with those statements about Christ that should be included. Give thought to the nature of the catechism that you want to create. Should it be a collection of beliefs or should it take on characteristics similar to those in the ministerial course of study and be concerned with being and doing as well as knowing?

## The Baptism of Jesus

*New American Standard Bible*  
(adapted slightly)

Matthew 3:13-17	Mark 1:9-11	Luke 3:21-22	John 1:31-34
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## Summary

A close comparison between the 4 Gospel accounts of Jesus' baptism reveals a number of interesting similarities and differences. Listed are just a few of the more obvious and suggest some of their possible implications.

- Only Matthew and Mark include any geographical information in their accounts of the baptism. Mark includes more.
- John is mentioned in Matthew, Mark, and John. Luke's sequence of events reports John's arrest and imprisonment in the pericope before the baptism, making it appear as if John could not have baptized Jesus. The Fourth Gospel says nothing about Jesus being baptized. Its approach to the entire story has few parallels with the Synoptics, beyond incidental features.
- Mark's sequence makes it appear—superficially, at least—that Jesus accepted baptism as a sinner in response to John's preaching of repentance. Matthew makes a point that this is not the case by introducing the dialogue between Jesus and John. This dialogue includes a number of Matthean distinctive features, particularly the crucial word "righteousness."
- Luke's removal of John from the scene by his re-sequencing of pericopes may have been occasioned by the same concern that motivated Matthew to introduce the dialogue.
- The fourth Gospel nowhere mentions that John preached repentance for sins and does not narrate John's baptizing of Jesus.
- These differences suggest that the three later Evangelists must have been uncomfortable with Mark's implications and had some interest in clarifying why Jesus was baptized and whether his baptism by John implied any inferiority to the baptizer.
- Luke alone makes a point that Jesus was praying at the time when the Spirit descended upon him. This is consistent with his stress on the prayer life of Jesus throughout the third Gospel. Luke is also the only Gospel to stress that it is precisely the *Holy* Spirit who descends. He also makes a point that the Spirit was visible in the form of a dove. This is consistent with Luke's interest shown in Acts for the tangible evidence of the Spirit's coming—in Acts usually accompanied by "tongues." The other Gospels seem merely to describe adverbially the manner in which the Spirit came upon Jesus—in a dove like descent. Precisely what they intend by this is not clear within the passages.
- John makes special note of the Spirit's abiding presence with Jesus. Luke will make a similar point in his account of the temptation. This may suggest that, unlike the OT judges and prophets on which the Spirit came briefly to aid them in fulfilling a particular task, Jesus is permanently endowed with the Spirit. That the Spirit comes like a dove may suggest his gentle coming in contrast to the dramatic outpouring that the OT sometimes reports.



- All four Gospels make a point that the Spirit comes from heaven (= from God?). The Synoptic accounts mention the opening of heaven, using the OT language of revelation. This event is of great importance because it reveals the identity of Jesus to the readers.
- In Mark's and Luke's accounts, the Heavenly Voice addresses Jesus only—"You are . . ."—rather than also John and the crowd—"This is . . .,"—as in Matthew and as implied in John. Otherwise, the words of the Voice—of God the Father—are identical and seem to allude to the language of Psalm 2 and Isaiah 42, identifying Jesus as the Suffering Servant Son of God. This has important messianic implications—What kind of Messiah will Jesus be? The accounts of the temptation of Jesus in Matthew and Luke will address this issue more fully.
- The fourth Gospel's report that John did not recognize Jesus would seem to present some problem for the implication found in Luke that Jesus and John were cousins. Of course, this may be explained by speculative conjecture—cousins do not always know one another well.

## Pentecost: The Coming of the Holy Spirit—Acts 2

Acts 2 is the biblical account of the remarkable circumstances of the first Christian Pentecost following the first Easter. The Risen Christ instructed his followers to wait in Jerusalem for the Father's promised gift—baptism "with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 1:4-5).

Forty days passed between Jesus' crucifixion and ascension. The apostles and others—perhaps 120 in all (Acts 1:15)—waited 10 more days in a second-story room in Jerusalem. There they prayed together and struggled to make sense of all that had conspired over the past two eventful months.

It was Sunday, but more particularly, it was the day observing the Jewish thanksgiving festival the Old Testament calls the Feast of Weeks (Ex 34:22; Deut 16:9-16). It had come to be known as Pentecost, from the Greek word meaning "fiftieth," because it was celebrated on the day following seven weeks—the 50th day—after Passover.

For first-century Jews, Pentecost celebrated the covenant God made with his ancient people at Mt. Sinai in the gift of the Law. For early Christians, Pentecost celebrated the new covenant God initiated with the birth of the Church that came with the universal gift of the Holy Spirit.

Verses 2 through 4 of Acts 2 describe what happened to participants—the gathered believers—when the Holy Spirit came. But verse 5 emphasizes the impact of this event on the spectators—representative Jews and Gentile converts to Judaism "from every nation under heaven" who witnessed these events.

Acts 2 reports three questions asked by the crowd of spectators on that first day of Pentecost.

- Notice the first question in verse 7: They asked, in effect, Who are these people? How are we to identify the participants in this Pentecost miracle?
- The second question is in verse 12: "What does this mean?" That is, How are we to interpret the pandemonium of Pentecost?
- The third question is in verse 37: "What shall we do?" That is, What are the implications of the promises fulfilled on Pentecost?

Let's consider the **second question** first: "What does this mean?"

Closely connected with the interpretation of these events is their occurrence on the day of Pentecost. "Fiftieth" as the meaning of the term "Pentecost" scarcely explains the promise this festival held in the expectation of those first participants.

In the Old Testament Pentecost is also called the Feast of Harvest (Ex 23:16). It gave the people of Israel an opportunity to express thanks to God for the winter rains and the fertile soil that made possible the harvest of the winter wheat. Surrounded by idolaters who had a god or goddess for every need or occasion, especially fertility, Israel was reminded by Pentecost of its faith in one God, who was the sovereign Lord of all of life, the supplier of every human need.

Pentecost was celebrated by the ceremonial bringing to the Temple in dedication to God of the first of the ripened wheat. This offering served as a symbolic reminder that

the entire crop belonged to God and expressed Israel's confidence that the full harvest would shortly follow. Thus, Pentecost was also called the festival of firstfruits (see Ex 23:16; Num 28:26).

But this festival of harvest was more than a thanksgiving celebration. Like the other major Jewish feasts, the festival over time came to be associated with the formative events of the nation of Israel.

As you may recall, the early spring feasts of Passover and Unleavened Bread were reminders of God's miraculous deliverance of Israel from Egyptian bondage. Similarly, the fall festival of Tabernacles or Booths reminded Israel of their 40 years of wilderness wandering because of their ancestors' disobedience.

In much the same way, Pentecost was associated with the gift of the Law on Mt. Sinai shortly after the Exodus. Every time Jews celebrated Pentecost, it called them to renew the covenant agreement initiated by God at the holy mountain and accepted by their ancestors. They were reminded of such scriptures as:

Exodus 19:4-6: "You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

The celebration of Pentecost was to initiate a life of renewed obedience to God. But as Stephen, the first Christian martyr, reminded his hostile audience just before the stones began to fly, the entire history of Israel had been one of repeated failure, of continual disobedience. "You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! . . . You who have received the law . . . have not obeyed it" (Acts 7:51, 53).

Stephen was not the first to recognize the failure of Israel to realize the meaning of Pentecost. The Old Testament repeatedly looks forward to a day when the unfulfilled demand of Pentecost would be realized.

- Deuteronomy 30:6, 8: "The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts . . . , so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live. . . . You will . . . obey the LORD."
- Jeremiah 31:31, 33-34: "'The time is coming,' declares the LORD, 'when I will make a new covenant. . . . I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, "Know the LORD," because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.'"
- Ezekiel 36:25-28: "I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you . . . to keep my laws. You . . . will be my people, and I will be your God."

The long-awaited promise of Pentecost was the creation of a holy people, cleansed and empowered to love and obey God completely, through transformed hearts and minds. Authentic covenant renewal was to come, not through external coercion, but through internal motivation, an inside-out transformation inspired by the personal presence of God's own Spirit.

The Old Testament promise of Pentecost was renewed by John the Baptist:

Luke 3:16-17: "I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

John connected the harvest festival of Pentecost with the work of the Messiah. The messianic harvest would involve both threat and promise. The Messiah would purge the sin out of his people, purge unrepentant sinners from among them, and raise up a new people who would actually obey God.

As the risen Jesus prepared to return to his Father, he announced that the promise of Pentecost was about to be fulfilled:

- Luke 24:49: "I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."
- Acts 1:4-5: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

Thus, when the perplexed spectators on that first Christian day of Pentecost asked the question, "What does this mean?" Peter's reply was simple: This is the fulfillment of the longstanding promise of God—this is the dawning of the age of the Spirit—this is the beginning of a new era of obedience—this is the renewal of the ancient covenant—God is keeping his promises. Peter quoted just one of the many Old Testament passages fulfilled in the events of Pentecost, Joel 2:28-32.

- Acts 2:16-19, 23: "This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: 'In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. . . . I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. I will show wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, . . . And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.'"
- Acts 2:22-23, 32-33, 36: "Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs . . . This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But . . . God has raised this Jesus to life, and . . . exalted [him] to the right hand of God . . . Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ."

What does this mean? How are we to interpret the pandemonium of Pentecost?

Pentecost finally fulfilled the longstanding promise of God to internalize the Law—to make inward obedience possible by the gift of his personal presence. Pentecost was the dawning of the last days—the beginning of the new age of the Spirit. Pentecost fulfilled the ancient promise to Abraham to bless all peoples on earth through his Descendant (Gen 12:2-3; see Gal 3:8, 14). The coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost created the Church—a remarkably heterogeneous community of renewed people made one by the unity of the Spirit (see Eph 4:2). Happy Birthday, Church! Two thousand-plus years old and thriving!

The 120 Spirit-baptized believers in the Upper Room were only the firstfruits of the harvest yet to come—3000 converts on the Day of Pentecost alone. Pentecost made

possible the implementation of Jesus' command reported in Acts 1:8: "When the Holy Spirit comes on you; you will be my witnesses . . . to the ends of the earth."

Pentecost universalized the gospel, launching the Church's world mission to invite all people to enjoy full and free salvation—to participate in covenant renewal. As Peter says in Acts 2:39: "The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call."

Peter's response to the question, "What does this mean?" distinguished the inaugural signs that served as proof the Spirit had come and the significance of the coming of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. The "sound like the blowing of a violent wind," the "tongues of fire," and the speaking "in other tongues" were merely the signs of Pentecost, not its substance.

Heavenly wind was only a symbol of the divine power from on high Jesus had promised—the God-given ability to live obediently. Tongues of fire were reminders of the purity the prophets had predicted the Spirit would bring—cleansing from self-idolatry, from hearts of stone—freedom from stubborn rebellion by the circumcision of the heart—hearts purified to do one thing: the will of God. Spirit-enabled tongues allowed uneducated Galilean peasants to proclaim the gospel clearly, intelligibly, and persuasively.

"What does this mean?" God has kept his promises and renewed the covenant with his people. Covenant renewal enables believers to do God's will, to speak God's word, to be his people in the world, to live lives of holiness, to love God with their whole selves. Pentecost means that all God's people can actually be all that God has always intended men and women to be—no more, no less.

We must consider more briefly the **first question** of the spectators on the Day of Pentecost: Who are these people? More literally translated, Acts 2:7 asks, "All of these people who are speaking are not Galileans, are they?"

Perhaps you recall the Gospel incident in which the disciples' distinctive Galilean accent was mentioned—during the trial of Jesus. Peter, sitting in the courtyard of the high priest, was accused by a servant girl of being with Jesus of Galilee. But he denied it and moved to the gateway, where another girl accused him of being a disciple of Jesus of Nazareth. Again, he denied it, this time with an oath. After a little while, those standing nearby challenged Peter, "Surely you are one of them, for your [Galilean] accent gives you away" (Mt 26:73).

Who are these people? How could they be so dramatically transformed so quickly? Now, far from cowering and denying Jesus, Peter openly, boldly, and without compromise, confesses, "Yes, I'm one of Jesus' disciples." Unblinkingly, he confronts the crowd with the accusation, "You crucified Jesus" (see Acts 2:22-23). Confidently, he insists,

'But God raised him from the dead . . . God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact. Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear' (vv 24, 32-33).

Who are these people? Witnesses to the fact that Jesus is alive through the gift of the Holy Spirit (3:12-16). Persuaded by the resurrection power at work within them, despite opposition from the religious authorities, Spirit-baptized disciples boldly insist that salvation is to be "found in no one else" than Jesus, that "there is no other name

under heaven given to [people] by which we must be saved" (4:12). Astonished by the courage of such "unschooled, ordinary" people, their opponents are now forced to ask, "What are we going to do with these [people]?" (v 16).

In response to Peter's explanation of the remarkable events of the Day of Pentecost, the Spirit convinced many spectators "of sin and righteousness and judgment," just as Jesus had promised he would (in John 16:7-14). Peter's bold witness to the resurrection of Jesus brought such strong conviction of sin that the spectators asked the participants, "What shall we do?" (Acts 2:37).

Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call" (vv 38-39).

This **third question** of Acts 2 is for us—"What shall we do?" That first Day of Pentecost is an event of dusty, ancient history. It will never be repeated. The new age of the Spirit has dawned—God has kept his promise. The question remains, What shall we do? The promise of the Holy Spirit is to all people—men, women; old, young; Jews, Gentiles; to those of that time, to those who were to live much later—to us.

It is for us to decide whether we will remain among the spectators or join the participants in the Day of Pentecost. What does this mean? Who are these people? What shall we do? You decide.

## Spirit-Inspired Mission: Acts 10

The story of Peter's housetop vision in Joppa and the conversion of the Gentile Cornelius in Caesarea is so important that it is reported three times in the Book of Acts—in chapters 10, 11, and 15.

The lengthy first account of this story appears in Acts 10. Acts 11 reports the criticism Peter received from ultraconservative Jewish Christians in Jerusalem for associating with Gentiles. Luke might simply have said, "So Peter explained what happened and they were placated." But instead, he retells the story at length. In Acts 15 Peter tells the story again, arguing that non-Jewish believers have full standing within the Church.

The threefold telling of this story is all the more striking when you think about the things that the Acts of the Apostles does not tell us. Besides Peter, what acts do the other 11 apostles do? Acts 1 tells us that Judas died a violent death, but it says nothing about his hanging himself. Acts 3 and 4 report that John hung out a lot with Peter, but it never tells us anything he said or did. Acts 12 tells us that John's brother Andrew was executed by Herod. Beyond this, Acts does not report even one act of any other apostle. We read stories about Paul of Tarsus, but Acts never calls him an apostle. We read stories about two of the seven deacons—Stephen the martyr and Philip the evangelist (Acts 6–8). But there's nothing about the acts of Philip the apostle, nor any other apostle, for that matter. Isn't it strange that we call this book the *Acts* of the Apostles?

Even this passage, important as it is, does not begin with the *acts* of the apostle Peter. It begins in an unlikely place with an unlikely character. Caesarea was the site of an artificial harbor constructed on the northern Mediterranean coast of Israel and the seat of Roman power. Cornelius was an officer in the Roman army of occupation—a centurion. He was no ordinary draftee; he was a well-paid, professional, career soldier.<sup>35</sup>

Cornelius was remarkable for other reasons as well. Acts says he was "devout," "righteous," "God-fearing," generous, and "prayed . . . regularly" (10:2, 22). But his military rank and good deeds were not enough to give him the assurance of salvation. Although he was "respected by all the Jewish people" (v 22), he was not a convert to Judaism. He remained uncircumcised (11:2)—a Gentile. And he still thought like a pagan. When Peter showed up at his door, Cornelius tried to worship him, as if he were a god (10:25-26). But let's leave Cornelius for now and take a closer look at Peter.

When we first meet Peter in our story he is in Joppa, a day's journey south of Caesarea. Before the ascension, Jesus had instructed his followers to be witnesses to all nations (1:8). But here we find Peter the fisherman on vacation by the seacoast (9:43). True, he's praying; but it's only while he's waiting on lunch; and he apparently falls asleep in the process.

Peter had been a follower of Jesus for no fewer than three years, perhaps longer, when he met Cornelius. Nonetheless, Acts' description of him leaves no doubt that he was still an ethnocentric bigot. Peter proudly claims never to have eaten anything

other than kosher food (10:14). And he makes a point of calling Cornelius' attention to the exception in this case. Normally, he refused to associate with people of other races.

In the minds of observant Jews there was a correlation between what one ate and who one was. You are what you eat, you know! Partly because Gentiles consumed "unclean" foods, Gentiles themselves were considered "unclean."<sup>36</sup>

Still, Peter was not nearly so scrupulous about ritual purity as he lets on. After all, in Joppa he was staying at the home of Simon *the tanner*. Tanning leather not only produces strong and unpleasant odors, but contact with the agents used in the process rendered one ritually unclean. After removing the fat from the skin, the hair was removed by scraping and soaking in urine and lime juice. The skin was rubbed with a mixture of leaves, tree bark, and oil; and then smoked.<sup>37</sup> Get the drift?

Although the odor at Peter's seaside retreat must have been even less appetizing than the strong scent of a sugar beet factory, it was noon and he was hungry. As his host prepared a meal, Peter went to the canopy-covered rooftop to pray in a secluded, shady spot, where cool sea breezes would help clear the air. While there, he "fell into a trance" (v 10).

His hunger and location undoubtedly influenced the form his dreamlike vision took. But this was clearly a divine revelation, for in it "he saw heaven opened" (v 11). Descending from heaven he saw "something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners" (v 11; cf. 11:5). Perhaps an awning shading him on the rooftop suggested this feature of the vision. The sheet contained a virtual menagerie of unclean animals—"all kinds of four-footed animals . . . reptiles . . . and birds" (v 12)—all considered ritually unclean according to traditional Jewish kosher laws (v 14).

Leviticus 11 contains a more exhaustive list of forbidden foods—including pork, camels, rodents, carnivorous mammals, scaleless fish (like the catfish), shellfish (like shrimp), reptiles, birds of prey, and most insects. Permitted meats included properly prepared beef, lamb, poultry, fish with scales, crickets, and grasshoppers. Yes, I said crickets and grasshoppers! Yummy! Every culture seems to have foods it finds particularly tasty and others it finds disgusting.

Jewish food laws were not concerned with etiquette, food preference, or hygiene. And the Jewish requirements of ritual purity involved more than avoiding "unclean animals." The meal was the place where Jews drew the boundary defining who was inside and outside their families, communities, and ethnic group. Gentiles were excluded from even ordinary meals. There were strict limits on what food was appropriate and how it was prepared and consumed. Jewish kosher laws reflect their belief that God is present at meals. To eat defiled food or to eat with "unclean" persons would dishonor God.<sup>38</sup>

This explains why Peter was so utterly shocked when he heard a heavenly voice urge him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat" (v 13; cf. 11:7). "Enjoy! Don't worry about the kosher laws!"

Peter's reply was a strong refusal, "Surely not, Lord!"—"No, Lord!" The combination of "no" and "Lord" sounds strangely oxymoronic. How can one say *No . . . Lord?* Was Peter prepared to let tradition take precedence over obedience? Was this a test of his faithfulness? He defended his reticence on the basis of his lifelong observance of



Israel's food regulations: "I have *never* eaten anything impure or unclean" (v 14, emphasis added; cf. 11:8).

The heavenly Voice took exception to Peter's excuse and urged him to reconsider, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean" (10:15). The divine command to kill and eat, Peter's refusal, and the divine objection to it happened "three times." Then the vision suddenly concluded as the sheet and its contents (11:10) were taken back to heaven.

When Peter awakened from his dream, hungry though he was, he did not immediately order a cheeseburger with bacon. He didn't begin to salivate for fried shrimp. But "Peter was greatly puzzled," not only about the strangeness of his vision, but also about the threefold repetition of the exchange between himself and the Voice. What was "the meaning of the vision" (10:17)?

As Peter contemplated its interpretation and implications, messengers from Cornelius arrived. Although the Spirit did not explain the vision, he prompted Peter to go to Caesarea with these men "without hesitation" (10:20, NRSV) and to make no "distinction" between them and himself (11:12, NRSV). That is, he was to treat these Gentile visitors as he would Jews. Thus, because it was too late to leave for Caesarea, "Peter invited the men into the house [where he was a guest] to be his guests" (10:23).

The next morning Peter and six Jewish Christians from Joppa (v 12) left with the three messengers for Caesarea, where they arrived the next day (10:23). Upon entering the centurion's house, Peter was reverently welcomed and introduced to Cornelius' many "relatives and close friends," who had gathered to hear whatever message Peter might bring (vv 24-27).

Peter rehearsed the exceptional circumstances that had led him as a Jew to accept the hospitality of a Gentile—something that was not ordinarily done (v 28). By this time he had come to understand his puzzling vision to imply that he "should not call [anyone] impure or unclean" (v 28). But he still did not know *why* Cornelius had invited him to his house (v 29).

Then Cornelius rehearsed *his* vision that had motivated him to send for Peter. He had done as he was instructed. The moment had finally arrived that he had been praying and waiting for for three long days. "Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us" (v 33).

No preacher could ask for a more receptive audience. Peter's opening words summarize the dawning realization to which *his* vision had led him, "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism" (v 34). God has no favorites. He is not prejudiced. He does not discriminate unfairly between Jews and Gentiles. No one "by the mere fact of his race . . . is unclean."<sup>39</sup>

Cornelius and his family were not isolated exceptions. Quite the contrary, God "accepts those from every nation who fear him and do what is right" (v 35). God no more discriminates between males and females than he does between races. God accepts anyone who shows him the respect he is due (see 10:2; 13:26).

That God accepts all who fear him and do what is right does not imply that salvation is based on human merit. Nor does Peter claim that God accepts only Gentiles pious

enough for Jews to approve.<sup>40</sup> His point is not an “abstract reflection about the possibility of attaining salvation apart from Christian preaching.”<sup>41</sup> Certainly, neither Cornelius nor Peter concludes that his piety made the gospel unnecessary.<sup>42</sup> Rather, reverence and righteous living are seen as visible expressions of the inward attitude we call “faith,” which is the only necessary human response to God’s gracious offer of salvation. But it is God alone, not these, or any other human activity, that saves.

Cornelius had been a seeker after God for some time, but not a finder—until this eventful day. Apparently this was his first indication that God had been hearing his prayers. Even his vision of the angel had brought him no comfort. Cornelius could only stare at him in fear and ask, “What is it, Lord?” (10:4).

When Peter came to Caesarea, he presumed that Cornelius was adequately informed about the rules and regulations of Judaism. “You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile” (v 28). And he even presumed that Cornelius was somewhat familiar with the gospel story. “You know the message” of Jesus of Nazareth (vv 36-38).

But Peter also presumed that neither Cornelius’ noble attributes nor his information was enough to grant him salvation. This was not news to Cornelius. He knew he was lost. No one needed to remind him that he was a Gentile dog—unworthy even to associate with the people of God. What Cornelius needed was the visit of Simon Peter and “*a message through which [he] and all [his] household [would] be saved*” (11:14, emphasis added).

And what is this saving message? Strangely enough, it is the shocking story about how Jews and Romans conspired together to kill Jesus “by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen . . . by witnesses” like Peter (10:39-41). The story of the Cross reminds us that Jews and Romans—the supposedly religious and supposedly pagan—are both sinners in need of God’s grace. The story of the Cross is the astonishing news that “peace” with God does not come from human status or efforts at self-reform. The good news of the gospel is that peace comes “through Jesus Christ” alone (v 36) because God has no favorites.

God made Jesus the sovereign “Lord of all” (v 36); but this fact is saving only to those who submit to him as Lord—who say, “Yes, Lord.” God also appointed Jesus “judge of the living and the dead” (v 42); and *anyone* who “believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (v 43).

When Cornelius and his family heard the message of forgiveness of sins through the cross of Christ, something remarkable happened. His good deeds had not been enough to give him the assurance of salvation. Knowledge of the story of Jesus was not enough. Even an encounter with a heavenly angel was not enough. But when simple trust in the crucified and risen Christ connected with God’s offer of salvation to all, Cornelius and his entire family received irrefutable evidence of their acceptance by God. The Holy Spirit entered their lives and their seeking gave way to finding. Their pleas gave way to praise.

The Jewish Christians who had accompanied Peter from Joppa to Caesarea were “*astonished* that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out *even on the Gentiles*” (v 45, emphasis added). They were “astounded,” “amazed,” even confused. Surprised and shocked at what God had done, they could scarcely believe their eyes and ears.

But believe they must. If God had accepted these Gentiles, who could deny them the sign of full standing in the Christian community? "Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit *just as we have*" (v 47, emphasis added). Peter's critics in Jerusalem accepted the coming of the Holy Spirit to these believing pagans as ample evidence that God had "granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life" (v 18).

But Acts 15 reports that years later at the Apostolic Council in Jerusalem, there were still Jewish Christians who insisted, "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved" (15:1). Peter would hear nothing of it, and rehearsed again the astonishing events that had occurred at the house of Cornelius in Caesarea by the Sea.

After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: "Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might *hear* from my lips the message of the gospel and *believe*. God, who knows the heart, showed that he *accepted them* by giving the Holy Spirit to them, *just as he did to us*. He made *no distinction* between us and them, for he purified their hearts *by faith*. . . . We believe it is through the *grace* of our Lord Jesus that we are *saved, just as they are*" (vv 7-9, 11, emphasis added).

Not circumcision and custom, but Christ and the Cross bring the grace of salvation. Centuries earlier Isaiah had prophesied that the Servant of the Lord would open "the eyes that are blind," bringing the light of salvation to the nations, by causing his people to become "a light for the Gentiles" (Isa 42:7, 6).

But sometimes the people of God are just as blind to what God is doing as are outsiders. The good news of salvation is not for God's people alone. Peter and Cornelius—Jew and Gentile, fisherman and soldier—stand side-by-side at the foot of the Cross, where it is always level ground. We all must receive our sight by faith at the Cross.

How are those of us who have seen the light to shine in the darkness when we insulate ourselves with thick walls of protection from contamination by the world around us? Perhaps we can learn from the example of Peter.

Quite obviously, Peter is not presented in an entirely favorable light in Acts 10 or elsewhere in the New Testament. He is never portrayed as the *ideal* disciple, but he is often far too *typical*. If time permitted, we could rehearse a number of stories about this disciple—who speaks because he can't think of anything to say, who makes promises he can't keep, who's better at telling war stories than at swinging a sword. Just one must do.

Do you remember the closing story in John's Gospel, in which Peter and six fellow disciples encounter the risen Christ after an unsuccessful overnight fishing expedition? Remember what Jesus calls Peter in their three-times repeated exchange? *Simon bar-Jonah*—"Simon, son of Jonah, do you love me more than these?" (Jn 21:15-17).

Recall that it was to Joppa that Jonah retreated when he tried to evade his God-given mission to Nineveh (Jon 1:3; Acts 9:43). In both cases God had to intervene to overcome his messengers' reluctance. Jonah spent three days in the fish; Peter required a threefold vision (Jn 1:17; Acts 10:16). Both received the divine commission, "Arise . . . and go" (Jon 3:2; Acts 10:20) before they finally delivered the

message to the Gentiles. Both the Ninevites and the household of Cornelius believed the message and were forgiven (Jon 3:5; Acts 10:43), despite protests by those who should have known better.

Jonah's God, who extends grace to outsiders, is Peter's God—the same God who continues to astonish us with his grace—grace sufficient to forgive a pagan soldier; grace sufficient to teach a bigoted fisherman a little more about fishing for people.

Acts tells Peter's story in the language of Jonah's earlier story. Cornelius' conversion is legitimized as the continuation of God's merciful work at Nineveh. Simon Peter is the "son of Jonah" who is "called by his ancestor's God to convert the Gentiles."<sup>43</sup> In response, the people of God should certainly praise Him for granting at the Cross "repentance that leads to life" to all who will receive it" (11:18, NRSV).

But is there anything else we should learn from this story? At the risk of being misunderstood, I would insist that the incident should challenge our muddle-headed thinking about mission. I have heard those who have been Christians long enough to know better say something like this: "If God calls me to prepare for ministry, of course, I'll do it. But if he doesn't, I'm just going to do what I want with my life."

They've got it all backward. God has already revealed his will that none should perish and that all should come to repentance (2 Pet 3:9), that those who know him should make him known to those who don't, regardless of who or where they are. Thus, Christians should say, "Unless I hear otherwise from God, I presume that I'm called to full-time Christian mission." One who is a Christian cannot think of his or her job as his or her life's mission.

Those who make their living as public school teachers have as their real mission to be a subversive influence for Christ among their students and colleagues. IBM may pay the bills for others, but they dare not give their lives for this or any other corporation. Some may become attorneys or physicians, but they must not get sidetracked by dreams of money, Mercedes, and mansions, headless to their real calling to mission.

Why are you planning a vacation in Joppa? If the stench does not drive you away, will it take heavenly visions and messengers from afar to wake you up to God's call to be witnesses for Christ in the marketplace? Are you so narrow-minded and bigoted that God must resort to desperate measures to move you to Caesarea and those you consider unclean with the good news of peace and life and the God who has no favorites?

## The Spirit of Unity: Ephesians 4

Introduction. At times it seems that the reality of Christian unity in the world is in sad contradiction to the New Testament ideal. The quality of Christian community life is not always superior to that of other merely human organizations. Christian churches are far from being exempt from personality conflicts, from petty bickering and rivalries. In fact they often seem to be hotbeds of unhealthy human relations. Where is the evidence that the Holy Spirit actually changes the lives of believers and their relationships to one another?

No book in the New Testament has a higher vision for the possibilities of the Spirit-filled life than the Letter to the Ephesians. And yet, no other New Testament book has a more down-to-earth treatment of what is required of Christians if God's ideals are ever to become a reality on this fallen planet.

The first half of the letter provides the theoretical basis for the practical applications of the second half. The first three chapters of Ephesians inform us about God's gracious provisions to enable the Christian community to be his means of achieving his eternal plan of redemption for the universe. Chapters 4–6 instruct us in the holy way of life that is appropriate for those who have such a high calling.

The major concern of Ephesians 4:1-6 is for unity and harmony among Christians, not merely as fellow Christians, but as fellow human beings. Read in the context of the entire chapter, it is perfectly clear that unity is not to be confused with uniformity. In the same way, singing in harmony is not the same as singing in unison. Harmony is possible because those with different voices blend them in a way that complements the other voices and the other parts. Just so, harmony within the Body of Christ is possible because God's diverse gifts equip us differently to grow and become mature in healthy relationships with others in the Body.

Differences of opinion and diversity in gifts and interests within the Christian family are not the same as division. In fact, diversity is a good thing. Your strengths complement my weaknesses, and vice versa. Your gifts compensate for my deficiencies, and vice versa. Christian unity does not mean that we all become clones of one another. But it does mean the end of cut-throat competition and comparisons. Instead, we compensate for and complete one another. Not as isolated individuals, but as a united community, we are the Body of Christ and reveal him to the world. Consider the words of Ephesians 4:1-6:

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

The central appeal of these verses is stated in verse 1. It is that we should live lives worthy of the calling we received when we became a part of the Body of Christ. Now, this does not suggest that we can somehow ever deserve all that God has done for us, that somehow we can pay God back for his grace. Ephesians makes it clear that the

Spirit-filled life is by grace from first to last. We are saved by grace. We are kept by grace. We may obey only because of his grace.

Behavior that is "worthy" of our calling is a manner of life that is appropriate, or consistent with the calling we received from God. We have been called to be representatives of a holy God in this world. We have been called to praise God with our lives. We must appropriate his grace to live up to his awesome call. More than with our words, we praise, or humiliate, God with our lives (1:6, 12, 14). Christian morality cannot be reduced to a list of rules. Typically, Paul urges Christians to act morally in a way that reflects who we are and whose we are. To live worthy of our calling, we must be what God's grace enables us to be. This is a consistent NT teaching, reflecting the ethical dimension of holiness.

First Thessalonians 2:12 calls for lives that are "worthy of God, who calls [us] into his kingdom and glory." Philippians 1:27 calls for conduct that is "worthy of the gospel of Christ." Romans 16:2, for "a way [of life] worthy of the saints." Colossians 1:10, for "a life worthy of the Lord," one that pleases Him in every way. Much the same point is made in 1 Peter 1:15, "Just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do."

God has great plans for his Church. According to Ephesians 1:5, he has planned that we should be holy and blameless before him in love. And he has provided all things necessary for us to fulfill his plans. In particular, he has given us his Holy Spirit. The question remains, Will we live lives worthy of our calling to represent the one true God in this world? Or will our petty divisions raise questions as to whether God exists and whether there is but one God? Christian unity is no small concern. On it hinges the conversion of the lost world to faith in Christ.

Ephesians 4:2-6 present the essential attitudes and actions necessary for Christian unity; the spiritual basis for unity and the bond of peace; and the core contents of Christian unity. Let's look at these in reverse order.

## The Core Contents of Christian Unity (4:4-6)

Christian unity exists! It consists in the following great realities that make Christians one. Verses 4-6 list seven realities that provide the non-negotiable core contents of the unity that already exists among Christians, despite our diversity. Because we hold these great realities in common, the petty things that divide us are small by comparison.

1. We are one body. One body (4:4) emphasizes the universality of the Church; there is only one Church and it includes all believers. All Christians are members of the same Body of Christ.

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. . . . For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the organs in the body, each one of them as he chose. If all were a single organ, where would the body be? As it is there are many parts, yet one body. The eye

cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary . . . God has so composed the body . . . that there may be no discord in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together (1 Cor 12:12-18, 25-26; RSV).

2. We all share the gift of the one Spirit. One Spirit (Eph 4:4), the Holy Spirit, is the source of the Church's life. It is not my skin color, my nationality, my accent, my educational level, my social class, my income, my job, my church membership, or anything else of my doing that makes me one with you. It is the Holy Spirit who creates and conserves Christian unity.
3. We all look forward to one hope. A share in the glorious, future consummation of God's redemptive plan for the entire universe is the one hope to which all believers are called. Our hope is glorious—it is more than we could ever ask or imagine—that we should enjoy every spiritual blessing with Christ in heaven (1:3); that we should be holy and blameless before him (v 4); that we should be sons and daughters of God (v 5); that we should be a part of his plan to unite all things in heaven and on earth in Christ (vv 9-10); that we should share in the hope of the resurrection from the dead (vv 15-23). I might as well learn to love the family I'll spend eternity with.
4. It is to one Lord, Jesus Christ, that all Christians give allegiance. We may come from different parts of the country or the world. We may speak in different languages or with different accents. Christians may belong to different denominations. Our personal idiosyncrasies may seem strange to one another. Our clothes may be different. Our tastes in food may be different. Our favorite baseball team may be different. But if Jesus Christ is Lord, our ultimate allegiance is one.
5. We all share one faith. The one faith is the same response of trusting obedience to Christ that is the basis of the salvation all Christians have in common (4:5).
6. The one baptism probably refers to the water rite of initiation through which all believers acknowledge Jesus as Lord and become a part of the visible Christian community (see Rom 6:1-11; 1 Cor 1:13; 12:13; Gal 3:26-28; Col 2:11-13; 3:10-11). Paul simply takes for granted, if you are a Christian, you have been baptized. You have, haven't you?
7. The one God is the Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all (v 6). Belief in "one God" is what theologians call monotheism. To be a monotheist is to see reality as of one piece. It is to recognize that everything that exists owes its origin and continued existence to this one God (see Rom 11:36). All that exists that is not God is his creation. God is our "Ultimate Parent," the Creator "of all" that exists. Because God is your Creator and mine, we are brothers and sisters—fellow human beings, despite all the lesser things that may divide us. Because this same Creator has acted to salvage his rebellious creation, I am twice your brother—by creation and by redemption. And so I should be twice my brother's and sister's keeper.

## The Basis for Unity and the Bond of Peace (4:3)

The worthy Christian life is to be further marked not only by these five Christlike qualities, but also by its eagerness to keep the unity of the Spirit (v 3). "To keep" or maintain unity is to preserve and protect it from loss. That we are to keep "the unity of the Spirit" should remind us that we cannot simply create this unity.

Unity is enjoyed by believers on the basis of the reconciling death of Christ made personal by the work of the Holy Spirit. Reconciliation brings together as friends those that were once enemies. Peace with God enables us to live at peace with one another. The Spirit makes it possible for believers, despite our differences, to remain one as the new people of God (see 2:14-22). Unity in our churches and in our homes is neither magic nor automatic. We can never take Christian unity for granted; it must be a priority—a high concern. Maintaining the unity God makes possible is not an option; it is a command.

Unity is a fragile gift and requires diligent maintenance and protection through the bond of peace (4:3). The bond, the mutual "chains," holding Christians together consist of peace. "Make every effort to preserve the unity which has the Spirit as its origin and peace as its binding force." Have you inspected lately the ties that bind our hearts in Christian love? Is everything in order? Are there any broken relationships that need mending? Hurts that need healing? Apologies unmade? Forgiveness withheld? Gratitude unexpressed? Are you making every effort to preserve the unity, which the Spirit has given?

## The Attitudes and Actions Necessary for Christian Unity

Ephesians 4:2 describes the character of the Spirit-filled life—the only kind of life that is worthy of our calling to be God's people (see Phil 2:1-4; Col 3:12-15). Such a life is marked by five Christlike qualities essential to harmonious life in community: humility, gentleness, patience, tolerance, and love. Ephesians 5 makes clear that these same attitudes and actions are essential for harmony in the Christian family. Let's consider these five qualities one at a time.

1. To be completely humble requires a self-image consistent with the truth (see Matt 11:29). It is to have neither an inflated nor deflated sense of our importance. It is not to pretend to be less than we are, nor more. It is to have a realistic estimate of our strengths and weaknesses. To be humble is not to wallow in the mud, as if we were mere animals, nor to imagine that we soar in the clouds, as if we were gods. It is to know we are just human creatures, but to know we are God's creatures. It is to know that we are not yet all that God intends for us to be, but—thank God—we are no longer what we used to be. To be completely humble is to be totally honest and realistic about ourselves. It is to live without pretense or hypocrisy.

The Christian community should be a place where we can be brutally honest about ourselves, a place where it is unnecessary to put on airs. We know we are important, not because of our greatness, but because of God's great love for us proven in Christ. He did not think of his equality with God as something to hold on to, but he humbled himself and became a man, a servant. And he put his life on the line for us. Will we follow him on the path of humility. Brutal honesty about ourselves would make it more difficult for most of us to be unlovingly critical about others.



2. To be gentle is to be caring and considerate. It means not insisting upon our rights at the expense of another's. It is to treat others in a fashion befitting their condition, with due care and concern. It is to respect others as creatures of God, who are not to be made into means to achieve our selfish ends, but as ends in themselves. It is to treat others with the same compassion and respect we would like to receive ourselves. It is to see in every human being, a person of eternal worth—one for whom Christ died.

Gentleness creates an atmosphere where hurting people can find healing and wholeness. The church is, or should be, a place where people injured and bearing scars from life's mishaps and disasters—great and small—can find care and cure. This place is a hospital for forgiven sinners, not a showcase for already perfect specimens.

To be gentle is to be flexible in dealing with others. It is to be willing to adjust, to be adaptable. It is to be empathetically concerned about others. It is to be willing to change myself in the interests of getting along with others. If we are gentle, we will adapt in the interests of others. Christ did.

3. To be patient means being long tempered as opposed to short-tempered. Patience is giving another a second chance when he or she fails—and a third, and fourth, and so on. Do you recall Jesus' story in Matthew 18 about the unforgiving servant? Patience is forgiving without being asked. Patience is giving the other the same advantage of the doubt we like to be given when we fail to live up to our ideals, or theirs. Patience is seeing another less for what he or she is now, than for what he or she could be by the grace of God.

To be patient is to give others time to change. It is to give others the benefit of the doubt. It is to wait and hope for the best. It is not to look for reasons to condemn and criticize others, but to give them and their behavior the best possible interpretation.

4. Tolerance means bearing with one another. It is giving someone the freedom to be different and to accept him or her anyway, without reservations. It is realizing that we need not recreate others in our image. We can let them be themselves. We not only give them time to change but give them space to remain the same—even if that means they remain forever unlike us. It is to learn not only to put up with the idiosyncrasies of others but to come to appreciate their uniqueness as a special gift of God to the Church.

To practice tolerance is not merely to settle for something different, it is to rejoice in diversity. It is to affirm the good in others, despite their differences. Imagine what gardens would look like if we treated them as we do people. Only white flowers? Only daisies? Then, recall the most beautiful garden you've ever seen. Wasn't it one of great diversity marked by unusual harmony? If I am tolerant, I will allow you to be you.

5. All of these qualities are only concrete expressions of love in real-life situations. Love is humility, gentleness, patience, and tolerance in action. Love is not primarily a feeling, nor even a disposition; it is active goodwill, seeking what is in the long-term best interests of the other. Christ loved the Church and gave himself for it that he might sanctify it and make it holy (Eph 5:26-27). Thus, it is in the

sphere of genuinely loving personal relationships that holiness finds its most eloquent and persuasive expression in everyday life. It is God's plan that the church should be holy and blameless before him in love (Eph 1:4).

Perhaps you heard of the old bachelor who was a child psychologist. He was constantly lecturing his neighbors with kids not to spank them, just love them. But one Saturday morning he was pouring a cement patio in his backyard when two neighborhood kids came running with reckless abandon right through the freshly smoothed surface of his new patio. Without a moment's thought he grabbed them both and gave them a sound spanking.

The neighbors who had observed it all were amused. "What became of your theory, 'Don't spank them, just love them?'" they asked.

He replied: "Oh, that was in the abstract, but they were in the concrete!" Love that doesn't work in the concrete is just so much talk. Theory must be expressed in practice.

"Love" that is more than in the abstract, that operates even in the concrete, even here below, with saints we know—genuine love requires giving others time and help (1:4; 3:17; 4:15-16). It means putting your interests over my interests. It means being humble, gentle, patient, and tolerant.

If all of us loved "one another" in this Godlike fashion, there would be no opportunity for any Christian to take advantage of another. All would help and be helped. We could all let down our defenses and be ourselves. I could be totally honest about myself with you and you with me. And you would never need to fear that I would ever use my knowledge of your vulnerable areas to hurt you. I could patiently wait for you to change and be tolerant even if you never did.

It all sounds so heavenly, doesn't it. But to live this way in this world involves a great risk. What if I take the first move, and you take advantage of me? What if I'm humble while others toot their own horn? What if I'm gentle and others manipulate me to achieve their selfish ends? What if I'm patient and others seem to have a short fuse? What if I'm tolerant of others and they don't accept me? What if I give myself up in Christian love and others act as if they couldn't care less? What if . . . ? What if I get crucified? Surely God wouldn't let that happen to his children. Or would he? When I imagine that self-preservation is more important than suffering servanthood, I need to look again at the Cross.

Love must be embodied in deeds. Words alone are not enough. Perhaps you've seen the bumper sticker, "Honk if you love Jesus!" Nonsense! If you love Jesus, prove it by being completely humble, gentle, tolerant, and loving to others.

It seems so logical, so compelling, so Christlike, that Christians, of all people, should live this way. So why doesn't real life in the Christian community seem to be like this?

Some things are definitely evil and can never be tolerated. We must learn to distinguish right from wrong. Love must not be blind in the realm of ethics. Genuine love will not allow me to wink at evil. According to Romans 12:9, genuine love means hating what is evil and holding fast to what is good.

We must learn to distinguish between the merely urgent and the truly important; between the ultimately essential and the finally optional; between the good, the better, and the best (Phil 1:9). Decisions about such things are best made in the context of a united Christian community marked by the qualities of humility, gentleness, patience, tolerance, and love.

## Conclusion

God has done all that is necessary for the Body of Christ to be a force in the world. Will we settle for a farce? Will we only play church? Or will we be the Church? Will we maintain the unity of the Spirit here and now?

Let us live by the Spirit and be now what God has called us to be. Let us live lives that are worthy of his call to be his representatives on this planet. Let us preserve the unity he has given. Real unity is not something mere humans can create by negotiation and compromise. Unity is something that may exist where as few as two or three gather together with only Christ in common (Mt 18). Unity is not automatic or magic. It calls for humility, gentleness, tolerance, patience, and love in real-life situations. We must not give up on one another now as we await the changes Christ will bring in the future.<sup>44</sup>

## Lesson 7: Life in the Spirit

### Due This Lesson

Review of Bible passages  
Reading of NDBT  
Reading of assigned resource  
Paper  
Journaling

### Learner Objectives

By the end of this lesson, participants should

- be able to explain the biblical foundations for pneumatology

### Homework Assignments

Read: The following sections of NDBT: Creation; God, Holy Spirit; Incarnation; Jesus Christ; Theophany. Prepare theological concepts that the reading seems to support.

Study the first three Articles of Faith in the *Manual* of the Church of the Nazarene.

Write: Summarize your current understanding of the biblical basis for the belief that God is Trinity, 2- to 3-page essay.

Write in your journal. Is the Holy Spirit real in your life? Do you tend to think more in terms of Father and Son and your relationship with them?

## Holy Spirit

The intertestamental period somewhat imprecisely identifies the 400 years following the return of the Jews from the Babylonian captivity and preceding the birth of Jesus. During this time Jewish rabbis began to think of the Spirit as in some sense distinguishable from God with a personal existence of His own. The rabbis used "Holy Spirit" as a personification representing God's presence in the world.

Although the New Testament was written in Greek and utilized the Greek term *pneuma* rather than the Hebrew *ruach* to refer to the Spirit, its background assumptions concerning the Spirit are Hebraic rather than Hellenistic. Thus, for example, there are no known references to a holy spirit in secular Greek literature nor was there any notion of the spirit as personal in Greek thought apart from Jewish and Christian influences.

The Old Testament and intertestamental Judaism cannot account for many of the Christian assumptions about the Holy Spirit; for example, that he is a person distinct from but closely related to God the Father and Jesus the Christ, and as such capable of the actions and reactions of a person—speaking, teaching, leading, etc.

## **Promise of the Spirit—John 7: 14-16**

### **The Proof of Obedience (14:15, 21-24)**

- His call to obey was not for the first disciples only, but for “whoever” loves Jesus (v 21).
- Real love was not an emotion but a bond of covenant faithfulness.
- The proof of obedience is love for Jesus and for one another.

### **The Promise of the Spirit (7:37-39; 14:16-17, 25-26)**

- The week-long Feast of Tabernacles was celebrated in Jesus’ day with elaborate water rituals symbolizing the Holy Spirit.
- Jesus is the source of the salvation-life the Spirit effects in us as believers.

### **The Presence of Jesus (14:18-20)**

- Because of the work of the Holy Spirit, the presence of Jesus is a present reality to believers.

### **The Peace of Jesus (14:27)**

- The inheritance of peace is as surely for us as is the gift of the Spirit.
- Jesus’ peace had nothing to do with the absence of conflict.
- Jesus’ peace is not a guarantee of happiness and good fortune.

The Holy Spirit brings the presence of Jesus close to encourage and strengthen us when we need him most. And where he is, there is peace. And since he is the Truth, his peace is no illusion.

## Paraclete

The Spirit is identified as the "Paraclete." Comforter, Counselor, Helper, Mediator, Encourager, and Advocate are all possible English translations. But no one translation is entirely adequate.

### *Who is the Paraclete?*

- He is the Spirit of Christ. Jesus calls him "another" Paraclete, implying that he himself is the first Paraclete (14:16).
- Paraclete is also the Spirit of God.
- The Paraclete is the gift of the Father to believers.

### *What is the work of the Paraclete?*

- *First*, his assignment is to represent Jesus to the disciples after Jesus' departure.
- *Second*, the Paraclete teaches disciples "all things."

### *Who may receive the Holy Spirit?*

- He is a gift reserved for believers only.

### *Why do we need the Holy Spirit?*

- We must have the Spirit of Christ if we are to live the Christian life. We cannot do it alone.
- The Paraclete helps us bear witness to Jesus.
- He convicts the world of the error of its unbelief in Jesus (16:8-11).
- He condemns the world of the sin of unbelief.
- He convinces the world that Jesus and his followers are correct.
- He makes possible the conversion of the world (3:16-17).
- The Spirit enables the Church.
- He creates the Church.

## Small Groups

You are to read each other's papers. One objective is to learn from each other about what the other read and studied. The other objective is to challenge and critique each other's work.

Mark the places where it is not clear what is being said. Mark places where good points have been clearly stated. Point out places where and why you disagree. Make comments about how they could make the paper better.

After you have read what your fellow students have written about your paper, give a response/defense. Discuss what you have learned.



## Small Groups

In your group read the assigned passage.

- Romans 8
- 1 Corinthians 12–14
- Galatians 3–5

Concentrate on Paul's teaching about the person and work of the Holy Spirit.

You will have 20-25 minutes to read, discuss, and prepare a brief report to share with the entire class.

## Unit 3: Unifying Theological Concepts

### Lesson 8: The Creator God

#### Due This Lesson

Reading  
Study of *Manual*  
Essay on the Trinity  
Journaling

#### Learner Objectives

- By the end of this lesson, participants should
- examine the growing biblical revelation of the nature and character of the one and only God, the sole Creator of the universe
  - be able to explain the biblical foundations for the Christian understanding of the mystery of our Triune God

#### Homework Assignments

Review the following Bible passages: Genesis 1–3; Exodus 32; Jonah. Prepare at least 6 theological statements that these passages would support.

Read the following sections in NDBT: Adam and Eve, Atonement, Forgiveness and Reconciliation, Grace, Guilt, Justice and Justification, Love, Mercy/Compassion, Redemption, Repentance, Righteousness, Sacrifice, Salvation, and Sin.

Write a 3-page salvation essay titled “What the New Testament Teaches About Becoming and Remaining a Christian.” Give particular attention to the human need for salvation and God’s means of dealing with the problem of sin.

Read **1** of the following:

- Resource 8-10, “The Sin of Ingratitude—Psalm 107”
- Resource 8-11, “Bad News/Good News—Romans 1–3”
- Resource 8-12, “God’s Love Undoes What Sin Destroyed—Romans 5”

Write a 1- to 2-page summary.

Write in your journal. Reflect on how this module is deepening your relationship with God.

## The One and Only God

The creation stories declare that creation was the work of one God. The second story makes sure that we understand that, that God is Yahweh who declared himself to Moses and called out Abraham.

The *Shema* in Deuteronomy 6 following the reiteration of the Ten Commandments declares in no uncertain terms that Yahweh is one. He is not a pantheon of gods. He stands alone. The declaration became the foundation for the belief that there is only one God, and that God is Yahweh.

The dominant issue in the books of the Former Prophets is the issue Moses tried to get through to Israel—Yahweh must be worshiped exclusively and he holds all power.

It is in the prophecies of Isaiah that we have, for the first time, clear enunciation of the fact that there is only one God and that all others called gods are not gods at all.

To the New Testament writers there is only one God—their God.

## The Otherness of God

The very word “God” expresses that this person is not human.

Scripture uses the contrast between God and humanity to reveal his otherness.

As we follow the life of Abraham we see that he tried to be obedient to God and trusted that God had his best interests at heart.

Moses recognized his limitations and turned to God with a request that God teach him.

This cry for the guidance of God, instruction in the ways of God, occurs repeatedly.

Psalm 139:23—It is a cry for restoration to a semblance of the image of God, a participation in the goodness of God, and a removal of the evil that makes humanity utterly other than God.

But the New Testament brings in greater revelation of the fact that God is other and yet with us. This otherness of God is best seen in Jesus.

- On the one hand he is human, he was one of us.
- But on the other hand he was not at all like us.

Certainly Jesus reveals that God is utterly other than humanity, but he also reveals that God wants us to become like him.

## The Good God

From the very first act of creation, what God does is good. Goodness flows from him.

- God gives good promises—Joshua 23:14
- Leads into a good land—Deuteronomy 8:7.
- Apart from him there is no good thing—Psalm 16:2
- His messengers carry good news and good tidings—Isaiah 52
- He instructs those who follow him—Psalm 25:7-8
- He does good to those who take refuge in him—Psalm 34:8
- He forgives

It is Micah who declares God's definition of goodness: "He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Mic 6:8).

The simple statement of the fact of the goodness of God, "Yahweh is good" or "God is good" occurs almost exclusively in connection with the worship formula—"Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever" (1 Chr 16:34).

## Holy God

Part of that which makes God different from humanity is the fact that God is holy.

- God's holiness is revealed in his dealings with humanity—holiness proceeds from God and is necessary for the fellowship with God that he intended with the establishment of the Sabbath holy day.
- God is serious about his desire to have fellowship with us, and to provide us with the holiness and life that proceed only from him.

Anything or anyone that approaches God needs to be holy.

Holiness belongs to God but God wishes to share it with humankind and to create for himself a holy people.

Isaiah repeatedly calls Yahweh "the Holy One of Israel" (Isa 1:4).

The essence of God is holiness, and his covenant out of which he expresses his love is rooted in that holiness. Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel refer to the actions of the Holy One as arising from his holy character. He will not allow his holy name to be defied and gives salvation to his people as evidence of his character.

There is no question but that throughout the Old Testament the central revelation of the character of God is his holiness made known through his power and the smoke of his glory and given expression in his righteousness, love, compassion, and above all by his *chesed*.

The New Testament declares that in and through Jesus Christ this desire—of God to share his holiness with humankind—can and has become a reality in the life of believers.

The truth expressed so often in the Old Testament—where it declares that anything or anyone coming into the presence of God must be holy—is still expressed in the New Testament. But now it has become possible through the mediation of our Great High Priest, for God to share his holiness with us.

It is in the Book of Revelation that we have a return to the emphasis upon the holiness of God. This time it is linked to the eternal being of God "who was and is and is to come" (Rev 4:8). In chapter 20 we see that his followers have been endowed with his holiness.

## Holy God

The most remarkable difference in the use of the word "holy" between the Old Testament and the New is its application to the Spirit. Only three times in the Old Testament is the Spirit of God called the Holy Spirit

- Psalm 51:11 where David asks God to forgive his horrendous sins and not remove His Holy Spirit from his life
- Isaiah 63 where in verses 10 and 11 Isaiah reminds Israel that they rebelled against the Holy Spirit who had been placed in the midst of the camp

The New Testament abounds with references to the Holy Spirit. This essence of God has come to humankind in and through the Spirit.

In John 16 he [Jesus] reminds the disciples that he has to leave so that he can send the counselor, the Holy Spirit whom the Father will send. He identifies him as the Spirit of truth who will guide the disciples into the truth.

The Book of Acts abounds in so many references that it has been popularly stated that the book should have been named the Acts of the Holy Spirit.

The collective force of the Old and New Testament references to God, to Jesus, and to the Spirit binds them together in holiness and as spirit, while at the same time it preserves a separate identity for each one.

## The Great I Am

Many times within Scripture God identifies who he is.

- "I am Yahweh who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans" (Gen 15:7, paraphrased).
- "I am God almighty; walk before me and be blameless" (17:1).
- "I am Yahweh, God of your father Abraham" (28:13, paraphrased).

Who God is, is defined by what he has done and what he asks humankind to do.

It is this mysterious, timeless aspect of God that is emphasized in Isaiah—"This is what the LORD says—Israel's King and Redeemer, the LORD Almighty: I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God" (44:6).

In Revelation this one who is first and last is the one who died and came to life again. Jesus is clearly being identified as God who is the Redeemer, Yahweh Almighty, the one apart from whom there is no god.

The identification of Jesus as the eternally existent is not the only "I am" that links Jesus to God. The "I ams" of Jesus recorded in the Book of John have many parallels with the "I ams" of Yahweh in the Old Testament.

- I am the bread of life—John 6
- I am the light of the world—John 8:12
- I am the Son of God—John 10:36
- I am the good shepherd—John 10:11
- I am the resurrection and the life—John 11:25
- I am the way, the truth, and the life—John 14:6
- I am the true vine—John 15:1

Jesus identified himself during his life on earth as the I am when he declared to the Jews: "Before Abraham was, I am!" (Jn 8:58, KJV). He is the eternally existent one.



## God Who Is Love

It is in John where we read the statement of Jesus that is the best known verse in Scripture: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (Jn 3:16).

The love of God.

- The root *ahab*—the deep sense of caring for another person or thing
- *Chesed*—mercy, love, kindness

"What does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Mic 6:8).

The best explanation we have of the meaning of love is in 1 Corinthians 13 where Paul explains, ἀγάπη, love, this way: "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails." (vv 4-8).

In the Old and New Testaments we must understand the love of God to be deep concern for the well-being and development of his people and himself.

## Attributes, Names, and Characteristics of God

### The God of Abraham, the Personal God

- The intent is to make clear that Yahweh is no stranger.
- Jesus emphasized that the true children of Abraham were those who followed God the way Abraham followed God—that the spiritual identity with Abraham was of far greater importance than the physical genealogy.

### All-Knowing God

- God is Creator means that he was understood to know everything about creation, for after all he made it.
- Psalms and Proverbs rest upon the belief that the source of wisdom and understanding is Yahweh, who knows all and provides knowledge and guidance.
- In the New Testament we see Jesus as the One who is applying the principles of the Law to the lives of his followers. He gave them a new command: “Love one another; as I have loved you” (Jn 13:34, KJV).
- Yahweh, the Creator, provides instruction in the Old Testament. Jesus the creator provides instruction in the New Testament, but Jesus tells us that he had to leave so that the Counselor could come and be the master Teacher who would guide his followers into all truth.

### All-Powerful God

- The fact that he is Creator means that he has immense power.
- The preservation of Israel in the desert for 40 years was a great manifestation of his ability to provide for any need.
- David’s kingdom was established on the route between two of the greatest powers on earth at that time—Mesopotamia and Egypt.
- Elijah demonstrated the power of God over the rains and over Baal.
- It is not without reason that the psalmist and the prophets so often spoke of Yahweh’s power and called Yahweh the Almighty, the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords, Sovereign Lord.
- God did not keep his power to himself—Isaiah 40:28-31.
- In the New Testament the final liturgical statement in the Lord’s Prayer acknowledges that power belongs to the Father, but over and over again it is clear that Jesus holds power.
- Jesus does not keep power to himself but tells the disciples after his resurrection to wait in Jerusalem until they receive power from the Holy Spirit.

## **Attributes, Names, and Characteristics of God**

### **King of Kings**

- God as King is a common concept in the Old Testament.
- Human kings were not God's initial plan for Israel.
- The concept of God as King was hardly spoken of in the Former Prophets but is pronounced in the hymns of worship.
- God is also recognized as King in the writings of the prophets.
- The New Testament has several statements that Jesus is the King, the fulfillment of the promised restoration of David.
- The majority of the discussion of Jesus as King came during the trial and Crucifixion.
- The concept of God as the eternal King over all the earth appears in the New Testament benedictions.

### **God the Husband**

- In the Old Testament the Book of Hosea provides us with the strongest picture of God as the Husband of Israel.
- Isaiah and Jeremiah use the same image of Israel and Judah as an unfaithful wife to God.
- In the New Testament it is the Church that is the Bride, and Jesus is the one who is redeeming and transforming that Bride so that he can present her to himself pure and unspotted even though she had been sinful and unclean.

### **God the Father**

- The concept of God as Father seldom occurs but is not unknown in the Old Testament.
  - Moses notes that God carried Israel like a father.
  - In Psalms we read that God is Father to the fatherless.
  - Isaiah calls the coming child who is born to govern, "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Is 9:6).
- The concept of God as Father comes into full meaning in the New Testament, for it is the name that Jesus most commonly applied to God.
  - God is Father and Jesus is the Son.
  - Jesus submitted to the will of the Father in Gethsemane.
  - The Father is the one who raised the son from the dead.
  - The Father shares his throne with the Son.

## The Sin of Ingratitude—Psalm 107

*Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted*

If you're a careful reader of your Bible, you may have noticed that the Book of Psalms is divided into five books. Psalm 107 introduces Book Five. Book Four reflects on the disaster of Israel's loss of nationhood as a result of its disobedience to God and the resulting exile in Babylon. The last two psalms in Book Four recall God's redemptive deeds in Israel's history—what God had done worthy of Israel's praise. Psalm 105 announces its theme as a call to remember and give thanks.

Psalm 105 then rehearses God's saving interventions in the history of Israel. Psalm 106 begins with the same words that open Psalm 107 (NIV)—

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;  
his love endures forever.

But, sadly, it continues with a confession—Israel forgot to pray and failed to praise God. Allow me to summarize: Both we and our ancestors sinned by failing to consider God's wonderful works. We did not remember the abundance of his steadfast love. Instead, we rebelled and pursued our own ways. He delivered us from slavery in Egypt and spared us at the Red Sea. But soon we forgot his works and rejected his guidance. We exchanged the glory of God for idols and forgot God. Many times he delivered us, but we persisted in our rebellion and suffered the consequences. Nevertheless, he continued to hear our cries of distress and to show us compassion.

From the bitter depths of Babylonian exile, the psalmist closes his poem with an intercessory prayer for his fellow captives (Ps 106:47, NRSV).

Save us, O LORD our God,  
and gather us from among the nations,  
that we may give thanks to your holy name  
and glory in your praise.

Psalm 107 introduces the final book of Psalms, which celebrates God's answer to such prayers. It begins with an invitation to give thanks to God and testimony to others of God's unfailing love: "O give thanks to the LORD," followed by two explanations why thanks is required: "for he is good" and "for his steadfast love endures for ever!"

This is a call to offer thanks to God because of (1) who he is and (2) what he has done. Thanksgiving is the appropriate response to God's character and conduct. God is good, and he continually shows unfailing mercy/love. The psalmist urges, "Let the redeemed of the LORD say *so*," as the King James tradition states. Some modern translations, like the NIV, urge the redeemed to "say *this*." Obviously, the psalmist's intention is not that we should say "SO" or "THIS." It is rather that we should pray—"Thank you, Lord!" and testify—"God is good!" "His love never fails!" This is an invitation to thanksgiving.

Those invited to give thanks are called "the redeemed of the LORD." This expression appears elsewhere in Scripture in Isaiah's identification of the exiles returned from Babylonian captivity (Is 62:12).

- Thus says the LORD . . . : "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine" (43:1).

- “Fear not, for I am with you; I will bring you . . . from the east, and from the west . . . the north . . . and . . . the south . . . [I will] bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the end of the earth” (vv 5-6).
- “I am the LORD, and besides me there is no savior . . . I am God . . . your Redeemer . . . your Holy One, [your] Creator . . . your King” (vv 11, 13-15).
- And you are my “chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself that [you] might declare my praise” (vv 20-21).

The setting of Psalm 107 is obviously congregational worship. People have “gathered in from the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south.” Men and women from every compass direction have come together to worship. What they have in common is the experience of redemption—deliverance “from trouble” of one kind or another (v 2).

What follows in the psalm are four matching pictures of redemption: The worship leader invites the assembled worshipers to thank and praise God by recalling and recounting how God redeemed them. He must have suggested a pattern to imitate and they must have obliged. For verses 4-32 consist of four matching pictures of redemption. Each has a nearly identical structure, highlighted by similar phrases.

Problems: Four descriptions of trouble, described in the past tense:

1. Some were lost in the desert (vv 4-5).
2. Some were in prison (vv 10-12).
3. Some were so sick they nearly died (vv 17-18).
4. Some nearly drowned in a storm at sea (vv 23-27).

Prayers: Four reports of prayers for deliverance:

1. “Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble” (v 6)
2. “Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble” (v 13)
3. “Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble” (v 19)
4. “Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble” (v 28)

Provisions: Four reports of specific answers to prayers:

1. “He delivered them from their distress” by leading them home (vv 6-7).
2. “He delivered them from their distress” by freeing them from prison (vv 13-14).
3. “He delivered them from their distress” by healing them (vv 19-20).
4. “He delivered them from their distress” by calming the sea and bringing them safely to harbor (vv 28-30).

Pleas for Praise: Four invitations to give thanks:<sup>45</sup>

1. “Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love,  
for such wonderful works to the sons of men!” (v 8).
2. “Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love,  
for such wonderful works to the sons of men!” (v 15).
3. “Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love,  
for such wonderful works to the sons of men!” (v 21).
4. “Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love,  
for such wonderful works to the sons of men!” (v 31).

Proof: Four reasons to give thanks / invitations to testify:

1. “For he satisfies him who is thirsty,  
and the hungry he fills with good things” (v 9).
2. “For he shatters the doors of bronze,

- and cuts in two the bars of iron" (v 16).
3. "And let them offer sacrifices of thanksgiving,  
and tell of his deeds in songs of joy!" (v 22).
  4. "Let them extol him in the congregation of the people,  
and praise him in the assembly of the elders" (v 32).

In verses 33-41 the psalmist picks up a number of key phrases from the preceding pictures of redemption to offer some generalizations about the meaning of redemption. It is a divinely initiated reversal of fortunes. The psalmist is persuaded that disaster and blessing come ultimately through the permission or providence of God. He realizes that judgment and deliverance are often two sides of the same coin. God turns streams into deserts, stumbling blocks into stepping stones, and earthly sovereigns into subjects so that he may redeem. To deliver Israelite slaves from bondage, God brought judgment on Egypt. There is no redemption without judgment. Heaven would not be heaven if rebels were allowed to enter there.

### A Word to the Wise

Psalms 107 concludes in verses 42 and 43 with a reminder that when God acts in the events of our personal and national histories, righteous people "see it and are glad," but wicked people are silenced (v 42). Then, the psalmist urges his readers to consider how they will respond. "Let those who are wise give heed to these things, and consider the steadfast love of the LORD" (v 43, NRSV).

In other words: If we are wise, we will study these stories of redemption and learn from them how the Lord shows his love. So, before we respond to the psalmist's invitation to give thanks to the Lord ourselves, let's take his advice and study these stories of redemption more closely.

### Wanderers Retrieved

The first group among the gathered redeemed are road-weary travelers. Their pilgrimage to thankfulness had taken them through the wilderness, through uninhabited desert wastes. Theirs was not a purposeful journey, but aimless wandering. With no moral compass, they had been everywhere, but it had gotten them nowhere. Lost and alone, they grew so hungry and thirsty that "their life was ebbing away" (v 5, NJB).

Each of the four pictures of redemption uses the same two words to characterize the point of desperation that drove these redeemed worshipers to their knees, to cry out to the Lord—"trouble" and "distress" (vv 6, 13, 19, and 28). Both words in Hebrew refer to the discomfort of cramped quarters—of narrow, tight places. Before these worshipers thought to pray, they had gotten themselves into desperate straits. They were in a real bind. Life seemed to be closing in on them. They were in a pinch.

But then they prayed. And God met them at their precise point of need and led them straight to civilization, to society. He brought them out of the empty places by a direct route to a city, to a community of faith, to the fellowship with other believers. Here they became people of integrity and responsibility. And God satisfied their hunger and thirst with "good things."

### Prisoners Released

The second group of redeemed worshipers had come by way of the pits. Theirs had been a life of darkness and gloom. Depression and hopelessness had left them bowed down and guilt-ridden. It is not clear whether they had been prisoners bound with iron chains in some real jail somewhere or only prisoners of misery. No matter. Their sentence amounted to the same—untold years of hard labor. Whether on a literal chain gang or only an assembly line, their work had been meaningless, grinding toil. Perhaps they were breaking big rocks into little rocks, turning little rocks into gravel, and moving piles of gravel from one spot to another and back, only to repeat the whole process again, back-breaking day after bone-weary day.

Or, perhaps they were only wishing their lives away—as every Monday morning they wished it was quitting time on Friday. And perhaps they lived only for the weekend, when they drowned their sorrows, numbing their senses with another artificial high. Slaves to addictions and surface relationships, they were left used, unfulfilled, and slaves. They were bound in chains too strong to break on their own. They could not count how many times they had said, “Never again,” only to fall again into the same self-destructive patterns. And when “they fell down,” there was “no one to help” (v 12, NRSV).

They could not protest that they had been unjustly charged and convicted. They knew full well that their misery was self-inflicted. “They had rebelled against the words of God” (v 11), they had rejected the guidance of the Lord. Confined and subdued in gloom and despair they, like the innocent travelers lost in the desert, knew they were in serious “trouble.”

But then they prayed. And the God they had been avoiding in their foolish rebellion for the freedom of their own way, who had been there all the time, met them at their specific point of need and brought them to the real freedom they had longed for.

### **Sick Restored**

The third group who offered thanksgiving consisted of those who had come to God by way of the hospital. The psalm leaves their diagnosis ambiguous enough to leave us guessing as to their precise symptoms. In any case, they were so sick they no longer cared to eat. And they nearly died.

The Hebrew word translated “affliction” (v 17) can mean simply to be over occupied, too busy. It can refer to the experience of oppression, mistreatment, abuse, humiliation, or shame. Or, it can refer to the resulting depression of such experiences—being downcast, discouraged, in despair. Whether from excess stress or sinful habits, they had brought their sickness upon themselves. Perhaps they had suffered at the hands of others—physical, sexual, or emotional abuse—through no fault of their own. But whatever had been done to them in the past, they were responsible for what they had done to themselves in response. Their present “trouble” and “distress” were no one’s fault but their own.

And so in pain they prayed. And God heard their cry and “sent out his word and healed them, and delivered them from destruction” (v 20, NRSV). Although the first two groups are exhorted only to thank the Lord for their experience of redemption, this group is specifically encouraged to testify to their deliverance—to “tell of [God’s] deeds with songs of joy” (v 22, NRSV).

### **Storm-tossed Rescued**

The fourth group of gathered worshipers had been spared from disaster in the pursuit of their occupation as sailors. They were hapless victims of circumstances beyond their control. These were no novice Saturday sailors. These were seasoned seamen. They knew and respected the sea as a place where God's awesome power was displayed (v 24). And they had survived other storms that had only proven and improved their skills as mariners. But this storm was different.

They mounted up to heaven,  
they went down to the depths;  
their courage melted away in their calamity;  
they reeled  
and staggered  
like drunkards,  
and were at their wits' end (vv 26-27, NRSV).

Only then did they learn to pray. The expression "at their wits' end" in Hebrew is literally "all their wisdom was swallowed up."<sup>46</sup> Only when they realized that their own wisdom was inadequate to the impossible task that faced them did they turn to the wisdom that comes from above. They learned that the storm they could not navigate, God could calm. The psalmist challenges such salvaged sailors to thank the Lord for his covenant-keeping love (v 31). Once only awed by the power of God in the storm—"his wondrous works in the deep" (v 24, NRSV)—they learned in the experience of redemption to see the hushed quiet of the winds and sea (29) as even more "wonderful works" (v 31, NRSV).

The psalmist will hear nothing of private gratitude. These rescued sailors are urged to offer thanksgiving publicly—"in the assembly of the people . . . in the council of the elders" (v 32, NASB).

## Conclusion

Psalm 107 illustrates the experiences of four groups of redeemed people—wanderers retrieved, prisoners released, sufferers restored, and sailors rescued. Redemption for the lost and lonely is home. Redemption for the oppressed and depressed is help. Redemption for the sick and suffering is health. Redemption for those in danger and despair is haven.

This song of thanksgiving and its brief case histories teach how faith is sometimes born and tested. Many come to worship God only after they have recognized through dire personal straits that God guides in the wilderness, frees from bondage, heals from self-inflicted wounds, and stills the storms of life.<sup>47</sup>

Such things as home and help and health and haven are sometimes not appreciated until they are lost and recovered. Friends and freedom and feeling fine and fair weather are not seen for the blessings they truly are until we have lost them. These blessings, once lost and restored, quite naturally lead us to give thanks.

What if it didn't take a disaster to teach us to appreciate our homes? Is it only dumb cattle who strain at the fence, longing for greener pastures, and fail to notice the lush fields in which they already reside. Has the failure to give thanks contributed to the tragic epidemic of divorce that is sweeping through our churches?

What if we learned to enjoy life as it is, without going through all the pain and trouble described in our psalm in order to appreciate it? What if we learned to be truly thankful to God for the life he has given us?



It is important to note that the psalmist "does not confront the problem of undeserved and unrelieved evil."<sup>48</sup> He has nothing to say of the wanderers, who through no fault of their own, never found their way home, who lie buried in an unmarked grave under some unknown sand dune. He offers no consolation "for the victims of political oppression or religious persecution who slowly rot away in their jails," or for those who remain hopelessly chained to self-destructive addictions. The psalmist "does not seem to think of those who were born, or struck . . . with an incurable disease of body or mind," of babies born with AIDS or born to die with bloated bellies in some two-thirds-world famine, or of young, God-fearing mothers who die of cancer, leaving grieving children and husbands behind. "He ignores all the courageous and unsung heroes 'lost at sea.'"

But we should not fault the psalmist for this. His purpose was not to puzzle over the insoluble mystery of evil—the perplexing problem of unjust suffering in this fallen world. His words are addressed to us, the living—not to the dead.

He sings on behalf of those returned from aimless wandering. He sings for those who know the fresh air of freedom that only Christ can bring.

He breaks the power of canceled sin.

He sets the prisoner free.

His blood can make the foulest clean.

His blood availed for me.<sup>49</sup>

The psalmist "sings on behalf of those who returned from the jaws of death,"<sup>50</sup> of those spared from would-be disasters. This psalm reminds us of the wonder of just being alive. O Lord, "So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart" (Ps 90:12, NRSV).

Psalm 107 also reminds us of the wisdom of living in daily dependence on God. There is never a time when we do not need God. Crying out to the Lord, living in dependence on him, should not be simply an emergency measure, but a way of life. "True wisdom is to cry out to God, to acknowledge one's utter dependence upon God and to know that God's steadfast love is sufficient for even the worst [case] scenario."<sup>51</sup>

What if we took the psalmist's advice and seriously considered the mercy/love of the Lord displayed in these matching pictures of redemption? Could we ever again take for granted our home, our health, our freedom, or our haven? How can we ever again be guilty of the sin of ingratitude?

## Bad News/Good News—Romans 1—3

**Introduction.** Most interpreters agree that Romans 1:16-17 is the theme of the letter. Here the apostle Paul boldly confesses that the gospel announces God's power to save everyone who believes. No wonder he calls it "good news." But first, there's bad news. Romans 1:18—3:20 *explains* why God revealed his "righteousness" (v 17)—his saving faithfulness to his creation. In a single, ugly word: SIN. But even this is good news when we consider the difference between what sinners deserve and what God gives them instead.

The gospel reveals God's righteousness in two ways: first as wrath and second as salvation. Apart from Christ the world stands under the wrath of God—lost, enslaved, abandoned. In Christ the world stands under its true Lord—saved from death, freed from sin, reconciled to God. God's wrath is his resolve to reclaim his rightful reign over a race in rebellion and on the road to ruin. The seriousness of sin is apparent in its awful aftermath. Not only in God's judgment of sinners but in his extraordinary measures to remedy it.

**Bad News: Humans Are Guilty as Charged (1:18-20).** The wrath of God is not a divine temper tantrum. It is not an emotion but is his personal reaction against sin. Nor is its revelation, for the present, to be seen in fire and brimstone falling on hapless sinners. God's wrath is expressed in permissiveness, not peevishness. He lets his rebellious creatures have their own way and suffer the consequences. The punishment for sin is—sin. No human law exacts a punishment for those who leap from skyscrapers. Like sin, its certain consequence is death—its own punishment. Like salvation, wrath has its present and future dimensions. The present revelation of wrath is not God's last word to unrepentant rebels, as we shall see in 2:5-11. In the meantime, sinners continue their "free-fall" to doom, becoming more depraved on the way. The only hope is repentance and rescue.

God's wrath is the dark side of his faithfulness to his creatures. For him to excuse sin would make him untrue to his own nature as God. When creatures refuse to acknowledge God as Creator and Lord, they remove themselves from his lordship. As creatures, we *will* devote ourselves to some lord. The only question is—Who or what will it be? Our lordship determines our character, the quality of our lives, and our destiny.

Different people in different cultures at different times and in different places have succeeded only in creating different forms of idolatry. People who lie, cheat, and steal to possess their "gods" become beasts in the process. For God to spare them the consequences of their choice of unworthy lords would be to encourage them in self-destructive folly.

Alcoholics Anonymous has a word for it: "the enabler." She is the one who constantly makes excuses for her alcoholic husband. Lying to his boss, "He's sick and can't come to work today." And to the children, "Daddy's under a lot of pressure at work." And to herself, "If I can only protect him from the results of his drinking, everything will be OK." Constantly bailing him out of trouble, she enables him to avoid the reality of his addiction, to avoid temporarily the consequences of his irresponsible actions—to his ultimate destruction. God loves his creation too much to be an enabler.

The whole world belongs to the Creator. This is the *truth* humans suppress. Human sin is not a matter of ignorance. It is an expression of rebellion against one's rightful Lord. God may be invisible, but his creation is "plain" for all to see. God's "clearly seen" creation reveals him as powerful and divine. It reveals enough to make men accountable. Paul knows nothing of the "noble savage." Sinners "are without excuse"—people in revolt against their Maker (vv 18-20). "The whole world [is] held accountable to God" (3:19). And His righteous decree is: Guilty!

The creation reveals enough to move people to worship God and to thank Him (v 21). Instead, they have made it the occasion for idolatry (vv 22, 23). We miss the point if we look with revulsion at paganism only. Idolatry in our culture rears its hideous head in more sophisticated isms—each has its own lord. Each destroys both its devotees and their victims.

**Bad News: Sinners Deserve Death (1:28-32).** The idolatrous abuse of the created order is illustrated in verses 24-27 by homosexual perversions. Illustrated, not exhausted. Paul considers these to be expressions of human depravity, not alternate lifestyles, somehow also acceptable to God. Verse 28 reminds us that the exclusion of God from our lives gives sin free sway. All sense of common decency is destroyed. Anything goes. "Idolatry opens the floodgates for vices which destroy society and turn creation back into terrible chaos."<sup>52</sup> Sin only goes from bad to worse.

The revulsion most "straight" society feels for "gays" and lesbians leads us to suppose them the lowest of perverts. But homosexual sins are only expressions of the root sin of idolatry. And as Paul has argued in verses 18-23, we all stand guilty of this—apart from Christ. In verses 29-31 Paul lists twelve other examples of the darkness that descends when people try to extinguish the light of God. It is all too easy to ignore our pet perversions. In doing so we assume hypocritically the judgmental stance of the "upright sinner" described in chapter 2.

There is no rhyme or reason to the list of things that "ought not to be done" (vv 29-31). Its arrangement is as chaotic as the beastly society it describes. These evils are only representative. But they are enough to prepare the way for the verdict. And it's bad news. "Those who do such things deserve death" (v 32).

Perhaps the most astonishing thing Paul says about sinners in this entire passage is found in verse 32. Guilty and doomed, their darkness has become so thick that they have no sense of guilt! What was once a source of private shame is now applauded in public. Some commentators suggest that Paul had in mind the graphic depictions of the ancient novel or scenes from comedy and mime.<sup>53</sup> If these appalled the apostle, what would he think about contemporary movies and television? Perhaps more importantly, what do we think? Our answer probably says more about our spiritual health than about Hollywood.

**Bad News: Repent or Else (2:1-11).** It was a world split in two. Where the boundaries were drawn all depended on who *you* were. For Greek-speakers, there were Greeks and barbarians; for the educated, there were the wise and unwise (1:14). For Jews, there were Jews and Gentiles. Egocentrism and elitism always define the world that way. Only the names have been changed to protect the ignorant. White and black, rich and poor, Western and Eastern blocs, Christian and non-Christian. And problems—they're always the other side's fault. Fortunately, God is above all this. He shows no favoritism (v 11). Unfortunately, the boat we're all in together is sinking. For

he “will give to each person according to what he has done” (v 6, citing Ps 62:12). The “privileged class” is first in judgment as well as in grace (v 9-10).

We say that it’s not *what* one knows but *who* one knows that matters. Paul, however, insists that it’s not what one *knows* but what one *does* that matters. Romans 1:18-31 succeeds in its intended mission only when we “good guys” begin to feel morally superior to the “bad guys.” When we say, “Amen!” too soon, Paul’s got us right where he wants us. We assume that if applauding evil is as bad as doing it (1:32), then booing it must be as good as not doing it. Not so, says Paul.

Romans 2:1-3 charges that we condemn ourselves when we assume the role of judge, for one of two reasons. We’re hypocrites, deceiving—privately relishing what we publicly reproach, or deceived—insensitive to our own inconsistencies. *Or*, we make ourselves self-idolaters, by assuming the role of Judge, reserved for God alone (see Jas 4:11-12). Since all of us are in the same sinking ship of self-centered “idolatry” of some shape or size, none of us is in a position to judge others.

Condemning evil in others detours us from attending to the guilt at our own doorsteps. We imagine that God’s willingness to let our evil go unpunished means there will be no future judgment. We confuse God’s patience for indifference. God’s kind tolerance is intended to lead us to turn to him and change our ways (v 4). If in our stubbornness, we refuse to repent, God gives us enough rope to hang ourselves. We are accumulating capital for damnation (5). The bad news is, Repent or else.

The criterion of judgment is deeds—not words, not knowledge, not intentions—deeds (v 6). This does not undermine Paul’s claims elsewhere that salvation is not by works but by grace through faith. The point of verse 6 is explained by verses 7-10. The issue is not this or that law. The problem is not this or that sin. The issue is obedience. The problem is rebellion.

Obedience is possible only on the basis of “repentance” (v 5). Paul uses this term with surprising infrequency (see 2 Cor 7:9 and 12:21). He prefers the word “faith” (1:5; 11:30-32; 15:18; 16:26) because it emphasizes the need for constant dependence on God and obedience to Him. Obedience is possible only on the basis of grace. If God were not there, if He were not gracious, faith would be to no avail. Thus, the reward of obedience retains its *gift* character (vv 7, 10; see 4:4-8; 6:23). And its reward is “eternal life” because “the righteous will live by faith” (1:17).

Because there is a God and he is gracious, we are responsible for what we do with the life he has given us. If we persist in rebellion, we can expect nothing from God but “wrath and anger” (v 8), “trouble and distress”—no matter who we are (9). And unless we repent, we can expect to earn our wages—death (v 12; 6:23).

Here’s the bad news: Judgment day is coming. And God, not we, will be the judge. Repent or else!

The good news of Romans 3:21 and following stands out all the more brightly as we move from the shadows of 1:18—3:20. God has acted to spare humanity from the results of rebellion. But at what cost to God! He could not forever ignore evil, like an indulgent parent blind to the truth about his children. To let us “get by” on our way to self-destruction would besmirch his character as well. But how could he at once reveal the seriousness of sin *and* his willingness to give humankind a fresh start?

**The Gift Is Jesus Christ (3:21-26).** The imagery of the courtroom, the slave market, and the sacrificial altar provide the backdrop for Paul's explanation of the good news of salvation in verses 21-26. As sinners we stand guilty before the bench of the Judge of the Universe. But we find that he also stands beside us as our defense attorney, intent on finding a way to do justice while extending mercy. We stand as hopeless slaves under sin's dominion. But we find that God has acted to emancipate us. We stand before the altar of God with nothing to offer. But there we meet God who has acted as both our Priest and Sacrifice to provide forgiveness for our sins.

But now a righteousness from God . . . has been revealed (v 21). The gospel reveals God's righteousness in two ways: first as wrath and second as salvation. The wrath of God is a present reality (1:18). Thankfully, God's faithfulness to his creation is also a present reality, in spite of human unfaithfulness (1:17; 3:21, 26). God's righteousness is his power to reestablish his lordship over his creation and so restore it to a positive relation to himself. He does so by breaking the power of sin, cleansing man of its depravity, and reconciling sinners to himself.

Law pointed out but was powerless to remedy the problem of sin (3:19-20). The seriousness of sin became apparent in its awful aftermath. Sin occasioned God's judgment of sinners. But it also occasioned his extraordinary measures to redeem. God's unprecedented measures to save were not unexpected. The Scriptures anticipated the reckless self-abandon of God. Many popular images of the OT are simply wrong. It is not a book of *law* in contrast to the NT as a book of *grace*. God did not get converted between the Testaments. God has always been gracious. The cross shows how far he was willing to go to save. Jesus Christ is the demonstration of God's faithfulness to his fallen creation. He has done what the Law was powerless to do (see 8:3-4).

The gift comes only through faith in Jesus Christ (v 22). Doing what the law requires cannot effect the right relation with God that sin has destroyed (3:20). As hopeless slaves to sin, we can change lords only by being set free from our bondage—that is, by redemption (v 24). Redemption has already been won once and for all by Christ. He gives his costly freedom freely to all who will take it. It remains only for sinners to accept the gift—this is faith. To have faith is to admit we are slaves to sin and helpless to free ourselves. To have faith is to turn from our rebellion to trust the God who is. It is to abandon the gods of our own creation to surrender to the lordship of our Creator. Restored to the relationship intended between humankind and his Creator, we are justified (v 26).

**The Gift Is for All.** The universality of salvation by faith, affirmed earlier in 1:17, is explained in 3:22-23. Just as sin knows no ethnic boundaries, so it is with salvation. Salvation is as extensive as sin. Paul's negative proof that "Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin" (v 9), is the basis for his positive claim. All whom God puts right with himself are righteous. But this righteousness is not a status we possess. As a relationship we enjoy, it is preserved intact only as God's gracious lordship over us, restored in Christ, is sustained. Only in the sphere of Christ's lordship is there universal salvation. Only believers enjoy the salvation intended for all.

The universality of sin is affirmed but not explained. "All have sinned" (v 23). As a result, "All . . . *fall* short of the glory of God" (v 23). God's glory is the reality of his presence. Sinful human beings are deprived of God's favor and presence. The right relation between creature and Creator has been lost. Though God has been wronged,

he has taken the initiative to make things right. He offered his Son as a "sacrifice of atonement" (v 25)—to reconcile previously alienated parties.

Theologians debate whether this atoning sacrifice is an "expiation" or "propitiation." They agree that what fallen humanity needed, to enjoy a right relation with God, God himself has provided. This sacrifice reconciles to God only those sinners who have "faith in his blood" (v 25). To have "faith in his blood" is to trust Christ's death as the sole means of salvation.

**The Gift Excludes Boasting (3:27-31).** Boasters are excluded from receiving the gift of righteousness! Because salvation is by grace, "the great" have no advantage. In fact, boasting and boasters are excluded! Why does the gift exclude boasting? First, because the basis of a right relationship with God is faith, not law (vv 27-28). Faith is receptiveness to God's gift. The way of law is achievement, accomplishment. If we imagine that we may earn our own salvation by this means, we imply that Christ's death was in vain (see Gal 2:19-21). Our success at law-keeping may be our undoing as Jesus' parable of the two men praying in the Temple illustrates (Lk 18:9-14). Not the boastful Pharisee, but the penitent publican, who prayed, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner," "went home justified before God."

The second reason arises from the central tenet of the Judeo-Christian faith, monotheism: there is only one true God (vv 29-30). The Law is God's unique gift to the Jews. But the same God wishes to be God of the Gentiles as well. Paul presents the majority Christian view: Gentiles need not become Jews to become Christians. The struggle to reach this consensus in the Early Church was heated and difficult (see Acts 15 and Gal, esp. 2:11-21). The factions that insisted on circumcision as essential for Christian as well as Jewish identity did not prevail. Because Jewish Christians had been circumcised as infants, the rite presented them no problem. Their subsequent faith in Christ proved the inadequacy of observing the Law as a means of salvation. But for Gentile Christians to receive circumcision was a serious problem. For them to add any requirement beyond faith implied a deficiency in the gift God had provided in Christ.

## God's Love Undoes What Sin Destroyed— Romans 5

The problem with the good news of salvation is that most Christians have heard it so often that we seem to treat it as if it were non-news, as if it were passé, or even as if it were not true. But try to hear the Good News again as if you were hearing it for the very first time. Let it roll around inside your head for a while. Let its truth soak in. This is incredible news—too good to be true. And yet it is true. God's love is forever, and the hope it inspires in our hearts will never disappoint us.

The Good News shows how God makes people right with himself—that it begins and ends with faith. As the Scripture says, "But those who are right with God will live by trusting in him" (Rom 1:17, NCV).

Even here, true to life, the apostle begins in Romans 1:18—3:20 with *bad news*. All people, pagan and religious alike, are responsible sinners, doomed to death. We all know better than to live as we do. It is not merely that we have messed up royally! We have wronged the King of Kings.

But here's the Good News: the God, who could justly destroy us, has decided to spare us instead. And yet, he will not save anyone by coercion. We must cooperate with his loving intentions for us, if we are to enjoy the benefits of this Good News.

The Bible teaches that the death of Christ is the basis for our justification. But "justification" has become a technical theological term that sometimes seems to mystify even seasoned Christians. For Paul's Roman readers, it was a perfectly ordinary, everyday, secular word.

Perhaps we can recapture the simplicity of the word if we will quit thinking about biblical theology and think about computer word processors. Those of us who have used these sometimes frustrating conveniences know about fully justified margins—that's when the type is lined up evenly on both sides of the page.

A justified paragraph has its right and left margins straight, perfectly in line. Even so, a justified person is one whose life is brought in line with God's purposes for human beings. To be justified is to be put right with God, to have our sins forgiven.

Of course, Paul's first readers did not think of computers, but of the Roman legal system. For them a justified person was one who had been acquitted before the law. Not merely declared innocent, but innocent. All charges were dropped against him or her. His or her criminal record was expunged. He or she was set free.

And so it is for us—because of what Christ has done and because we trust in him alone for salvation. We were all hopeless sinners. Guilty as charged of capital crimes. But God, our merciful Judge, chose to go easy on us.

Let us not mistakenly imagine that our sins simply disappeared into nothingness, thanks to God's forgiveness. The victim of a forgiven murderer is not resurrected simply because the murderer repents of the crime. Likewise, when we sin, the damage

is done. When God forgives our huge “debt” of sins, the debt does not magically vanish. God assumes the “debt” himself. He takes the loss.

Just also with our salvation. We live, because he died. The last verse of Romans 4 provides the necessary context for our text. “Because of our sins [Christ] was given over to die, and he was raised to life in order to put us right with God” (v 23, TEV). God chose to suffer the consequences for our sins himself—dying in the person of his only Son so that we might live. But God the Father raised Christ from the dead so that we might have a right relationship with him. Precisely how Christ’s death provides human salvation remains a mystery.

*Propitiation?* The theological term “propitiation” seems to convey the mistaken notion that God needed to vent his anger in order to deal graciously with guilty sinners. Sin deserves death, and sinners have to die to satisfy God’s justice; so the explanation goes. But Jesus stepped forward, “Father, don’t kill them. Kill me instead!” And God did. So now, his justice satisfied and his anger relieved, God can deal graciously with us. What a vicious view of God! No! God did not spare himself by choosing an innocent victim to take our punishment. He took the loss himself. He suffered our death himself, so that we might live.

*Expiation?* Likewise, the term “expiation” may convey a mistaken understanding of Christ’s atoning death. Some theologians suggest that sinners are justified by God’s decision to play a trick on himself. We remain incurable sinners, but he chooses to look on us through the righteousness of Christ. And so, though we remain soiled with sin, he sees us spotless in his innocent Son. What nonsense! Justification does not mean that God treats us as if we are right with him, although we really are not. God actually makes us right!

Romans 5:1-11 is *not* about *how* we are put right with God. It is about the consequences of justification. When we are right with God, there are consequences. In our text, Paul lists three.

**Peace:** First, “we have peace with God” (5:1). This is not talking about something so easily deceived and so deceptive as our emotions. Simply because we become Christians is no guarantee of perpetual inner tranquility. We may not feel laid-back or cool, calm, and collected at all times. But the fact remains “we have peace with God.” We are no longer his enemies. By faith, we have accepted the terms of peace and are no longer at odds with God.

The same is true of the promise found in Romans 8:1—“There is . . . no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” This is no assurance that we will never *feel* guilty. It is a reminder that God no longer holds us responsible for our past sins. We are not condemned by God no matter what our emotions may tell us.

Just so, “peace with God” is not about *subjective feelings*, but about the *objective reality*: We are no longer God’s enemies, but his friends (5:9-11)! This is the point of Paul’s discussion of “reconciliation” in verses 9-11 of our text.

Like justification, the transformation of the secular notion of reconciliation into a technical theological term has complicated its understanding for many. Reconciliation in everyday life is about restored relationships. It is another way of talking about the benefits of “peace with God.”



God's amazing love has put an end to our excuses. It has captured us in its embrace. It has reconciled us to our Creator. It has freed us from our crippling fear of impending death. It has restored our true sight. It has given us boldness to approach God, assured that we are safe in his care. "Peace with God" is the first consequence of justification. Thus, justification and reconciliation and regeneration—the new birth—are indistinguishable in Christian experience.

Our new, reconciled relationship with God is the basis for renewed relationships on the human level as well. Wherever there are relationships involving fallen human beings, there will always be the need for reconciliation.

The root cause of it all is sin and a broken relationship with God. "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way." And the solution is in the saving death of the Suffering Servant. "The LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isa 53:6, RSV).

Like Adam and Eve in the Garden, we find ourselves in rebellion against our Creator. We try in vain to pin the responsibility for our problems on God. But God goes on loving his creation, even though he is the injured party. He takes the initiative to bring reconciliation. At incalculable personal expense, he seeks to reconcile his wayward children to himself and to one another. Reconciliation is not just for me, it is for *us*.

God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, . . . has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us (2 Cor 5:18-19, NRSV).

**Grace:** The second consequence of our justification is this: Christ "has brought us by faith into this experience of God's grace, in which we now live" (Rom 5:2). God's "grace" is not indulgence. It is not simply that God overlooks our shortcomings and dotes over us like a permissive, cosmic Grandpa. It is true that God loves us enough to accept us just as we are—sin and all. But he loves us too much to leave us as we are—wallowing in our sin.

Grace is not simply about forgiveness for our old life. It is about our new life after forgiveness. This is "standing grace." We live in the ongoing experience of grace. Grace is not the doorway into the Christian room; it is the room in which we live and breathe.

This is not to suggest, as some misguided Christians would have us think, that when we are converted, God forgives all our sins—past, present, and future. This perverts grace into a license to sin.

The grace the Bible talks about is the God-given ability to be and do what we could never be or do on our own. Grace brings us into the realm of God's rule. As we choose to live under his sovereignty, we find ourselves empowered to obey him. We are not left as God found us. We become new creations. The old is gone; the new has come (2 Cor 5:17).

Hear Paul's words in Romans 6:

What shall we say, then? Should we continue to live in sin so that God's grace will increase? Certainly not! We have died to sin—how then can we go on living in it? For . . . we were buried with him and shared his death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from death by the glorious power of the Father, so also we might live a

new life . . . so that we should no longer be the slaves of sin. For when we die, we are set free from the power of sin. Since we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him (vv 1-4, 6-7, TEV).

Living in grace does not release us *from* obedience; it empowers us *for* obedience. We must not surrender any part of ourselves "to sin to be used for wicked purposes. Instead," we must "give [ourselves] to God, as those who have been brought from death to life, and surrender [our] whole being to him to be used for righteous purposes. Sin must not be [our] master; for [we] do not live under law but under God's grace" (vv 12-14, TEV).

**Hope:** Among the consequences of justification are "peace with God" and "this grace in which we now stand." The third consequence Paul mentions is "the hope . . . of sharing God's glory" (5:2). Before we were put right with God, we "all sinned and continually fell short of God's glory" (3:23, author's translation). Peace and grace not only care for the failures of our past and the ongoing needs of the present, but also open up possibilities that did not exist before. A right relationship with God gives us hope for the future.

Popular notions about "hope" are quite different from the Bible's teaching. Hope is not merely optimism about the future. The fact is, as Paul admits, Christians have troubles. But we can "boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us" (5:3-5, NRSV).

We are not in heaven yet, but we can rest assured that we "will be saved" from the wrath of God (v 9).

Despite the empty promises of the prophets of positive thinking, God's children are not exempt from suffering in the present. Jesus was not, so we should not expect to be either. As Paul writes in Romans 8: "Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. . . . Our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us" (8:17-18).

Optimism must come to grips with the realities of life. "Fairy tale" weddings sometimes end as "horror stories"—witness the sad tale of Charles and Diana. Christian hope is not just another fantasy. It is not wishful thinking. Hope is "faith oriented to the future."<sup>54</sup> And like faith, hope is no more reliable than the one whose promises we trust.

Despite a steadily declining percentage of church attendance, despite their half-hearted responses to the demands of the gospel, recent surveys suggest that nearly all Americans expect to go to heaven, by and by, when they die. But the Bible does not offer any basis for such fanciful hopes. Sad to say, as the old African-American spiritual reminds us, "Ever'body talkin' 'bout Heaven ain't goin' there."

So, sadder but wiser, cynics ask, "What is to make us think that Christian hope is any more trustworthy than all the rest of the fairy-tale promises?" Paul's answer is simple and to the point. The hope God inspires for a bright future "does not disappoint us, for God has [already] poured out his love into our hearts by means of the Holy Spirit, who is God's gift to us" (5:5, TEV).

Christian hope is not just another sweepstakes offer actually designed to entice us to buy some overpriced magazines or the latest how-to manual. Christian hope for the future is based on God's already proven love for us in the past.

We can trust God's promises because he has already delivered far more than we had any reason to expect. "For when we were still helpless, Christ died for the wicked . . . It is a difficult thing for someone to die for a righteous person," much less a sinner (vv 6-7, TEV). "But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us" (v 8, NRSV). "What then shall we say to this? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him?" (8:31-32, RSV).

Let us rejoice in the marvelous, forever-love God has for us! Let us not forget to thank God for his love that caused him to die for us. Let us celebrate his free gifts of justification and reconciliation. No matter what wrongs we may have done, undying love has made us right with God. No matter how far away we wandered from God, self-sacrificing love has made us his friends. We have peace with God! No matter how weak we feel, we can rest assured that his resources are more than sufficient to our need. We stand in grace! No matter how dark the present may seem, he has given us promises that will not let us down. We have hope!

It may seem too good to be true—a fantastic fairy tale. But it's true: God loves you! It's not a ploy. God is not after anything but your friendship. He does not love you, so that . . . He does not love you if . . . He just loves you. His love is unconditional. There is nothing you can do to make him love you more. There is nothing you can do to make him love you less. He simply loves you.

So let us rejoice in our hope! Let us rejoice despite our troubles. And let us rejoice because we have been reconciled to God. And let us rejoice that nothing—"neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (vv 38-39).

Though God has made peace, grace, and hope possible, many continue to live as God's enemies. Though God offers life, many exist in death. Many are satisfied with less when they could have "much more" (see 5:9, 10, 15, 17). The Good News is that God's grace is stronger than sin. Hope is stronger than despair. And life is mightier than death. The obedience of Christ is greater than the trespass of Adam. Faith is more decisive than fate.

Paul analyzes the human problem as alienation. Humans live as aliens in the universe created to be their home. They are lost. Because of human sin, men and women—all of us—have made ourselves enemies of God. We are estranged from our Creator. As such, we have cut ourselves off from the life of God. Our existence is marked by death. But God, the injured party, has taken the first move to make things right. Why? In a word—love.

For Paul God's "love" was not an emotion but covenant faithfulness. God proved his love by the Gift of His only Son. What love! The remarkable character of his love is also shown by the unworthy character of its recipients (v 7). God loves sinners. The uncommon character of God's love is also shown in that, he spared no expense in the gift he gave (v 8). God gave Christ to die for us sinners.

The Gift is for all. But only those of us who by faith receive God's gracious Gift enjoy its blessings. "We have now been justified" (v 9). We now enjoy a right relationship with God. We may know the present reality of forgiveness (see 4:7). Already, we have been reconciled to God. Once at odds, we are now God's friends (v 10). Though we enjoy God's gift freely (see 3:24), it was at great cost to Him. For it is by the blood of Christ—His life-giving death—that God makes things right (vv 9-10).

God's proven love can be trusted. What God has done in the past assures us that our future is bright. The hope He has placed within us will not let us down (v 5). We will be spared in the coming judgment—the future day of God's wrath (v 9; see 2:5; 1 Thess 1:10; 5:9). We will be saved (Rom 5:10). God gave a gift that keeps on giving. We have hope for the future (vv 1-5) because we have His help in the present.

The gift of love is intimately tied to the events of salvation history. The Crucifixion is not only the supreme proof of God's love but also makes salvation possible. The Second Coming will bring salvation to completion. Believers for the time being continue to live in a fallen, sinful world. But we are already citizens of heaven. We live between the times.

For the present salvation consists in a restored personal relationship with God. Reconciliation is experienced as Eden-like friendship with our rightful Lord. It is the experience of being loved by our Creator. All this is possible only through Christ, who tore down the barrier between us and God that our sin had erected. Joy is the experience of the gift of His wonderful love.

How is it that we may be changed from God's enemies to His friends? How is it that the death of Christ provides salvation? Paul's answer simply put is just this: "Christ got us out of the mess Adam got us into. What Adam did, Christ undid; where Adam failed, Christ succeeded."<sup>55</sup>

**The Curse of Death and the Gift of Life (5:12-17).** At an airport, the plane you board will inescapably determine the destination you reach. Where you begin decides where you will end up. This is just as true of our fate as human beings. But here our choices are not between a dozen terminals, scores of airlines, and thousands of destinations. Our choice is not between competing religions or denominational labels. According to the apostle Paul, our choices are two: "Belong to the humanity whose destination is determined by Adam or belong to the humanity whose destination is determined by Christ."<sup>56</sup>

Romans 5:12-21 has long been misunderstood as an explanation of *how* it is that all human beings are sinners. Certainly, the passage affirms *that* all people are sinners, but it nowhere explains *how*. In fact, the passage has a very different purpose. It presents the contrastive resemblance between Adam and Christ in order to explain *how* God frees people from the problem of sin and the curse of death it brought in its wake. The passage is not concerned to explain the origin of sin, but to explain the origin of the new life of obedience. Verses 12-14 prepare for this by contrasting death as the consequence of Adam's condemning act with life as the consequence of Christ's justifying act.

We have no choice as to whether we will be a part of humanity. Our choice is restricted to which of the two humanities we will join, which of the two heads we will follow. That choice determines everything else. Adam's disobedience brought the reality of sin into the world. Adam is our common ancestor. He represents the whole

of humanity. And he represented us poorly. Because Adam sinned, sin was in the world from the beginning. With sin came death. Death became a part of the experience of the entire human race, not because Adam sinned, but "because all sinned" (v 12). Humans repeat the sin of their ancestor Adam. Paul will shortly emphasize that heredity need not decide our destiny. There is a way out. But it is not the way of Law.

Law is not a solution to the problem of sin. Law serves the positive function of making people conscious of sin (see 3:20). What Adam did is not counteracted by the Law, but by Jesus Christ. The Law identifies sin as sin, but it is powerless to set people free from its deadly grip. Only Christ, God's gracious Gift to humankind, sets people free from the power of sin and the curse of death.

But if Law is not the solution of the sin problem, neither is it its cause. Sin was a reality even before the coming of the Law. Apart from the Law it operated like an invisible, poisonous gas. What was the evidence of sin's pervasive presence in the world before Moses gave the Law? People died. They died even though they did not sin in the same way Adam did. He disobeyed a specific command, "You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (Gen 2:17). Apart from Law, sin did not exist as trespass, but it obviously did exist as a death-dealing power.

Let us return to the analogy of the airport. Adam and Christ are both pilots of a plane of human destiny. Their courses are set in opposite directions. Law paints a skull and crossbones label on the plane piloted by Adam. It stations monitors throughout the airport identifying the destination of Adam's airline as "Death." But Law is not the plane to Life (see Rom 7:7-12). It is even unable to rebook doomed humanity on the flight to "Life." Apart from Christ our course is set on death.

Though opposite in the consequences of their acts, Adam and Christ are also alike (5:14). Each is the head of a human family. Adam is the founder of a family doomed to death; Christ, of a family destined to life. Because Adam sinned, death became our ruler. But grace overflows the boundaries drawn by sin (v 16).

The one sin of Adam brought the sentence of death to all his descendants. In Adam we live under the curse of divine condemnation. But the free gift of God, despite the many sins of Adam's children, is justification. In Christ we are acquitted. We are freed from death's oppressive reign, to share in the "reign in life" through Christ (v 17, RSV). Our lord determines our destiny just as our pilot determines our destination.

**The Cure of Death Through Christ (5:18-21).** God's verdict of guilty because of the first Adam's disobedience is overturned by the obedience of the last Adam (see 1 Cor 15:45). The first man did wrong. As a result all human beings are sentenced to death. The last man did right. As a result all human beings are put right with God and given the gift of life (Rom 5:18). Is the work of Christ as all-inclusive as the work of Adam? Is salvation in Christ as universal as condemnation in Adam? Paul seems to say yes!

Does this imply that since the time of Christ all people are saved without respect to their response of faith in God's offer? Paul's answer, explicit throughout his letters, is clearly no. Faith is essential. Perhaps this explains why he writes in verse 19b that through Christ's obedience "the many will be made righteous."

But if we concede this point, honesty compels us to grant another. He also says that "through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners" (v 19b). Are all human beings made sinners solely by the disobedience of Adam without respect to their own rebellion against God? Paul's answer again seems to be no. All people are sinners and subject to death, "because all sinned" (v 12). Because of Christ, heredity need not be our destiny. We may choose to continue to live in Adam and die. Or we may choose to live in Christ and truly live.

The freedom to choose the part of the human family to which we will belong is not natural. It is a benefit of God's overflowing grace. Law did not solve the lethal problem of sin. God in Christ did. Law only made sins evident. The introduction of Law resulted in an overflowing abundance of sin. But God's superabundance of grace far surpassed the stain of sin. Grace dethroned the sinister monarch Death and enthroned Life in its place.

Let us return again to the analogy of the airport. Christ is not only the pilot of the plane bound for salvation but also our travel agent. He will cancel our tickets on the plane of Death and rebook us on the plane of Life. There is no cost to us for this service, although it cost him dearly. All we need do is accept the ticket. That's faith for you literalists!

## Lesson 9: Sin and Salvation

### Due This Lesson

Review of Bible passages  
Reading of NDBT selections  
Essay  
Resource reading and summary  
Journaling

### Learner Objectives

At the end of this lesson, participants should

- explain the biblical foundations for the Wesleyan understanding of sin and salvation

### Homework Assignments

Review the Book of Hebrews and Deuteronomy 1—6. Prepare theological statements that these passages would support.

Read the following sections of NDBT: Circumcision, Covenant, Election, Exclusion, Kingdom of God, and Temple.

Do an exhaustive concordance study on the Bible's use of the term "covenant." NIV uses "covenant" and "treaty" to translate the Hebrew *berith*. Write a 3-page essay summarizing what you learned from this study and your readings.

Write in your journal. Reflect on the prayer from the lesson.  
Thank you, Lord, for changing your mind! Because, if you didn't, we wouldn't have a prayer!

## Sin and Salvation

Well over 50 different Hebrew and Greek terms cover the broad range of meanings associated with the biblical concept "sin." In the biblical tradition sin always concerns dysfunctional divine-human relationships due to human malfeasance or failure.

- Sin may involve either being or doing wrong.
- Sin may mean missing an intended target, stepping over the line, rebellion, failure, falling down, false living, injustice, going astray, and disrespecting God.
- Sin may also entail being unclean, corrupt, crooked, wicked, desperately ill, or indebted to God.
- Sin involves a failure to be and do what God expects of humans.
- Sin is generally an expression of idolatry—whether of self or of dependencies that occupy the place in one's life reserved for God alone.
- Sin is a violation of the trusting relationship of obedience and dependence God expects of his human creatures.

Salvation, God's solution to human sin, is not merely a negation of its consequences. Salvation restores humankind to the intimate relationship with God intended in the creation.



## **The God Who Changes His Mind**

### Exodus 32

The Hebrew word translated “repent” in the golden calf incident and elsewhere in the Old Testament as applied to God’s activity does not imply that God had sinned and needed to turn from it. It refers instead to his reluctance to follow through on his threats of judgment—to his change of attitude and behavior toward sinners.

### Jonah

The Book of Jonah contains only one prophecy—“In forty days Nineveh will be destroyed!” (Jon 3:4, GL). . . they do repent and because God is faithful to his character of redemptive love, God repents—he relents and changes his mind.

But if God’s people turn from obedience to rebellion, God is also free to change his mind about the blessings of salvation he has promised them.

## God's Choice

John Wesley suggests, God does things in response to prayer that he would not otherwise do. And if God is genuinely free to change his mind in response to our prayers, the implications are mind-boggling. If changing one's mind is authentically possible—whether God's mind or ours, then the future is not a finished script written in timeless eternity and only played out in time.

God freely chose to limit himself by creating. All that exists that is not God is his creation. Creation has a beginning and will have an end. God did not have to create; he chose to do so. He did not have to give humankind freedom; he chose to do so. But God's choices, like ours, bring with them inevitable consequences, which even he must live with. Even God cannot have his cake and eat it too. Even God cannot create and have no creation. Even God cannot grant humankind authentic freedom and control the future absolutely. But that's his choice. He didn't have to limit himself. But the Bible suggests that he did, freely, graciously.

God has not ceased to be God because his creation has not turned out as he would have preferred. . . . God is redemptive; he is absolutely free to be responsive to his creation.

Because God has determined that his ultimate purposes for this world will be achieved by persuasion—or coercion, only if necessary—predictive prophecy is possible. But virtually every prophecy about the future comes with an explicit or implicit asterisk attached—"unless."

God has chosen to act in ways that are responsive to what his creatures choose to do. And because he is faithful to his character, because he keeps his promises, even God is to a certain extent *predictable*. But God must be free in order to keep faith with fickle people and yet fulfill his promises.

# Lesson 10: The Covenant Relationship

## Due This Lesson

Bible review  
Essay  
Journaling

## Learner Objectives

At the end of this lesson, participants should

- be able to explain the biblical foundations for understanding the concept of covenant and its expression as a life of worship

## Homework Assignments

Review 1 and 2 Corinthians, and James. Prepare theological statements that these books would support.

Read the following section of NDBT: Law, Faith, and Obedience.

Read **1** of John Wesley's two sermons on the nature and purpose of the Law: Resource 10-12 **or** 10-13. Write a 1-page summary/response.

Write: Select an appropriate biblical passage of your choice and sketch out the beginnings of a sermon on the subject of the law and the Christian.

Preparation for the Opening Activity: Read the following passages and imagine the settings in which they occurred. Prepare an outline of how you would act out **1** of the pronouncements, in the setting you have imagined.

- Covenant with the Gibeonites—Joshua 9:1-16; 2 Samuel 21:1-14
- Establishment of Taxes by Solomon—1 Kings 4:1-28
- Situations Brought Before the Judge—1 Kings 3:16-27; Matthew 25:14-30; Exodus 21:33—22:4

Write in your journal. Write a covenant between you and God as you feel led and directed by God.

## Covenants

### Hittite Covenants

One of the most detailed resources for understanding a covenant is the collection of Hittite covenants.

- First comes the identification of the person or persons making the covenant and the statement of the relationship between them.
- Then come the stipulations or requirements—the dos and don'ts.
- These are followed by the penalties—the benefits if the agreement is kept and the curses if it is broken.
- Finally the relevant gods are called upon to witness the agreement.

### Covenants in Scripture

- Personal Covenants—between two people
- National Covenants—between two people groups or between kings
- Yahweh's Pre-Israelite Covenants—The majority of references to covenant are to the ones that God made with an individual.
- Yahweh's Covenants with Israel
  - Covenant with Abraham—commitment of Yahweh is to make of Abraham a great nation
  - The Sinai Covenant established under the leadership of Moses is a detailed development of the covenant that God made with his people.
  - The covenant of life and peace with Levi—a covenant of salt
- The covenant relationship has to be maintained and reaffirmed.
- A covenant relationship is not transmitted genealogically, but by the acceptance of each generation.

## Covenants

### Other Covenants

- The taking of a vow by a group was seen as a covenant.
- Malachi makes the only reference to marriage as a covenant
  - Marriage is not presented as an agreement or covenant between two parties but as the union into a single whole.
  - The covenant element is present in the betrothal. Marriage is the culmination of the covenant and the beginning of the union

### The Nature of Covenants of God and Covenants of Mankind

- The covenant form is perhaps the strongest of all forms of relationship described in the Scriptures.
- A covenant with Yahweh is based upon the strength and character of Yahweh.

## The Covenant with Israel

### Initiation of the Covenant

- Yahweh is the only One who can initiate a covenant with humanity—the covenant is *offered* to Abraham.
- This was a covenant that targeted the transformation of the participants and a restoration of fellowship with Yahweh. It is given by grace.

### The Character of the Covenant

- Dependent upon Yahweh—acting, not because of the goodness of Israel, but rather despite the sins of Israel.
- The character of Yahweh is holiness, merciful love expressed in the orderliness of law, power, authority, and life.

### Acceptance of the Covenant

- God gave Abraham male circumcision as the mark of the person who had accepted the covenant—this was a spiritual act of submission to Yahweh.
- Under the new covenant the Church accepted that the true circumcision was spiritual and meant the transformation of the heart and mind.

## **The Covenant with Israel**

### **The Purpose of the Covenant**

- God was seeking out those who would worship him. It is not because God needed something from us, but because it is only in this relationship that humanity is fulfilled.
- The immediate effect of observance of the covenant, of worship of Yahweh, would be a good life.
- The call of Abraham—he would become a blessing to the nations and through him all the nations would come to blessing themselves.
- The covenant came into being both to provide opportunity for true worship and to make possible the restoration of fellowship.

### **Admission to the Covenant Fellowship**

- The problem for those who have accepted the covenant is that they do not qualify for admission into fellowship with God. We are sinners.
- In order to enter the presence of God, sin must be dealt with.
  - A sacrificial offering had to be brought.
  - Hands had to be washed.

### **Life in the Covenant**

- The emphasis of the covenant has to do with the way in which the followers of Yahweh conduct their lives.

## The Covenant

### The Covenant Guides All Living

- The tabernacle was placed in a unique location. Holy places were traditionally on the tops of mountains. Such locations were believed to be closer to heaven.
- The location of the tabernacle of Yahweh, his meeting place with humankind, was not on the top of a sacred mountain, nor at some distant point from the people. It was at the very center of the camp.
- Righteousness was not upheld by the presentation of sacrifices or performance of rituals, but was “to act justly and to love mercy (*chesed*) and to walk humbly with your God” (Mic 6:8).

### The Covenant Functions in Grace

- The primary symbol of the covenant is the ark of the covenant—that special seat and container that represented the throne of Yahweh in the midst of his people.
- The focal point of the ark was the throne of Yahweh. This was the seat of *chesed*—the mercy seat, the symbol of the steadfast love of God for humankind.
- Yahweh’s relationship with his people is based upon this grace that provides salvation, redemption, and restoration.
- Jesus becomes the ultimate demonstration of the *chesed* of Yahweh in his compassion for the sick, poor, and needy, and his salvational death upon the Cross.



## The Principles of the Covenant

Within the ark were placed three items that represented major aspects of the covenant—the very principles upon which the covenant was established.

### The Law

- The primary stipulations of the covenant were written upon the two tables of stone that were placed within ark.
- The confession of faith, the *Shema*, summarizes the relationship to God.
- Many times the reason for following the instructions is simply “I am Yahweh.”
- The Torah—the five books of Moses—provides guidance for life.
- The principles, expressed in statements like the Ten Commandments, do not change, but the application to guide conduct must be restated again and again.

### The Manna

- Placing the pot of manna into the ark of the covenant symbolized the recognition that the worshiper of Yahweh is secure only as he or she trusts in him.
- The manna becomes the reminder that life in Christ, being in the center of the will of God, is the most secure place that humankind can find.

### The Rod

- The rod represents that Yahweh held authority and could give it to whomever he pleased.
- Submission to authority was difficult for Israel.
- The covenant requires acceptance of the authority of Yahweh. We do not hold authority. He holds all authority.

## Maintenance of the Covenant

The tabernacle was given to Israel as a place where Yahweh could be worshiped. It was an intensely symbolic structure.

### The Courtyard

- A courtyard surrounded the tabernacle. It was in this courtyard that people came to pray, to worship and to seek forgiveness for their sins.
- There were two items of furniture: the altar and the washbasin.
- The primary responsibility cared for in the courtyard was making sacrifice upon the altar.
- The focus was on the restoration of a right relationship with God and with humankind.
- All who entered the courtyard used the washbasin. The symbolic washing was to remove the grime of life from the hands of the worshipper.

## Maintenance of the Covenant

The tabernacle was made up of two rooms. The outer room was the holy place and the inner room was the holy of holies.

### The Tabernacle—the Holy Place

- Three symbols were in the room: the lamp, the golden or incense altar, and the table of showbread.
  - ◆ The Lamp
    - The lamp was tended twice a day.
    - Oil and fire were considered to be symbols for the work of the Spirit of God among humankind.
    - The instruction of God, the word of God, is the lamp that guides the direction a wise person takes.
    - The lamp is the reminder that there must be a continual learning experience in the lives of the believers.
  - ◆ The Golden Altar
    - Incense was to be placed on the golden altar each morning and each evening—symbol for prayer.
    - This was the opportunity for communication with God and for acknowledgment that Yahweh is the One who supplies every need.
    - Jesus reminded his disciples that prayer is that which takes place between the individual and God.
  - ◆ The Table of Showbread
    - It was on this table that the Bread of the Presence was placed each Sabbath.
    - This was taken from the best of the tithes and offerings brought by the people.
    - Yahweh is the owner and has made his followers the stewards of it all.
    - The table is the constant reminder that the presence of God is with his people as they acknowledge his Lordship over their lives.
    - To Jesus everything must be understood to be a resource for God to use if a person wanted to “be perfect.”
    - The display of the tithe is not in the courtyard—the court of Israel/the Church—but in the holy place.

## Maintenance of the Covenant

### The Tabernacle—the Holy of Holies

- The ark of the covenant was within this inner room. This was the most glorious of the rooms, lined with the finest of tapestries and filled with the glory of God.
- God will only live at the core of the believer's life. He will not set up his throne anywhere else. He brings his throne of grace into the core of life along with his values, his authority, and his resources.

### Covenant Transformation

- The day was coming when Yahweh would establish a new kind of covenant with his people. His would be a covenant that replaced stone with flesh and wrote the Law on the tables of the heart.  
    "The time is coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the LORD. "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the LORD. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more" (Jer 31:31-34).

## The Covenant with the Church

- The focus of all of the Gospels is to make clear that the mission of the Christ is to accomplish spiritual salvation, the inner transformation of those who are the people of God.
- Jesus made a covenant with his disciples and future believers. Jesus initiated this new covenant. He is the Lord of the covenant.
- The Lord's Supper is the symbolic acceptance of the new covenant in the blood of Christ.
- The new covenant is the reality that the old covenant symbolized. The life that we receive in Jesus Christ is the life that was intended in the giving of the covenants.
- We are offered a covenant that brings life and peace, that establishes righteousness and truth, that enables the transformation of heart and mind so that the Christian life can display the love and the mercy—the holiness of God.

## Small Groups

If you consider that the covenant is an important concept regarding the relationship of Christians to the Lord, what is the best way to bring the issues of the covenant into the catechism?

How would you use covenant to reorganize a catechism? Traditionally the catechism has been a list of intellectual beliefs.

JOHN WESLEY  
SERMON THIRTY-FIVE

## THE LAW ESTABLISHED THROUGH FAITH: DISCOURSE ONE

*"Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid: Yea, we establish the law."*  
Romans 3:31.

1. St. Paul, having the beginning of this Epistle laid down his general proposition, namely, that "the gospel of Christ is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth;"—the powerful means, whereby God makes every believer a partaker of present and eternal salvation;—goes on to show, that there is no other way under heaven whereby men can be saved. He speaks particularly of salvation from the guilt of sin, which he commonly terms justification. And that all men stood in need of this, that none could plead their own innocence, he proves at large by various arguments, addressed to the Jews as well as the Heathens. Hence he infers, (in the 19th verse of this chapter,) "that every mouth," whether of Jew or Heathen, must be "stopped" from excusing or justifying himself, "and all the world become guilty before God."

"Therefore," saith he, by his own obedience, "by the words of the law, shall no flesh be justified in his sight." "But now the righteousness of God without the law,"—without our previous obedience thereto—"is manifested;" "even the righteousness of God, which is by faith of Jesus Christ, unto all and upon all that believe:" "For there is no difference,"—as to their need of justification, or the manner wherein they attain it;—"for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God;—"the glorious image of God wherein they were created: And all (who attain) "are justified freely by his grace, through the redemption that is in Jesus Christ, whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood; that he might be just, and yet the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus;—"that without any impeachment to his justice, he might show him mercy for the sake of that propitiation. "Therefore we conclude," (which was the grand position he had undertaken to establish,) "that a man is justified by faith, without the works of the law." (Verses 20-28.)

2. It was easy to foresee an objection which might be made, and which has in fact been made in all ages; namely, that to say we are justified without the works of the law, is to abolish the law. The Apostle, without entering into a formal dispute, simply denies the charge. "Do we then," says he, "make void the law through faith? God forbid! Yea, we establish the law."

3. The strange imagination of some, that St. Paul, when he says, "A man is justified without the works of the law," means only ceremonial law, is abundantly confuted by these very words. For did St. Paul establish the ceremonial law? It is evident he did not. He did make void that law through faith, and openly avowed his doing so. It was the moral law only, of which he might truly say, We do not make void, but establish this through faith.

4. But all men are not herein of his mind. Many there are who will not agree to this. Many in all ages of the Church, even among those who bore the name of Christians, have contended, that "the faith once delivered to the saints" was designed to make void the whole law. They would no more spare the moral than the ceremonial law, but were for "hewing," as it were, "both in pieces before the Lord; "vehemently maintaining, "If you establish any law, Christ shall profit you nothing; Christ is become of no effect to you; ye are fallen from grace."

5. But is the zeal of these men according to knowledge? Have they observed the connexion between the law and faith? and that, considering the close connexion between them, to destroy one is indeed to destroy both?—that, to abolish the moral law, is, in truth, to abolish faith and the law together? as leaving no proper means, either of bringing us to faith, or of stirring up that gift of God in our soul.

6. It therefore behoves all who desire either to come to Christ, or to walk in him whom they have received, to take heed how they “make void the law through faith;” to secure us effectually against which, let us inquire, First, Which are the most usual ways of making “void the law through faith?” And, Secondly, how we may follow the Apostle, and by faith “establish the law.”

I. 1. Let us, First, inquire, Which are the most usual ways of making void the law through faith? Now the way for a Preacher to make it all void at a stroke, is, not to preach it at all. This is just the same thing as to blot it out of the oracles of God. More especially, when it is done with design; when it is made a rule, not to preach the law; and the very phrase, “a Preacher of the law,” is used as a term of reproach, as though it meant little less than an enemy of the gospel.

2. All this proceeds from the deepest ignorance of the nature, properties, and use of the law; and proves, that those who act thus, either know not Christ—are utter strangers to living faith—or, at least, that they are but babes in Christ, and, as such, “unskilled in the word of righteousness.”

3. Their grand plea is this: That preaching the gospel, that is, according to their judgment, the speaking of nothing but the sufferings and merits of Christ, answers all the ends of the law. But this we utterly deny. It does not answer the very first end of the law, namely, the convincing men of sin; The awakening those who are still asleep on the brink of hell. There may have been here and there an exempt case. One in a thousand may have been awakened by the gospel: But this is no general rule: The ordinary method of God is, to convict sinners by the law, and that only. The gospel is not the means which God hath ordained, or which our Lord himself used, for this end. We have no authority in Scripture for applying it thus, nor any ground to think it will prove effectual. Nor have we any more ground to expect this, from the nature of the thing. “They that be whole,” as our Lord himself observes, “need not a physician, but they that are sick.” It is absurd, therefore, to offer a physician to them that are whole, or that at least imagine themselves so to be. You are first to convince them that they are sick; otherwise they will not thank you for your labour. It is equally absurd to offer Christ to them whose heart is whole, having never yet been broken. It is, in the proper sense, “casting pearls before swine.” Doubtless “they will trample them under foot;” and it is no more than you have reason to expect, if they also “turn again and rend you.”

4. “But although there is no command in Scripture, to offer Christ to the careless sinner, yet are there not scriptural precedents for it?” I think not: I know not any. I believe you cannot produce one, either from the four Evangelists, or the Acts of the Apostles. Neither can you prove this to have been the practice of any of the Apostles, from any passage in all their writings.

5. “Nay, does not the Apostle Paul say, in his former Epistle to the Corinthians, ‘We preach Christ crucified?’ (1:23,) and in his latter, ‘We preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord?’ (4:5.)”



We consent to rest the cause on this issue; to tread in his steps, to follow his example. Only preach you just as Paul preached, and the dispute is at an end.

For although we are certain he preached Christ in as perfect a manner as the very chief of the Apostles, yet who preached the law more than St. Paul? Therefore he did not think the gospel answered the same end.

6. The very first sermon of St. Paul's which is recorded, concludes in these words: "By him all that believe are justified from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses. Beware therefore, lest that come upon you which is spoken of in the Prophets; Behold, ye despisers, and wonder, and perish: For I work a work in your days, a work which you will in no wise believe, though a man declare it unto you." (Acts 13:39, 40.) Now it is manifest, all this is preaching the law, in the sense wherein you understand the term; even although great part of, if not all, his hearers, were either Jews or religious proselytes, (verse 43.) and, therefore, probably many of them, in some degree at least, convicted of sin already. He first reminds them, that they could not be justified by the law of Moses, but only by faith in Christ; and then severely threatens them with the judgments of God, which is in the strongest sense, preaching the law.

7. In his next discourse, that to the Heathens at Lystra, (14:15ff.) we do not find so much as the name of Christ: The whole purport of it is, that they should "turn from those vain idols, unto the living God." Now confess the truth. Do not you think, if you had been there, you could have preached much better than he? I should not wonder if you thought too, that his *preaching so ill* occasioned his being *so ill treated*; and that his being *stoned* was a just judgment upon him for not *preaching Christ!*

8. To the gaoler indeed, when "he sprang in, and came trembling, and fell down before Paul and Silas, and said, Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" he immediately said, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ;" (Acts 16:29, 30;) and in the case of one so deeply convicted of sin, who would not have said the same? But to the men of Athens you find him speaking in a quite different manner; reproving their superstition, ignorance, and idolatry; and strongly moving them to repent, from the consideration of a future judgment, and of the resurrection from the dead. (17:24-31.) Likewise when Felix sent for Paul, on purpose that he might "hear him concerning the faith in Christ;" instead of preaching Christ in *your* sense, (which would probably have caused the Governor either to mock or to contradict and blaspheme,) "he reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come," till Felix (hardened as he was) "trembled." (24:24, 25.) Go thou, and tread in his steps. Preach Christ to the careless sinner, by reasoning "of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come!"

9. If you say, "But he preached Christ in a different manner in his Epistles:" I answer, (1.) He did not there preach at all; not in that sense wherein we speak: For preaching, in our present question, means speaking before a congregation. But, waving this, I answer, (2.) His Epistles are directed, not to unbelievers, such as those we are now speaking of, but "to the saints of God," in Rome, Corinth, Philippi, and other places. Now, unquestionably, he would speak more of Christ to these than to those who were without God in the world. And yet, (3.) Every one of these is full of the law, even the Epistles to the Romans and the Galatians; in both of which he does what you term "preaching the law," and that to believers, as well as unbelievers.

10. From hence it is plain, you know not what it is to preach Christ, in the sense of the Apostle. For doubtless St. Paul judged himself to be preaching Christ, both to Felix, and at Antioch, Lystra, and Athens: From whose example every thinking man must

infer, that not only the declaring the love of Christ to sinners, but also the declaring that he will come from heaven in flaming fire, is, in the Apostle's sense, preaching Christ; yea, in the full scriptural meaning of the word. To preach Christ, is to preach what he hath revealed, either in the Old or New Testament; so that you are really preaching Christ, when you are saying, "The wicked shall be turned into hell, and all the people that forget God," as when you are saying, "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world!"

11. Consider this well;—that to preach Christ, is to preach all things that Christ hath spoken; all his promises; all his threatenings and commands; all that is written in his book; and then you will know how to preach Christ, without making void the law.

12. "But does not the greatest blessing attend those discourses wherein we peculiarly preach the merits and suffering of Christ?"

Probably when we preach to a congregation of mourners, or of believers, these will be attended with the greatest blessing; because such discourses are peculiarly suited to their state. At least, these will usually convey the most comfort. But this is not always the greatest blessing. I may sometimes receive a far greater by a discourse that cuts me to the heart, and humbles me to the dust. Neither should I receive that comfort, if I were to preach or to hear no discourses but on the sufferings of Christ. These, by constant repetition, would lose their force, and grow more and more flat and dead, till at length they would become a dull round of words, without any spirit, or life, or virtue. So that thus to preach Christ must, in process of time, make void the gospel as well as the law.

II. 1. A Second way of making void the law through faith is, the teaching that faith supersedes the necessity of holiness. This divides itself into a thousand smaller paths, and many there are that walk therein. Indeed there are few that wholly escape it; few who are convinced, we are saved by faith, but are sooner or later, more or less, drawn aside into this by-way.

2. All those are drawn into this by-way who, if it be not settled judgment that faith in Christ entirely sets aside the necessity of keeping his law; yet suppose either sets aside the necessity of keeping his law; yet suppose either, (1.) That holiness is less necessary now than it was before Christ came; or, (2.) That a less degree of it is necessary; or, (3.) That it is less necessary to believers than to others. Yea, and so are all those who, although their judgment be right in the general, yet think they may take more liberty in particular cases than they could have done before they believed. Indeed, the using the term *liberty*, in such a manner, for liberty from obedience or holiness, shows at once, that their judgment is perverted, and that they are guilty of what they imagined to be far from them; namely, of making void the law through faith, by supposing faith to supersede holiness.

3. The first plea of those who teach this expressly is, that we are now under the covenant of grace, not works; and therefore we are no longer under the necessity of performing the works of the law.

And who ever was under the covenant of works? None but Adam before the fall. He was fully and properly under that covenant which required perfect, universal obedience, as the one condition of acceptance; and left no place for pardon, upon the very least transgression. But no man else was ever under this, neither Jew nor Gentile; neither before Christ nor since. All his sons were and are under the covenant of grace. The manner of their acceptance is this: The free grace of God, through the

merits of Christ, gives pardon to them that believe; that believe with such a faith as, working by love, produces all obedience and holiness.

4. The case is not, therefore, as you suppose, that men were *once* more obliged to obey God, or to work the works of his law, than they are *now*. This is a supposition you cannot make good. But we should have been obliged, if we had been under the covenant of works, to have done those works antecedent to our acceptance. Whereas now all good works, though as necessary as ever, are not antecedent to our acceptance, but consequent upon it. Therefore the nature of the covenant of grace gives you no ground, no encouragement at all, to set aside any insistence or degree of obedience; any part or measure of holiness.

5. "But are we not justified by faith, without the works of the law?" Undoubtedly we are; without the works either of the ceremonial or the moral law. And would to God all men were convicted of this! It would prevent innumerable evils; Antinomianism in particular: For generally speaking, they are the Pharisees who make the Antinomians. Running into an extreme so palpably contrary to Scripture, they occasion others to run into the opposite one. These, seeking to be justified by works, affright those from allowing any place for them.

6. But the truth lies between both. We are, doubtless, justified by faith. This is the corner-stone of the whole Christian building. We are justified without the works of the law, as any previous condition of justification; but they are an immediate fruit of that faith whereby we are justified. So that if good works do not follow our faith, even all inward and outward holiness, it is plain our faith is nothing worth; we are yet in our sins. Therefore, that we are justified by faith, even by our faith without works, is no ground for making void the law through faith; or for imagining that faith is a dispensation from any kind or degree of holiness.

7. "Nay, but does not St. Paul expressly say, 'Unto him that worketh not, but believeth on Him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness?' And does it not follow from hence, that faith is to a believer in the room, in the place, of righteousness? But if faith is in the room of righteousness or holiness, what need is there of this too?"

This, it must be acknowledged, comes home to the point, and is, indeed, the main pillar of Antinomianism. And yet it needs not a long or laboured answer. We allow, (1.) That God justifies the ungodly; him that, till that hour, is totally ungodly;—full of all evil, void of all good: (2.) That he justifies the ungodly that worketh not; that, till that moment, worketh no good work;—neither can he; for an evil tree cannot bring forth good fruit: (3.) That he justifies him by faith alone, without any goodness or righteousness preceding: And, (4.) That faith is then counted to him for righteousness; namely, for preceding righteousness; that is, God, through the merits of Christ, accepts him that believes, as if he had already fulfilled all righteousness. But what is all this to your point? The Apostle does not say, either here or elsewhere, that this faith is counted to him for *subsequent righteousness*. He does teach that there is no righteousness *before* faith; but where does he teach that there is none *after* it? He does assert, holiness cannot *precede* justification; but not, that it need not *follow* it. St. Paul, therefore, gives you no colour for making void the law, by teaching that faith supersedes the necessity of holiness.

III. 1. There is yet another way of making void the law through faith, which is more common than either of the former. And that is, the doing it practically; the making it

void in *fact*, though not in *principle*; the *living* as if faith was designed to excuse us from holiness.

How earnestly does the Apostle guard us against this, in those well-known words: "What then? Shall we sin, because we are not under the law, but under grace? God forbid:" (Rom. 6:15:) A caution which it is needful thoroughly to consider, because it is of the last importance.

2. The being "under the law," may here mean, (1.) The being obliged to observe the ceremonial law: (2.) The being obliged to conform to the whole Mosaic institution: (3.) The being obliged to keep the whole moral law, as the condition of our acceptance with God: And, (4.) The being under the wrath and curse of God; under sentence of eternal death; under a sense of guilt and condemnation, full of horror and slavish fear.

3. Now although a believer is "not without law to God, but under the law to Christ," yet from the moment he believes, he is not "under the law," in any of the preceding senses. On the contrary, he is "under grace," under a more benign, gracious dispensation. As he is no longer under the ceremonial law, nor under the Mosaic institution; as he is not obliged to keep even the moral law, as the condition of his acceptance; so he is delivered from the wrath and the curse of God, from all sense of guilt and condemnation, and from all that horror and fear of death and hell whereby he was all his life before subject to bondage. And he now performs (which while "under the law" he could not do) a willing and universal obedience. He obeys not from the motive of slavish fear, but on a nobler principle; namely, the grace of God ruling in his heart, and causing all his works to be wrought in love.

4. What then? Shall this evangelical principle of action be less powerful than the legal? Shall we be less obedient to God from filial love than we were from servile fear?

It is well if this is not a common case; if this practical Antinomianism, this unobserved way of making void the law through faith, has not infected thousands of believers.

Has it not infected you? Examine yourself honestly and closely. Do you not do now what you durst not have done when you was "under the law," or (as we commonly call it) under conviction? For instance: You durst not then indulge yourself in food: You took just what was needful, and that of the cheapest kind. Do you not allow yourself more latitude now? Do you not indulge yourself a *little* more than you did? O beware lest you "sin because you are not under the law, but under grace!"

5. When you was under conviction, you durst not indulge the lust of the eye in any degree. You would not do anything, great or small, merely to gratify your curiosity. You regarded only cleanliness and necessity, or at most very moderate convenience, either in furniture or apparel; superfluity and finery of whatever kind, as well as fashionable elegance, were both a terror and an abomination to you.

Are they so still? Is your conscience as tender now in these things as it was then? Do you still follow the same rule both in furniture and apparel, trampling all finer, all superfluity, every thing useless, every thing merely ornamental, however fashionable, underfoot? Rather, have you not resumed what you had once laid aside, and what you could not then use without wounding your conscience? And have you not learned to say, "O, I am not so scrupulous now?" I would to God you were! Then you would not *sin* thus, "because you are not under the law, but under grace!"

6. You was once scrupulous too of commending any to their face; and still more, of suffering any to commend you. It was a stab to your heart; you could not bear it; you sought the honour that cometh of God only. You could not endure such conversation; nor any conversation which was not good to the use of edifying. All idle talk, all trifling discourse, you abhorred; you hated as well as feared it; being deeply sensible of the value of time, of every precious, fleeting moment. In like manner, you dreaded and abhorred idle expense; valuing your money only less than your time, and trembling lest you should be found an unfaithful steward even of the mammon of unrighteousness.

Do you now look upon praise as deadly poison, which you can neither give nor receive but at the peril of your soul? Do you still dread and abhor all conversation which does not tend to the use of edifying; and labour to improve every moment, that it may not pass without leaving you better than it found you? Are not you less careful as to the expense both of money and time? Cannot you now lay out either, as you could not have done once? Alas! how has that "which should have been for your health, proved to you an occasion of falling!" How have you "sinned because you was not under the law, but under grace!"

7. God forbid you should any longer continue thus to "turn the grace of God into lasciviousness!" O remember how clear and strong a conviction you once had concerning all these things! And, at the same time, you was fully satisfied from whom that conviction came. The world told you, you was in a delusion; but you knew it was the voice of God. In these things you was not too scrupulous then; but you are not now scrupulous enough. God kept you longer in that painful school, that you might learn those great lessons the more perfectly. And have you forgot them already? O recollect them before it is too late! Have you suffered so many things in vain? I trust, it is not yet in vain. Now use the conviction without the pain! Practice the lesson without the rod! Let not the mercy of God weigh less with you now, than his fiery indignation did before. Is love a less powerful motive than fear? If not, let it be an invariable rule, "I will do nothing now I am 'under grace,' which I durst not have done when 'under the law.'"

8. I cannot conclude this head without exhorting you to examine yourself, likewise, touching sins of omission. Are you as clear of these, now you "are under grace," as you was when "under the law?" How diligent was you then in hearing the word of God! Did you neglect any opportunity? Did you not attend thereon day and night? Would a small hinderance have kept you away? a little business? a visitant? a slight indisposition? a soft bed? a dark or cold morning?—Did not you then fast often; or use abstinence to the uttermost of your power? Was not you much in prayer, (cold and heavy as you was,) while you was hanging over the mouth of hell? Did you not speak and not spare even for and unknown God? Did you not boldly plead his cause?—reprove sinners?—and avow the truth before an adulterous generation? And are you now a believer in Christ? Have you the faith that overcometh the world? What! and are less zealous for your Master now, than you was when you knew him not? less diligent in fasting, in prayer, in hearing his word, in calling sinners to God? O repent! See and feel your grievous loss! Remember from whence you are fallen! Bewail your unfaithfulness! Now be zealous and do the first works; lest, if you continue to "make void the law through faith," God cut you off, and appoint you your portion with the unbelievers!

Edited by Josh Williams with corrections by Ryan Danker and George Lyons of Northwest Nazarene University for the Wesley Center for Applied Theology.

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JOHN WESLEY  
SERMON THIRTY-SIX

## THE LAW ESTABLISHED THROUGH FAITH: DISCOURSE TWO

*"Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid! Yea, we establish the law."  
Rom. 3:31.*

1. It has been shown in the preceding discourse, which are the most usual ways of making void the law through faith; namely, First, the not preaching it at all; which effectually makes it all void a stroke; and this under colour of preaching Christ and magnifying the gospel though it be, in truth, destroying both the one and the other: Secondly, the teaching (whether directly or indirectly,) that faith supersedes the necessity of holiness; that this less necessary now, or a less degree of it necessary, than before Christ came; that it is less necessary to us, because we believe, than otherwise it would have been; or, that Christian liberty is a liberty from any kind or degree of holiness: (So perverting those great truths, that we are now under the covenant of grace, and not of works; that a man is justified by faith, without the works of the law; and that "to him that worketh not, but believeth, his faith is counted for righteousness:") Or, Thirdly, the doing this practically; the making void the law in practice, though not in principle; the living or acting as if faith was designed to excuse us from holiness; the allowing ourselves in sin, "because we are not under the law, but under grace." It remains to inquire how we may follow a better pattern, how we may be able to say, with the Apostle, "Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid: Yea, we establish the law."

2. We do not, indeed, establish the old ceremonial law; we know that is abolished for ever. Much less do we establish the whole Mosaic dispensation; this we know our Lord has nailed to his cross. Nor yet do we so establish the moral law, (which, it is to be feared too many do,) as if the fulfilling it, the keeping all the commandments, were the condition of our justification: If it were so, surely "in His sight should no man living be justified." But all this being allowed, we still, in the Apostle's sense, "establish the law," the moral law.

I. 1. We establish the law, First, by our doctrine; by endeavouring to preach it in its whole extent, to explain and enforce every part of it, in the same manner as our great Teacher did while upon earth. We establish it by following St. Peter's advice: "If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God;" as the holy men of old, moved by the Holy Ghost, spoke and wrote for our instruction; and as the Apostles of our blessed Lord, by the direction of the same Spirit. We establish it whenever we speak in his name, by keeping back nothing from them that hear; by declaring to them, without any limitation or reserve, the whole counsel of God. And in order the more effectually to establish it, we use herein great plainness of speech. "We are not as many that *corrupt* the word of God;" (as artful men their bad wines;) we do not *cauponize, mix, adulterate, or soften* it, to make it suit the taste of the hearers: -- "But as of sincerity, but as of God, in the sight of God, speak we in Christ;" as having no other aim, than "by manifestation of the truth to commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God."

2. We then, by our doctrine, establish the law, when we thus openly declare it to all men; and that in the fullness wherein it is delivered by our blessed Lord and his Apostles; when we publish it in the height, and depth, and length, and breadth

thereof. We then establish the law, when we declare every part of it, every commandment contained therein, not only in its full, literal sense, but likewise in its spiritual meaning; not only with regard to the outward actions, which it either forbids or enjoins, but also with respect to the inward principle, to the thoughts, desires, and intents of the heart.

3. And indeed this we do the more diligently, not only because it is of the deepest importance; -- inasmuch as all the fruit, every word and work, must be only evil continually, if the tree be evil, if the dispositions and tempers of the heart be not right before God; -- but likewise because as important as these things are, they are little considered or understood, -- so little, that we may truly say of the law, too, when taken in its full spiritual meaning, it is "a mystery which was hid from ages and generations since the world began." It was utterly hid from the heathen world. They, with all their boasted wisdom, neither found out God, nor the law of God; not in the letter, much less in the spirit of it. "Their foolish hearts were" more and more "darkened;" while "professing themselves wise, they became fools." And it was almost equally hid, as to its spiritual meaning, from the bulk of the Jewish nation. Even these, who were so ready to declare concerning others, "this people that know not the law are cursed," pronounced their own sentence therein, as being under the same curse, the same dreadful ignorance. Witness our Lord's continual reproof of the wisest among them for their gross misinterpretations of it. Witness the supposition almost universally received among them, that they needed only to make clean the outside of the cup; that the paying tithes of mint, anise, and cummin, -- outward exactness, -- would atone for inward unholiness, for the total neglect both of justice and mercy, of faith and the love of God. Yea, so absolutely was the spiritual meaning of the law hidden from the wisest of them, that one of their most eminent Rabbis comments thus on those words of the Psalmist, "If I incline unto iniquity with my heart, the Lord will not hear me:" "That is," saith he, "if it be only in my heart, if I do not commit outward wickedness, the Lord will not regard it; he will not punish me unless I proceed to the outward act!"

4. But alas! the law of God, as to its inward, spiritual meaning, is not hid from the Jews or heathens only, but even from what is called the Christian world; at least, from a vast majority of them. The spiritual sense of the commandments of God is still a mystery to these also. Nor is this observable only in those lands which are overspread with Romish darkness and ignorance. But this is too sure, that the far greater part, even of those who are called *Reformed Christians* are utter strangers at this day to the law of Christ, in the purity and spirituality of it.

5. Hence it is that to this day, "the Scribes and Pharisees," the men who have the form but not the power of religion, and who are generally wise in their own eyes, and righteous in their own conceits, -- "hearing these things, are offended;" are deeply offended, when we speak of the religion of the heart; and particularly when we show, that without this, were we to "give all our goods to feed the poor," it would profit us nothing. But offended they must be; for we cannot but speak the truth as it is in Jesus. It is our part, whether they will hear, or whether they will forbear, to deliver our own soul. All that is written in the book of God we are to declare, not as pleasing men, but the Lord. We are to declare, not only all the promises, but all the threatenings, too, which we find therein. At the same time that we proclaim all the blessings and privileges which God hath prepared for his children, we are likewise to "teach all the things whatsoever he hath commanded." And we know that all these have their use; either for the awakening those that sleep, the instructing the ignorant, the comforting the feeble-minded, or the building up and perfecting of the saints. We



know that "all Scripture, given by inspiration of God is profitable," either "for doctrine," or "for reproof," either "for correction or for instruction in righteousness;" and "that the man of God," in the process of the work of God in his soul, has need of every part thereof, that he may at length "be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works."

6. It is our part thus to preach Christ, by preaching all things whatsoever he hath revealed. We may indeed, without blame, yea, and with a peculiar blessing from God, declare the love of our Lord Jesus Christ; we may speak, in a more especial manner, of "the Lord our righteousness." We may expatiate upon the grace of God in Christ, "reconciling the world unto himself;" we may, at proper opportunities, dwell upon his praise, as "bearing the iniquities of us all, as wounded for our transgressions, and bruised for our iniquities, that by his stripes we might be healed:" -- But still we should not preach Christ, according to his word, if we were wholly to confine ourselves to this: We are not ourselves clear before God, unless we proclaim him in all his offices. To preach Christ, as a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, is to preach him, not only as our great High Priest, "taken from among men, and ordained for men, in things pertaining to God;" as such, "reconciling us to God by his blood," and "ever living to make intercession for us;" -- but likewise as the Prophet of the Lord, "who of God is made unto us wisdom," who, by his word and his Spirit, is with us always, "guiding us into all truth;" -- yea, and as remaining a King for ever; as giving laws to all whom he has bought with his blood; as restoring those to the image of God, whom he had first re-instated in his favour; as reigning in all believing hearts until he has "subdued all things to himself," -- until he hath utterly cast out all sin, and brought in everlasting righteousness.

II. 1. We establish the law, Secondly, when we so preach faith in Christ as not to supersede, but produce holiness; to produce all manner of holiness, negative and positive, of the heart and of the life.

In order to this, we continually declare, (what should be frequently and deeply considered by all "who would not make void the law through faith,") that faith itself, even Christian faith, the faith of God's elect, the faith of the operation of God, still is only the handmaid of love. As glorious and honourable as it is, it is not the end of the commandment. God hath given this honour to love alone: Love is the end of all the commandments of God. Love is the end, the sole end, of every dispensation of God, from the beginning of the world to the consummation of all things. And it will endure when heaven and earth flee away; for "love" alone "never faileth." Faith will totally fail; it will be swallowed up in sight, in the everlasting vision of God. But even then love, --

Its nature and its office still the same,  
Lasting its lamp and unconsumed its flame, --  
In deathless triumph shall for ever live,  
And endless good diffuse, and endless praise receive.

2. Very excellent things are spoken of faith, and whosoever is a partaker thereof may well say with the Apostle, "Thanks be to God for his unspeakable gift." Yet still it loses all its excellence when brought into a comparison with love. What St. Paul observes concerning the superior glory of the gospel above that of the law may with great propriety be spoken of the superior glory of love above that of faith: "Even that which was made glorious hath no glory in this respect, by reason of the glory that excelleth. For if that which is done away is glorious, much more doth that which remaineth exceed in glory" Yea, all the glory of faith, before it is done away, arises hence, that it

ministers to love: It is the great temporary means which God has ordained to promote that eternal end.

3. Let those who magnify faith beyond all proportion, so as to swallow up all things else, and who so totally misapprehend the nature of it as to imagine it stands in the place of love, consider farther, that as love will exist after faith, so it did exist long before it. The angels who, from the moment of their creation, beheld the face of their Father that is in heaven, had no occasion for faith, in its general notion, as it is the evidence of things not seen. Neither had they need of faith in its more particular acceptation, faith in the blood of Jesus: for he took not upon him the nature of angels, but only the seed of Abraham. There was therefore no place before the foundation of the world for faith either in the general or particular sense. But there was for love. Love existed from eternity, in God, the great ocean of love. Love had a place in all the children of God, from the moment of their creation. They received at once from their gracious Creator to exist, and to love.

4. Nor is it certain (as ingeniously and plausibly as many have descanted upon this) that faith, even in the general sense of the word, had any place in paradise. It is highly probable, from that short and uncircumstantial account which we have in Holy Writ, that Adam, before he rebelled against God, walked with him by sight and not by faith.

For then his reason's eye was strong and clear,  
And (as an eagle can behold the sun)  
Might have beheld his Maker's face as near,  
As the' intellectual angels could have done.

He was then able to talk with him face to face, whose face we cannot now see and live; and consequently had no need of that faith whose office it is to supply the want of sight.

5. On the other hand, it is absolutely certain, faith, in its particular sense, had then no place. For in that sense it necessarily presupposes sin, and the wrath of God declared against the sinner; without which there is no need of an atonement for sin in order to the sinner's reconciliation with God. Consequently, as there was no need of an atonement before the fall, so there was no place for faith in that atonement; man being then pure from every stain of sin; holy as God is holy. But love even then filled his heart; it reigned in him without rival; and it was only when love was lost by sin, that faith was added, not for its own sake, nor with any design that it should exist any longer than until it had answered the end for which it was ordained, -- namely, to restore man to the love from which he was fallen. At the fall, therefore, was added this evidence of things unseen, which before was utterly needless; this confidence in redeeming love, which could not possibly have any place till the promise was made, that "the Seed of the woman should bruise the serpent's head."

6. Faith, then, was originally designed of God to re-establish the law of love. Therefore, in speaking thus, we are not undervaluing it, or robbing it of its due praise; but on the contrary showing its real worth, exalting it in its just proportion, and giving it that very place which the wisdom of God assigned it from the beginning. It is the grand means of restoring that holy love wherein man was originally created. It follows, that although faith is of no value in itself, (as neither is any other means whatsoever,) yet as it leads to that end, the establishing anew the law of love in our hearts; and as, in the present state of things, it is the only means under heaven for effecting it; it is on that account an unspeakable blessing to man, and of unspeakable value before God.

III. 1. And this naturally brings us to observe, Thirdly, the most important way of establishing the law; namely, the establishing it in our own hearts and lives. Indeed, without this, what would all the rest avail? We might establish it by our doctrine; we might preach it in its whole extent; might explain and enforce every part of it. We might open it in its most spiritual meaning, and declare the mysteries of the kingdom; we might preach Christ in all his offices, and faith in Christ as opening all the treasures of his love; and yet, all this time, if the law we preached were not established in our hearts, we should be of no more account before God than "sounding brass, or tinkling cymbals:" All our preaching would be so far from profiting ourselves, that it would only increase our damnation.

2. This is, therefore, the main point to be considered, How may we establish the law in our own hearts so that it may have its full influence on our lives? And this can only be done by faith.

Faith alone it is which effectually answers this end, as we learn from daily experience. For so long as we walk by faith, not by sight, we go swiftly on in the way of holiness. While we steadily look, not at the things which are seen, but at those which are not seen, we are more and more crucified to the world and the world crucified to us. Let but the eye of the soul be constantly fixed, not on the things which are temporal, but on those which are eternal, and our affections are more and more loosened from earth, and fixed on things above. So that faith, in general, is the most direct and effectual means of promoting all righteousness and true holiness; of establishing the holy and spiritual law in the hearts of them that believe.

3. And by faith, taken in its more particular meaning, for a confidence in a pardoning God, we establish his law in our own hearts in a still more effectual manner. For there is no motive which so powerfully inclines us to love God, as the sense of the love of God in Christ. Nothing enables us like a piercing conviction of this to give our hearts to him who was given for us. And from this principle of grateful love to God arises love to our brother also. Neither can we avoid loving our neighbour, if we truly believe the love wherewith God hath loved us. Now this love to man, grounded on faith and love to God, "worketh no ill to" our "neighbour." Consequently, it is, as the Apostle observes, "the fulfilling of the" whole negative "law." "For this, Thou shalt not commit adultery; Thou shalt not kill; Thou shalt not steal; Thou shalt not bear false witness; Thou shalt not covet; and if there be any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself." Neither is love content with barely working no evil to our neighbour. It continually incites us to do good, as we have time and opportunity; to do good, in every possible kind, and in every possible degree, to all men. It is therefore, the fulfilling of the positive, likewise, as well as of the negative, law of God.

4. Nor does faith fulfil either the negative or positive law, as to the external part only; but it works inwardly by love, to the purifying of the heart, the cleansing it from all vile affections. Everyone that hath this faith in himself, "purifieth himself, even as he is pure;" -- purifieth himself from every earthly, sensual desire, from all vile and inordinate affections; yea, from the whole of that carnal mind which is enmity against God. At the same time, if it have its perfect work, it fills him with all goodness, righteousness, and truth. It brings all heaven into his soul; and causes him to walk in the light, even as God is in the light.

5. Let us thus endeavour to establish the law in ourselves; not sinning "because we are under grace," but rather using all the power we receive thereby, "to fulfil all righteousness." Calling to mind what light we received from God while his Spirit was

convincing us of sin, let us beware we do not put out that light; what we had then attained let us hold fast. Let nothing induce us to build again what we have destroyed; to resume anything, small or great, which we then clearly saw was not for the glory of God, or the profit of our own soul; or to neglect anything, small or great, which we could not then neglect, without a check from our own conscience. To increase and perfect the light which we had before, let us now add the light of faith. Confirm we the former gift of God by a deeper sense of whatever he had then shown us, by a greater tenderness of conscience, and a more exquisite sensibility of sin. Walking now with joy, and not with fear, in a clear, steady sight of things eternal, we shall look on pleasure, wealth, praise—all the things of earth, as on bubbles upon the water; counting nothing important, nothing desirable, nothing worth a deliberate thought, but only what is “within the veil,” where Jesus “sitteth at the right hand of God.”

6. Can *you* say, “Thou art merciful to my unrighteousness; my sins thou rememberest no more?” Then for the time to come see that you fly from sin, as from the face of a serpent! For how exceeding sinful does it appear to you now! How heinous above all expression! On the other hand, in how amiable a light do you now see the holy and perfect will of God! Now, therefore, labour that it may be fulfilled, both in you, by you, and upon you! Now watch and pray that you may sin no more, that you may see and shun the least transgression of his law! You see the motes which you could not see before, when the sun shines into a dark place. In like manner you see the sins which you could not see before, now the Sun of Righteousness shines in your heart. Now, then, do all diligence to walk, in every respect, according to the light you have received! Now be zealous to receive more light daily, more of the knowledge and love of God, more of the Spirit of Christ, more of his life, and of the power of his resurrection! Now use all the knowledge, and love, and life, and power you have already attained: So shall you continually go on from faith to faith; so shall you daily increase in holy love, till faith is swallowed up in sight, and the law of love established to all eternity!

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Edited by Jennette Descalzo with corrections by Ryan Danker for the Wesley Center for Applied Theology.

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# Lesson 11: Law, Security, and Authority

## Due This Lesson

Reading  
Sermon beginning  
Outline  
Journaling

## Learner Objectives

At the end of this lesson, participants should

- be able to explain the biblical foundations for understanding the place of law and the roles of obedience and faith in the Christian life

## Homework Assignments

Review the following Bible passages: Psalm 4; Mark 6—8; Luke 24; John 17; Acts 3; Romans 6; 1 Corinthians 13; Philippians 1; 1 Thessalonians; Hebrews 12; 2 Peter 1; 1 John 3. Prepare theological statements these books/passages would support.

Read the following sections in NDBT: Holiness, Love, and Peace.

Read **1** of the following resources:

- Resource 11-9, "Holiness Overcomes Uncleaness—Mark 6—8"
- Resource 11-10, "Peace Be with You—Psalm 4, Luke 24, Acts 3, Hebrews 12, 1 John 3"
- Resource 11-11, "Growing Love—Philippians 1"

Write a 1-page summary.

Write in your journal. How will you apply what you have learned in this lesson to your life?

## The Law

In the New Testament the term *nomos* is the word used when speaking of almost all aspects of the Law.

In the Old Testament two words dominate.

- *Mishpat* is used most often and is usually translated as judgment or law or statute.
- *Torah* is used only a little less and usually means the instruction, teaching, or law of God.
- Three other words are also used: *mitsvah*, *chaqah*, and *dath*. They usually meant commandment or charge, inscription or decree, and imposing a sentence respectively.

### Law Forms

In the Old Testament society the dictatorial rulers issued decrees. Some of the best examples of these decrees are found in the Hittite treaties where the requirements are stated as positive or negative decrees—"You shall" or "You shall not." These are called apodictic law. We see this form of law in the Ten Commandments.

Judgment given by a court of law—The most common place for such laws to be formed was in the gate of the city where the elders, the influential people, of the city would be asked to sit down and consider a case. This is called casuistic law. When it is written up it takes the form of a conditional statement and a consequential statement often using these words: "If . . . ; then . . ."

## Moral and Cultic Law

There are some laws that apply to what happens in the tabernacle or Temple and the practice of the cult. Others apply to the way in which people conduct themselves in society.

If morality is understood as living according to the intention of God in his act of creation, and if cultic law is understood as all that pertains to the salvation or restoration of humankind, then we might call these two groups creation laws and salvation laws.

The Law of God, whatever the format in which it was presented to humankind, is not the product of some heavenly legislative body but is direction on how to live in *shalom* with creation. *Shalom*, usually translated peace, meaning not stillness but everything being as it was intended to be.

## Salvation or Cultic Law

The laws that provide salvation for Israel are all a part of the cult, and all were fulfilled by the death of Christ. These salvation laws no longer needed to be acted out because now the meaning of that which they symbolized was revealed and now Christ needs to be accepted as our salvation.

**Necessity for Obedience**—Following where God leads is the essence of receiving the gift of salvation.

**Necessity of Remembrance**—Jesus initiated the covenant with the Last Supper that commemorates His death for us, His action of salvation on our behalf. He tells us that we must remember—remind ourselves and bring to the attention of our children—this salvation by the reenactment of the Lord's Supper.

**The Priesthood**—The role of the priests was to enable the Israelites to follow Yahweh. The role of Jesus, our Great High Priest, is to enable Christians to walk with God.

**The Sacrifices and Offerings**—A study of the various offerings is very complex.

- The fire on the altar was never to be allowed to go out. Forgiveness was always available.
- The sin offering was the primary offering, and often accompanied by other offerings. No one was excluded from presenting an offering.
- Sin offerings were presented whenever a person recognized that he or she had committed a sin.

**Day of Atonement**—The annual event that took the accumulation of sin known and unknown by the nation and sent it out of the camp. The atonement could not be earned. God gives it.

**The Washing**—The dirt of life, even the dirt from the Court of Israel, had to be removed before entrance into the presence of God.

**Contamination**—Maintaining the physical health of the community was important. Protection from pollution of heart and mind was harsh. The power of God within us, the holy love of God he gives us, not only withstands the contamination but also offers redemption to the unclean.



## Creation or Moral Law

One of the premises for understanding the moral law is that it arises not from the action of a legislative body but from the very act of creation. Its foundation is that there is only one God, the God who created the universe and all in it. It is an expression of his character, and his character is love.

### Prophets and the Law

- Their primary emphasis was upon the failure of Israel and her leaders to observe the Law.
- The Law and justice are bound together and injustice paralyzes the Law.
- The Law was not just for Israel; it had bearing upon all nations.
- To the prophets continuation in the blessings of the covenant could only take place when the people were obedient to the Law that God had given to them.

### Wisdom and the Law

- The Book of Psalms opens with praise for the person whose delight is in the law of Yahweh and who thinks about the law day and night.
- Wisdom literature insists that the Law is the source of life and knowledge. It brings hope and strength. The person who worships God loves his Law, for it is the source of guidance, the fountain of life.

### Jesus and the Law

- Jesus was in all things obedient to the Law but also was in conflict with some of the interpretations of the Law in his day.
- He was in no way a legalist and strongly denounced those who observed the letter of the Law and not the spirit of the Law.
- Clearly Jesus declares that the Law is valuable instruction for life. He himself is never recorded as breaking any of the Torah, although he was rightly accused of breaking some of the traditions of the Jews.

### Paul and the Law

- The apostle Paul goes to great pains to clarify a misunderstanding of the Law, by the Jews of his day, in the Book of Romans.
- Paul makes clear that the observance of the Law cannot accomplish salvation whether you are thinking of observance of the cultic or moral law.
- Paul insists that the cultic law was a representation of the work of Jesus, who is the reality behind that law.
- The moral law is at the heart of the covenant that Jesus makes with us when we believe.

## Law and Culture

When we read these ancient laws we need to recognize that they address the issues of their times. Laws are written to give guidance for real situations.

In order to understand what God was teaching his people, we need to understand the laws in *their* setting and not in ours. Then we need to do what Jesus did when he applied the Law—go to the root of what it is talking about.

The moral principles involved will carry through, but the specific injunctions may be irrelevant.

One of the important factors that we need to recognize is that the instruction of God—which includes the instructions that Jesus has given us—is not only directives that will enable us to live spiritually, but gives instruction for our relationship to other people and to the world in which we live.

## The Law and the Covenant

The covenant was made by God and given by his grace to Israel. The idea of the covenant was to make life possible, because life is only possible when God is present since God is the source of life and light, knowledge and wisdom, holiness and love.

### Love Everlasting

- Atonement of sin is the ultimate act of mercy to the sinner and displays the *chesed* that is the steadfast love or mercy of God as nothing else can do.
- The throne of mercy rests upon three things that have been placed in the ark:
  1. The Tables of the Law
  2. The Pot of Manna
  3. The Rod of Aaron

## A Pattern for the Christian Life

The tabernacle is a remarkable set of symbols. Jesus took it as the pattern for himself.

### **Centrality of the Tabernacle**

The location of the tabernacle at the center of the camp emphasizes that God wants to be at the center of the life of his people.

### **Quality of the Tabernacle**

The quality of materials and workmanship required emphasizes that God will receive only that which is our best.

### **Entrance Requirements**

The fact that there is a fence about the courtyard and a gate where entrance can be refused is a reminder that when we come to God it must be either to seek forgiveness by claiming the blood of the Lamb, or because we have already claimed the cleansing of the blood and our hands are clean and our hearts are humble.

### **Court of Israel—the Church**

The Court of Israel becomes the court of the new Israel, the believers in Jesus Christ—his Church.

- Activities in the Courtyard
  - Prayer
  - Singing
  - Teaching of the Torah
  - Offerings brought
  - Prophets preached
  - Babies dedicated
  - People blessed
- Furniture in the Courtyard
  - Washbasin
  - Altar

The altar together with the washbasin stand within the courtyard as the constant reminder that the primary task of the Church is to help people get right with God and at the same time right with each other and at peace with oneself.

## The Tabernacle Structure

Jesus referred to himself as the Temple, and that Paul recognized that the believer was supposed to take on the characteristics of the Temple. The symbolism is thus a pattern of what the Christian ought to be.

### Holy Place

- The priests entered it on a daily basis so that they could tend to the lamp, the incense altar and the table.
- Believers in Jesus are priests. It is our responsibility to tend to such matters—bringing people to the altar, the foot of the Cross, and tending to the affairs of the holy place.
  - Seven-branch Lampstand
  - The lamp addresses the need to be taught by the spirit through the use of Scripture on a continual basis. We do not stop learning and growing in our relationship with God. It is a daily and continual relationship.
  - Incense Altar
  - Prayer is the privilege of talking with God. The privilege is made possible by the sacrifice given on the altar.
  - Prayer is also the recognition that God is the source of all that we need.
  - Table of Showbread
  - Tithes and offerings, as we have noted previously, are not given because of the need for support of the clergy or the need of the poor or for festivals. Rather they are given in praise and thanksgiving to God and in acknowledgment that we are stewards and God is the owner of everything.

### Holy of Holies

- In the life of the believer God transforms this place of darkness and deceit into the abode of his glory and light. It should be the holiest place, the cleanest place, the most beautiful place in a believer's life.
- There is room for only one piece of furniture in the holy of holies and that is the throne of God. Any other throne must be taken out to make room for the King of Kings.
- One aspect of the tabernacle is radically different under the new covenant. The veil is gone.

## Holiness Overcomes Uncleanness—Mark 6—8

Most ancient people took for granted that the world was divided into three realms. On the one extreme was the world of the “holy,” inhabited by God and persons and things consecrated to him; on the other, the world of the “unclean.” In between was the mundane world of everyday life. Both the sacred and the impure possessed an inherent “mysterious and frightening force.” These two forces transformed everything they came in contact with. The “unclean” and the “holy” were both considered “untouchable.” Those who touched them became themselves “untouchable.” Thus, for example, Old Testament laws prohibited touching impure things—such as corpses—and sacred things—such as the ark of the covenant.<sup>57</sup>

Such regulations reminded Israel of the awesome holiness of its God and of the holiness it was to preserve as his chosen people. They also assured that Israel remained separate from the pagan nations that surrounded it. But following the Babylonian Exile, preoccupation with ritual purity and the development of impractical prescriptions made most Jews despair of the possibility of personal holiness. They took for granted that uncleanness was “contagious.” Even casual physical contact with an “unclean” person would make them unclean.

**Alternative Views of Holiness.** Different groups of first-century Jews had different ways of responding to this predicament. Be forewarned that my characterizations of these groups are unavoidably overly simplistic, broad generalizations. But these brief sketches should be sufficient for our purposes.

1. Sadducees assumed that social and political realities demanded compromise with the occupying Roman power in order to maintain peaceful coexistence. Because they represented the elite of Jewish society, Sadducees had considerable to lose if d'tente failed. “Better Roman than ruined,” they might have said. They chose the path of secularization rather than that of sanctification. Holiness was relegated to holy days, in holy places, in the fulfillment of their holy office. But on every other day, in every other place the Sadducees assumed it was life as usual—get “down and dirty”; meet the Romans on their turf on their terms.
2. On the opposite extreme in first-century Palestine were the Essenes, the Jewish sect believed to have produced and preserved the Dead Sea Scrolls. This is the only group that is not mentioned in the New Testament. And there’s a reason. Essenes contended that evil was so strong and evil people so numerous that even normal social interaction was to be avoided. Everyday life in mainstream society unavoidably involved the risk of the fatal contagion of sin. Thus, Essenes moved into remote, wilderness, monastic communities, miles from every known form of sin. Hard work, rigid discipline, constant study of Scripture, frequent prayers, and repeated ritual baths enabled them to sustain their hard-earned holiness from contamination by the world. They took quite literally the Law of Moses ordering everyday life in their communities. Consider one example. The Community Rule of the Qumran Essenes dictated a rigid adherence to Deuteronomy 23:12-14. In compliance with the biblical command, all members of the community were issued a trowel to prepare suitable toilets for themselves. Holiness for the Essenes

required isolation from the world, a relegation of holiness to the margins of life. Holiness meant isolation—not the sanctification of all of life.

3. In contrast to those who saw escape and separation as the only solutions, Jewish Zealots took the route of active, often violent, opposition to evil in the world. The enemies of holiness that loomed largest in their minds were the Romans. Thus, Zealots refused to pay taxes because to do so was to aid and abet the occupying pagans, to concede Israel's enslavement to Rome. It would be an unconscionable betrayal of the one true God. The Zealots' politicization of holiness allowed them to justify even violent means in the pursuit of just ends, because they assumed that real holiness could not exist in a fallen world dominated by evil men.
4. Despite the modern image of the Pharisees as pedantic legalists, the Essenes considered them far too liberal for their tastes. And they were far too willing to compromise for the Zealots' tastes. And they were both too conservative in their practice and too liberal in their theology for the Sadducees' tastes. The Pharisees, however, thought of themselves as simply realists in an extremist world.

Unlike the Essenes, they recognized the need to adapt Old Testament regulations to the "modern world" of the first century. It was not enough simply to repeat wooden laws that were given to maintain sanitation for people wandering in the wilderness. The Pharisees were not opposed to sanitary toilets suitable for city dwellers. Similarly, to the dismay of the Zealots, as a necessary concession to existing realities, the Pharisees paid taxes. Grudgingly. Who doesn't? Unlike the Sadducees, they were no friends of Rome. They relished the day when Israel would once again enjoy autonomy. Unlike the Zealots, Pharisees were reluctant to take matters into their own hands. They awaited the coming of God's kingdom, when he would destroy his enemies and vindicate his faithful people.

In their passion for holiness, the Pharisees took it upon themselves to do more than the Law required and less than it allowed. Though only laymen, they voluntarily accepted the law's purity regulations intended for priests serving in the Temple. Not only shewbread eaten in the Temple by priests, but every meal was to be observed as holy unto the Lord. The Pharisees attempted to extend the boundaries of the holy priesthood to include all people. They expanded the regulations securing the sanctity of the holy Temple to include all places.

The Pharisees assumed, as did most of Jesus' contemporaries, that uncleanness was "contagious" and holiness, threatening at best. The Pharisees were realists. They knew they could not perfectly observe all of their own regulations. Thus, they developed and extended Old Testament teaching on the necessary means for cleansing oneself after even inadvertent contact with uncleanness (Lev 15). This normally took the form of a ritually prescribed procedure of hand washing—twice, with specific amounts of water and hands held in appropriate positions. Most Pharisees lived near Jerusalem so they could offer various sacrifices to atone for their contamination and to reestablish their tarnished holiness.

The Pharisees risked the contagion of life in the world and the inevitable contacts with wickedness with which it confronted them. Their so-called legalism was intended to preserve their fragile sanctity in this hostile environment. The Pharisees' 613 general and special rules were an attempt to "build a fence around the law." By observing these practical and specific guidelines for holy living one could avoid even the hint of evil. By means of their protective "fence," Pharisees

even avoided deeds that were not wrong in and of themselves, but that might lead to sinful actions. Thus, for example, they drew up a list of 39 activities forbidden on the Sabbath. One forbade women to look in a mirror on the Sabbath to avoid the possibility that—vain as women are—they might see a gray hair, be tempted to “harvest” it, and so violate the commandment forbidding work on the day of rest.

Modern caricatures of all Pharisees as legalists and hypocrites are largely unfounded and unfair. Their concern to “build a fence around the law” was an honest expression of their commitment to live out the terms of Israel’s covenant with God in the real world. They did not imagine that observing the Law would save them. They knew that their relationship with God was founded on his grace alone. But they took obedience to this gracious God seriously. The Pharisees’ approach to holiness might be called the path of privatization and ritualization. And, wherever holiness is relegated to the realm of private piety and ritual, legalism finds a fertile field.

The biblical call to holiness does involve separation from the world, personal piety, and radical obedience to the will of God. Before we dismiss the Pharisees entirely, let us hear the words of Jesus: “Woe to you, . . . Pharisees . . . ! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former” (Mt 23:23).

Before we lightly dismiss the Pharisees’ legalistic preoccupation with petty issues, we should ask ourselves, Are we more committed than the Pharisees to what Jesus called “the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness”? Are we as willing to be a self-conscious minority for issues that really matter?

The Pharisees sought to live in the world without being contaminated by it. This, you may recall, is very much like what Jesus prayed might be his disciples’ experience of sanctification (in Jn 17:14-19). But Jesus’ focus was quite different from that of the Pharisees. His concern was not merely that Christians might find a private preserve from the evil of the world and personal protection from the evil one. Sanctification is not a safe sanctuary from the world. Those who are “truly sanctified” are sent into the world to serve, just as Jesus himself was sent into the world. Lives of holy love lived before the eyes of the world just might convince the world to turn from belief to faith.

Although the Pharisees were the largest of the four major Jewish sects, their numbers were comparatively small. Estimates are that they made up no more than one or two percent of the population of Palestine. Nevertheless, their influence on the minds of the masses was considerable. Their views were widely held, even if the vast majority of first-century Jews could not, or would not, take the time and trouble to observe scrupulous Pharisaic practices. As a result most Jews accepted the Pharisees’ assessment that the masses were hopeless sinners. Few first-century Jews ever seriously attempted to observe rabbinic provisions for the preservation and restoration of ritual holiness. The Pharisees in our reading seem unconcerned to do more than save themselves.

All this may explain why Jesus met such opposition. He insisted that the only uncleanness that might defile a person was moral uncleanness (Mk 7:17-22). He also assumed that ethical holiness was “contagious.” Though he was “the Holy One of God,” his holiness threatened only evil, not the people who were its helpless victims.



Jesus' refusal to practice the customary ritual hand washing before eating was not a rejection of basic hygiene, but of the notion that he might have been "infected" by casual contact with sinful people. His Sabbath healings seem to have been deliberate affronts on popular sensibilities about holy days. Nothing urgent compelled Jesus to heal people who had suffered many years from their affliction (Lk 13:10-17).

What difference would waiting one more day have made to one who had suffered for 20 years? But Jesus insisted, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath" (Mk 2:27; NRSV). It was appropriate to do good, to meet human need, even on the Sabbath day (Mt 12:9-14). A person's deeds, not the day of the week, made the day holy or mundane.

Jesus associated freely with sinful, unclean people. Most of his contemporary Jews believed that to eat with others was to accept them as friends, to accept them as they were, to condone their sin, to compromise, and so, to be contaminated. But Jesus accepted invitations to eat in the houses of known sinners, blatantly ignoring Jewish sensitivities. He fellowshiped with tax gatherers who, by virtue of their livelihood, had compromised with pagan Rome, and so were unclean.<sup>58</sup>

Jesus flaunted social conventions that presumed uncleanness was more powerful than holiness (Mt 15:1-20). The Gospels tell us that he touched lepers, freeing them from their uncleanness (Lk 5:12-16; 17:11-19). Unlike most Jewish males of his day, he accepted women—even the sexually immoral—as fully human beings (Lk 7:36—8:3; Jn 7:53—8:11). Far from being contaminated, Jesus felt "virtue" pass from him when a woman suffering from a chronic menstrual disorder touched him (Lk 8:43-48; 6:17-19). He took time to bless worthless children, to the dismay of even his disciples (Lk 18:15-17). He risked contact with those believed to be possessed by evil spirits, causing demons to flee when confronted by such powerful holiness (Lk 7:26-39). Jesus did not hesitate to put his hands on the sick—despite the prevailing view of his time that their illness was caused by their sin. By touching them, he brought them healing and forgiveness (Mk 2:1-12; 6:53-56; Jn 9:1-3). He even touched the dead, and by doing so brought life (Lk 7:11-17; 8:49-56; Jn 11).

Even if Jesus was correct in his view of holiness, he did risk one thing by ministering to the unclean. His reputation. The Pharisees might have dismissed Jesus as just another one of the unclean masses, were it not for his remarkable reputation with the crowds as a credible religious teacher—a holy man. It was not enough that he was careless in the observance of the proper distinction between clean and unclean, between the holy and the profane. He led others astray as well.

Little wonder that in the name of religion Jesus' enemies eventually sought to eliminate him as a serious threat to their worldview. They justified their antagonism by describing him as a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax gatherers and sinners (Lk 7:34). This description was more than the charge of guilt by association—"Birds of a feather flock together." It was a declaration of war, an identification of Jesus as one deserving of death (Deut 21:18-23). Jesus' attempt to cleanse the Temple of extraneous religious paraphernalia to make room for Gentile worshipers seems to have been "the straw that broke the camel's back" (Mk 11:15-19; 14:53-59). So it was the law and law-abiding, "holy" men who finally brought Jesus to his death.

Jesus had urged his followers to take the Good News to people of all nations (Mt 28:18-20; Lk 14:15-24; Acts 1:8). The Book of Acts illustrates that his disciples, steeped in the traditions of Jewish exclusivism as they were, at first resisted the

mission to the Gentiles. Even the gift of the exalted Christ, the Holy Spirit, did not immediately overcome their religious prejudices. It did not happen overnight, but eventually they came to understand and emulate Jesus' radical understanding of "contagious" holiness. Peter required a threefold vision to see that non-Jews were appropriate candidates for God's cleansing power (Acts 10). Other Jewish Christians, even his fellow apostles, at first called him to task for engaging in such risky business. But even Peter was not always able to balance consistently his new insight and his old friends, as the Apostle Paul had to remind him in a public confrontation.

Perhaps it is time to clarify my strange use to the word "contagious." I do not mean to suggest by this term that holiness makes people sick, nor that you can "catch" holiness simply by spending time with a holy person. But I am suggesting that holiness is more powerful than sin, in fact it has the power to defeat sin on its own turf. I am suggesting that authentic holiness is at least as "contagious" as laughter, that holiness is attractive and winsome, that it transforms all it touches.

Confidence in the "contagious" power of holiness led the apostle Paul to urge spouses in mixed marriages (believer/nonbeliever) not to seek divorce (1 Cor 7:10-16). He was persuaded that the believing spouse might "sanctify" the unbelieving. He was persuaded that holiness was stronger than unbelief, sin, idolatry, etc. A believer might lead his or her spouse and children to the faith.

Paul knew the power of the Sanctifying Spirit. But he also knew the power of conviction. "I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean" (Rom 14:14, NRSV).

**The Power of Conviction.** Are we equally convinced of the "contagious," cleansing power of holiness? Most of us probably consider ritual taboos such as those first-century Jews customarily avoided as reflections of primitive superstitions. Today we consider people who are preoccupied with meticulous cleansings after casual contact with "sinners" to be mentally ill.

But in many other ways our practice sometimes suggests that we have greater sympathies for the views of Jesus' opponents than for those of Jesus, Paul, and the Early Church. Are we really persuaded that God is stronger than Satan, the Holy One than the evil one? that good is stronger than evil? that right is stronger than might? that grace is greater than our sin? that the Spirit is stronger than the flesh?

Do we really believe that holiness is "contagious"? Or, are we so preoccupied with self-preservation that we fail to touch the lives of needy people? Do we avoid AIDS victims because personal survival takes precedence over Christlike service? Is our religious reputation more important than reality? Are we more concerned with how holy people THINK we are than with BEING holy? Are we cleansed and empowered to serve in Jesus' name? If so, are we demonstrating our sanctification by self-giving service? Or are we storing up virtue for some future contingency?

If God is the source of authentic holiness, are we not convinced that his supply is inexhaustible? Will we ever persuade unbelievers of the reality and cleansing power of Jesus Christ if we cower in a "holy huddle" somewhere? When will we break out and move to the "line of scrimmage" where the contest between the forces of good and evil takes place?

But how do we confront an unclean world with the conviction that holiness is “contagious”? How do we comfort the walking-wounded with the optimism of grace? What will it take to persuade us of the certainty that a holy God can change this unholy planet through a holy people?

**Changed Hearts.** Nothing short of the inside-out transformation we call entire sanctification will enable God’s people to serve him and lead the world to know that he is God. In today’s text, Jesus quotes the words of Isaiah (29:13): “These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men” (Mk 7:6-7).

The temptation to which the Pharisees yielded is a common one among religious folks like us. It is to fulfill only the “laws” directed toward formal worship. But God’s concerns go beyond the “interruptions” in our daily routine to worship. God’s concerns go beyond faithful attendance at church services. Worship involves more than praise in words alone or than worship only in the sanctuary.

God’s demand on us extends to the supposedly “secular” as well as the “sacred” dimensions of life. God longs to guide every day of our lives, not simply our special days. “Either the whole of Christian life is worship,” and we gather together to be equipped for this, or our gatherings lead “to absurdity.” True worship does not consist only of what is practiced at sacred sites, at sacred times, and with sacred acts. It is the offering of ourselves as living sacrifices in our day-to-day existence in the world.<sup>59</sup> To talk about worship in this broad biblical sense requires attention to personal and social ethics as much as corporate and private spiritual disciplines.

True worship, as the believer’s wholehearted response to God, takes place primarily in the world and especially takes the form of service to our brothers and sisters. God wants practical, everyday religion. Religion that helps the helpless and empowers the powerless (Jas 1:27; Mt 25:31-46). Religion that puts fine talk about love into action (Jas 2:14-17; 1 Jn 3:17-18). Ritual can never replace doing right. Just seeking God is no substitute for seeking justice in the street (Amos 5:21-24). Worship and prayer are not means of bribing God to give us security or emotional release.

Sacrificial offerings, worship services, and private devotions are meaningful only in the context of lives of wholehearted obedience (1 Sam 24:23; Jer 7:21-26; 14:12; Hos 6:6; Mic 6:6-8). The problem with the Pharisees in our text was not merely their quarrel with Jesus over the doctrine of holiness. It was a lack of practical trust in and obedience to God. It was using religion as a blank check to excuse wrongdoing.

Jesus was not opposed to the Pharisees’ regular public religious gatherings. The Gospels suggest that he regularly attended the synagogue. He certainly did not discourage their practice of private prayer or their study of the sacred Scriptures. But worship apart from obedience is meaningless. In our religious observance, have we lost the reality of true worship? Do our lips sing God’s praises while our lives march to the world’s beat? No one would ever accuse US of legalism. But are we satisfied with empty worship?

Isaiah 58 is perhaps the Bible’s most vigorous attack on empty worship. It is an answer to the complaint of God’s people that God has not properly rewarded their feverish religious activity. I would urge you to read again verses 6-9. Holiness like this is “contagious”!

Have we conceded to the non-biblical worldview that there are some areas of life that are not God's concerns, that there are sacred and secular realms of life? Jesus rejected the notion that any area of life was outside the sovereignty of God. Have we privatized holiness so that Christians have increasingly lost influence in the political, economic, scientific, and moral spheres of human life? Have we relegated holiness to our private inner lives? Do we imagine that wholesome intentions matter more than holy living?

Lives of authentic holiness lived in the world and for the world is the most appropriate expressions of our worship to God because they witness to the world of God's reality. Sanctification that operates only within the supposedly sacred spheres of life is not entire enough. Too many of us have imagined that the word "entire," in our precious doctrine of entire sanctification, implies that when we "get it," God's finished with us. We can coast into heaven. Not on your life!

Authentic holiness must be "contagious"! No, it doesn't make people sick. No, you can't "catch" holiness simply by spending time in the company of a holy person. But genuine holiness is more powerful than sin. In fact, it has the power to defeat sin on its own turf. Real holiness is at least as "contagious" as laughter. Holiness is attractive and winsome. It transforms all it touches.

The "contagious" holiness I'm talking about is a human life wholly given to the Holy One in behalf of an unholy world. It is the life of Jesus Christ lived out in the lives of ordinary people, who have been thoroughly cleansed from preoccupation with their own reputations and extraordinarily empowered by the reality of the sanctifying Spirit and the peace he brings and so they reflect well the character of the God of holy love. Such holiness is "contagious." Catch it!

## Peace Be with You—Psalm 4, Luke 24, Acts 3, Hebrews 12, 1 John 3

Did you notice the remarkable range of emotions describing the disciples' reactions to the appearance of the risen Jesus to them in the Upper Room on that first Easter Sunday evening as reported in Luke?

- Verse 38—"startled and frightened"
- Verse 38—"troubled" with "doubts" rising in their minds
- Verse 41—unbelief, "joy and amazement"

We might have reacted in much the same way if someone we had seen die just days earlier showed up at our gathering. It might even make us believe in ghosts.

But this "ghost" challenges everything we take for granted about ghosts, if they do exist. Far from being a semi-transparent apparition, he has hands and feet with gaping wounds, substantial flesh and bones that can be touched and seen (vv 39-40), and an appetite for ordinary human food (vv 41-42). And the first word out of this ghost's mouth, when he appears is not "Boo!" Instead, it is "Peace."

In ancient as well as modern Israel, *shalom*—"peace," is the common daily greeting we would translate as "Hello." Like the old English meaning of our word "hello," it really expresses a wish for good health—"may you be whole"—may you have all the physical and spiritual resources you need.

*Shalom* is the Hebrew word most commonly translated "peace" in the OT. Here peace is not simply a negative concept—the absence of war and the emotions of terror and chaos it evokes. Peace conveys the positive notion "to be whole, complete, healthy."

Completeness is at the heart of the meaning of *shalom*—"peace." In the language of Jesus, debts that were paid were said to be *shalom*; promises that were fulfilled were then *shalom*. Conflicts that were resolved resulted in *shalom*.

Peace in this biblical sense within the **political realm** is not just stalemate or détente—the mutual agreement to live in distrust while refusing to come to blows. Peace is not merely the absence of something negative—like war or terror; it is the achievement of something positive—like victory and reconciliation—friendly relations between former enemies.

Peace in the **personal realm** allows one within the community to speak openly and honestly with others: "A frank rebuke leads to peace," says Proverbs 10:10 (GL).

To appreciate peace in the **spiritual realm**—peace between God and people, it is necessary to note that the Bible closely links peace with covenant, justice, and truth. The relationship guaranteed by a covenant—mutually binding promises—is *shalom*.

A covenant of peace initiates a relationship based on mutually accepted and assured obligations. The Bible presumes that peace and justice belong together. Psalm 34:14, (NRSV) urges us to "Do good, seek peace, and pursue it." Peace is not something that

simply happens on its own; it is the result of the active pursuit of justice (see Zech 8:16-19). Peace cannot exist until injustice is judged—condemned and conquered.

Peace, truth, and justice are parallel expressions in the Bible. The content of peace is justice and truth. Peace requires relationships that are ordered correctly. Ps 85:10, RSV says that “righteousness and peace will kiss”—as partners in the blessed life.

Isaiah 32:16-17 claims that peace is the effect of righteousness or peace is the work of justice. To exist, peace requires far more than the cessation of war or the absence of conflict. Peace is not merely tranquility and order; it is a commitment to do justice—to do the right thing. Peace happens when justice prevails, when the victory of right over wrong inaugurates peace.

Psalms 4 begins:

Answer me when I call to you, O my *righteous* God. Give me relief from my distress; be merciful to me and hear my prayer (emphasis added).

The Hebrew word for “righteous” describes one who does what is right, who practices justice. Psalm 4 concludes with an affirmation of quiet trust:

I will lie down and sleep in *peace*, for you alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety (emphasis added).

How does the mood of this prayer change from distress to rest? It is the Psalmist’s memory of the experience of God’s presence.

Many are asking, “Who can show us any good?” Let the light of your face shine upon us, O LORD. You have filled my heart with great . . . joy (4:6-7).

Whenever Israel gathered for worship, the LORD had instructed its priests to bless the people by putting his name on them with this benediction:

The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his *face shine* upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you *peace* (Num 6:22-27; quotation 24-26; emphasis added).

Peace is the order of creation as God intended it to be. Genesis depicts creation as an act of divine completion. “On the seventh day God finished the work that he had done” (Gen 2:2, NRSV). “And God saw all that he had made, and it was very good” (Gen 1:31). God so ordered the cosmos as to create harmony and peace. Justice, righteousness, and peace are all present in this “original state.”

The original paradise was one in which sin was unknown. Paradise was lost when humans believed the serpent’s lies about God, disobeyed God, hid from God, blamed one another, were expelled from God’s presence, murdered their brother, were divided and scattered. Creation, once complete, is now fractured and fallen—without peace.

We should read **1 John 3:2-7** in this light. Like Adam and Eve, we are already children of God, dearly loved and intimately known by him. But we live no longer and not yet in paradise. We live in a world that does not recognize us for who we are. And we are gathered, waiting for our Lord to show his face again.

The point of this passage is not to burden us with distress about our failures. Contrary to popular misunderstanding, sin is not about “messing up.” It is about lawlessness—

stubborn rebellion. Sin is about disrespecting God. We disrespect God when we refuse to take God seriously as God.

If we are, in fact, God's children, we know that "he is pure" (v 3). We know that "in him is no sin" (v 5). We know that "he is righteous" (v 7)—that he is just. We know that Christ came to "take away our sins" (5). We know that "we shall be like him" (v 2). And so we strive to live holy lives (v 3). Peace and holiness are two aspects of the same divine gift. Hebrews 12:14 puts it this way:

Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.

The Gospels report that Jesus often told those he restored to wholeness: "Go in peace"—whether his gift to them was healing (Mk 5:34; Lk 8:48) or forgiveness (Lk 7:50).

And what about us? What emotions have we brought with us to this classroom? If Jesus is here, his presence here is more like that of a ghost than like the hungry man of flesh and bones who showed his wounds to those first disciples of long ago and far away. And this should come to us as no surprise. After all, the point of Luke's account of the Ascension of Jesus, which immediately follows this sighting of the risen Christ on Easter Sunday night, is that resurrection appearances of the kind reported here have ended (so also Paul in 1 Cor 15). The Book of Acts gives a more complete account of Jesus' exaltation to the right hand of God. Acts 3:21 makes the point that Jesus "must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets."

So, are we at a disadvantage compared to those early disciples? Or, may we, like they, still experience the reality of the presence of the risen Christ? Luke suggests **three ways** in which the peace of Christ is mediated to all believers—even to us.

Luke 24:13-27 tells the familiar story of the downcast disciples who were joined by the risen Christ as they walked the seven miles from Jerusalem to Emmaus during the late afternoon on that first Easter Sunday. They did not at first recognize that it was Jesus who accompanied them.

They came to understand who Jesus was, only after he, "beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, . . . explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself" (v 27). They realized only later, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" (v 32).

Similarly, **Scripture study** is once again mentioned as the means by which disciples in the Upper Room came to recognize adequately who Jesus really was. He reminded them:

This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.

Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem (v 44-47).

Jesus is not here with us in precisely the same way he was there with them, but can't he still open our minds as we study the Bible, so that we may recognize him?

Luke mentions a second means by which the early disciples came to recognize Jesus' presence. After his Bible lesson on the Emmaus road, he joined these believers for supper. Although he was their guest, he assumed the role of host, and "took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them" (v 30). Their eyes were "opened" and they "recognized him" (v 31) "when he broke the bread" (v 35).

This is why we should celebrate **Communion** regularly. Some sermons are super; others, just so-so. Some Bible studies cause our hearts to burn within us; others only give us heartburn. But, if we receive the consecrated bread and wine as the body and blood of the living Lord, given for our salvation, our eyes are opened, and we recognize Jesus.

The third means by which we come to experience the living presence of Jesus is through his **gift of the Holy Spirit**. Jesus told his disciples: "I am sending . . . you what my Father promised . . . power from on high" (v 49, NRSV). The gift of the Holy Spirit as peace, power, and presence of Jesus is now the privilege of all believers.

The risen Jesus' parting gift to his disciples was peace (Jn 14:27; 20:19, 21, 26). In the gift of the Holy Spirit, Jesus could claim: "Peace I leave to you, my peace I give to you, the kind of peace the world cannot give" (Jn 14:27, GL). "In the world you will have trouble. But take courage! The victory is mine; I have conquered the world" (16:33, GL).

But I must tell you that we experience the reality of the Holy Spirit only as we are witnesses of the risen Jesus. He told his first disciples, "You are witnesses of these things" (Lk 24:48). "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses" (Acts 1:8).

Please, don't misunderstand me. I'm not trying to put you on some kind of guilt trip, intended to persuade you to corner strangers on the street and force them to listen to your testimony or your latest brilliant thoughts about the Bible. Witnessing is more than trying to persuade unbelievers to accept Christ in one-on-one settings.

Witnesses are people who tell what they know to be true based on their own experience. They are living and breathing evidence for the truth of the Christian claim that Jesus Christ is alive. As St. Francis put it so well, "Witnesses preach the gospel—with words, if necessary."

Does your Bible study open your eyes to the true identity of Jesus? Does your celebration of Communion cause you to recognize Jesus as the gift of God's love? And do your words and actions bear witness, through the power of the Holy Spirit, to the truth that Jesus Christ is risen?

*Shalom*—"Peace be with you" (Lk 24:36). May you be whole and complete as you live in the reality that Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!



## Growing Love—Philippians 1

In the opening verses of Philippians Paul writes of his confidence that the God who “began a good work” among them “will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ” (1:6, NRSV). Unlike some of his churches, the Philippians are not Paul’s problem, but his partners (v 5; 4:15). They are not his field, but his force. They are not helpless sinners, but mature saints (1:1; 3:15)—they belong completely to God.

In fact, if these Macedonian Christians had any problem, it may have been the tendency of some among them to imagine, that because of their spiritual prowess, they had arrived. At least Paul makes a special point of stressing his own need for progress in chapter 3. “I want to know Christ fully and become completely like him. I have not already achieved this nor have I already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own” (vv 10-13, GL). He recounts his decision to put his personal successes behind him in a single-minded pursuit of one goal—the upward call of God in Christ Jesus (vv 4b-14) and he urges the Philippians to do the same (v 15).

Paul’s prayer in Philippians 1:9-11 is not for unbelievers; it is not for floundering failures; it is not for backsliding believers. But for exemplary, mature Christians—Christians who need to be reminded that no matter how far they’ve come in their Christian walk, they’ve not yet reached the goal. The experiences of conversion and sanctification may be behind them, but the resurrection is still ahead—and their final salvation is contingent on continued faithfulness to Christ until the end (see 3:11).

**Developing Love.** Paul does not find it necessary at this point to define what he means by the word “love.” He will illustrate its meaning soon enough. In chapter 2, he appeals to the Philippians to adopt the example of love demonstrated by Jesus Christ. Love is the selfless surrender of my rights in the interests of others. Though the eternal Christ was in the form of God, he emptied himself, assumed human form, and became obedient, to the point of death on a cross. But even before this description, the Philippians, who had heard Paul preach, must have known how central “love” was to his gospel.

In fact, it is striking how little truly novel moral instruction you find in Paul’s letters. There are clear parallels to most of what he has to say in the teachings of contemporary Jewish rabbis and Stoic philosophers—that is, apart from Paul’s remarkable preoccupation with “love.” If Paul’s letters offer any clue as to the content of his preaching, we can rest assured that the Philippians knew well enough what he meant when he told them he was praying about their love life.

Look again at verse 9. Paul prays, first of all, that their love may develop. His language permits no suggestion that their love is deficient. He clearly implies that they already love. His prayer is not that they should start to love but that their love should keep growing still more and more until it surpasses all measurement. Paul does not say what or who it is they are to love, just yet. He does not specify that they should love him more, or one another more, or God more. He simply prays that their love should develop.

**Discriminating Love.** Notice that Paul's prayer for a developing love is not a request that their love should increase in quantity, but that it should improve in its quality. "It is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent" (1:9-10, RSV). What Paul hopes for is not an increased *intensity* in their love lives—he does not pray for a greater emotional or religious *fergency* in their love. It is not a more intense, but a more *intelligent* love that he seeks. His prayer is that their love may develop in such a way that it will be marked by Christian discernment and healthy discrimination.

In our concern to be politically correct, we need to remind ourselves that not all discrimination is bad. It is one thing "to make a difference in treatment or favor" based on prejudice, not persons. Paul insists that the coming of Christ has made distinctions based on ethnicity, gender, or social status totally inconsequential. To discriminate in this negative sense is entirely alien to Christian love.

But it is essential that Christians learn to discriminate in the positive and productive sense of recognizing differences that are consequential—between truth and error, between justice and injustice, between right and wrong, between good and bad, and between better and best.

Paul's concern was not simply that the Philippians should love, but with *how* they loved and with *what* they loved. It is the very same word for "love" Paul uses when he urges: "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Rom 13:9; Gal 5:14). It's also the same that he uses when he grieves, "Demas has forsaken me, because he loved this present world" (2 Tim 4:10, GL). Misguided love, no matter how intense, is not a virtue. Mature Christian love is ethically sensitive and spiritually discerning.

*Ethically Sensitive.* In Paul's concern for discriminating love, he prays first that the Philippians' love might grow in "knowledge." Paul consistently uses this word to refer not to mere intellectual awareness but to ethical sensitivity. By this knowledge he means that they should become increasingly familiar with the will of God. That they should know *what* God wants of them and *why*. That they should learn that God's will for them is good, acceptable, and perfect (Rom 12:2).

There is nothing to be said for mindless obedience to an externally imposed list of rules that make no sense at all. God longs for us to become mature Christians who are internally motivated to do what is right, regardless of the consequences, regardless of who's watching. This is the test of our Christian character.

*Regardless of the Consequences.* Paul reminds the Philippians that God has given us "the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well" (Phil 1:29, NRSV). Are Philippians the only Christians who need to learn that practicing God's kind of love may involve a cross? Now as in Paul's day, there are professing Christians whose craving for comfort and security make them behave like the enemies of Christ's cross (3:18). But as Paul reminds the Philippians: "Their future is eternal destruction. Their god is their appetite, they brag about shameful things, and all they think about is this life here on earth" (v 19, NLT).

*Regardless of Who's Watching.* Are Philippians the only Christians who need to learn that obedience must not be limited to times when apostles are present (2:12)? It is in Paul's absence that he urges them to allow their salvation to express itself visibly and reverently. This is not self-salvation, for "it is God who, for his own generous purpose, gives you the intention and the powers to act" (2:13, GL).

Paul is talking here about the issue of **Christian character**. Character is what you are when you're in the dark, when you are not performing for the public, when you're off guard, when you're alone or only with strangers, when you think no one will ever know.

Ethical sensitivity only begins when God transforms and renews our minds as we offer ourselves fully to him (Rom 12:1-2). We learn new holy habits that make it easier to obey than to disobey.

Holy actions flow from holy attitudes cultivated from disciplined practice. Intelligent love is no more magic or automatic than is the ability to play a musical instrument well. Entire sanctification gives us the capacity to put our renewed desires and inclinations into practice. We may know what we should love, but that is of little help if we do not choose to do it.

An informed Christian love is a matter of the head before it can be a matter of the heart. It is not a warm fuzzy feeling but the will to do God's will above all else. It is an intellectual decision to pursue the good and reject the evil as it affects the other. In Romans Paul writes: "Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love" (12:9-10).

*Spiritually Discerning.* The discriminating love Paul prays for is characterized, first, by "knowledge" in the sense of ethical sensitivity. Second, it is marked by "all discernment" of "every kind of spiritual insight." Paul prays that the Philippians may not only know what to love, but how that knowledge is to be put into action in real-life situations. He does not pray simply that they will become experts in ethical theory—knowing "this is good" and "that is bad." "Discernment" requires the moral experience that puts theory into practice. It is not enough to want to do right, nor to know what is right and wrong. We need to develop the "spiritual sense" to know how to apply moral judgments in the making of truly Christian decisions. Here's the rub—knowing how best to express Christian love.

Thus, Paul prays that the Philippians' love may become increasingly discriminating so that they "may approve what is excellent" (1:10, RSV), or, as another translation has it, so that they may approve the things that "really matter" (NLT)—the things that are inherently valuable. Paul prays that the ethical choices they make will not grow out of blind obedience, but will arise naturally from their transformed Christian character and their allegiance to Christian ethical values. It doesn't take a course in logic to recognize that, if there are some things that really matter, there are other things that really don't matter. That's a "no-brainer." The problem is sorting out which are which.

Paul knew well that Christian values were often diametrically opposed to the values of the world. He writes in 2:15 that the Philippians live in the midst of a "crooked and perverse generation" (RSV). And so do we. Even non-Christians recognize flagrant sin when they see it. As Paul told the Galatians: "The works of the flesh are obvious" (5:19, NRSV). In an evil world Christians are to "shine like stars" (Phil 2:15, NRSV).

But sometimes the Church and the world share common values. Paul urges the Philippians: "Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things" (4:8). This is not a list of uniquely Christian values. In fact, it seems to represent the best of the virtues urged by pagan moral philosophers of Paul's day. Paul seems to suggest that there was much in heathen views that might

and ought to be valued and retained by Christians. The Christian ethic cannot be defined so simply as the antithesis of worldly values.

Christians must resist the temptation of *extremism*. It is too easy to blend into our culture like chameleons, or to stick out like sore thumbs. Paul's hope for the Philippians is that they will take neither of these extremes.

We must likewise resist the temptation of *negativism*. In our concern to be right and to do right we may find ourselves sidetracked by "complaining or arguing" (Phil 2:14). Instead, Paul urges the Philippians: "You are to live clean, innocent lives as children of God in a dark world full of people who are crooked and stubborn. Shine out among them like beacon lights, holding out to them the Word of Life" (vv 15-16a, GL).

Consistently choosing the things that really matter in a world with distorted values will inevitably result in conflict and suffering—whether physical or psychological. Christians do not have to seek out suffering like masochists. Paul does not call for us to be so obnoxious that we become deserving objects of persecution. On the contrary, he urges us to live so that we "may command the respect of outsiders" (1 Thess 4:12, RSV). And yet, it is far too easy in the pursuit of respectability to be more concerned with what people think than with what God thinks. Who ever said it would be easy living like a Christian?

**Demonstrating Love.** Paul prays that the Philippians may approve the things that really matter. The word "approve" has a twofold sense. It means both to approve and to prove—to discover what really matters and "just do it." Thus, Paul prays that the Philippians' love should not only develop, and discriminate, but that it should be demonstrated. Our inner character is proven by our outward conduct. Love cannot remain merely a lofty ideal. It must move from our heads to our hearts to our hands. "It is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruits of righteousness which come through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God" (1:9-11, RSV).

Paul's prayer concentrates on two specific kinds of fruit that Christ would produce in the lives of the Philippians—that they should be "pure" and "blameless." To be "pure" suggests that their lives should be marked by honesty, transparency, genuineness, authenticity, and integrity. In fact, the word translated "pure" here is a compound of two words meaning "tested in the sun." Fine ideals must leave the friendly confines of sanctuaries and the cloistered halls of academia and be exposed to the scrutiny of the marketplace. To be "blameless" suggests that the Philippians should not stumble themselves in their Christian walk, nor should they cause another to stumble by their behavior. Paul prays that what we love and how we love may make us holy and harmless.

As elsewhere in Scripture, "the fruit of righteousness" is "conduct pleasing to God." To demonstrate Christian love in ethical living means to give visible, bodily confirmation of the fact that we belong to God. This demonstration is not merely a performance. It is an authentic expression of who we are as Christians. Paul prays that the lives of the Philippians may blossom forth in a harvest of "righteousness." Being put right with God—righteousness—is not the destination of the Christian life. It is only its entrance. Righteousness must have its fruit—its consequences. It is possible for us to forfeit our salvation by not allowing Christ to produce the fruit of righteousness in our lives. His fruit is not a work that we can offer to merit our salvation. Righteousness begins and

ends as a gift from Jesus Christ. It is entirely his work. But we must give him permission to produce his fruit in our lives, and cultivate the crop he produces.

“Righteousness” begins with a right relationship with God. Growing out of this new relationship, we are empowered to live in a right relationship with our neighbors. Justification demonstrates itself in the doing of justice. Righteousness entails not only personal piety but social responsibility. It is not enough to *be harmless*—to refrain from doing evil—Christians *do good*.

The demonstration of love Paul prays for could not be farther from the message of the supposedly Christian bumper sticker: “Honk if you love Jesus!” If you love Jesus, do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with God. Any fool can honk! Demonstrate!

Finally, Paul says that this demonstration of love has as its object the glory and praise of God. Jesus put it this way, “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Mt 5:16, RSV). The good the Christian does is not a personal advertisement but, in the truest sense of the word, it is worship—it assigns supreme worth to God.

When we gather to sing God’s praises, to pray together, to share our mutual faith in God, to hear the preaching of God’s word—this is not all there is to worship; this is only the preparation for true worship. True worship manifests itself in daily life. Either the whole of Christian life is worship, and our gatherings for formal public worship equip and instruct us for this, or these gatherings are absurd and empty and an insult to God (see Amos 5:21-24). True Christian worship is the offering of our bodily existence in the sphere of the world as living sacrifices to God and in service to values that really matter.

This is my prayer for you: May your love grow more and more. May your love be infused with ethical sensitivity and spiritual discernment. May you learn the difference between good and bad, and always choose what is best. May you be pure yourselves and may your conduct cause no one else to do wrong. May you be always ready for Christ’s return. May you do all the good you can, to all you can, for as long as you can, because, by the grace of Christ, you can. So live that you may bring glory and praise to God (author’s translation of Phil 1:9-11).

## Lesson 12: Holiness, Peace, and Love

### Due This Lesson

Review of Bible passages  
Reading of NDBT selections  
Reading and summary of resource  
Journaling

### Learner Objectives

At the end of this lesson, participants should

- be able to explain what Nazarenes mean by “scriptural holiness”

### Homework Assignments

Review Matthew 8, Mark 5, Galatians 5–6, 1 Corinthians 5, Colossians, Philippians, Philemon, 1 & 2 Peter, and 2 Timothy 3–4. Prepare theological statements that these books/chapters support.

Read from NDBT: Church, Discipline, Humility/Pride, Wisdom, 1 Peter, 2 Peter

Write an essay on this hypothetical situation: The spouse of a member of your church board has just given you credible evidence that this board member has been having an affair with another member of your congregation. Identify the biblical basis for the course of action you would propose to take in dealing with this difficult issue.

Read **1** of the following resources:

- Resource 12-9, “The Disciple-Ship”
- Resource 12-10, “Disciplined to Discipline”

Write a 1-page summary.

Write in your journal. Reflect on Jesus’ High Priestly Prayer as it relates personally to you and your ministry. Is “holiness” just another word in theology or is it the life you live?

## **Scriptural Holiness**

Biblical theology distinguishes what the Bible teaches from that which depends on other authorities. We cannot begin with our holiness theology and go to the Bible for proof-texts that seem to support our pet views and still claim to preach “scriptural holiness.” The scriptural doctrine of holiness is to be discovered inductively, not deductively. That is, it must be based on generalizations derived from a wide array of specific biblical passages.

What the Bible says is not the last word in our theology; it is the first word.

## Word Study

The English words “holiness” and “holy” come from the Germanic—Anglo-Saxon—roots of our language. In old English “holiness” referred to the state of being “whole” or “healthy.”

“Sanctify” and “sanctification” come from the Romance—Norman-Latin—origins of English. The Latin verb *sancifico* meant “to make sacred,” that is, “to set apart for the service of the gods.”

In the Hebrew Old Testament, the abstract noun *qodesh* is usually translated “holiness” . . . The Hebrew verb *qadash* means “to make holy” or “to sanctify.”

In the New Testament, “holiness” usually translates the Greek word *hagiosmos* . . . To be holy is to be “set apart,” “unique.” “Sanctification” translates the Greek word *hagiosyne*. The noun, also derived from *hagios*, refers to the act or process by which one is made to be or recognized as holy.

Scripture refers to God as “holy” for two reasons.

- Transcendence—he is utterly distinct from his creation
- He is uniquely just and loving in his dealings with his creatures



## John 17

John 17:19, Jesus' High Priestly Prayer, includes the words, "I sanctify myself."

- In John 17:19 Jesus' self-sanctification refers negatively to the paradox of being in the world but not of the world (vv 11-14).
- Positively, it refers to his unswerving commitment to the mission for which the Father sent him into the world (vv 17:3, 8, 18, 23, 25, 26).

Jesus' prayer for the sanctification of his disciples—and for those who were to believe because of them—in verse 17 must be understood in this same light. At the very least, "holiness" must involve wholehearted commitment to God's costly redemptive mission—a commitment made on behalf of the people of the world, but without compromise to the world's values.

## Scriptural Holiness

In a recent book by a leading publisher from the Reformed Tradition, William M. Ramsay writes: "Galatians is not about '*justification* by faith,' as Luther and his followers through the centuries have believed. It is about *sanctification* by faith. It is not about how one gets sins forgiven. It is about how one is to live when that initial forgiveness has been received."<sup>60</sup>

It is not the terminology, but the meaning of the terms that is decisive. Holiness is a crucial biblical teaching. But it is "the whole tenor of scripture," not any single passage or any pet interpretation of Scripture, that proclaims scriptural holiness.

## Entirely Sanctified—1 Thessalonians

1 Thessalonians is an occasional letter, written in response to a real-life situation. It is not simply a sent theological treatise.

1 Thessalonians 1:2 through 3:13 is concerned entirely with thanksgiving to God for the faithfulness of these new Christians. Even when Paul turned to encouragement and exhortation in chapters 4 and 5, Paul's overflowing gratitude for the Thessalonians was obvious.

Paul's letters are not theology textbooks. There are no logically organized sections devoted to such topics as the doctrine of God, anthropology, hamartiology, or soteriology. The theology found in Paul's letters is pastoral and occasional, not systematic.

### ***Election***

- Impressive evidence of the Thessalonians' call and conversion to Christ (1:4; 2:13).
- Yet, he sent Timothy back to Thessalonica (3:2-5). It was possible that the Thessalonians, despite God's election and the genuineness of their conversions, might lose their faith and be lost.

### ***Eschatology***

- Paul's concern that the Thessalonians might lose their faith was not because of the inadequacy of their conversions . . . Salvation is not only a past event and a present experience; it is also a future expectation (1:9-10; 5:5-10).
- Salvation in the fullest sense is a future hope—something we will receive, if we remain faithful in the present.
- The doctrine of "last things"—as the second coming of Christ, the resurrection from the dead, and final judgment.
- Eschatology describes the ultimate goal of election—final salvation.

### ***Holiness***

- God calls believers to lives of holiness as the essential preparation for life in eternity with a holy God.

## Summary—1 Thessalonians

1. Sanctification is something God longs to do in the lives of believers. God calls believers to live holy lives and can be trusted to provide the ability to fulfill what his call requires through his gift of the Holy Spirit.
2. Sanctification is not automatic, as if God will do it apart from human cooperation and self-discipline.
3. A single sanctifying moment will not suffice. Growth in sanctification entails an ongoing process.
4. The Lord is the source of the continuing “increase and overflow” of love in the lives of sanctified believers.
5. God’s sanctifying activity affects the Christian’s entire being—one’s “whole spirit, soul and body” (5:23).
6. Sanctification is expected to be a reality in the lives of believers prior to Christ’s return.

*Conclusion.* Although we are persuaded that the Wesleyan-Holiness understanding of sanctification coheres with an objective reading of 1 Thessalonians, honesty compels us to admit that other interpretations are possible. Wesleyans need not hesitate to refer to their distinguishing doctrine as “scriptural holiness.” It rests on no one biblical book or proof-text, but on the whole tenor of Scripture. Whatever else the message of “scriptural holiness” involves, it must include the challenge of 1 Thessalonians. God expects moral integrity of his people, because he has given his Holy Spirit to enable them to live exemplary, Christlike lives, in this world as they prepare for the world to come.

## Small Groups

*Compare and discuss the 4 versions of John 17:15-19.*

### **NIV**

My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified.

### **RSV**

I do not pray that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; thy word is truth. As thou didst send me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be consecrated in truth.

### **NLT**

I'm not asking you to take them out of the world, but to keep them safe from the evil one. They are not part of this world any more than I am. Make them pure and holy by teaching them your words of truth. As you sent me into the world, I am sending them into the world. And I give myself entirely to you so they also might be entirely yours.

### **Phillips**

I am not praying that you will take them out of the world but that you will keep them from the evil one. They are no more the sons of the world than I am—make them holy by the truth; for your word is truth. I have sent them to the world just as you sent me to the world and I consecrate myself for their sakes that they may be made holy by the truth.

*Compare and discuss the 4 versions of 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24.*

### **NIV**

May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it.

### **NRSV**

May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.

### **NLT**

Now may the God of peace make you holy in every way, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless until that day when our Lord Jesus Christ comes again. God, who calls you is faithful; he will do this.

### **Phillips**

May the God of peace make you holy through and through. May you be kept in soul and mind and body in spotless integrity until the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is utterly faithful and he will finish what he has set out to do.

## Jesus' High-Priestly Prayer

### Mission Accomplished—17:1-8

- The opening section is his prayer for himself.
- Prays that his Father will glorify him.

### Conserved in the World—17:9-12

- Jesus prays exclusively for disciples.
- Jesus' ultimate concern is that the world, too, might become believers.
- Jesus describes believers as those given him by the Father (v 9).
- The glory Jesus seeks is not selfish, but the means by which more people will be drawn to believe.
- Sanctification is not a "thing." It is a relationship of unity with the Holy One that makes possible a similar relationship with other believers.

### Protected from the World—17:13-16

- Jesus describes his forthcoming death as a going to his Father.
- Explains why he allows his disciples to overhear his prayer—"so that they may have the full measure of [his] joy within them" (v 13).
- To be "in the world" is simply to live on this earth as a human being. To be "of the world" is to live according to the values and standards of the people who have rejected God.
- Jesus prays for the safety of the disciples on this earth, not their escape from it.

### Sanctified for the World—17:17-19

- Jesus wants the disciples not only to be conserved *in* this evil world, but, committed to change the world for good.
- He wants them not only protected *from* the world, but, sanctified *for* the world.
- Ultimately, God is the Sanctifier. He is the One who sanctified Jesus for his mission in the world (10:36).
- Jesus prays that God may sanctify the disciples.
- The sanctified community serves best as an inviting alternative to the world, not just a "nicer" imitation of it.

### United in Love Before the World—17:20-23

- Jesus extends his prayer to include not only the original disciples, but believers of all time (v 20).
- He prays that they may be united in God "so that the world may believe that [the Father] sent [Jesus]" (v 21).
- The most important witness the Church can bear to unbelievers is the silent witness of loving unity among Christians.

## The Disciple-Ship—Matthew 8:18-27

**Introduction:** Each of the first three Gospels reports a remarkable incident in the life of Jesus that we call “The Stilling of the Storm.” On the essential facts they agree: During a voyage across the Sea of Galilee with his disciples, Jesus fell asleep in the ship and continued to sleep even while a fierce storm arose on the normally placid lake. The winds and the waves threatening to sink the craft caused even the seasoned fishermen among the disciples to be seized with fear and awaken Jesus, a carpenter. Rising, Jesus calmly spoke the word and the winds hushed and the sea was still.

So far as we know, that is exactly what happened. But we have no way of checking the facts. We have no means of proving—or disproving—the miracle. This is not our task. The only reporters we have, the first three Gospel writers—the Synoptic evangelists—tell the story as I have summarized it. It was not their intention to prove the miracle, but to proclaim the good news about Jesus. Although the Gospels tell the story of Jesus, they are not really “biographies” but sermons in story form. If we are to be true to the evangelists’ purpose, our task must then be to understand what the event meant to them.

**The Old Testament Background.** For the original Jewish disciples the idea of stilling the stormy sea was not a new idea. They knew their history—how God had divided the Red Sea to free his people from bondage—how God commanded the winds and waves, because he was their Maker. In their Psalms we often read about this theme (Ps 65:5; 93:4; 95:5; 98:8-9). The God the Hebrews were taught to worship is the God who controls the sea. He is the One who raises the waves and he is the One who alone can calm them. The disciples knew well: ONLY GOD CAN STILL THE SEA.

**The Experience of the Disciples.** Let your imagination take you back to that scene on the storm-tossed Sea of Galilee in the “disciple-ship.” You hunch together with the other disciples in fear. The Lord of your lives seems ready to swallow you up in the sea and take back the life he gave you. In holy terror you cry out with them for help.

Then imagine the terrible awe that overcomes you when you see that man in your midst do what only God is able to do. Can you share the faith—and doubt—of those worshiping disciples of long ago and far away? WHO IS THIS MAN WHO DOES WHAT ONLY GOD CAN DO?

**Matthew’s Account.** If your imagination failed to transport you to the “disciple-ship,” perhaps you can try to see the scene through the eyes of one of those who survived to tell the story. The story of “The Stilling of the Storm” is told in Matthew 8, Mark 4, and Luke 8. Although all three Synoptic Gospels agree on the essential “facts” of the story, there are important differences in their accounts of the incident, both in the way the story is told and where it is told in relation to other incidents during Jesus’ ministry. These differences, although minor at first glance, not only cannot be ignored, they are the only way we have to understand what the story meant to the Evangelists. Since Luke tells the story in essentially the same way as Mark, we will not look at Luke’s account for this discussion.

We will concentrate on what it meant to Matthew by a comparison with Mark. We will try to see through Matthew’s eyes. In that way, perhaps, we will learn what is the good news about Jesus that Matthew has for his readers as he retells the story of “The

Stilling of the Storm.” What did he intend to say as he said what he says as he says it? Let me repeat that question, What did Matthew intend to say as he said what he says as he says it?

**The Setting in Matthew’s Gospel.** Before considering the *what* of Matthew’s good news in this story, it is necessary to notice where he places it within his Gospel. Matthew’s account of “The Stilling of the Storm” is found in a section framed at beginning and end by nearly identical verses summarizing Jesus’ ministry (4:23 and 9:35).

*The Mission of the Master:* The five chapters between these two verses illustrate the two major dimensions of Jesus’ messianic ministry: preaching and teaching, and healing and casting out demons. In chapters 5, 6, and 7—the familiar Sermon on the Mount, Matthew has brought together in one collection a number of Jesus’ teachings, which are spread throughout the Gospel of Luke. He does this to demonstrate that Jesus is the **Messiah in Word**. He is God’s Spirit-anointed representative and proves it by his words. In chapters 8 and 9 Matthew brings together a number of miracle stories, which are scattered throughout Mark 1–5, with material about discipleship, found also in Luke, but spread out in different contexts. He does this to demonstrate that Jesus is **Messiah in Deed**. He is God’s Spirit-anointed representative and proves it by his works. Matthew 5–9 demonstrate that Jesus is the promised Messiah in his message and his mission, in his words, and his works.

*The Mission of Disciples:* Matthew links all this with disciples because he understands the activities of preaching and teaching and healing and exorcising demons to be the task of disciples as well (10:7-8, 24-25).

It is Matthew’s concern throughout his Gospel to show what it means to be a follower of Jesus, what it means to be a disciple. In chapters 10, 16, and 18 Matthew brings together Jesus’ verbal instructions about the life of discipleship. But already with the story of “The Stilling of the Storm,” Matthew intends to show in action what it means to be a disciple—both the dangers and the glories of discipleship, the joys and the jolts that come with following Jesus. By telling the story as he does and where he does, Matthew intends to do more than simply report an interesting event in one day in the life of Jesus. His deeper purpose is to interpret the story of the “disciple-ship” as a picture of the meaning of discipleship.

**The Good News According to Matthew.** Before we look more closely again at Matthew’s account, let’s look at Mark’s version of the story. Turn in your Bibles to Mark 4:35-41 while holding your place in Matthew 8:18-27. By highlighting the differences between the two accounts, Matthew’s purpose should become clear.

*The Call to Follow:* The most obvious difference between the two accounts appears at the very beginning, where Matthew inserts a dialogue of Jesus with 2 potential disciples. Both cases are concerned with following Jesus.

*Dangerous Discipleship:* The first potential disciple is a scribe, a teacher of the Law, who offers to follow Jesus wherever he goes. Jesus is not impressed by the would-be follower’s credentials. Jesus is not willing to capitalize on his own success and popularity with the “great crowds” of miracle-mad, halfhearted followers. He is not overly anxious to add another uncommitted member to the church rolls. So instead of encouragement, Jesus warns the potential disciple about the danger of an unconsidered decision: “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but [I have]



no place to lay [my] head" (8:20). And so it is sometimes for those who follow Jesus. The story of "The Stilling of the Storm" illustrates how true Jesus' warning is when he is forced to sleep in the ship.

All security must be thrown aside if one is to follow Jesus. Recall Jesus' saying, "Whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (16:25, RSV). To be a disciple of Jesus means to take up one's cross—to accept humiliation, suffering, even death—and follow Jesus. But the disciple's life of cross-bearing is not a silent one. On the way to our own destiny with death we have the privilege of announcing the good news of the kingdom of God—the Good News that in the face of all evidence to the contrary, God is King, he reigns, Satan has been defeated. Authentic discipleship means throwing aside all man-made security—in myself, in my titles, in my family, in my possessions, in my own righteousness. It is to seek first the rule of God and his righteousness and to find everything I need added. For as I cling tightly to my life I find it slipping through my fingers. But if I release my life for Jesus' cause, I discover real meaning in life. As martyred missionary Jim Elliott wrote, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

*Radical Discipleship:* The second potential disciple proposes to follow Jesus, but only after he has buried his father. "But Jesus said to him, 'Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead' " (8:22, RSV). On the surface Jesus' answer appears to be insensitive, callous, and unfeeling. Matthew 15:4 makes it clear that Jesus does not intend to suggest that following him frees disciples of all responsibilities to their families. There he vigorously defends the demand of the commandment to honor one's parents. There he is critical of the Pharisees who evade the spirit of the commandment by an artificial interpretation that places religious responsibilities over against family responsibilities. But here Jesus makes another point. He quotes the proverbial saying, "Let the dead bury their own dead," to call the would-be disciple to a radical decision—to follow the letter of the law OR to follow Jesus. Jesus' shocking reply puts the issue clearly before the disciple. His objection is irrelevant. "The dead can be left in charge of the dead now that life itself is present and awaits men in following Jesus."<sup>61</sup>

I cannot delay my response to Jesus' call to follow until I'm good and ready, until I have solved all my this-worldly problems. I cannot wait until I have no other concerns calling for my attention. The call is to follow Jesus now. To follow Jesus means to tell others about the kingdom of God. The call to "follow" is not merely to accompany Jesus across the lake or to walk behind him on the road. It is a call to dynamic service to others that supersedes all my selfish concerns.

Matthew makes it clear that the story of "The Stilling of the Storm" is about discipleship in other ways as well. Notice how Matthew describes Jesus' and the disciples' entry into the boat compared to Mark's account. "And when [Jesus] got into the boat, his disciples followed him" (8:23, RSV). The call has been given to follow and when Jesus enters the boat, disciples follow. Notice how differently Mark words this: "And leaving the crowd, [the disciples] took [Jesus] with them in the boat, just as he was" (Mk 4:36, RSV).

*The Security of Discipleship: In the Presence of Jesus.* Matthew makes it perfectly clear that what Jesus says about discipleship in his words to the 2 would-be followers (Mt 8:19-23) is illustrated in a tangible way in what takes place in the voyage across the lake. To follow Jesus means to follow him in the storm (v 23). Jesus nowhere promises that following him will be easy. To follow him in faith requires that I throw

aside all worldly and self-made security and trust myself to him—sink or swim. But the promise is that he is in the boat with us, going through what we go through. He has not promised us calm sailing, but that he will be with us no matter how chaotic the seas. Matthew wants us to focus our attention less on the miracle of “The Stilling of the Sea” than on the life of discipleship, following Jesus even through the storm.

**In the Church.** Matthew makes it clear that the disciples’ only security is in the ship. Notice that Mark (4:36) refers to “other boats” accompanying them on the voyage; Matthew does not. Matthew knows of only one ship, and Jesus Christ is the captain of that vessel, even when he seems to be asleep. Probably due in large part to this story, from the earliest days of Christianity the “ship” has been a symbol of the Church. We still refer to the “old ship of Zion” and the “ark of safety.” Disciples, whose task is figuratively described as being “fishers of men,” must know that the best fishing is always from within the boat. In telling the story of disciples within the ship on the storm-tossed Sea of Galilee, Matthew reminds his readers of the perils the Church faces in the world.

**Under the Lordship of Jesus.** Other details in Matthew’s account of “The Stilling of the Storm” agree with the understanding of the story as an illustration of the life of discipleship. Notice the disciples’ cries for help. In Mark (4:38, RSV) it is a question: “Teacher, do you not care if we perish?” In Luke (8:24, RSV) it is an exclamation: “Master, Master, we are perishing!” But in Matthew (v 25, RSV) it is a prayer: “Save [us], Lord; we are perishing.”

For a disciple to call Jesus “Teacher” or “Master” is only a mark of respect. But to call him “Lord” is to confess our utter dependence on him. It is to ascribe him the divine majesty, power, and authority that is due him as our judge and our Savior. To cry out, “Lord, save us” is to admit, “We cannot save ourselves.”

**In Spite of the Weakness of Disciples.** Notice also the difference in Jesus’ remarks after the disciples awaken him. In Mark and Luke Jesus performs the miracle immediately and then rebukes the disciples for their lack of faith. But in Matthew, before the elements are brought to silence, in the midst of a mortal threat, the word of Jesus goes out to the disciples. Before rebuking the storm, he rebukes his weak disciples and puts them to shame for their little faith, not lack of faith. The reprimand is before, not after. Their problem is not unbelief, but deficient belief.

Matthew frequently uses the expression “little faith” in Jesus’ references to his disciples. (It appears four times in Matthew and never in Mark.) It always denotes a faith that is too weak. In Matthew 6:25-33 (GL) it describes disciples who are unduly anxious about the needs of life for food, water, clothing, and shelter. Jesus says, “If God cares for sparrows, how much more will he care for you, O you of little faith?” We can be grateful that not only those of gigantic faith are called to be disciples, even if we cannot rejoice in our sometimes “wimpy” faith. Fortunately, discipleship is a path not a destination.

*The Rigors of Discipleship.* Notice also how differently Matthew describes the rising storm compared to Mark. Mark (4:37-38, RSV) has this description: “And a great storm of wind arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already filling. But [Jesus] was in the stern, asleep on a cushion.” Matthew’s version is not only much briefer but also very different in the original language: “And behold, there arose a great storm on the sea, so that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but [Jesus] was asleep” (8:24, RSV). The term Matthew uses to describe the storm is

unusual—it is more frequently used to describe the tremor of an earthquake or the chaos of the end times. Matthew's brief account makes the before/after contrast totally clear. Compare Matthew 8:24 and 26. With just a word from Jesus "a great storm" gives way to "a great calm." Matthew has less interest in describing the details of the storm than calling us to worship the Lord, who brings great calm out of great chaos.

The need of the disciples on the Sea of Galilee becomes a symbol of the distress involved in discipleship as a whole. So Jesus' word of peace takes on the meaning of his saying in John (16:33, RSV), "In me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." What a basis for optimism in the face of opposition—"In me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!" (NRSV).

In Matthew the story of "The Stilling of the Storm" has become a description of discipleship. Jesus' disciples do experience trials and storms, but in him, in the church, there is deliverance and security. Jesus warns potential disciples of the dangers and the rigors of discipleship. He has no place to lay his head. When he cures the insane men of the Gadarenes, the supposedly sane people beg him to leave them alone. And this is to be the lot of disciples, to risk their security on behalf of a needy world only to be misunderstood and rejected by that world. Nevertheless, there is the promise, not of exemption from the storms of life but of his presence in the midst of the storms and of deliverance out of them.

**Conclusion.** Matthew's is the only Gospel to begin with the identification of Jesus as Emmanuel—God with us (1:23) and to close with the assurance, "I am with you always, to the end of the age" (28:20, NRSV). But this is a comfort only to disciples, those who have heard and heeded the call to repentance; who have forsaken earthly security for the kingdom of God; who have surrendered their self-sovereignty to the Lordship of Jesus.

Disciples alone are able to answer correctly the question, "What sort of man is this, that even the winds and sea obey him?" The answer is not a theological discourse but a life of obedient discipleship in a troubled world. The test of my discipleship is not only in my creed but in my conduct; not only in what I say but in what I do. Remember Jesus' words in Matthew 7:21-23 (RSV), "Not every one who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you.' "

Storms are inevitable. The question is only when and how we will face them. Will we face them now as disciples of the one who stills the storms? Or will we face them in the end, in the great storm of judgment, as will those who place too high a value on earthly security? We must "go over to the other side" (Mt 8:18, RSV). Will it be on the "disciple-ship"?

## Disciplined to Discipline—Galatians 5 and 6

The last of the nine fruit of the Spirit is “self-control”—self-discipline. At first glance it may seem contradictory or paradoxical to claim that **self**-control is a fruit of the Spirit. This is especially true in light of Galatians 5:25, which claims that the principle upon which the Spirit-filled life is based is simply keeping in step with the Spirit; living a life of uninterrupted obedience to God. Obviously, self-control must not be confused with autonomy—doing whatever we please in our own strength.

Thanks to the Spirit’s work in our lives obedience to God is possible. The Holy Spirit is the source of the Christian’s salvation-life. Apart from his work in our lives, we are hopeless, helpless sinners—living on our own, from our own pitifully inadequate resources and living for meaningless, worthless ends.

Our existence without the Spirit—for it cannot truly be called life—is marked by “the works of the flesh.” Paul describes this doomed existence in Galatians 5:19-21. The works of the flesh are shamelessly “obvious”—at times even within Christian churches. They include hatred, discord, jealousy, anger, selfish ambition, divisions, factions, and envy. We need to recall Paul’s warning that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God, even if we call ourselves Christians.

This need not be. For where the Spirit rules in our lives and relationships, the results are “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Gal 5:22-23a).

Even those who enjoy the justifying and sanctifying resources of the Spirit may not take them for granted. Because the Holy Spirit is a person, his activity in our lives is neither magic nor automatic. It is personal and relational.

Obviously, “the fruit of the Spirit” cannot be evident in the lives of those who refuse to live under the Holy Spirit’s sovereignty, who live solely on the basis of human resources. For that is to live under the tyrannical rule of the “flesh.”

But neither does the Spirit’s fruit grow and flourish in the “gardens” of Spirit-filled Christians who do not cultivate them. This explains Paul’s appeal in Gal 5:25, “Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.”

The expressions “keep in step” or “fall in line” are military terms. It is a not very subtle reminder of the self-discipline that is required to live the Spirit-filled life. The Spirit will lead, if we will heed. He will guide only as we follow.

Although “self-control” is a “fruit of the Spirit,” it is available only to those who practice it. The Spirit is the source of the Christian’s existence. But the implications of this fact are that we must choose to live like it.

The first part of Galatians 5 summarizes the fact of salvation. The conclusion treats the implications that arise from it. We cannot save ourselves; but we can damn ourselves. There is nothing we can do to earn our salvation, but there are things we can do to forfeit it. If God is to accomplish his purposes in our lives, we must

cooperate with him. Since God has given us freedom, there are things we must do to keep it.

The first 12 verses of Galatians 5 warn against the danger of losing our freedom by falling victim to legalism. The next 9 verses warn against the danger of losing our freedom by surrendering to licentiousness. Christian freedom is a precarious tightrope from which one may fall to either right or left with equally devastating consequences. Paul uses the word “flesh” to describe the occasion for falling.

Contrary to the NIV’s unfortunate translation of the term, “flesh” is not to be identified with “the sinful nature.” Flesh is:

- The soft tissue of the human body
- By metonymy, the body
- The real person, our selves
- Weak humans vs. powerful God
- Unaided humanity, left to its own resources
- Humans and human systems turned against God

The “sinful nature” is not a thing, although it really exists. But it exists as a reality by virtue of a distorted relationship between the flesh and the Spirit.

The particular form of legalism threatening the Galatians was circumcision. This does not seem to have much appeal to modern believers. In fact, legalism of all kinds seems to have fallen on hard times. It is certainly not the menace it was in some Nazarene circles 40 or 50 years ago.

**Gal 5:1-12.** Circumcision becomes a threat to freedom when it is promoted from a matter of indifference to a decisive human achievement, an idol that threatens to take the place that Christ alone should have in our lives (see Gal 6:11-15; 1 Cor 7:19).

- 1—Christ has set us free—stand firm—resist
- 2—Christ will be of no benefit
- 4—cut off from Christ, fallen from grace
- 6—neither counts—faith working through love

The Galatians seem to have been most seriously threatened by the danger of the flesh parading its own achievements in the error of legalism. But Paul seems to have recognized that liberated legalists all too easily become libertines.

**Gal 5:13-21.** Note these key emphases:

- 13—opportunity for self-indulgence—free to become love-slaves
- 14—law of love
- 16—live by the Spirit and do not/**you will not** gratify the desires of the flesh
- 17—flesh’s desires vs. Spirit’s desires = stalemate?  
you cannot do what you want
- 18—But if . . . led by the Spirit . . . not subject to law
- 19—21 Works of the flesh—perversions of God-given gifts

**Gal 5:22-25.** Note these key emphases:

- 23—no law against such things
- 24—those who belong to Christ have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires (cf. 17-18)
- 25—stay in step with the Spirit

Let's think about life in the Spirit. Sometimes we tend to think of sanctification as an abrupt and dramatic conversion-like transformation. But Paul speaks of the Spirit-filled life as a journey—a disciplined march, one step after another.

Every dramatic turnaround in our lives has antecedent causes that lead up to and prepare their way. And while outward change of behavior may occur dramatically, internal change of character is another matter. Christ-likeness is achieved over a long period of time by numerous choices and decisions.

God respects our nature as temporal—time-bound—beings too much to violate them by making us instantaneously virtuous, morally perfect. He may give us the capacity to achieve Christ-likeness in an instant, but the possibility is realized only as we follow through, moment-by-moment. Wesley closely associates sanctification with growth and maturation, processes both preceding and following the decisive moment of total surrender to God and his gift of sanctifying grace.

The only satisfactory explanation for the bewildering array of good and evil permitted in a world created by a good God is that God expects us to cooperate with him in our moral transformation. God takes our freedom seriously and is patient with it. He recognizes that even those of us who have made an initial decision to follow his will often make only sporadic or inconsistent progress in carrying out our resolutions. While it is God who enables and encourages our transformation each step of the way, our cooperation with his will is necessary to our sanctification.

How can God change us while leaving our freedom intact? How can what I want become what the Spirit wants instead of what the flesh wants? How can my desires be changed without violating my freedom?

Desires are more complicated than we sometimes realize. Let's use my decision to go on a diet to illustrate what I mean. For a variety of reasons, I did not want to stay as fat as I had become over the last 15 years. I was willing to fall in step with the guidelines of Weight Watchers in order to achieve my goal of losing about 45 pounds. But my desire to lose weight did not change the fact that I still would much prefer to eat the kinds and quantities of foods that made me fat to begin with. Desires are complicated.

We humans have basic, first-order desires. I would love to eat a Quarter-Pounder with cheese and a super-sized order of fries, washed down with a 32-ounce cup filled to the brim with regular Dr Pepper, followed by a large slice of cherry pie topped with vanilla ice cream.

But we humans also have second-order desires—desires about our basic desires. I wish that my basic desire for unhealthy, fat-laden food was different. But not too much! I remember too vividly how much pleasure I derived from some of the foods I have mostly left behind for months—too much to be willing never to eat them again, much less to want not to eat them. I don't want to be fat, but I don't want not to relish the thought of eating a whole bag of potato chips with a half-gallon of buttermilk. What I really desire is that I could eat whatever I desire without any adverse consequences. But this wish is incapable of being fulfilled.

I will always struggle with my food problem so long as my basic desires remain unchanged. Here's where **Gal 5:17** comes into play.

Now, I admit that gluttony is listed among the traditional seven deadly sins. But it is not listed among the works of the flesh in the Bible. These works are expressions of sinful, first-order desires gone amuck. So what can the Holy Spirit do in our lives to free us from our slavery to sinful desires that, if yielded to, will bar us from the kingdom of God?

Sanctification occurs with our freedom intact when God changes us at the level of our first-order desires in response to our sincere second-order desire that he do so. Of course, God's grace alone enables us to have appropriate second-order desires. But this grace does not effect instantaneous, magical transformation the moment we express the second-order desire to be sanctified. Why not? Because our desires are so complicated.

The problem is that our desire to be holy is so vague. It consists of a general submission to God and an effective desire to let God remake our character. But a willingness of this sort is psychologically compatible with stubbornly holding on to any number of sins.

Making sinners holy requires a process in which believers' specific desires are brought in harmony with our governing second-order desires to allow God to bring us to Christlikeness—righteousness and holiness. As we allow God to do this, the result is a gradual alteration in our first-order desires, as well as an ongoing transformation of our minds and hearts.

Only as we continue to walk in the Spirit do we discover the depths of our entanglement in sinful desires. The reason that our desire for holiness is psychologically compatible with holding on to any number of sins is sometimes that we do not clearly recognize them as sins.

At other times we may recognize that certain behaviors and attitudes are not right, but excuse them as unchangeable personality quirks, due to our heredity or environment. Our short fuse is not really a sin; it is just because we are Irish. Our stubbornness is not sinful; it's just that we're Norwegian. I am the way I am because of the home in which I was raised, the part of the country I'm from, etc. I am the way I am because of what someone did to me—I was sexually abused or whatever.

At other times we do not clearly perceive the destructiveness of certain behaviors and attitudes to the point of truly wishing to be delivered from them. It's like my food problem—I do not truly want to be delivered from my taste for chocolate chip cookies and cheeseburgers.

The process of sanctification involves coming to see the truth about not only our overt sinful actions but also the more subtle sinful attitudes we cherish. A broad, general desire to be sanctified simply may not recognize all that is involved. That's why it takes time and growth for grace to penetrate the deeper recesses of our sinful characters.

That is why the last fruit of the Spirit—self-control—is so vital. We can only do what we want when we fully and finally give the Spirit control of our lives. Until we do, we live in frustration and stalemate.

But even this is a process. Once I have surrendered all I know to God, he seems to find something else from the depths of my person-hood that I had been able to ignore

totally before. But now that he has called it to my attention, I must deal with this, too, before I can continue on the path of spiritual growth.

The point of Galatians 5:25 is that the Christian ethic in a nutshell involves Spirit-empowered self-examination. The principle upon which the Spirit-filled life is based is simple—keep in step with the Spirit; live a life of perfect obedience to God. Thanks to the Spirit's work in our lives, Paul insists that this is possible and so it is expected. But the problem is that Christians sometimes sin. What then?

Paul recommends a prescription and yet warns of its potential to be more serious than the problem. It is here that he gets to the point of the entire passage. It is to get his readers to turn their gaze from the failures of others to themselves. The purpose of Galatians 6 is to spell out the practical, personal implications of the Spirit-filled life.

**The Principle: Practical Possibilities.** The Holy Spirit is the source of the Christian's life. Apart from his work in our lives, we are hopeless, helpless sinners. We live on our own, from our own pitifully inadequate resources. And we live for meaningless, worthless ends. Our existence—for it cannot truly be called life—is marked by the works of the flesh. Paul describes this doomed existence in Galatians 5:19-21. But undisciplined living is not inevitable. For where the Spirit rules in our lives and relationships, the results are "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Gal 5:22-23a).

**The Problem: Profession and Pretense.** In Galatians 5:26 Paul reminds us that the failure to "follow the Spirit" results in empty pretentiousness. We profess to be Spirit-filled and Spirit-led, but we are out of step with the Spirit. When we call him Lord, but still call the shots, we are frauds, braggarts, hypocrites, and imposters. And by our pretending, we provoke others. Interpersonal hostilities are inevitable. At worst we turn against one another; at best we turn away from one another. Envy rears its ugly head. Life together becomes the exact opposite of the love and mutual service the Spirit intends. Self-love leads eventually to the disintegration of authentic community. Sadly, I've seen it happen in Christian churches and even in holiness institutions of higher education.

So what are we to do when a Christian does not live like one? How do we deal with the problem of sin in our midst? To say "someone is caught in a sin" suggests that Paul does not consider routine transgression to be the norm. Here is a Christian brother or sister surprised in an unintentional wrong—caught red-handed, in the act, so to speak. What is striking is that "Paul does not seem overly concerned with the offence itself, but his concern is more with the possibility that the handling of such a case might become a source of evil for those who administer it."<sup>62</sup>

The Apostle knew that God's grace was more than competent to cure the wrongdoer. His concern was with the would-be physicians. Jonathan Edwards, a famous early American preacher, is best remembered for his sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." Paul's concern is for sinners in the hands of spiritual people. "Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently" (Gal 6:1)

**The Prescription: Procedures and Purposes.** The disciplinary procedure Paul prescribes here is to treat the case in a manner that befits spiritual people and that befits the condition of the fallen brother or sister. The sinner is to be:



- restored—not punished
- put right—not condemned
- cured

The discipline that Paul calls for is of the spiritual person, not of the sinner. “Watch yourself!” Keep a critical eye on yourself; be compassionate to others. The transgressor is to be treated with remarkable leniency and tolerance. The faithful are to focus their critical powers on themselves, not on the flops. They are to be gentle, not gloat. The fallen Christian is to be brought back to the right path in a manner that reflects God’s grace.

The contradiction between the ideal and reality in the church brings with it the temptation to self-righteousness and arrogance. The prescription for the problem of transgression may itself prove to be a threat to the community, an opportunity for works of the flesh. “Paul seems keenly aware that a self-righteous posture of prosecutors can cause greater damage to the community than the offence done by a wrongdoer.”<sup>63</sup> Thus, he urges us, “Carry each other’s burdens” (Gal 6:2a). To “carry” or bear another’s burdens is not merely to tolerate them, but actively to assist and relieve them. When we share another’s burdens and misfortunes, we sympathize and support him or her in his daily struggles.

We bear with another’s problems and help him or her cope with them. When we enter into the lives of others—walk a few miles in their shoes, so to speak—it becomes more difficult for us to condemn them. To realize, “There but for the grace of God go I,” is not to condone their sin. It is to resist the temptation to self-righteousness. But more than this, it is to fulfill Christ’s “Golden Rule”—Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. It is to fulfill the second half of what he called the great commandment—Love your neighbor as yourself. This fulfillment is not a condition but a result of salvation. According to Galatians 5:14, to fulfill the love command is to fulfill the whole law. And since, according to 2:20, it is Christ’s love that secures our salvation, the law of love may be called Christ’s law. By bearing one another’s burdens, we “will fulfill the law of Christ” (6:2).

We should notice that Paul does not say here, the strong are to carry the burdens of the weak. We all have burdens, no matter how spiritual we may be. And we all can help others carry their burdens, no matter how weak we may be. Self-discipline is everyone’s personal responsibility. In fact, Paul seems to contradict himself in verse 5 when he insists, “Each one should carry his own load.” Surely loads and burdens are much the same—the daily struggles of life with its unavoidable pressures and problems. But there is no real contradiction, for “‘sharing the burdens of life’ does not eliminate the fact that everybody must learn how to live with himself.”<sup>64</sup>

**The Point: Pride and Praise.** To live with ourselves begins with knowing ourselves. This calls for an extraordinary measure of honesty. It is remarkable how capable we are of self-deception. Even prominent Christian spokesmen urge us to love ourselves and to develop high self-esteem. Paul’s advice seems to be out of date, “If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself” (v 3).

The good news of the gospel is not that we have been set free by Christ to love ourselves, but that we have been set free from self-obsession and called to self-discipline. Sooner or later, we must learn, usually the hard way, to swallow our pride, acknowledge our humanity, and declare our utter dependence on God. There is a tremendous sense of relief that comes in discovering that the security and acceptance

we were struggling to earn has been given to us freely by the One whose love and acceptance matter most!

The greatest danger we face is not being discovered actually to be nothing or nobody important. For apart from God's grace, that is exactly what we are. The danger is that we might be deluded into thinking we are somebody. If we are truly Spirit-filled, we must not be caught up in delusions of grandeur. I leave it to your imagination what the apostle might say to those Holiness folk who profess to be entirely sanctified but whose lives and relationships seem to reveal nothing of the character of Christ. I am not qualified to be their judge.

"Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to somebody else" (v 4). Just as surely as Christian self-examination does not permit us to condemn others, it denies us the right to grade ourselves on the curve. We must not judge ourselves by comparison with others.

There is nothing wrong with achievement. But the achievement exists only with reference to ourselves not in reference to others. There is nothing wrong with taking pride in our achievements. But if we understand our achievements correctly, Christian boasting becomes a form of worship. As Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15:10 (RSV), "By the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain." Proper boasting praises God for his achievements in and through and often in spite of me. And there is nothing wrong with "self-sufficiency." After all, "each one should carry his own load" (v 5).

**Conclusion.** May I commend to you the path to peace and joy found by keeping in step with the Spirit?

The *first step* is to abdicate the throne of the universe. It may come as a surprise to you that God already occupies that place and he's not about to let you have it anyway. He doesn't need your help ruling the world. And he can help you only as you acknowledge his right to reign in you.

The *second step* is to accept your incompetence as judge of the world. I understand that God has that position sewn up as well. Our task is to bear and share and care when others fall. It is not to condemn. It is not to exalt ourselves at their expense. I am called upon to examine only one person—myself. I am not enhanced by your failure or diminished by your success. I do not answer to you and you do not answer to me. God alone is our Judge and he sets the terms by which each of us is to examine ourselves. God's meter alone matters. We march to the beat of a different drummer.

The *third step* is to admit that, regardless of the state of grace you profess, you are nothing apart from God's grace in your life. Our greatest joy is to be found in a life that brings praise to him. God's notice alone matters. I do not seek your praise nor fear your criticism. I await his words, "Well done, good and faithful servant . . . enter into the joy of your [Lord]!" (Mt 25:21, RSV).

"Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other. Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently" (Gal 5:25—6:1).

## Unit 4: The Concepts of Warning, Evangelism, and Discipline

### Lesson 13: Discipline and Discipleship

#### Due This Lesson

Scripture review  
Reading from NDBT  
Essay  
Resource reading and summary  
Journaling

#### Learner Objectives

At the end of this lesson, participants should

- be able to offer some biblical guidelines for discipline and discipleship

#### Homework Assignments

Review biblical passages: Psalms 37, 49, 73; Matthew 13, 25; Luke 16; 2 Thessalonians; Revelation 16—22. Prepare theological statements that these passages would support.

Read the following sections in NDBT: Apostasy, Death and Resurrection, Eschatology, Evil, Hardening, Hell, and Judgment.

Do a biblical concordance study on the concepts of hell, eternal damnation, divine wrath, judgment, etc. Summarize your results in a 2- to 3-page essay. Your essay should give some attention to these questions: Why does the OT mention nothing about postmortem judgment? Why are there no references to hell in Paul's letters?

Read **1** of the following resources

- Resource 13-2, "Judgment Day Separates"
- Resource 13-3, "Judgment Is Reversal"
- Resource 13-4, "In the Judgment Evil Is Eternally Destroyed"

Write a 1-page summary.

Be prepared to discuss the advisability or inadvisability of preaching on the subject of eternal damnation to a modern audience, AND the problem of undeserved suffering.

Write in your journal. Reflect on the difference between discipline and punishment. Who are the people in your life that have positively shaped you by their discipline and holding you accountable? Have you ever thanked them?

## Making Disciples—2 Timothy 3 and 4

2 Timothy 3:14-15 urges the younger generation to learn from two reliable external sources:

- First, the godly examples of Christians of the previous generation (3:10-13; cf. 1:8-13; 2:9-10)
- Second, the application of the message of Scripture to life (3:14-17)

2 Timothy 3:14-15 offers two reasons for remaining faithful to one's calling.

- The first reason is "because you know those from whom you learned it" (v 14).
- A second reason for continuing in the path of discipleship is because "from childhood you have known the holy scriptures" (v 15).

Our focus should be on the usefulness of Scripture.

- *Positively*—Scripture teaches us what we should believe and disciplines us as to how we should behave (1 Tim 4:6, 13, 16; 6:3; Titus 2:12).
- *Negatively*—Scripture is useful for "rebuking" false teaching and "correcting" wrong conduct (2 Tim 4:1-5).

Five solemn charges (4:2)

- First, proclaim the message (NRSV)
- Second, we must be prepared (NIV) and persistent (NRSV)
- Third, to correct (NIV) and convince (NRSV)
- Fourth, to rebuke
- Fifth, to encourage

## Judgment Day Separates—Matthew 25:31-46

In response to questions by his disciples, Jesus had given an extensive discourse on the *Parousia* and the consummation of the age (24:3, 35-44). In conclusion, he spelled out the implications of his second coming for discipleship in four parables: The Servant Set in Authority (vv 45-51)—live in anticipation; The Ten Virgins (25:1-13)—live in preparation; The Talents (25:14-30)—live with reckless abandon; and The Sheep and Goats (vv 31-46)—live compassionately.

Jesus described the end of the age as a time of unexpectedly severe judgment (24:36-39) and separation (vv 40-41). The only hope was constant readiness (vv 42-44), evidenced by a life of sober, loving service in the household of God (vv 45-51). The present parable is Matthew's account of the Last Judgment as parabolically described by Jesus.

The furniture in this picture of final judgment is conventional Jewish apocalyptic expectation. But the arrangement and some details seem to be unique to Jesus. Unlike the usual Jewish view, here the Judge is not God but the Son of Man.

Unlike the majority of Jesus' parables, the central characters in this story are introduced as animals—personified sheep and goats (as in fables). Mixed flocks as such as these were customary in Palestine. In the evening the shepherd separated the sheep from the goats, since the goats needed to be kept warm at night and the sheep preferred the open air. Since sheep were usually white and goats were usually black, even in the gathering dusk the division could be made without mistake.

The separation to the "right" and "left" hands reflects the widespread understanding in the ancient world associating evil and the left hand. In fact, our word "sinister" is derived from the Latin word for "evil." Curiously enough, the word translated "left" here is actually a euphemism used to avoid even speaking the word.

Jesus uses the title "Son of man" in several ways. Following Ezekiel (2:1 *ben adam* [Hebrew]), the expression often serves as a self-designation modestly avoiding the use of "I"—the first person singular pronoun. But here (as in Mt 16:27-28; 24:30; 26:64; and Rev 14:14) he employs it in the sense of Daniel (7:13), where the "one like a Son of man" is a heavenly eschatological figure. Jesus answers the disciples' question regarding *his* coming (24:3, 42) by constantly referring to the coming of the *Son of man* (vv 27, 30, 37, 39, 44; 25:31).

When the Son of man assumes his heavenly throne, he becomes the King—the enthroned Messiah. The parable equates the king not only with the Son of man, but with a shepherd, the Messiah in his glory, and the eschatological Judge. All these references identify Jesus.

The parable mentions no trial, only the pronouncement of judgment. The evidence has already been submitted, it is for sentencing, not trial, that the court is assembled. The King's "Father" (25:34) then must be God.

But who are the sheep and goats? Who are the King's siblings (v 40)? Are the least of his brothers and sisters the same as the hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick and imprisoned (vv 35-39, 42-44)? Any answer must be tentative. Parables often seem to leave such matter open to various applications.

The parable itself (vv 32) suggests that the sheep and goats represent the assembled throngs of "all the nations." The qualifying adjective "all" is usually inclusive, i.e., "all without exception." This, on the surface at least, seems to refer to all people of all nations of all time. But Jews often used the term "nations" to refer to non-Israelites—to "Gentiles" in contrast to themselves.

Identifying the King's "brothers and sisters" is complicated by the fact that they do not seem to be included in those represented by the sheep and goats. Do the sheep and goats represent all humanity except the King's "brothers and sisters"? Do the sheep represent "Israel"? Do they represent "righteous Gentiles" who will have a part in the Kingdom despite the fact that they are not numbered among Jesus' followers?

The sheep and goats seem to be representatives of two classes of humankind. Those that the Shepherd King places at his right hand are the sheep (v 33), who unwittingly helped him in "his" need. These he calls "blessed of my Father" (v 34) and "righteous" (v 46). They are heirs of the Kingdom of God (v 34) and of eternal life (v 46).

The goats are placed at the King's left hand (v 33). These, who refused him help in "his" need, are called "cursed" (v 41). They are to be the victims of "eternal punishment" (v 46) in the "fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (v 41). "Eternal" (vv 41 and 46) refers to the character of the age to come and not necessarily to that which lasts forever. But before we take too much comfort in the possibility of a hell with an expiration date there is more to consider. The same word refers to both punishment and bliss, and so gives little real consolation for those in perdition.

Who are the King's "brothers and sisters"? Will they be excluded from the judgment of the Last Day? Jesus indicates that they are secret representatives of the King (13:35-40, 42-44). The omission of the expression "my brothers and sisters" (simply "these") in the formula of judgment addressed to the cursed (13:45; cf. 13:40) makes the identification of the King's siblings with the hungry, thirsty, etc. quite certain.

Can a more precise identification of the King's "brothers and sisters" be made? Surely the parable does not teach that simply because certain people during their earthly lives suffered from hunger, thirst, or other dire needs, they will be excluded from the Judgment. These needy folks stand in some special relationship to the King: they are *his* "brothers and sisters."

They must not be simply the biological half-siblings of Jesus: James, Joseph, Simon, Judas, and his sisters (v 55). But are they Christians, i.e., members of the Christian Church (see 18:15-22; Rom 8:29)? Are they the 12 disciples (see 23:1, 8; 28:10; Lk 22:32)? Are they Jesus' fellow Israelites (see Acts 2:29)?

Most commentators conclude that the King's "brothers and sisters" include *all* of suffering humanity, despite the interpretive difficulties this creates. If Jesus is indebted to Daniel's description of the coming of the Son of man as he appears to be, a proper understanding of Daniel 7 might help solve the problem.

In Daniel's vision the Son of man comes with "the clouds of heaven" (cf. Mt 16:27-28; 24:30; 25:31; 26:64) to the "Ancient of Days" (Dan 7:13, 9, 22). The Ancient of Days is equated with the "Most High," i.e., with God (vv 18, 22). In Old Testament apocalyptic, "clouds" both conceal and reveal the radiance of God. In the parable of the Last Judgment, Jesus substitutes "glory" for the usual "clouds" (see Mt 24:30). To the Son of man, God gives "everlasting dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him" (Dan 7:14, paraphrased). In Matthew 25:31-42 the Son of man receives a throne and is afterward called King.

But in the same context, Daniel refers to the "saints of the Most High" as receiving dominion, a kingdom, etc. (Dan 7:18, 22, 27). These saints ("holy ones") are the true Israel, who were persecuted by . . . evil people (vv 21, 25). But to them was given authority to judge all nations (vv 14, 22, 25-27).

This may explain the virtual identification of the Son of Man and the King's siblings in the parable. The Son of Man represents the saints. What is done to them is done to him (Mt 25:40, 45). Thus, the King's "brothers and sisters" are Jesus' disciples, Christians, the true Israel, who with Christ will judge the world (1 Cor 6:2). They are included among the sheep who are declared righteous before the judgment seat of Christ (2 Cor 5:11; cf. Dan 7:22, 26).

This is a particularly difficult parable to interpret. Does Jesus teach that people who do not know Christ will be judged on the basis of the love and compassion they show to the needy, who unbeknownst to them are his representatives? Elsewhere in the New Testament it is clear that love is the expression of one's status as a child of God (1 Jn). In this judgment scene, the Judge asks nothing that would apply only to professing Christians. He says nothing about repentance or faith in Christ. His concern is only about how they have treated others. Those declared righteous were just as surprised by their recompense of joy as the unjust were by their condemnation. Nowhere else in the New Testament is there a suggestion that people may be justified by works of love.

In this parable, the vital question is not whether people lived a moral life, whether they were decently kind to others, whether they had an essential religious experience like the new birth or entire sanctification, or whether they espoused the orthodox Christian faith. It is how they related to the incognito Jesus. This alone determined whether they were on the side of the Kingdom or against it.

This parable, which is so difficult to interpret, should not be used to compromise the essential truth of Christianity: "In none other [than Jesus Christ] is there salvation: for neither is there any other name under heaven, that is given among mortals, wherein we must be saved" (Acts 4:12, GL). But does the parable offer some insight into the criterion for judgment for those who have never known Christ? We cannot be certain.

This much is clear and confirmed by other scriptural teaching: Judgment is the eventual destiny of all humanity (2 Cor 5:10; Heb 9:27-28). Jesus is the just Judge. A right relationship to him and the Kingdom of God will be determinative of one's final destiny. The judgment will bring startlingly unexpected consequences. The judgment will effect the eternal separation of humanity into just two classifications—the blessed and the punished.

## Judgment Is Reversal—Luke 16:19-31

In the preceding parable—the Unjust Steward—Jesus taught the positive truth: “Make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous mammon, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal habitations” (16:9, RSV). Possessions should serve an eternal purpose. Use them wisely that you may have treasure in heaven (Mt 6:19-21) and favor with God. God can trust no one who squanders earthly wealth with the true wealth that never fails, i.e., eternal life (Lk 16:10-12). Use money to serve God’s purposes. Don’t serve money (v 13).

But some Pharisees in his audience were unimpressed. They espoused the classic Deuteronomic view that wealth was a divine reward for obedience. How ridiculous of Jesus to say that one could not serve God and wealth! Were they not living proof to the contrary? The lust for possessions (see 1 Tim 6:10) had blinded them to eternal truths (Lk 16:14). They justified their selfish use of material possessions (v 15; cf. Mk 7:9-13). While they tried to appear righteous before men, the hypocrisy of their hearts was known to God (16:15; cf. Mt 23:25-28). The earthly things they so valued were loathsome in the estimation of God (v 15).

Jesus found their legalistic understanding of the Old Testament nearly impenetrable to the message of the gospel (v 17). They could not recognize the kingdom of God before their very eyes (17:21). Before it was only a hope, a distant dream, an expectation, but now it had arrived. They could seize it, gain it, take it by force (16:16-17); but they missed it.

Dives, the Latin term for “rich man,” is often used as his name. The name Lazarus, from the Hebrew “Eleazar,” means “God helps.” This is the only parable in which a character is named. The poor beggar, Lazarus, stands in stark contrast to well-dressed and, well fed Dives (v 19). That there was a high ornamented portico in front of his luxurious, palatial home indicates something of the extent of his wealth. On the doorstep of affluence sat a cripple, who suffered from a skin disease (vv 20-21) similar to that of Job (Job 2:7). With luxury in sight, Lazarus eked out a meager existence by begging from the people of means entering and leaving the rich man’s house.

For table napkins the wealthy of Jesus’ day customarily used pieces of bread, which were then discarded for the dogs (Lk 7:28). Lazarus would have happily feasted on these, but even they were refused him. The presence of plenty in the nearby house of Dives only made the poor man’s misery more intolerable. Even the unclean street dogs were better fed than he. It is unclear whether their licking of Lazarus’ sores was welcome comfort or merely added insult to injury.

Broken, diseased, and malnourished, the poor man died, apparently as he had lived—unnoticed. Nothing is said of his funeral—perhaps the dogs cleaned his bones (see 1 Ki 14:11; 21:23; Jer 15:2-3). But Jesus’ concern is with his spirit—which “was carried by the angels to Abraham’s bosom” (16:22, RSV).

In a religious setting that equated riches with righteousness and considered misery a recompense for sin (Jn 9:1-2), complete reversal of fortune was undoubtedly alarming



to Jesus' audience. Though not stated, we may assume that Lazarus was a pious believer, for he moved from intolerable torment to unimagined joy, to the highest place of honor at the heavenly banquet beside Father Abraham.

In time "the rich man also died and was buried" (Lk 16:22*b*)—everyone does eventually. While the pomp and circumstance of his funeral was still underway, Dives looked up to survey his changed condition. The torment of Hades is accentuated by the sight of Paradise in the distance, and the presence of Lazarus there (vv 23-24). But separating the two locations was a great uncrossable chasm. Abraham acknowledges Dives as his "son," but God's irrevocable judgment separates the two. Dives shared the race but not the grace of his ancestor (cf. Lk 3:7ff).

Abraham acts as a spokesman for God in this parable: "Son, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things" (Lk 16:25*a*, RSV). Dives received in full the things he valued during his lifetime (6:21-25).

Riches alone did not keep Dives out of Paradise. Abraham himself had been rich (Gen 13:2). Nothing in the parable suggests that the rich man had lived a wicked life. He is asked to remember his life of selfish indulgence, with no room for others or for God. Had Dives used his wealth wisely—in love and compassion—upon his death, Lazarus may have been the friend to receive him into "eternal habitations" (16:9, RSV). But, it was too late now. He who denied Lazarus crumbs is now denied Lazarus' comfort (vv 20, 24-25).

Jesus' parable adopted current Jewish imagery for the future life, in much the same way that our heavenly humor almost uniformly places St. Peter at the Pearly Gates. Jesus apparently makes no attempt to give firsthand information on existence beyond the grave. "Abraham's bosom" literally refers to the folds of his robe. But the expression was one popular designation for Paradise (cf. Lk 23:43), the temporary resting place of the pious dead.

Hell or Hades in this parable uses the term understood to refer to the destination of all the dead in the OT. But here it is reserved exclusively for the wicked. The mention of fiery torment (16:23-24) makes Hades here very nearly equivalent to Gehenna, the normal NT term for hell. Jesus uses symbols without intentionally referring the temperature of hell or the menu of the heavenly banquet. But if this is only symbolic, what must the reality be like?

Dives remains unrepentant even as he pleads for comfort. He attempts to justify his inhumanity on the basis of ignorance. Like his five brothers, he hints that he needed a wake-up call from beyond the grave to believe. Perhaps a visionary appearance of dead Lazarus, or a bodily resurrection would have convinced him to repent (v 30). But Jesus has Abraham refuse even this request (v 31). With the Old Testament in his hand and Lazarus on his doorstep, he and his brothers needed nothing else.

The parable does not even imply that the rich man was dishonest, unscrupulous, penurious, or miserly. In fact, it implies that he was little different from most people (vv 27-28), so wrapped up in self-concern that they never see beyond their own needs. Wealth was not his crime but his unused opportunity. Dives failed to put love into action. Failure to live up to the revelation of God's will one has is the inexcusable, damning sin.

This parable is not really intended to teach about the afterlife. We probably do not have the capacity to comprehend what truly lies beyond. But some truths about Jesus' portrayal of the world beyond do stand out. There self-consciousness, memory, responsibility, and moral decision remain. Are we to imagine that one who cared nothing for eternal salvation while he was alive became interested in evangelism in the world beyond (vv 27-28)? Or did he only use the unrepentance of others to excuse his own?

Jesus does not make heaven a projection of this world. In fact he says that the things people hold precious are utterly insignificant to God (v 15). Imagine, a place where gold is so despised that they pave the streets with it (Rev 21:21), where righteousness is at home (2 Pet 3:13), where Christ reigns unchallenged (Rev 22:1-5), where the redeemed of all ages are comforted together (Lk 16:25; cf. Rev 21:4)—and that would be Paradise.

But the message of the parable is not to inform people about heaven or hell. It is intended to warn those like the rich man and his brothers of impending danger. While the prayer of Dives that Abraham would send Lazarus to his five brothers is denied, the one telling the parable, a visitor from the eternal world, is being rejected (Lk 16:15). The return from the dead of another Lazarus did not prompt a revival, but a plot to kill both him and Jesus (Jn 11:46ff). The demand for a sign is an evasion and a sign of unrepentance (see Mk 8:12; Lk 11:29-30).

“Do you think that Dives and his brothers were worse sinners than all the other Jews, because he suffered thus? I tell you, No; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish” (paraphrase of Lk 13:2-3). One has risen from the dead! You have not only the Old, but the New Testament. You need no further signs—You must repent!

## In the Judgment Evil Is Eternally Destroyed 2 Thessalonians 1 and 2

Paul was pleased that the Thessalonians were persevering as Christians despite the unjust persecutions they were experiencing because of their faith. This was for him visible proof that God was already at work in them in the present and that His future vindication of them would be certain and just. The only "evidence" for this hope was their perseverance in the present. "God's judgment" was expected only in the future, with the Second Coming (see 1:7).

The Thessalonians' present suffering was not deserved, but Paul considered it proof that they were deserving of the reward awaiting them in the future. They suffered because they allowed God to rule their lives in this present evil age. When Jesus returned, the tables would be turned. These unjustly persecuted believers would have a part in the blessings of the coming age, in which God would rule without rival.

"God's judgment" had both a positive and negative side. It involved at once vindication for the just and retribution for the unjust (see Phil 1:28-30). God would not only reward the faithful Thessalonian believers, but punish their unjust persecutors. In God's righting of wrongs, those responsible for the wrong will become just victims of their own injustice. The suffering of the persecutors was, thus, not so much a punishment as a consequence. Nevertheless, the certainty of a fair and equitable final judgment is not merely natural, but assured by the just character of God (see Rom 2:2-11). Scripture rejects the repayment of evil for evil by humans (Mt 5:38-48; Rom 12:14-21), affirming that God alone is qualified to administer impartial judgment (Mt 7:1-5; Rom 2:1-3; 14:3-4, 10-13; Jas 4:11-12).

"This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven" (1:7). Paul insists that final judgment awaits the Second Coming, at which time "the Lord himself will come down from heaven" (1 Thess 4:16). The New Testament seems to make no distinction between the most frequent Greek word referring to this event,

*parousia*—"coming"—see, for example, 2 Thess 2:1, 8; 1 Thess 2:19; 3:13; 4:15; 5:23; 1 Cor 15:23

and the less frequent *apokalypsis*—"revelation"—see 1 Cor 1:7; 1 Pet 1:7, 13; 4:13; Rev 1:1

and *epiphaneia*—The NIV translates the word "coming" in 2 Thessalonians 2:8; "appearing" in 1 Timothy 6:14; 2 Timothy 4:1, 8; and Titus 2:13.

All three terms describe the events of "the day of the Lord" (1 Thess 5:2, 4; 2 Thess 1:10; 2:2, 3; 2 Pet 3:10) as related to Jesus Christ.

But the Second Coming may be described as it relates to the experiences of people. Believers will be raised, resurrected, raptured, changed, obtain salvation, put on immortality, and always be with the Lord (1 Cor 15:12-58; 1 Thess 4:13-5:11). Whereas "destruction will come on [unbelievers] suddenly" (1 Thess 5:3; see 2 Thess 1:9). That is, they will suffer God's coming "wrath" (1 Thess 1:10; 5:9).

Although God is the Judge (1:5), the Lord Jesus will execute his sentence (1 Thess 4:6; 2 Thess 1:8). The sentence may be translated as "vengeance" (KJV, RSV),

“retribution” (NASB), or “punishment” (NIV). The punishment is not arbitrary, vindictive, or a private vendetta; it will justly repay sinners for their evil deeds.

The two phrases describing those who will be punished—“those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus” (1:8)—refer to a single group of people. This is an example of synonymous parallelism, in which the second phrase further identifies and clarifies the first (see Ps 36:10; Isa 53:1; Rom 10:16). Those condemned include all who consciously exclude God from their lives and so reject the good news of salvation He has provided in Christ (see Ps 9:17; 79:6; Jer 10:25; Rom 1:19-28; 2:9).

“They will be punished with everlasting destruction” (1:9). The word “they” refers to the persecutors described in verse 8. Their “penalty” (NASB) is described from two perspectives.

First, it is “eternal ruin” (NAB) or “destruction” (NIV, RSV, TEV), which does not seem to imply their annihilation or extinction. It is simply the opposite of the “eternal life,” which is God’s gift to believers of salvation in the age to come (Rom 2:8; 5:21; 6:22-23; Gal 6:8). Thus, “everlasting destruction” apparently refers to continuous and unending punishment (Mt 18:8-9; 25:41). Presumably this refers to “hell”—a term Paul never uses.

Second, it is to be “shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power” (1:9). Paul never describes the ultimate fate of unbelievers as active torture. For him “hell” consists in the horror of unending separation from the Lord and all the good that His presence involves (see Isa 59:1-2; Mt 7:23; 25:41, 46). Those who choose to exclude God from their lives are finally granted their wish, to their loss. For to be separated from Him is to be deprived of all hope and help; it is to be alone. In contrast, “heaven,” the final destiny of those who choose to live now with the Lord (1 Thess 5:9), is to “be with the Lord forever” (1 Thess 4:17).

The two phrases—“to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed” (1:10) are synonymous (cf. v 8). They describe in mutually interpretive ways the favorable result of Christ’s second coming for believers. His return will be marked by “glory.” The “glory” is the Lord’s (v 9), but all Christians will share in it (v 10). The all-surpassing glory of that day for believers will be amazing beyond description.

“This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you” (v 10). Paul assured the Thessalonians that they would participate in the blessings of the Second Coming, not as compensation for their sufferings, but as a consequence of their conversions to the Christian faith Paul had preached among them.

It is always appropriate to remind ourselves as we read the Pauline Epistles that we’re reading someone else’s mail. But it is perhaps never as appropriate as in the case of 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12, a notoriously difficult passage to interpret. This is not to suggest that these verses have no relevance to us. It is only a modest admission of the limits of our knowledge. Paul’s original readers had considerable firsthand information we never will have (see v 5). Thus, every interpretation of these verses has a larger than usual measure of tentativeness about it.

Paul requests calm in the face of confusion concerning the Second Coming (v 1). His appeal is based on the certainty of divine justice and the final defeat of evil stressed in chapter 1 (1:5-10; see 2:3, 8).

Paul offered proof that the day of the Lord had not yet come in 2:3-12. Overly simplified the proof was: First, evil had not yet been destroyed (see vv 3 and 8). Second, although evil was already a reality, it had not yet reached the crescendo it would before its certain doom (see vv 3, 5-7, 9-12). Third, Jesus had not yet come again (v 8). Much in these verses remains obscure. This much is clear. When the day of the Lord comes, there will be no confusion about it. Everyone will know it beyond any doubt.

“That day will not come, until the rebellion occurs” (v 3). The first five words in this verse in NASB—a generally quite literal translation—have no basis in the original Greek, although they seem to be implied by the context. One event that must take place before the day of the Lord comes is “the rebellion” (NIV, RSV, TEV) or “apostasy” (NASB). In Greek literature of the time the term referred to political chaos or military rebellion and the resulting civil disorder and anarchy. Jewish apocalyptic literature used this term to refer to mass defections of the people of God expected in the end times in the face of great evil and intense persecution (see Mt 24:11-13; 2 Tim 3:1-9). If this was Paul’s understanding, the faithful perseverance of the Thessalonians was evidence enough that “the rebellion” had not yet occurred.

“That day will not come, until . . . the man of lawlessness is revealed” (2 Thess 2:3). Accompanying “the rebellion” Paul expected the appearance of “the man of lawlessness” (NIV, NASB, RSV). In the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, both “lawlessness” and “rebellion” translate the Hebrew word *Belial*, which in New Testament times came to be a name of Satan (see 2 Cor 6:15). “The man of lawlessness” is called “the lawless one” in 2 Thessalonians 2:8 and 9. Whoever he may be, whether human or supernatural, he is Satan’s agent, if not an incarnation of Satan himself (v 9). For the sake of convenience we will call him the Rebel. Although Paul never uses the term, it has often been assumed that the Rebel is the so-called Antichrist.

The term “Antichrist” appears in the New Testament only in 1 John 2:18, 22; 4:3; and 2 John 7. There it is said that there are many Antichrists, some of whom were already at work in the false teachers of John’s church. Although usually associated with the “Beast” of Revelation 13, the term “Antichrist” *nowhere* appears in the Book of Revelation.

The two phrases, he “opposes and exalts himself” (2 Thess 2:4 NASB) could be translated to provide two further names of the Rebel, that is, the Adversary and the Self-exalter. It is noteworthy that the Hebrew term *Satan* means “the adversary” (see 1 Tim 5:14). Old Testament passages, such as Isaiah 14:12-15, Ezekiel 28, and Daniel 7:25; 8:9-12; 11:36-37 seem to stand behind the description of the Rebel as the Self-exalter. These passages have been the basis for a great deal of highly imaginative speculation about the origin of Satan. A careful reading, however, will demonstrate that they refer explicitly to the demise of *human* kings whose claims to divine rights set them in opposition to God and His people.

The Rebel will speak against and exalt himself over “everything that is called God or is worshiped” (2 Thess 2:4). This is precisely what the kings described in the Old Testament passages noted above had done.

The self-idolatrous tradition of pagan kings may also explain Paul's reference to another offense expected of the Rebel: "He . . . [even] sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God" (2:4). The word "temple" in the Bible usually refers to the inner shrine of the Jerusalem Temple, the holy of holies. It was here that God himself was believed to dwell. Did Paul expect one final repetition of the previous sacrileges?

The two phrases, "what is holding him back" (v 6) and "the one who holds it back" (v 7), refer to the actions of a power/person that for the present prevents two things from happening. For convenience, we'll call it/him the Restrainer. Paul claimed that his readers knew something about this (v 6). It is not clear whether they knew the Restrainer's identity or that the Rebel had not yet been revealed or both.

What/who is the Restrainer? Since Paul nowhere identifies it/him, we can only guess. What is the Restrainer holding back? The words "him" (v 6) and "it" (v 7) have no basis in Greek. The context, however, implies that he restrains the Rebel, delaying his future revelation and the open exercise of his sinister mission (v 6), **and** "the secret power of lawlessness," limiting its present effectiveness (v 7; Jude 6; Rev 20:1-10).

The purpose of the Restrainer's action is "so that he may be revealed at the proper time" (2 Thess 2:6). Although "he" must refer to the Rebel, it is not clear **who** reveals him nor **who** decides when the "time" is right. Does the same person do both? Who? Is it God? the Restrainer? Satan? the Rebel himself? someone else? We simply cannot be certain.

The point of verse 7 is not simply that evil is already active in the world—that would be a profound understatement. The word "already" implies that Paul was convinced that the extraordinary evil of the end times had begun even before the end had fully come. The "rebellion" had not taken place. The Rebel had not yet been revealed. But "lawlessness" was "already at work" (NASB). Thus, although "the day of the Lord" had not yet arrived, its coming was near.

Paul was convinced that the last days had already dawned with the coming of the Messiah, his resurrection from the dead, and the dawning age of the Holy Spirit. Thus, he was not surprised that other events, usually associated with the end times, had already taken place as well.

Christ's decisive victory over the Rebel is described in two ways in verse 8.

- First, "the Lord Jesus will overthrow [him] with the breath of his mouth." The word "overthrow" could be translated "slay" (NASB, RSV), "kill" (TEV), or "destroy" (NAB). The figure of speech, borrowed from Isaiah 11:4, is comparable to the contemporary slang expression that refers to killing someone as "blowing him away."
- Second, Christ will "destroy [the Rebel] by the splendor of his coming" (2:8; cf. 1:7; Rev 19:11-21). This could be translated "bring [him] to an end by the appearance of his coming" (NASB) or "annihilate him by manifesting his presence" (NAB; but see 2 Thess 2:3).

The expression "those who are perishing" should not suggest that some people are predestined to doom through no fault of their own. Rather, it implies that the final destiny of unbelievers is not yet sealed. Just as Christians are **being saved** but may forfeit final salvation by disobedience, so unbelievers need not perish (see Jn 3:16-17; 1 Cor 1:18; 10:33; 15:2; 2 Cor 2:15; 4:3; 1 Thess 2:16). If unbelievers do perish, it

will not be through an arbitrary divine choice nor through ignorance. It will be “because they refused to love the truth and so be saved” ( 2 Thess 2:10).

“The truth” they reject is the divinely revealed good news about Jesus and the salvation He makes possible (Jn 14:6; Rom 1:25; Gal 2:14; Col 1:5). By persisting in unbelief, by preferring the false to the true, the Rebel to Christ, unbelievers choose death for themselves.

The “powerful delusion” God sends has two results, the first immediate, the second ultimate.

- First, unbelievers become all the more gullible to the lie (2 Thess 2:11, see v 10). God not only lets people sin and suffer its consequences, but he actively helps them achieve their evil ends. Paul makes a similar point about the wrath of God in Romans 1 and 2. Sin is its own punishment, although sinners fail to realize this. This is why God graciously pushes forward the consequences of sinful choices—not as a vindictive judgment but in order to prompt sinners to repent before it is eternally too late.
- Second, “all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness” (v 12, see v 10). Those who refuse to love the truth have their values so perverted as to regard sin as pleasurable (see Rom 1:32). And those who refuse salvation receive the condemnation they choose, sharing the ruin of the Rebel (2 Thess 2:3 and 8; see Mt 25:41).

Paul did not explain why God permitted evil to persist in the world. But he insisted that it would not always be so. Christ would be victorious. Justice would prevail. Evil would finally be destroyed. Until this had become a reality, Paul told his readers that they could rest assured that the day of the Lord had not yet come. And because even more intense evil would come before Jesus’ return, Paul did not urge them to be overly anxious for the Second Coming. Rather, they were to wait patiently for God’s perfect timing, confident that God was able to sustain to the end those who stood firm in His grace.

## Lesson 14: When Humans Go Too Far

### Due This Lesson

Bible review  
Reading of NDBT selections  
Concordance study  
Response to assigned resource  
Preparation for discussion  
Journaling

### Learner Objectives

- At the end of this lesson, participants should
- offer some biblical insight as to the fate of the finally impenitent and the special problems this presents for Wesleyans
  - articulate examples of the Bible's approach to theodicy

### Homework Assignments

Review the following Bible passages: Genesis 37–50; 1 Kings 8; Jonah; Psalm 137; Matthew 5–7; 27:3-8; John 21; Acts 6; and Revelation 2–3. Prepare theological statements that these books/chapters would support.

Read the following sections in NDBT: Apostasy; Compassion; Forgiveness and Reconciliation; Mercy; Repentance.

Search the Internet, collections of illustrations, and classic literature—such as Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*—for stories of the transforming power of forgiveness, divine and human, that seem to shed light on biblical theology. Summarize several such stories and bring them with you to the next class.

Write in your journal. Listen to the "Hallelujah Chorus" by Handel. Reflect on all that you feel as you listen.



## God Is Judge

Theodicy—a system of natural theology aimed at seeking to vindicate divine justice in allowing evil to exist

The conviction that God is the Judge of the entire world is one basis for the Christian hope that injustice will one day be dealt with fairly and finally.

As the Creator of the universe, God is ultimately responsible for all that exists.

## The Wedding Supper of the Lamb

Faithful—reward consists of an invitation to attend the Marriage Supper of the Lamb. In stark contrast, the punishment of the wicked consists in a quite different, grisly feast in which they are the menu (19:11).

Revelation 19:6-8 is the victory song of “all” God’s servants “both small and great.” The shout of the crowd began with the Hebrew call to worship, “Hallelujah!” That is, “Let us praise Yahweh!” This call, frequent in the Psalms, appears only in Revelation 19:1, 3, 4, and 6 in the NT.

The basis for the summons is described from two perspectives.

- First, “the time has come for the wedding of the Lamb” (TEV; 19:9). The Lamb, of course, is John’s favorite designation for Christ. “The wedding” as a symbol of God’s reign is further developed in Revelation 21:1–22:5.
- Second, his Bride has made herself ready. The imagery of the Church as the “bride of Christ” appears also in Matthew 22:1-14; Mark 2:19-20; 2 Corinthians 11:2; and Ephesians 5:22-32. Old Testament prophets used the metaphor of marriage to describe the covenant relationship between God and his people (Hos 2:16-22; Isa 54:5-6; 62:5; Jer 2:2; Eze 16:6-14).

The bride’s readiness was symbolized by her wedding dress (Rev 19:8). It is described as “dazzling white linen” (NJB). In the Old Testament clean garments symbolized holiness (Gen 35:2; Isa 52:1; 61:10; Zech 3:4; Rev 3:4-5, 18; 6:11; 7:9, 14). Her wedding gown was given her to wear. The Church’s holiness is a gift Christ made possible by his saving death (7:14). And yet fine linen also represents the righteous acts of the saints.

The fourth beatitude of the Book of Revelation—Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb! (Rev 1:3; 14:13; Lk 14:15)

Genuine prophecy pointed people to the revelation of God in Christ.

## The Feast of God's Judgment

Revelation 19:11-21 announces the fate of those who steadfastly refuse to worship God . . . using imagery borrowed from Ezekiel's vision of the defeat of Gog and Magog (ch 38—39). Despite the imagery, Revelation reports no battle. The Second Coming only completes the victory begun at the Cross.

The punishment of the wicked was necessary if God was to establish justice in the world.

Revelation 19:17-18 issues an invitation to a quite different grizzly banquet of the consequences of rebellion against God. It visualizes judgment as the self-destructiveness of evil.

Because the human response to Jesus is decisive for salvation, he is the Judge.

John's vision turned to another angel . . . the call of this angel is to a gruesome funeral banquet . . . so scavengers might dispose of the flesh, literally "fleshes"—the corpses, of God's enemies.

"The beast" embodied all the forces and powers who presumed to usurp the sovereignty that belonged to God alone.

According to Revelation 16:16 the final battle occurs at "the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon." But this must certainly symbolize Golgotha. For before the final battle begins Christ's garment is "a robe dipped in blood" (19:13; see Isa 63:1-3). This is not the blood of his vanquished foes, but his own blood (see Rev 1:5-7; 9:9-10). The decisive battle was fought and won by the Lamb on the Cross.

## Feast of God's Judgment

The first result of Christ's victory is the capture of the beast and the false prophet (Rev 19:20).

Both "the beast" and "the false prophet" were human agents of Satan. The "beast" might represent anything that demands the ultimate allegiance that God alone deserves. And the "false prophet" would represent false religion or perverse value systems and social structures that turn people away from the worship of God to idolatry in any of its forms.

Christ's only weapon was the sword that came out of his mouth. This again suggests that the war he waged was the "battle" for human allegiance.

This grizzly imagery graphically reminded John's readers of the self-destructiveness of evil.

# Lesson 15: Forgive and Forgiveness

## Due This Lesson

Review of Bible passages  
Reading of NDBT selections  
Summaries of transforming stories  
Journaling

## Learner Objectives

At the end of this lesson, participants should

- be able to summarize the Bible's theology of forgiveness, divine and human

## Homework Assignments

Review the following Bible passages: Exodus 33–34; Numbers 14; Deuteronomy 5–7; Nehemiah 9; 2 Chronicles 30; Psalms 77; 86; 103; 111, 116; 145; Joel 2; Jonah; Matthew 18–25; Luke 15 and 19; and Romans.

Read the following sections in *NDBT*: Blessing, Faith, Faithfulness; Gentleness, Grace; Healing; Hospitality; Mercy/Compassion; Poor/Poverty; and Ruth.

Read **1** of the following:

- Resource 15-12, "The Grumbling Graced"
- Resource 15-13, "The Ungrateful Son"
- Resource 15-14, "What Shall I Do Now?"

Write a 1-page summary.

Write in your journal. Reflect on the power of bitterness when people refuse to forgive.

## Forgive and Forgiveness

Salvation is only possible because God in His mercy is willing to forgive the sinner.

In the Old Testament in particular forgiveness usually occurs in the context of the mercy—the love or *chesed*—of God. Forgiveness is not talked about or theorized about nearly as much as it is reported in the accounts of the life of God's people.

One evidence of the complexity of the word problem is that the three words translated as "forgive" or "forgiveness" in the Old Testament are rendered by a score of Greek words in the Septuagint.

Forgiveness is the action of the one who has been wronged. Mercy is the prerequisite for the granting of forgiveness. Repentance is the prerequisite required of the wrongdoer. Restitution and confession are the actions that validate true repentance. Reconciliation is the result of the granting of forgiveness.

## Forgive, Pardon, and Forgiveness

There are four roots in Hebrew that are translated as "forgive" or "forgiveness." The most common of these,

- *nasa*, "lift away"
- *salach*, "send away or let go"
- *machah*, "wipe away or erase"

have as their common concept separating the fault or sin from the person who has sinned by the person sinned against.

The word *kaphar* is also used for "forgive," and it brings to our attention the aspect of covering the sin, making it disappear.

The New Testament shares this dual aspect of forgiveness with words that indicate the removal or destruction of sin, *apoluo*, "let go away"

- *aphiemi*, "send away"
- *exaleipho*, wipe away, in the first case
- *charizomai*, "being gracious to" in the second

## Mercy and Grace

Four Hebrew words are often translated as “mercy” or “love” and are used to emphasize this aspect of God’s character.

- *Ahab* is the most common root used for “love” or “affection,” and God loves his people and his people love him.
- *Hesed* is the most important word for us in this context, for it is the merciful love that is based in the covenant.
- *Chanan* expresses the extension of graciousness toward the offender. This is the most common translation of the word.
- *Racham* is a word that can be translated in a variety of ways. The root is associated with the womb.

In the Greek New Testament text

- *Oiktirmon* simply means mercy or tender mercy. It is the extension of clemency toward the offender.
- *Eleeo* is also used to express compassion for or extending mercy to another.
- *Charis* is the word most often used for the extension of the grace of God to others. It is given freely by God and can be secured in no other way. It is a gift.
- *Ayapao* is the most common verb used to speak of love being poured out upon another person. It is not extended only to those who are following God but is extended to all persons, including all of us who have offended God. It is the basis for granting mercy.



## Repent and Repentance

### Hebrew

- *Nacham* is sometimes used for the penitent person. It carries with it the concept of being comforted or relieved of a burden.
- The primary word for repentance is *shub*. This basically means a change of direction.

### Greek

- *Metamelomai* is the kind of “repentance” that Judas had after he betrayed Jesus, and is best translated as remorse.
- *Metanoeo* is the word most frequently used for repentance and implies that the repentant has had a total change of mind.

## Restitution

Restitution, the rectifying of the wrong done whenever that is possible, is an action that always accompanies true repentance.

### Hebrew

- *Temurah*, usually translated as “restore,” is rooted in the concept of exchanging for something of equal or greater value.
- *Shalam* shares its root with the word for peace, *shalom*, and carries the meaning of restoring to the way that things ought to be.
- *Shub* is used in Psalm 23 not for humankind returning what was taken, or setting right what he did wrong, but as God returning humankind to the state that they ought to enjoy.

### Greek

- *Apodidomai*, which means to give back, is the one used by Zacchaeus when he commits to returning that which he has seized.
- Other words such as *apokatastasis* and *apokathistemi*, often translated as “restore” are usually used in connection with physical healing
- *Katartidzo* is the word that Paul uses when he reminds Christians that we have a responsibility to restore a fallen brother to a healthy spiritual state (Gal 6:1).

## Confess

The other aspect of the repentance that accompanies forgiveness is confession.

The only Old Testament word for confess, *yadah*, is used much more frequently in connection with praising God.

In the New Testament the words *homologeō* and *exomologeō* are used to express the same relationship between confession and forgiveness.

Refusal to recognize the fact that we are sinners makes it impossible to receive forgiveness.

Romans 10:9-10: "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved," helps us to see the link that is made between trust in God, acknowledgment of who God is, and our forgiveness that results in our salvation. It also reveals that the speaking out about God's character, the praise of God, is an integral part of salvation.

## Reconciliation

The goal of forgiveness is the restoration of the relationship that we should have with God and with others—the establishment of true *shalom*, true peace.

### In the Old Testament

- *kaphar*, to conceal or atone
- *ratsah*, to make pleasing
- *chata*, offering for sin

### In the New Testament the words

- *Apokatallatto*, *katallasso*, and *diallattomai* all carry the meaning of transformation. The blood of Christ accomplishes this transformation.
- The word *ilaskomai*, used in Hebrews for the work of the high priest, carries much the same meaning as the Old Testament words.

## Old Testament Instructions and Pleas

**Forgiveness for Sins Committed**—Leviticus 4, following the making of the sacrifice it is stated “they will be forgiven.”

Admission of guilt and acceptance of atonement are prerequisites for forgiveness.

**Corporate Guilt**—The corporate concept was not restricted to the family. A family was a part of one of the 12 tribes or of the Levites. The tribes were a part of the nation of Israel. Sins committed by a part of the whole make the whole guilty and require atonement for all the tribe or for the entire nation.

**Forgiveness Withheld**—A striking contrast to the assurances of forgiveness is the instances cited when God refuses to forgive. In Deuteronomy 29:20 we read that curses will fall upon the one who refuses to keep the Law.

**Intercessory Pleas**—Contrasting with the cries for vengeance we have great intercessory prayers. Several times Moses stood between an angry God and the sinner—usually Israel.

Such pleas were made because they knew that Yahweh functioned in harmony with His character and at the heart of His character was the love that extended *chesed* to humankind.

**Foundation for Forgiveness**—*Chesed* is the Old Testament word that gives us the basis for forgiveness. The loving-kindness, the mercy, the steadfast love that flows from the very person of God reaches out to humankind offering a new start, a clean slate.

**Requests for Human Forgiveness**—There are no direct instructions in the Old Testament to forgive others. Nevertheless one of the characteristics of the wicked man is that he refuses to show mercy (Ps 109).

## Forgiveness in the New Testament

There are few areas where the distinction between the Old and New Testaments is more evident than in the area of forgiveness even though it is clear that the concept and reality of forgiveness in both Testaments are based upon the same truth.

**Jesus Forgives Sins**—Jesus specifically states that healing is done “so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins” (Mt 9:6). The healing is done to affirm Jesus’ authority from God, His oneness with the Divine.

Love, respect of God, mercy—*chesed*—is shown to be the foundation upon which forgiveness rests.

**Jesus Instructs His Disciples to Forgive Sin**—There are several contexts in which Jesus instructs His followers to forgive. The best known is in the Lord’s Prayer.

Forgiving those who sin against us is an integral part of loving.

The followers of Christ are to be a part of extending forgiveness, both through their way of life and through their witness to Christ.

### **New Testament Forgiveness and the Law**

- Jesus came to bring forgiveness and take away the sin of the world. This was the announcement of John the Baptist and is repeated throughout the New Testament.
- It was through the blood of Christ that we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace.
- Repentance and confession remain as prerequisites for forgiveness.

**The Unforgiven**—In the New Testament there are two categories given where forgiveness is unavailable.

- If you refuse to forgive, then you cannot receive forgiveness.
- Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit

## Small Groups

The following passages have been selected because they display or contrast various aspects of forgiveness:

1. Before the giving of the Law we have interesting examples of forgiveness in
  - Esau's forgiveness of Jacob—Genesis 32—33
  - Joseph's forgiveness of his brothers—Genesis 42—46, and especially 50
2. Contrast the aspect of forgiveness in the story of Jonah, the story of Esther, Psalm 137, and the death of Jesus and Stephen—Luke 23 and Acts 7.
3. Compare the forgiveness available through Jesus in the lives of Peter and Judas.
4. Compare the role of forgiveness in the sign act—marriage to Gomer—of Hosea with the letters to the seven churches.

Be prepared to share your conclusions with the class.

## **Formulation of Statements and Catechism**

Write out a statement about each aspect of forgiveness that you have noted in today's study. Organize them into a structure that you believe makes them teachable.

Update your catechism notes with those statements about forgiveness that should be included.

Give thought to the nature of the catechism that you want to create. Should it be a collection of beliefs or should it take on characteristics similar to those in the ministerial course of study and be concerned with being and doing as well as knowing?



## The Grumbling Graced

### Matthew 20:1-16

“The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard,” as this story is customarily known, might be called “The Parable of the Eccentric Employer.” It relates a day in the life of an employer and the labor-dispute resulting from his peculiar salary scale and his obstinate insistence on his right to maintain it, despite the boisterous protests of his employees with the greatest seniority.

In real life we can be quite certain that none of his employees would have been so stupid as to come to work at dawn the next day if he could get a full day’s pay so much easier by coming late. Who wouldn’t prefer to work for only a little while at the close of the day? Who’s brainless enough to do 12 times the work for the same money? It doesn’t take a CPA or MBA to know that this employer is a fool; he is turning the whole economy upside down.

And we could dismiss the story as absurd and totally irrelevant to the real world we live in, were it not for two disturbing facts: (1) It is Jesus who tells the story and (2) he says the kingdom of God is like the circumstances he describes. In this light, it becomes imperative that we understand it.

Since this is a parable, not an allegory, it makes just one major point. Just one key successfully unlocks its code. What is that point in this story? Before we can hope to understand and appropriate the spiritual reality of Jesus’ parable, we must first understand the story itself. And to understand the story we must understand something of the circumstances of that time.

In Palestine the customary 12-hour work-day began at 6 AM and ended at 6 PM. Hired servants were always employed by the day and paid at its end. This provision of the Law safeguarded the rights of the poor, who lived on the edge of destitution. The usual daily wage during the period of Jesus’ earthly ministry was a denarius. It was not the smallest unit of money possible. There was the *pondion*, which was one-twelfth of a denarius.

Unemployment in Jesus’ day was a major social problem, as was the huge disparity between the economic classes—the rich and the poor. Few could have been called middle class. According to the custom of the day, the unemployed gathered in the village marketplaces where they stood or sat and gossiped, waiting to be hired by some wealthy landowner.

As we turn to our story, we meet first a landowner seeking men to harvest the grapes in his vineyard. Presumably, the urgency of harvesting the crop before the rainy season set in accounts for his repeated visits to the marketplace to secure additional laborers. He hired men at five different intervals throughout the day: at 6 AM; at 9 AM; again at noon; again at 3 PM; and finally at the eleventh hour, about 5 PM.

According to verse 2, the owner of the vineyard agreed to pay those hired at dawn a denarius for the day—the customary wage. According to verses 3-5, those hired at 9, noon, and 3 were promised to be paid what was right, which they probably interpreted to mean the portion of a denarius proportionate to their time in the vineyard, 3/4, 1/2, and

1/4 denarius respectively. This would not have been a living wage, but the unemployed were really in no position to bargain—anything was better than starvation. In verses 6-7, those hired last were promised nothing, but merely told, “You also go and work in my vineyard.”

Although five groups were hired, at the end of the parable only two groups of workers are given attention—those hired first and last. The order of payment, the last first, provides opportunity for those hired first to see that those who worked only one hour received a full day’s pay. Apparently their imaginations began to work overtime, as they calculated, “One hour—one denarius, twelve hours . . .” You know what they thought! In any case, they reasonably “expected to receive more.” But when they received the customary denarius that they had contracted to work for, “they began to grumble against the land-owner” and to complain that they had been treated unfairly by being paid the same as those who worked only one hour in the cool, late afternoon while they had worked 12 hours, bearing the “burden of the work and the heat of the day.”

The vineyard owner disdainfully replied, “Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go.” Before they left, the owner defended his eccentric behavior with two questions.

The first question was—“Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money?” There were no labor unions; no minimum wage laws. The employer had the sole right to set the terms of employment and payment.

The second question was—“Are you envious because I am generous?”

Do you get it yet? Perhaps, at least, the story is clear enough. But those of us who work for a living are still probably more sympathetic with the grumblers than with the vineyard owner. They were right. In the world as we know it, they might reasonably have expected more. Is there no reward for faithfulness, diligence, and loyalty? Shouldn’t there be a correspondence between effort and outcome? The parable totally upsets worldly expectations. The parable’s conclusion, “The last will be first, and the first last,” turns the world as we know it upside down. But, this is not unusual in the Gospels. You recall Jesus’ sayings: “He who would save his life shall lose it, but he who would lose his life shall find it.” Or another: “He who would be great among you must become the servant of all.”

Didn’t Jesus know that our world’s not like that? Yes, he knew. But where God rules worldly expectations are reversed. The kingdom of God is not merely a glorified version of the kingdoms of this world—in it worldly values are turned upside down. The kingdom of heaven is not an extension of this world, but a radical alternative to it. People don’t get what they deserve.

Now that we are properly shocked and antagonized by Jesus’ story, which was probably his intention, after all, we are prepared to ask the question again: What was his point? What was it that he wanted to say about the kingdom of God? Various interpretations have been suggested, some that are more likely than others. Before we consider what seems to me to be Jesus’ point, let’s consider five unsatisfactory explanations.

1. Some suggest that it is the quality and not the quantity of a person’s work that counts. True enough, but nothing in the parable suggests that the last hired were better workers than the first, nor that their efforts or performances were superior, nor that those hired first were lazy or incompetent.

2. Some see in this parable two great economic truths: The right of every person to a day's work and the right of every worker to a living wage. Certainly involuntary unemployment is always a pathetic tragedy. However, Jesus' point here has nothing to do with economics.
3. Some see in Jesus' parable of the "Workers in the Vineyard" the good advice, "Be grateful for what you have and do not envy the good fortune of your neighbors."

The flaw in the grumbling workers is not simply ingratitude or envy. They cannot tolerate kindness shown to others. These problems are only symptoms of the threat they felt to their self-understanding. Their insistence upon the application of a merit system—with rewards exactly proportionate to achievement—shows that they do not understand grace.

4. John Calvin saw the point of Jesus' parable in the landowner's question in verse 15, "Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money?" and thus emphasized the sovereignty of God—salvation is God's to do with as he chooses, to whom he chooses. Wesley saw the love of God reaching out in prevenient grace. But this is not the point of the parable.
5. Some suggest that the parable's point is to highlight and praise the limitless generosity of God. But a denarius was not a lavish wage. What everyone received was an amount sufficient to sustain life; enough for daily bread, but not cake.

The parable overthrows perfectly reasonable expectations. The landowner is not pictured as one who is especially gracious, but as one who violates ordinary expectations. Notice verse 10: "When those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each of them received a denarius." They expected; but he upset their expectations. This leads us closer to the understanding of the parable.

None of the points others have suggested for this parable are without value, but they do not seem to be Jesus' point or the point of Matthew's Gospel. So what is the point? To answer that question, it is necessary to pay attention to the context in which Matthew reports Jesus' telling of the parable, in chapters 19 and 20. It is set in the midst of a series of events in which the disciples demonstrate their misunderstanding of the mission of Jesus and the values of the Kingdom whose coming he announced.

Recall Matthew 19:13-15. In a society that considered women and children on a par with slaves, the disciples' rebuke of the women who brought their children to Jesus was not unexpected. But Jesus upset conventional expectations. "Don't rebuke them," he said, "the kingdom of God belongs to nobodies like these."

And notice Matthew 19:16-30. In a society that considered wealth God's compensation for pious people, Jesus upset conventional expectations when he told the rich young man to sell all his great possessions and give them to the poor. The young man had hoped salvation was just a matter of rule keeping—but everything? Rich people aren't accustomed to being told some things aren't for sale. Jesus told his disciples that it was impossible for the rich to enter the kingdom of God—apart from the grace of God. And what's true for the rich is true for all of us. There is nothing we can do to earn salvation. It is a gift only those honest enough to admit they're nobodies can receive.

Peter, who had witnessed it all, began to think out loud, "Lord, we have left everything to follow you, what then shall we get?" To paraphrase the verse, "We're not rich! We aren't

going to be paid the same as those people who take it easy and enjoy life until they grow old and worn out or suddenly have a last-minute attack of religious panic when the earthquake strikes and suddenly get converted, are we? Say it ain't so, Lord!"

Jesus assured Peter that there was great reward in following him. In fact, the disciples would reign with him. But he also reminded them that the basis for rewards in God's kingdom was the reverse of human expectations: "But many that are first will be last, and the last first." Not only Peter, but all the disciples thoroughly misunderstood the nature of the Kingdom Jesus had called them to enter and their place within it. This is so even after Jesus told the parable.

In Matthew 20:17-19 Jesus had to remind his disciples for the third time that submission to the rule of God in his life would mean a cross. And still they didn't get the point. In Matthew 20:20-28 the disciples vie for special places in the Kingdom. So Jesus had to call them together and say, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. [It must] not [be] so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your slave—Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Jesus' parable was intended to set the disciples straight in their understanding of the kingdom of God. The grumbling workers were far too much like the disciples in their expectation of preferential treatment. They didn't seem to get the point of the parable until after the Resurrection. But we live this side of the Resurrection. Surely, you get it by now, don't you?

Matthew got it. Let me give you another hint. Matthew knew that the vineyard was a frequent symbol of Israel, the specially invited people of God, in the Old Testament (see Isa 1:8; 5:1-7; Jer 12:10). At the close of chapter 9 Matthew had reported that Jesus was moved with compassion when he saw the crowds "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." His remark to the disciples then was, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."

We discover the meaning of the parable of the "Workers in the Vineyard" when we recognize that the work takes place in the Lord's vineyard, and is service for the Lord, and thus cannot be viewed as something earned or merited.

**THE POINT OF THE PARABLE IS THIS:** *The salvation, which the rule of God brings, is not pay at the end of the day, but the call to serve in the Lord's vineyard. The invitation to work in the vineyard of grace is its own reward.*

Christian service is itself a gift and carries its reward in itself. In the Lord's vineyard disciples are near their Father and his care. Those who are rich are called to give everything. Those who are talented are called to give all their talents. All our time is his. But service is not what earns salvation. To be called and enabled to serve—this IS salvation. Salvation is the gift of service—to be given the ability to give our lives away to serve others—to be instruments of God's grace in a desperately needy world.

When we answer God's gracious call to enter his vineyard; when we are moved with compassion for those around us who are harassed and helpless and in need of his guidance; when we do something for our Lord; when we receive children and extend his blessings to them by serving as Sunday School teachers or youth workers; when we

really take seriously his call to serve him by actively ministering to the needs of the poor; when we leave our secular jobs to prepare for full-time Christian ministry; when we leave our home countries to become missionaries; when we give our most precious commodity—time—to a hurting neighbor or work associates; when we forsake our sinful habits; when we pray and study our Bibles; when we surrender our lives with their joys and sorrows to God; these are not means to an end. Rather these are an end in themselves. The gift of service is itself “salvation.” This is the parable’s point!

Have you ever heard the old Latin hymn credited to St. Francis Xavier?

My God, I love thee, not because I hope for heaven thereby.  
Nor yet because, if I love thee not, I must forever die.  
Thou, O my Jesus, Thou didst me upon the cross embrace;  
For me didst bear the nails and spear, and manifold disgrace;  
And griefs and torments numberless, and sweat of agony.  
Yea, death itself—and all for one that was thine enemy.

Then why, O blessed Jesus Christ, should I not love Thee well?  
Not for the sake of winning heaven, nor of escaping hell;  
Not with the hope of gaining aught, not seeking a reward;  
But as Thyself hast loved me, O everloving Lord;  
So would I love Thee, dearest Lord, and in Thy service sing;  
Because Thou art my loving God, and my eternal King.

This hymn is not in our hymnal. But could we honestly sing such a hymn? With enthusiasm? Is it true? Should it be? Why? Why not?

People who know that it is a privilege of grace to be fellow workers with God, who have learned to love him, who know that whatever they do is done for the Lord—such people suddenly find that their whole attitude toward life is different. They are able in simple faith to trust that the everydayness of everyday life has a place in God’s plan for them. Those who know they have been called into the Lord’s vineyard, who have been given the grace of God—and anybody who knows anything at all about it will confirm this—for such people service is in itself a joy. Life finds its meaning and fulfillment in their service to him. For them, everything they do for God is in itself a happy privilege.

Perhaps now we understand why the grumblers in the parable were clearly in the wrong. Now, perhaps we can see how Peter’s question, “We have left everything to follow you! What then do we get?” missed the point entirely. Perhaps now we can believe that true greatness is to be found, not in power or prestige, but in simply giving our lives away. There is no fuller life than that of a disciple—than being a follower of Jesus—than serving Jesus in the lost, the last, and the least. There is no greater fulfillment than to know God has graciously called you: “Why have you been doing nothing? Go and work in my vineyard.”

But even inside the vineyard we must come to learn, if we have not yet, that truly living in the vineyard depends on our ability to accept God’s grace—freely given to us and others. Grace shatters our calculations about how things ought to be in the world. Only then do we with the latecomers know that the call, “You too, come work in my vineyard,” is gospel—Good News, not Law. It is privilege, not duty—you may, not you must.

## The Ungrateful Son

### Luke 15:11-32

The setting of the parable of the prodigal son is identical to that of Luke's account of the lost sheep and the lost coin (Lk 15:1-10). Jesus justifies his gospel against its critics, the scribes and Pharisees, in the presence of tax collectors and sinners, who gladly received it. The entire chapter emphasizes lostness and God's joy in finding the lost. The first two parables were a defense of Jesus' gracious ministry to the lost. This parable is an attack against the critics of grace, with a subtle invitation to share the joy of grace.

The parable concerns itself with two sons and their father (note the conformity to "the rule of three"; cf. Mt 21:28-31). The "portion" of the younger son was half that of his older brother (Deut 21:17). After receiving his share, the so-called prodigal son went overseas. There he squandered all he had "in loose living," in unsaving ways. Eventually impoverished, the prodigal was forced into humiliating dependence on his employer—feeding swine. In dire poverty and near starvation he entertained the thought of eating the carob pods, intended for the pigs.

But "he came to himself"—he genuinely repented. Repentance calls for more than a flash of remorse, and self-pity—a journey back home was required. He had sinned not only against God—"heaven" is a circumlocution for the divine name—but also against his father.

Oriental dignity was forsaken as the aged father ran to meet his returning son, who was then treated as a guest of honor—forgiven and reinstated to the full rights of sonship.

Returning home after faithful labor in the fields, the elder brother heard the unexpected sounds of musical instruments and singing. When he learned from a servant that his brother had returned home, he was angry, possibly because the prodigal was hospitably received and protected from possible persecution. Because he refused to enter the banquet hall, the father went out to invite him in.

"I have slaved for you and never disobeyed you" (15:29), says the elder son. His words indicate that he considered his relation to his father as one of slavish bondage, not the free relationship of a child. His complaint that his father hadn't spent so much as a pittance on him revealed his own stinginess rather than poverty. As the sole heir, the entire estate was, in fact, at his disposal (v 31).

The elder brother refused even to recognize his relationship to his brother—"this son of yours" (v 30) Addressing his elder son, the father said affectionately, "Dear child, you ought to be glad and celebrate. Your brother has come home."

This parable was not intended as a doctrinal treatise on sin, grace, or salvation. But it justly deserves the description given it by many commentators: "The Gospel within the Gospel." The central thrust of the story is essentially the same as that of the lost sheep and the lost coin—God's joy in forgiving the lost. But were this the only message intended, it would appear unnecessary. The common factor in all three

parables is being lost, suggesting that in God's estimation sin is not so much about being bad as about being away, out of relationship with God.

In the parable of the lost son, Jesus exposes a moving page from real human experience that beautifully illustrates his mission "to seek and to save the lost" (19:10), as God's representative. Though not an allegory, the parable's external symbols are transparent. It is difficult to identify God as the father, since the wayward son's prepared speech distinguishes his father from God—"heaven." Thus, the father points us to Jesus. The prodigal reminds us of the taxgatherers and sinners. The elder brother resembles the scribes and Pharisees.

The younger brother sought freedom in license and became a slave and totally lost. His sin consisted in his rebellious breaking away from his father. Recognizing his condition, he admits at the same time his guilt and worthlessness. But his repentance had its source in his hunger. He knew what it was like to be in his father's house, and he determined to throw himself upon the mercy of his father. But the prodigal completely underestimated his father's grace. He sought only the precarious role of a day laborer, not even the security of a slave. He could never have dreamed that he might be welcomed again as a son.

Unlike the father, who can only meet the son halfway when he returns, the preceding parables show that God had been seeking him long before he had any remorse for his sins (see Rom 5:8). "This," Jesus says, "is how I forgive and how God forgives—not according to merit, but out of love for the lost. This is why I act as I do toward sinners. And this is how you should treat them."

Because they had repented and believed in the "way of righteousness," tax collectors, harlots, sinners, and the despised received God's forgiveness and were entering the kingdom of God (Mt 21:31-32; Lk 3:12; 7:29, 47-50; 14:15, 21-24). Jesus' involvement with the lost cost him his reputation, earned him a great deal of bitter hatred from his enemies, and eventually cost him his life. "For the Son of man came to seek and to save the lost . . . and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Lk 19:10).

In Jesus' parable, the elder brother is a repulsive reflection of the critical scribes and hypocritical Pharisees. Their attitude toward publicans and sinners and Jesus' treatment of them was identical to that of the elder brother toward the prodigal and his father. The father rebuked his elder son for the contempt he held toward his brother, but his rebuke became a loving appeal to love—to understand and participate in grace.

The elder brother, though he had never physically left home, never lived in his father's world of grace. His self-image as the perfect son caused him to resent his brother and imagine him as exactly the opposite. His professed virtues sound strangely like those of Pharisee in the parable of the Pharisee and the publican (18:9-14), and the honest confession of the publican like that of the prodigal (15:18). And it was the publican who was justified by God. The Pharisee was still inwardly empty and estranged from God. Romans 2 is the perfect picture of this self-righteous sinner.

The elder brother, not the younger, proved to be the ungrateful son. He knew nothing of grace—loveless, unforgiving, censorious, and self-righteousness. In this parable, Jesus faults the Pharisee's ingratitude. He, too, owed all he had to the father. And yet all that the father possessed was at his disposal (vv 12, 31). If he had not received any real enjoyment from his father's riches, he had only himself to blame. The story

ends with his father and the elder brother outside—outside only because the son refused to go in (v 28). As the story ends, the plot remains unresolved. Will the elder son join the grace party or not?

Everything we possess we owe to God, yet “we have turned everyone to his own way” (Is 53:6b). Paul vividly pictures the same truth (Rom 1:21-22):

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools.

Here is what grace looks like. Though fools and prodigals, God loves us and by his love forgives us. None is too lost to be found. Some people get lost by leaving God and the Church in outward rebellion and flagrant violation of God’s laws like the prodigal. Others, like the elder brother, rebel inwardly but are equally lost. The parable helps us realize the father’s way is as completely right as the elder brother’s is totally wrong. Ingratitude, not waywardness, separates us from grace. “If you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Mt 6:15, RSV). We all must come to God empty handed, “Father, I have sinned. Treat me like a servant.” But graciously He says, “Welcome home, child” (see Eph 2:8-9).

By God’s eternal plan, Jesus Christ is the pattern to which all the redeemed will ultimately conform (see 1 Jn 3:2; Phil 3:7-11), “in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren” (Rom 8:29, RSV). Jesus, the ideal elder brother, reminds the Pharisees: “Tax collectors and prostitutes enter the Kingdom of God, but you are excluded because you refused to repent” (Mt 21:31-32, RSV). Though in the context of the parable, the prodigal referred to despised Jews, by extension it may legitimately apply to the Gentiles (Mt 21:43; Romans 9—11, especially 9:24-26; 11:11-15). And if to Gentiles, it may apply to anyone. No one is beyond the reach of God’s grace.

If by God’s unmerited love, you have graciously been drawn into God’s redemptive plan (see Eph 2:11—3:13), you must “be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Eph 4:32—5:2, RSV).

As the Body of Christ, the Church by the Spirit acts in behalf of God. But too often even in the Church we find people who are strangers to grace. Christians who are loveless and unforgiving do not deserve the name. Equally destructive is the self-righteous attitude that excludes sinners from the fellowship of the Church. If the Church is ever to redeem our world, it will not do so by snubbing it. Perhaps the elder brother is largely responsible for the alienation and prodigality of his younger brother.

We might have hoped for a happy ending. Shouldn’t the story close with the three men, hand-in-hand, entering the banquet hall together? But as Jesus concludes the story, the tension is left unresolved. The father and his older son remain outside, while the younger son is inside. Is it too late for Jesus’ antagonists to join the party? After all, this is the house of grace.



## **“What Shall I Do Now?”** **Luke 16:1-13**

The words of the dishonest/shrewd manager that serve as the title of this study are **not** the musing of someone just completing a course of study in preparation for ministry. Quite the contrary, he has just received notice from his employer that he is about to be terminated, and he is considering his limited options. This hapless manager was the employee of a certain rich man.

The rich man does not seem to be the hero of our story; everyone knows about rich people! Ancient stereotypes make today's seem mild by comparison. Misers. Insensitive aristocrats. Cheats. Power-hungry tyrants. Oppressive money-grubbers. They most likely came by their wealth dishonestly—taking advantage of the poor. And they preserved their wealth by using their privileged positions to manipulate others to serve their selfish ends. Or perhaps they inherited their wealth, without so much as lifting a finger. Everyone knows about rich people! And everyone knows what the rich and powerful think about the rest of us.

If you've seen "The Wizard of Id" comic strip, you're familiar with its intolerant little king. In one strip an angry mob is gathering in the streets outside the palace. A messenger rushes into the throne room with the news, "The peasants are revolting!" to which the king responds, "You can say that again!" Peasants don't care much for pompous princes either—or for their aides, for that matter.

"There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions" (Lk 16:1). The language of Jesus' parable allows for the possibility that the rumors about the manager's malfeasance were maliciously motivated—maybe even untrue. Perhaps, the manager was the unfortunate target of a smear campaign and sabotaged precisely because of his employer. As the representative of the rich man, the manager's position was extremely tenuous. To stay on good terms with his employer required him to maintain and enhance his master's holdings. Just doing his job brought him into direct contact and daily conflict with the impoverished masses as the despised "bill collector." In this exploitive and predatory system the manager's position in the middle made him a target from both sides—his master's insatiable greed and the debtors' backstabbing.

Whether or not the gossip was true, the rich employer distrusted his manager enough to act promptly. "So he called him in and asked him, 'What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your management, because you cannot be manager any longer'" (v 2). If the manager said anything in his own defense, we are not told what he said.

Perhaps, a flush of red moving up his neck and face said it all. Did the shame of being caught in his dishonesty leave him speechless? Is the manager's silence in view of such serious charges an implicit admission of guilt?

Or is there another explanation? Perhaps, he discerned from the tone of his master's voice and his demeanor that nothing would change his mind. He'd been fired on the spot. What room was there for explanations or pleas for mercy?

Although the manager said nothing to his master, Jesus' story lets us enter the desperate man's thoughts, as he talks to himself. We must be intended to empathize with his plight. "The manager said to himself, 'What shall I do now? My master is taking away my job. I'm not strong enough to dig, and I'm ashamed to beg'" (v 3).

Cut loose from his only viable source of livelihood, the dismissed manager recognizes that his options are few and bleak. His cushy job had ill-prepared him to compete with the day-laborers, who survived by sheer brawn. His association with the elite gave him no appetite for the soup kitchen. Charged with corruption or incompetence, the manager admits only that he is weak and proud.

It is in total despair that he asks himself, "What shall I do now?" (v 3). Suddenly a course of action dawns on him—"I know what I'll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses" (v 4). At this point in Jesus' story, we are denied further access to the manager's thoughts. We are not told his scheme, only its motivation—future security.

What exactly did the manager hope to gain by his apparently dishonest scheme? If incompetence got him into this mess, would conniving get him out? We get just two glimpses of what the manager did next.

"So he called in each one of his master's debtors. He asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?'

"'Eight hundred gallons of olive oil,' he replied.

"The manager told him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred.'

"Then he asked the second, 'And how much do you owe?'

" 'A thousand bushels of wheat,' he replied.

"He told him, 'Take your bill and make it eight hundred'" (vv 5-7).

For those who don't keep up on the commodities market, the manager's unauthorized "discounts" amounted to the first-century equivalent of more than three-years' wages for each debtor. And these were just two of who knows how many debtors. This discount did not directly benefit the manager. He simply wrote off from 20 to 50 percent of the debts owed at his master's expense. Of course, by accepting the renegotiated contracts, the debtors put themselves in the manager's—and his master's—debt. The Ancient Near East knew no favors without strings attached.

What did the manager hope to gain by his daring scheme? Was this just one example of how he routinely wasted his master's possessions (v 1)? Was dishonesty his *modus operandi* all along, and these negotiations merely demonstrated his character? Was this simply one last opportunity to defraud his master, even if it brought him no direct personal gain? Or, did desperation drive him to desert his integrity and live up to the charges against him? What did the manager hope to accomplish with this scheme?

Did he imagine that his generous discount would allow him to become a permanent houseguest of those debtors his "creative" accounting scheme benefited? How long would they extend hospitality to their former enemy, once he lost his job and his ability to benefit them further? Did he hope that the goodwill generated by his generosity would get him a good job? Or, is it possible that the manager was now dealing honestly for the first time—dispensing with the exploitive interest previously added to the debts, despite the provisions of God's Law against usury? Had desperation driven him to his senses—to obey God and use his final moments in office to the advantage of the downtrodden?

We cannot be sure. And we are not told whether his plans were successful. What we are told is by far the most puzzling feature of this strange parable. "The master *commended* the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly" (v 8a; emphasis added). Are we to imitate this sleazy character? Is he the hero of our story? What are we to make of this strange parable and of this strange master?

What makes the parable of the dishonest manager all the more difficult to understand is its location *immediately* following one of the best-known and most loved stories of Jesus—the parable of the prodigal son. Keep in mind that chapter breaks in the Bible are not an original part of the ancient text; they were introduced over a thousand years later. Is the proximity of the two parables in Luke's Gospel merely an unfortunate coincidence? Or do these two stories shed light on each other, mutually informing their correct interpretation?

Is it possible that the despised and envied "rich man" in our parable represents the distorted image of God held by many people? Distant? Demanding? Inscrutable? Are the parables of the prodigal son and the dishonest steward really about the "Indulgent Heavenly Father" and the "Foolish Divine Master"? Can we learn from them about a God whose grace overrides the scheming of a wayward son and a crooked manager?<sup>65</sup> Is this a glimpse for debtors of a kingdom in which forgiveness of debts is more than a petition in a prayer?<sup>66</sup>

Is it even possible that the "dishonest manager" somehow represents Jesus, whose "outrageous and scandalous cancellation of debt . . . so upset the religious authorities of his day"? He certainly practiced a forgiveness that defied human expectations and seemed unjust by human standards.<sup>67</sup> Time does not permit us to decide. Our urgent concern is this: Does this strange parable teach anything about grace?

Immediately following the parable's conclusion Jesus remarks, "The people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings" (vv 8b-9). This suggests that "if a bad man will take pains to make friends to cushion his fall, then good people ought to take time to make friends to further the reign of God." Far too often "the people of the light" grudgingly receive prodigals more like the unforgiving elder brother than like his indulgent father. We alienate the very people we should cultivate "with kindness and friendship."<sup>68</sup> If even worldly people are shrewd enough to use their masters' money to its best advantage, shouldn't God's servants use the grace he trusts them to manage to further his cause, and their own eternal good?<sup>69</sup> Should we recognize ourselves in the dishonest manager? Desperate? Destitute? Devious?

John Wesley's titles his sermon on this parable "The Use of Money."<sup>70</sup> For him the central point of the parable is that the way we handle our assets determines our eternal destiny. If we believe—really believe, as we profess we do—in the world to come, we will give careful attention to how we use our resources in this world. Money is never to be an end in itself, but always a means to an end.

Wesley noted that the people of this world are wiser in their own way than most Christians. They are more consistent with themselves; truer to their principles; more committed to their goals than the people of the light. Jesus urged his followers to learn from the dishonest manager to make wise and timely use of wealth. Gain friends

by doing all the good you can by all the means you can, so that when you and your wealth are gone, God may welcome you into heaven.

In Wesley's day, as in ours, worldly people were more apt to discuss the use of money than were believers. Wesley protested this neglect. True, "the love of money is the root of all evil." But money itself is not evil. The fault does not lie in the money, but in those who use it. It may be used badly. And what may not? But it may be used well. It is equally applicable to the best, as to the worst uses. Money is an excellent gift of God, serving noble ends in the hands of God's children. It may be food for the hungry, drink for the thirsty, clothing for the naked, shelter for the homeless, husband to the widow, father to the fatherless, defense for the oppressed, health to the sick, relief to those in pain, eyes to the blind, feet to the lame. Indeed, it may lift the gates of death!

To instruct Christians as to how money may achieve these glorious ends, Wesley formulated three simple rules. By carefully observing all of these, we may prove ourselves to be faithful managers of our assets.<sup>71</sup> *First*, gain all you can. *Second*, save all you can. *Third*, give all you can.

To gain all we can applies not only to money. Wesley insists that it is a shame for Christians not to improve on whatever they do. We should continually learn—from the experience of others or our own; from reading and reflection—to do everything better today than we did yesterday.<sup>72</sup>

By save all we can,<sup>73</sup> Wesley did not have in mind wise investments in the stock market. The virtue he recommends is frugality: Do not waste any of your God-given assets.

But Wesley continues. We must not imagine that we have done anything, by gaining and saving all we can. If we stop here, all is for nothing. We do not save anything, if we only pile it up. We either use money wisely, or we effectively throw it away. If we are to use it to gain friends for ourselves, we must add a third rule. Having, gained all we can and saved all we can, we must give all we can.<sup>74</sup>

But can we really learn this from the dishonest manager? After all, the money he gave away was not his, but his master's. Wesley insists that this is precisely the point. Christian giving is grounded on the biblical conviction that God alone is the Owner of heaven and earth. We are in his world, not as masters, but as managers. All we are and have are gifts of God's grace. God has entrusted us, for a while, with assets of various kinds. But they remain his property. We do not even belong to ourselves. We are to offer ourselves and our substance to him as living and holy sacrifices, acceptable to him through Christ Jesus, to serve him and those for whom Christ died.<sup>75</sup>

Ask yourselves, "What shall I do now?" Consider this carefully and prayerfully; your very lives are at stake.

"Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own?"

"No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money" (Lk 16:10-13).

How are you handling God's grace?

# Lesson 16: Freely Received and Freely Given

## Due This Lesson

Review of Bible passages  
Reading of NDBT selections  
Summary of resource  
Journaling

## Learner Objectives

At the end of this lesson, participants should

- offer a full-orbed survey of the biblical theology of grace

## Homework Assignments

Review the following Bible passages: Exodus 20–21; Leviticus 19; Deuteronomy 6–9; 22; Amos; Matthew 5–7; Acts 10; Romans 12–15; 1 Corinthians 8–11; 13; Galatians 5–6; Ephesians 4–6; Colossians; James; and 1 John. Prepare theological statements that these chapters/books seem to support.

Read the following sections in NDBT: Deuteronomy; Adultery; Anger; Childlessness; Clothes; Covenant; Discipline; Freedom; Grace; Holiness; Hospitality; Law; Love; Man and Woman; Marriage; Obedience; Poor/Poverty; Repentance; Righteousness, Justice, and Justification; Sabbath; Sin; Tradition; Wisdom; and Word.

Survey the *Manual's* Covenant of Christian Character and The Covenant of Christian Conduct and the biblical rationale for them offered in the *Manual*. Write a 3-page essay entitled, "A Biblical-Theological Rationale for Changing/Reinforcing the Ethical Principles of the Church of the Nazarene."

Read Resource 16-3. Write a 1-page summary/response.

Write in your journal. Does your life reflect the joyous party of God's grace? How can you change?

## Romans

Romans 1:16-17 is transitional, concluding the letter's opening and announcing the theme of its body.

The body of the letter, however, begins in 1:18—3:20 with the announcement of the bad news of God's righteousness judgment against sin.

God's solution to the problem of sin is the concern of 3:21—8:39.

Chapters 5 through 8 spell out the consequences of justification as a fulfilling life in the present—peace, reconciliation with God, love, and bright hope for the future.

Chapters 9 through 11 respond to a question that might be raised to God's faithfulness. What about Israel, God's earlier people? Didn't he forsake them?

Consequently, Romans 12:1—15:13 calls for Christians to:

- make themselves available to God
- be sanctified for his purposes
- use the gracious gifts he has given them
- extend the love they have received to all—even enemies
- live as responsible citizens
- accept freely even those who are different from us just as Christ accepted us

In 15:14-33 Paul announces his travel plans, which may help clarify why he wrote the Romans.

The letter closes with a lengthy collection of greetings to all those he knows from his travels who are now resident in Rome, and a warning.

## Good News

### **Good News—You're Invited (Rom 1:1-7)**

- God is throwing an "eternal party" and everyone's invited. Even the Gentiles—those who were once on the list "not to invite," are now welcome.
- You are loved by God! He proved His love by sending his Son to show you how to live. And die!
- You are "called to be saints."

### **Good News—You Can Change (1:8-13)**

- Diplomatic introduction—A faith that had made the headlines! Objects of the apostle's constant prayers!
- The demand to be established is not an invitation to a "self-improvement" program. It's all about grace.
- The invitation to trust and obey is a call to be all God's grace enables us to be.
- To be established requires not only God's grace but also encouragement by the faith of others.
- Our character and conduct are reshaped by the One whose call we answer.

### **Good News—No Strings Attached (1:14-17)**

- Evangelism is not an option. It is a compulsion motivated by love for Christ and those for whom Christ died.
- What is the "gospel"? . . . It is good news "because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes."
- The gospel is the operation of a power, not the presentation of an idea. It is not a doctrine, timeless truths, or religious ideas. It is not a human invention but a divine intervention. It is not an announcement; it is a gracious activity—the activity of God.
- The celebration begins as soon as we accept the invitation, even though the "party" itself is not yet in full swing.
- The gospel's scope is universal. It is for everyone who has faith.



## Rights and Responsibilities

### 1 Corinthians 8:1—11:1

Does Paul's discussion of food sacrificed to idols (1 Cor 8:1—11:1) have any moral lesson for contemporary Christians?

In 1 Cor 4:19 Paul warns the Corinthians that he intends to discipline any who remain arrogant when he visits the church in Corinth. In 5:2 he alleges that the Corinthians are arrogant; in 8:1 he explains that "knowledge" makes people arrogant—"puffs up." Underlying all these references to arrogance is the same Greek root, which appears elsewhere only in 13:4—love is not arrogant. In 8:1 Paul offers the positive counterpart: instead "love builds up."

In 10:23, building up becomes the criterion that challenges the Corinthian slogan repeated from 6:12 to the effect that "everything is permissible." Similarly, building up is a significant criterion in Paul's assessment of the spiritual gifts on tongues and prophecy in 1 Corinthians 14:3-5, 12, 17, 26. The opening chapters of the letter prepare us to expect Paul's devaluation of alleged human knowledge, under the heading of the term "wisdom" (1:17, 19, 20, 21, 22; 2:1, 4, 5, 6, 7, 13; 3:18, 19, 20; 6:5).

In 1 Corinthians 8—10 Paul addresses three distinct issues related to the general subject of food sacrificed to idols (8:1-8; 10:23-24, 31—11:1):

1. eating sacrificial food at pagan temples (8:9-13, see esp. v 10; 10:14-22)
2. purchasing for home consumption the same food sold in the marketplace (10:25-26)
3. eating this food in the home of an unbeliever (10:27-30)

This raises the question of the relevance of the lengthy discussions of Paul's surrendered apostolic rights in chapter 9 and of the experience of Israel in the wilderness in 10:1-13. The example of Israel is intended to challenge the Corinthians' false sense of security and to impress upon them the serious consequences of their irresponsible behavior—the very real possibility that they would forfeit their salvation unless they changed. Paul's autobiographical remarks in chapter 9 illustrate and substantiate his reasoning in this section of the letter (8:1—11:1), which, significantly, concludes with an appeal for the Corinthians to imitate his example (11:1).

**Problem: Abused Rights (8:1-13).** Although Paul initially refers to the Corinthians' arrogant claim of knowledge (1-8), the focus of the problem is the behavior they imagined this illusory knowledge authorized (vv 9-13).

**Knowledge: True and False (8:1-3).** Our ignorance of the Corinthians' letter to Paul puts us at a real disadvantage here. We cannot be certain about the origin of the slogan Paul quotes—"We know that we all possess knowledge" (v 1). Assuming the Corinthians promoted it, if they did not invent it, we still cannot be certain what they claimed to know, although it seems reasonable to assume that 8:4-8 clarifies this. If so, Paul does not so much deny what they claim to know as deny their assumption that everyone knows it. The attitudes of arrogance and independence are at the heart of their problem, for which Paul offers love as the solution.

Just as Paul evaluates divine and human wisdom differently in 1 Corinthians 1–3, here he distinguishes true and false knowledge. On the one hand, he depreciates knowledge by comparison to love (v 1), referring to love for both other humans and for God (v 3). The knowledge Paul rejects is the imagined wisdom of “the man who thinks he knows” (v 2). In contrast, Paul implies the existence of true knowledge—knowing “as he ought to know” (v 2). But perhaps his “not yet” (v 2) implies that such knowledge must await the eschaton. For now “we know in part . . . but when perfection comes . . .” we shall “know fully, even as [we are] fully known” (13:9-10, 12). Undoubtedly, God’s knowledge of humankind is superior to their knowledge (v 3; cf. Gal 4:8-9). True human knowledge consists not in the accumulation of facts, but in the ability to live in love. Paul insists that knowledge cannot serve as the primary basis for Christian ethics.

**We Know That Idols Are Nothing (8:4-6).** These verses indicate that the Corinthians boasted knowledge concerns the conviction, “We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one” (v 4). If so, Paul’s reminder in 8:7—“not everyone knows this”—challenges their assumption that all their fellow Christians are fully persuaded monotheists. Paul and his knowledgeable hearers totally agree on the conviction that there is but one true God. Even if pagans imagine there are many gods and lords, monotheism is at the heart of the Judeo-Christian faith. “For us there is but one God” (v 6; see Rom 3:29-30; Gal 3:20; 1 Tim 2:5). But Paul’s concern here is less with theology than with its ethical implications. Thus, he is at one with James (2:18-26) in affirming that truly monotheistic faith decisively determines—or should determine—Christian behavior. We live for him alone (v 6; see Rom 14:8; 2 Cor 5:15).

**Not Everyone Knows This (8:7-8).** Paul agrees in principle with the monotheistic faith of his “knowing” hearers, but rejects their opinion that “all” their fellow Christians in Corinth are equally convinced of this truth (see 8:1). Apparently, some recent converts “are still so accustomed to idols” that eating food offered to nonexistent idols at a pagan temple is not a religiously indifferent act. What is objectively true—one God—is not a fully integrated subjective reality for them. Their emotions have not kept pace with their intellects. For them to return to the place where they once worshiped idols represents an act of infidelity to their new Lord and so defiles their weak conscience (v 7). Paul agrees in principle with the knowledge that eating such meat is a matter of indifference. Food in and of itself can neither improve nor impair one’s relationship to God (v 8). But eating meat is not the real issue; attendance at pagan temples is. And factual knowledge is not the decisive issue; love is. Thus, Paul issues the following warning.

**Do Not Cause Your Brother to Sin (8:9-13).** It is not the views of the knowledgeable Paul challenges as much as the irresponsible application of these views. Apparently, they believed that their awareness of the nonexistence of idols authorized<sup>76</sup> them to eat “in an idol’s temple” with a clear conscience (v 10). Cultic meals at temples were a regular part of pagan worship. Temples were the basic “restaurant” in the ancient world.

For now Paul warns of the serious dangers such meals entail. Their “exercise of freedom” might cause a weaker fellow Christian to sin (v 9). Such brazen flirting with idolatry might “encourage” weak Christians to do with a bad conscience what they cannot in good conscience do—“eat what has been sacrificed to idols” (v 10). Thus, rather than building them up—as love would do, the thoughtless exercise of freedom

based on knowledge alone would lead to the spiritual ruin of their weaker fellow Christians—people whom Christ died to save (v 11).

What all the Christians have in common is not “knowledge” in the sense of shared doctrinal convictions, but the fact that Christ died for all. This ultimate demonstration of “love” calls us to put aside our rights on behalf of our weaker brother. The free may do less than their consciences permit; the weak cannot do more.

The weak have “rights” too. Insisting upon my individual rights may not only cause my fellow Christian to sin, but is itself a sin against both him or her and Christ (v 12). To sin against Christ is to destroy his body, the Church. By endangering the salvation of others and thus undermining Christ’s saving purposes, we put our own salvation at risk. Thus, Paul concludes, “I will never” do anything that may cause my fellow Christian to fall into sin. His personal resolve prepares for the more general treatment of rights and responsibilities based on his example in chapter 9. Anticipating 11:1, already in 8:13 Paul implicitly admonishes his hearers to imitate his example in dealing with other Christians.

Paul’s insistence upon the centrality of the love ethic has historically found a sympathetic hearing among Wesleyans. Knowledge, even in the form of orthodox doctrinal pronouncements, cannot displace the priority of love. This stance is not anti-intellectual as much as it is pro-relational. Wesley emphasized that there is no holiness that is not social holiness. That is, community responsibilities take precedence over individual rights. But some in Wesleyan circles have turned the love ethic into a straitjacket.

In the past Wesleyans were more likely to err on the side of legalism than on the side of license. Thus, we should recognize that Paul’s concern here is not with the possibility that my conduct may merely *offend* a legalistic Christian’s religious sensibilities. Paul’s intention is not to put us in bondage to the overly scrupulous conscience. Rather, his concern is with behavior that may *entice* a weak Christian to do what his conscience will not permit and so cause him to sin and forfeit his or her salvation.

Our contemporary cultural preoccupation with individual freedoms may make this distinction out of date. Perhaps, contemporary Wesleyans have become so “enlightened” that we, like the Corinthians, have put all our scruples aside and are offended by Paul’s insistence that there are some absolutes. Perhaps we, like they, need to be reminded that Christian love calls us to put aside our rights in the interests of others’ needs.

**Paul’s Positive Example: Surrendered Freedom (9:1-27).** Paul’s shift to the first person singular in 8:13 provides the necessary transition from his critique of the Corinthian insistence upon their rights to the presentation of his personal example of not exercising his apostolic rights. The key issue is not apostleship, but freedom/rights. Although Paul nowhere in this section refers directly to the issue of food sacrificed to idols, the issues are clearly related in two explicit ways. First, the verb *metecho*, “I partake,” which appears in 9:10, 12; 10:17, 21, and 30, may mean “I share in” or “I eat.” Thus, it refers to both rights and food. Second, Paul’s repeated references to food in his personal remarks (8:13; 9:4, 7, 13) and in the bad example of Israel (10:3, 7) never allow the issue of sacrificial food to submerge too far beneath the surface.

The function of chapter 9 is to substantiate and illustrate Paul's argument as to the proper approach to eating idol food in chapter 8 on other, presumably less sensitive, grounds. His example of foregoing personal rights as a concession to the needs of others urges the Corinthians to put aside their alleged right to continue to frequent pagan cultic meals in the interests of their fellow believers. He mentions the examples of Barnabas, Cephas, and the other apostles in verses 5-6 to challenge contrasting Corinthian conduct.

**An Apostle (9:1-3).** Paul introduces the discussion of his apostolic rights in chapter 9 with a series of rhetorical questions in verse 1. The Greek syntax requires that the expected answer to each question is "Yes." Paul's apostleship is not in doubt, nor does he concede that anyone has in fact denied it. Paul's point is that he does not need to defend his apostolic status to them because their Christian existence is itself indisputable evidence of it (vv 2-3; see 4:15). To deny his standing would abrogate their own.

**The Right of an Apostle to Financial Support (9:4-23).** Paul asserts his indisputable apostolic status in 9:1-3, as the presupposition for his right to live at the expense of the church. He does this in a series of rhetorical questions in verses 4-14. Again, the Greek grammar demands "Yes" as the implied answer to each question. Despite Paul's rights, according to verses 12b and 15 he continues to refuse the financial support of the Corinthians. Paul insists upon this right, not to secure their support, but expressly to renounce it (vv 12b, 15-18; see 2 Cor 11:7-12; 12:13).

**Relinquished Rights (9:15-23).** Paul had explained in verse 12b that he surrendered his right for financial support in order to avoid doing anything that might hinder the gospel. In verses 15-23 he offers two additional reasons why he relinquished his apostolic rights. By voluntarily surrendering his rights he was able to preserve both his self-respect and his freedom. Paul insisted that he was able to maintain his freedom (v 19; see 9:1) only by voluntarily surrendering his rights (vv 15-18). Because he was a slave to no one, he could choose to be the slave of all people. Paul pursued a voluntary and self-conscious strategy of missionary accommodation—"I have become all things to all men" (v 22). This strategy was not dictated by the need to maintain his salary (vv 15-18). It was motivated by his commitment to his mission—"to win as many as possible" (v 19), "so that by all means I might save some" (v 22). He accommodated himself to the limitations of his audience "in order to" accomplish his mission. He refers specifically to four categories of people whom he worked to win to faith in Christ: "Jews" (v 20ab), "those under the law" (v 20cd), "those not having the law" (v 21), and "the weak" (v 22). By referring to this last group, Paul returns explicitly to the issue of 8:13—his willingness to cater to the needs of the weaker brother.

Paul's strategy of accommodation is far removed from a scheme of compromise, authorizing him to do whatever he pleased. "Freedom" was not his goal; the salvation of others was. Because he was free, he choose to serve, just as Jesus did (see Phil 2:5-8; Rom 15:1-9). Paul's accommodations were dictated by his mission and the needs of his audience, not by his personal preferences or principles. He voluntarily made himself a slave, not to deceive and manipulate his audience, but so as not to alienate them unnecessarily over secondary, purely social or cultural issues (see 10:31-33).

Paul's "situation ethics" was not unprincipled. Because he had sorted out for himself the central and the peripheral, he was free to choose differently in different situations.

Concern for the salvation of as many as possible governed his choices in specific situations. His willingness to accommodate was not a cloak for self-indulgence, but a tool of evangelism. He was consistently inconsistent, not by accident, but by design. Christian unity was a higher virtue than petty consistency. Paul is tolerant about anything that does not directly affect the gospel itself (1:18-25; 5:1-5; see Gal 2:11-14).

As a Jew, Paul practiced Jewish customs but insisted that the Law was not a way of salvation. Freedom from the Law did not mean lawlessness. He knows he must be obedient to Christ. His apostolic status does not exempt him from the demands of the gospel he preaches. To share its blessings, he, too, must submit to its inflexible authority (1 Cor 9:23). Because only the gospel is changeless, Paul could change his ethically indifferent behavior to suit the needs of his hearers.

**Self-Discipline (9:24-27).** This transitional paragraph brings the discussion of Paul's positive example to a conclusion and prepares for the following discussion of Israel's negative example. Paul must have known of the biannual Isthmian Games near Corinth, even if he never attended them. In the absence of adequate inns to house thousands of competitors and spectators, demand for his tents must have improved, as did the potential audience for his preaching.

Paul applies the analogy of the race to the Corinthians' Christian life, urging them to the self-discipline necessary to obtain "the prize" (vv 24-25). The prize is certainly final salvation. Paul applies the analogy of the games to himself in verses 26-27, referring to running and boxing. Should Paul misuse his freedom, even he might fail to win God's approval. Paul insists on the necessity of self-discipline in his own case, suggesting that apart from this even he might be lost. Within this context, Paul's specific concern is to warn those who insist on their right to eat in pagan temples. For the sake of higher values, he urges them to deny themselves of their rights.

**Israel's Negative Example (10:1-22).** In verses 1-13 Paul rehearses Israel's disobedience in the wilderness as a negative example—as a warning (v 11) to the Corinthians of behavior not to imitate (see vv 7-10). Israel's failure serves as a typological warning that even the "knowledgeable" Corinthians might fail to obtain eschatological salvation. Christian liberty unchecked may deteriorate into license and endanger not only the weak but the strong Christian as well. Repeatedly Paul challenges the imagined security of his enlightened hearers.

**Israel's Judgment (10:1-5).** Self-discipline is essential as demonstrated by the experience of "our forefathers" (v 1)—the people of Israel, who failed to exercise it. It is striking that Paul, speaking as a Jew, addresses Gentiles as "brothers" and includes them in his reference to "our" ancestors. Israel's crossing of the Red Sea (Ex 14:19-22) and their partaking of the divinely provided bread (16:4-30) and drink (17:1-7; Num 20:2-13; 21:16-18) serve as types of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Their experiences did not spare them from falling into idolatry or from suffering God's punishment. Their example serves as an implicit warning to the Corinthians against a false sense of security based on either the sacrament of baptism or the Lord's Supper. In 1 Corinthians 10:6-13, Paul makes the specific application of Israel's experience to the Corinthians.

**Application (10:6-22).** Paul reviews the negative example of Israel as a warning to his hearers not to imitate them (vv 6, 11). Both Israel and the Corinthians share common blessings (vv 1-4). The vast majority of the people of Israel came under the

judgment of God because of their disobedience (vv 5, 8-10). Thus, Paul warns the Corinthians not to do as Israel did (vv 6-10). They are not to imagine that their blessings secure them against divine judgment any more than Israel's did (v 12). Nevertheless, Paul assures the Corinthians that failure and judgment are not inevitable; God will provide them the ability to resist temptation (v 13).

The "enlightened" Corinthians who imagine they can eat idol food at pagan temples (see ch. 8) seem to be those who think they are "standing firm" (v 12). Paul warns them, "Be careful that you don't fall!" He assures them that God can be trusted to enable them to "stand up under" any "everyday" temptation they may face (v 13).

**Flee from Idolatry (10:14-22).** Paul appeals to their shared understanding of the Lord's Supper (vv 14-17) as compared to Israel's sacrificial practice (v 18) to argue against their irreconcilable participation in idolatrous sacrificial feasts (vv 19-22). The Lord's Supper as a communion or participation in Christ (vv 14-17) is totally irreconcilable with the Corinthian's participation in the feasts at pagan temples (vv 19-22). Contrary to every form of polytheism and henotheism, monotheism demands exclusive allegiance to the one true God.

**Fellowship with the Lord (10:14-17).** Here Paul concludes his case against the Corinthian practice of participating in cultic meals at pagan temples begun in chapter 8. The Lord's Supper creates and celebrates a bond of communion among believers and an exclusive union between them and the Lord.

**Fellowship with Demons (10:18-22).** In the same way, participation in cultic meals at pagan temples creates and celebrates a union with demons that is incompatible with communion with the Lord. Although the gods represented by idols do not actually exist, demonic powers use idolatry as a means of entrapping incautious worshipers. Therefore, Paul calls for his converts to make a total and decisive break with idolatry and the evil it represents. They cannot participate in both. God demands exclusive worship. Those who attempt such a compromise put themselves in line for divine punishment (v 22).

**Exhortation (10:23—11:1).** Paul concludes his arguments against idolatry begun in 8:1 with this final exhortation. In 10:23a Paul repeats the slogan quoted earlier in 6:12 and as there corrects it in 23b, before amending it in verse 24. The correction—"not everything builds up" connects this passage closely with a repeated concern in the letter for building up (8:1, 10; 14:3-5, 10, 17, 26).

In 10:25-30 he states his agreement in principle with "the knowledgeable," spelling out the conditions under which meat possibly offered to idols may be eaten or should be refused. When Paul turns to exhortation proper in verses 31-32, he urges his hearers to eat to the glory of God and, like him, to take care not to cause fellow Christians to sin (see 8:13). In verse 33 he endorses again his personal example of pleasing everyone in every way by not seeking his own advantage (see v 24). He concludes his exhortation in 11:1 with a call to imitate his Christlike model.

**The Good of Others (10:23-24).** The verb *exestin*, "is permissible," in the slogan "Everything is permissible" (see also 6:12) is from the same Greek word-family as the noun *exousia*, "right" or "freedom" (8:9; 9:4-6, 12, 18). Paul again calls for a renunciation of one's personal rights in the interests of what is "beneficial" (v 23; see 6:12; 12:7) or "constructive" (v 23; see 3:9-14; 8:1, 10; 14:3-5, 10, 17, 26) for others (v 24). "Love" and "up building" are more crucial than "knowledge" and

"rights." The insistence of the knowledgeable upon their right to eat "food sacrificed to idols" is only one expression of their fundamental misunderstanding of the Christian life. The issue does not hang on specific terminology or specific issues but on the difference between a self- and an other-centered approach to life. "Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others" (v 24; see 10:33; 13:5; 14:12).

**Questions of Conscience (10:25-30).** Paul is not prepared to sacrifice personal freedom for petty reasons. Nevertheless, he is more than willing freely to surrender it for the good of others (vv 29b-30). His concern in this section is to distinguish between situations when freedom may operate and when it must be relinquished.

**Freedom to Eat (10:25-27).** The two issues are held together by their shared advice, "Eat . . . without raising questions of conscience" (vv 25, 27). Paul instructs his hearers in effect, "Don't ask whether the food was previously offered in a sacrifice to an idol. It simply is not a moral issue." Although Paul has totally forbidden eating at cultic meals in pagan temples (vv 1-22), his advice here makes it perfectly clear that the issue is not food itself, but the situation in which it is eaten. Here Paul gives examples of situations that are religiously neutral, where the source of the food is a matter of indifference. The first neutral situation is the public meat market where food is purchased for home consumption; the second, a private meal in a nonbeliever's home.

**Meat Market Food (10:25-26).** Much of the food available in meat markets throughout the Greco-Roman world had once been offered in pagan sacrifices to idols. But because the gods these idols represent do not exist (8:4-7), the prior history of the food is totally irrelevant. Paul appeals to Scripture, "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it" (v 26, citing Ps 24:1). Even the consciences of the weak are not wounded by eating such meat (see 8:7-12), provided they ask no questions. It is not that Paul accepts the maxim, "Ignorance is bliss" or "Don't ask, don't tell." But he does reject the Jewish requirement to investigate the source of the meat. Freedom prevails, for the indirect origin of food is morally indifferent since God is its ultimate source.

**Meals in Private Homes (10:27).** Because the origin of meat market food is irrelevant and because the sanctity of Christians is not threatened by association with unbelievers (see 7:12-16; 9:20-22), the same advice applies at a private meal in the home of an unbeliever—"Eat . . . without raising questions of conscience" (v 27; see v 25). Freedom prevails: you may do what you want (v 27).

**Freedom to Refrain (10:28-30).** If an unbeliever tells Christians either at the meat market or eating in his home, "This has been offered in sacrifice," they must not eat the food (v 28). The pagan world was fully aware of Jewish scruples over such food. If a sense of moral obligation compels the unbeliever to warn Christians of the origin of the food, they must not offend his or her expectations of them.

**For the Other (10:28-29a).** Although Paul writes, "Do not eat," under these circumstances, he makes clear that Christians refrain from eating, only out of deference to the person who transformed the situation, by making the origin of the food a moral issue. In this context, the amoral becomes moral.

**Thanksgiving to God (10:29b-30).** Here Paul turns from the second person plural imperative in 10:25-29a to the first person singular. His call for imitation in 11:1

makes the question moot whether he refers only to his personal practice or uses the "I" in the sense of "anyone" (see 8:13). In either case, this is not a defense of his past conduct, but of Christian freedom. Christian freedom is not restricted by the conscience of another person. What is a moral issue to one person is not necessarily so to another.

Christians refrain from eating in the situation Paul describes, not because the information the other person supplies changes the character of the meat but because it changes the character of the situation. Thus, I freely decline to eat out of concern for my informant. I am free to eat anything so long as I give thanks to God for the food. But I am free to refuse to eat, because I put the other's interests ahead of my own (see 10:24). Paul presumes an ethic of gratitude. I obey, not in order to . . . but because God has . . .

**Glorify God (10:31—11:1).** Here Paul concludes and summarizes his discussion of food sacrificed to idols, which began in 8:1. He expands the implications of the issue to include not only eating and drinking but "whatever you do" (v 31). Ultimately, his concern is not to restrict his hearers' freedom but to turn them from preoccupation with their rights to two decisive principles.

First, everything must be done "for the glory of God" (v 31). Obviously, not everything a Christian does directly praises God. Some issues are of no concern to him. Still, I must ask whether my exercise of freedom in a given situation can be done in thankfulness to God the Creator. The point here is that in deciding whether to assert or surrender my freedom in a given situation, I must consider which course of action best advances his interests, not mine. The second principle is that nothing must be done to cause another to sin (v 32).

In verse 33 Paul supports these two governing principles by two generalizations drawn from his own example cited in 8:13—9:23. The first concerns his method—"I try to please everybody in every way." The second, his motive—"I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved" (see 9:22; 10:24). The stark contrast between Paul's self-surrender of his rights and its end—salvation—with the stubborn insistence of his "knowing" hearers upon their rights and its end—destruction—could not have been missed by his hearers. His restriction of his personal rights in the interests of the Corinthian community is the basis for his concluding recommendation: "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ" (11:1; see Rom 15:1-3).

Paul apparently gave considerable thought to the situations in which it was necessary to please God rather than people (1 Thess 2:4; Gal 1:10) and those in which it was necessary to please other people rather than oneself (1 Cor 10:33; Rom 15:1-3). The path he calls us to follow is a tightrope that few Christians in his day or ours have been able to walk without falling to either the right hand or the left. Paul insists upon the reality of Christian freedom but refuses to make it an absolute. Love, the eternal good of others, and the glory of God are higher values that may require Christians freely to surrender their freedom to do what they consider morally indifferent. But freedom is not to be surrendered for petty, nonmoral issues.

The problem, of course, is that Christians disagree among themselves as to what constitutes moral issues. Those of us in the Wesleyan tradition would do well to notice how very liberal Paul is and how seldom he presents issues in shades of black and white. Most issues are morally indifferent, except as they assume a moral character by



a specific situation in which the real issue is more basic. Love determines that I put my neighbor's well being before my own. Concern for the eternal salvation of others, and my own, compels me to accommodate my cultural biases to advance the gospel. Everything I do or don't do must contribute to the glory of God!

## Unit 5: Practical Relationships

### Lesson 17: Biblical Ethics

#### Due This Lesson

Review of biblical passages  
Reading of NDBT selections  
Essay  
Resource reading and summary/response  
Journaling

#### Learner Objectives

- At the end of this lesson, participants should
- summarize the Bible's approach to personal and social ethics and morality

#### Homework Assignments

Review the following biblical passages: Genesis 17:1-8; Exodus 20:8-11; Psalm 90; Ecclesiastes 3:2-8; Zechariah 12–14; 1 Thessalonians 5:2-4; Galatians 4:1-7; Hebrew 3:7-15; 1 Peter 1:19-21.

Read the following articles in NDBT: Time, Wisdom.

Prepare 10 thought-provoking but factually based questions, over the assigned reading and provide model answers to these questions. A good question should require more than a one-word answer.

Write in your journal. Reflect on your response to this lesson. Were there areas of resistance? Were there moments of enlightenment? How will this lesson make a difference in your life and ministry?

## **Biblical Ethics**

How can the meaning of a specific scriptural passage exercise a controlling influence over its meaning and application now? Before attending to such questions, allow me to clarify what I mean by biblical foundations of Christian ethics. My concern is primarily with the use of the Bible in ethics, not particularly with the ethics in the Bible.

The role of the Bible in Christian ethics is intimately related to the nature of biblical authority and the practice of biblical interpretation. Christians of the Wesleyan/Holiness tradition, in agreement with the Church generally, accept the Bible as not only the authoritative and normative source of its faith, but also of its ethical practice.

## The Nature of Biblical Authority

1. The authority of the Bible is *derived*.
  - The Bible is not God, it is not the fourth member of an expanded holy quartet—Father, Son, Holy Spirit, and Bible.
  - The historically relevant word of God written in human words
  - Its authority arises from its canonical status—the Church’s recognition of this anthology as the fully inspired word of God.
  - The Bible’s divine message is to be found in its wholeness, not in any of its parts divorced from the whole.
  - Inerrantly reveals the will of God in all things necessary for our salvation—it describes what the Bible does, not what it is.
  
2. The Bible has a unique significance for Christian ethical discourse.
  - The distinctive dimension is to be found in the ethical motivation and the source of its moral norms.
  
3. The Bible’s authority is not absolute or exclusive.
  - Wesleyans appeal to the “quadrilateral”—tradition, experience, and reason as well as Scripture as sources of moral norms. Among these four, Scripture is the court of last appeal.
  
4. The Christian assertion of the primacy of Scripture is a confessional stance, not one based on an empirical or objective evaluation.
  - Only as Scripture actually functions authoritatively is Christian ethics Christian.
  
5. The functional authority of Scripture acknowledges its diversity.
  - Not every timely word is obviously timelessly relevant to subsequent generations of readers.

## **Pragmatic Challenges to Biblical Authority**

Although Christians debate concerning the nature of inspiration and the extent and manner of God's role in the authoring of the Bible, virtually all agree that it was written by numerous human authors, who brought with them their respective talents and handicaps, assumptions and prejudices, faith and failures.

Scripture itself testifies that God addressed people in the midst of changing and diverse historical and cultural settings. . . . To do this required him to adopt and adapt existing ethical practices.

The diversity of Scripture makes it necessary to distinguish between its authority and the authorization to move from Scripture to moral claims.

## **Biblical Authority Authorizes**

Authority provides a sufficient and meaningful basis for action. Authority is more than a list of positive and negative commands. It gives freedom to act within a range of options.

Authority defines the nature of reality—the source and limits of the freedom it authorizes. The crucial realities informing the biblical worldview are the God of the Bible, the biblical story, and the people of God.

One problem confronting the use of Scripture in ethics is the same as that complicating its use in biblical theology and preaching—the remarkable dominance of the narrative or story form.

Stories are different from commands—they have a different impact on us. A good story encourages us to reflect on ourselves and ask deeper questions about who we are and where we are going. A command, on the other hand, does not invite reflection but orders us to act. A choice between the two modes does not seem to be necessary. Both are essential and neither is without its difficulties. The command mode is flawed by a tendency to treat the Bible as if it were a book of rules.

Applying Scripture to ethics is unnecessarily restricted if we limit ethics to rules and Scripture's contribution to it as moral norms.

## The Exemplary Role of Jesus

The exemplary role of Jesus is obvious throughout the NT. Christians are called to imitate his example, not only implicitly in the Gospel narratives, but also explicitly in other non-narrative NT material. Nevertheless, a distinction between reflective imitation and mindless copying is called for.

Paul identifies the surrender of his personal freedom or apostolic rights in order to minister more effectively to the needs of his converts as imitation of Christ

The Gospels characterize the perils of the life of discipleship, the abandonment of personal security in obedience to Christ, as imitation of his acceptance of the cross. The self-abandoning love that moved Jesus to accept the suffering of the Cross is the object of imitation in John and the Johannine Epistles. Accepting undeserved abuse as Jesus did in his passion is the object of imitation in 1 Peter.

A more subtle implication of the example of Jesus calls for looking beyond specific events in his life to the Christ-event as a whole. Reflective imitation of Jesus invites us to think about choices and social problems in the light of what Jesus means, and to make decisions in this light. Biblical ethics and biblical theology must be closely related.

What happens to our view of biblical ethics if we take seriously the systemic character of evil in our fallen world and the cosmic scope of redemption in Christ? Surely, we would recognize that evangelism—narrowly conceived as “soul winning”—is too truncated a vision of the Church’s mission to the world.

## **The Practice of Biblical Interpretation**

If the Bible is actually to be an ethical resource, the church-at-large needs to be more adequately equipped for the task of biblical interpretation. It needs a more adequate understanding of the character of the biblical witness.

The Church also needs a more disciplined method for the study and use of the Bible. The practice of biblical interpretation is not the exclusive domain of pastors and Bible professors.

Modesty and flexibility—a willingness to abandon preconceived ideas when the evidence demands and to suspend judgment when the evidence is weak—are essential virtues.

Mature and serious students of biblical interpretation consult not only the views of commentaries likely to agree with their point of view, but those that are likely to disagree. There is nothing to fear from the truth, even if it is found in unexpected places.



## Existing Approaches for Relating Scripture to Christian Ethics

### Handbook

- Fundamentalists and conservative evangelicals tend to equate biblical ethics and Christian ethics. They assume that Scripture provides a unique, revealed morality that speaks to every situation Christians face without ambiguity.
- It overlooks the complexity of contemporary issues and problems, while failing to take seriously enough the historical distance separating the present from the historical period during which the Bible was written.

### Antique

- Very liberal Christians effectively consider biblical ethics to be irrelevant for Christian ethics.
- Its assessment of Scripture overstates the problems. It effectively leaves Christians on their own with no guidance as to the criteria for determining which among the diverse contemporary norms are correct and Christian.

### Medium

- So-called neo-orthodox theologians assign a mediating role to the Bible in relation to ethics. Scripture is not to be understood to *be* the word of God but to *become* the word of God to the serious reader.
- It fails to explain how commands become specific, especially in the face of moral dilemmas, or how we are to distinguish the command of God from other voices calling for obedience.

### Model

- A number of contemporary scholars have stressed the role of the Bible in the formation of Christian character. The focus of this approach is not on moral decision-making but on the process of character formation.
- It remains vague how one moves from biblically formed character to specific moral decisions.

### Resource

- The Bible is a resource for normative reflection. This approach recognizes that, because there is no one-to-one correspondence between the biblical material and many contemporary moral dilemmas, biblical-theological reflection is necessary.
- It establishes no clear method for moving from reflection on the biblical text to moral decisions and actions.

## From Biblical Principles to Appropriate Conduct

Life's situations are so unique that it would be impossible to anticipate every moral contingency. This is the advantage of principles over rules. But principles require persons whose cognitive maturity makes them capable of principled thought—the ability to construct and grasp broad generalizations based on similar, although not identical, cases. Through reflection, biblical stories may give rise to principles, which operated in God's dealings with his people long ago, and which, by analogy, may still provide ethical guidance today.

### Example from Acts 10

- The operative principle is not simply "impartiality"—that all people equally deserve a Christian's respect and concern. It is the principle of the imitation of God—that our actions should be coherent with those of God.

### Example from Deuteronomy 22

- Deuteronomy 22:5 admonishes against women wearing men's clothing and men wearing women's clothing. Deuteronomy 22:8 requires homes to have parapets. There was an apparent contradiction over the application of the one command and the neglect of the other.
- For homes—was there an underlying principle that might be applied more broadly? Was God concerned not only about people getting saved and sanctified but also that the houses should be safe places to live?
- For clothing—the principle of maintaining distinctions between the genders and the strong revulsion within Israel's law for homosexual practice suggest that this passage might still have relevance, although not so simple as the one during the 1950s and 1960s.

# Lesson 18: Wisdom and the Secret of Time

## Due This Lesson

Review of biblical passages  
Reading of NDBT selections  
10 questions  
Journaling

## Learner Objectives

At the end of this lesson, participants should

- summarize the Bible's approach to God's timing and its place in salvation
- be able to articulate the role of wisdom in the life of the believer

## Homework Assignments

Review the following Bible passages: Isaiah 9—12; 24—27; John 14; Romans 5 and 8; 1 Corinthians 15; 2 Corinthians 5; Philippians 1 and 3; 1 Thessalonians 4—5; Hebrews 11—12; 2 Peter 3; Revelation 16—22. Prepare theological statements that these chapters seem to support.

Read the following sections in NDBT: Death and Resurrection, Eschatology, Glory, Heaven, Hope, Judgment, Kingdom of God, Life, Revelation (the book), Reward, Salvation, and Worship.

Read **1** of the following:

- Resource 18-12, "Messianic Hopes"
- Resource 18-13, "Resurrection of the Dead"
- Resource 18-14, "God with Us"

Write in your journal. Reflect on how this lesson has helped your understanding of many passages of Scripture.

## Periods and Points of Time

The hour is not a time period of importance in the Old Testament and is translated in a variety of ways. It is used in the New Testament usually to indicate a point in time but also as the occasion of a momentous or difficult event.

The day, sometimes designated as evening and morning since the Hebrew day started at sunset, is based upon the relationship of the earth to the sun. Days were simply numbered except for the seventh day, which was the Sabbath. The word "day" is frequently used as "day of" in order to specify an event—battle, judgment, wrath, redemption—or the eschatological day of Yahweh.

The week, made up of seven days, the last of which was the Sabbath, was an important time period. The focus of the week was the Sabbath, the day set aside for worship. The Sabbath cycles are probably the most theologically significant cycles of time in Scripture.

The period that the month represents is more complicated, for it is tied to the cycle of the moon but adjusted in order to fit the annual solar cycle. Most references to a month are to a specific month named by number.

The year is another important period of time. Most references either establish a chronology, the age of an individual, or length of rule of a king.

The use of terms like "morning," "midday," and "evening" are usually straightforward references to the various segments of the day.

## Cycles of Time

The repetitiveness of the various time cycles is seen as one of the indications of the faithfulness of God. He established evening and morning and the rising and setting of the sun, and these go on throughout time. Twice in Scripture irregularities in the cycle are noted and affirmed as special signs from God.

The lunar cycle is recognized, but not as dominant as among many of Israel's neighbors. The new moon was one time when regular sacrifices were to be made.

The cycle of seasons was important socially and religiously, for the festivals occurred annually and several like the First Fruits and Harvest were in direct connection with the various seasons.

The cycles associated with the Sabbath were the most important. By New Testament times the ritual observance of the Sabbath had become foundational in Jewish thought.

## **Generations, Chronology, and Symbolic Time**

Just what is meant by the time period of a generation is not always clear. The wilderness wanderings, 40 years, are often used to indicate that this is the standard period of a generation, and certainly the combination of 4 and 10 as symbolic numbers would support such a conclusion.

Throughout Scripture, and especially in the Old Testament, attention is given to the order of things in time.

- the length of life
- age of the father at the time of the birth of the firstborn son
- the start and end of reigns of judges and kings
- events recorded in the books of the prophets are placed in specific time slots

The exodus from Egypt is referred to as a focal point in the progression of time for Israel.

When time is associated with numbers, the meaning may be symbolic and not chronological.

- The most common is 7, the cycle associated with the Sabbath.
- The next most common is the number 40.

## Wisdom and Time

Wisdom literature places considerable emphasis upon time, particularly from the standpoint of the proper time. The whole focus of wisdom literature is to guide the “son”—the learner—in the proper application of the principles of the Torah to the details of daily life.

**Integrity**—A prime aspect of the character of a wise person is that person’s integrity, the correlation of word and deed.

**Sexual Morality**—Extensive wisdom lectures warn the young man of the dangers of yielding to uncontrolled sexual passion, and the importance of avoiding those situations where temptation occurs.

**Ethics**—Acting in accordance with standards based on the Torah ethics is not done abstractly but primarily in terms of the way in which you treat your neighbor . . . In all cases the behavior has to coincide with the time when that behavior is needed.

**Hard Work**—The emphasis is not on keeping busy but rather on working toward the accomplishment of a purpose.

**God First**—Satisfaction and meaning come not from goods accumulated or physical experiences, but from our relationship to God. Well-being will follow.

**Timing**—A wise person knows the times and uses them accordingly. This can be applied to every area of life. The most important area is recognition of the right time in relationship to God.

**Understanding Suffering**—A basic assumption shared by the Torah, the Prophets, and the wise men was that a consequence of sin is suffering. Suffering follows sin. The problem was that good men sometimes suffered and evil men sometimes prospered.

## Appropriate Time

The wisdom concept that there is an appropriate time for everything is not essentially theological. The belief that God knows all the right times, and judges in accordance with the observance of the right time, is theological.

The phrase “not yet” occurs in Scripture and usually indicates that from the perspective of the writer the fact that was being mentioned had already come to pass, although in the narrative it had not.

Many different expressions like “due time” and “fullness of time” convey the idea that something had not yet happened because the proper time had not arrived.

In the Old Testament we have several injunctions that tell the Israelites to set the stage for an appropriate time to teach their children.

One of the most common time-related concepts is the idea that the right time has arrived, and action now will be taken.



## Eschatological Time

The eschatological use of time-related terms is common particularly in the prophets and in the New Testament. The people of Israel wanted the day of the Lord to come because they thought it would be a day of vengeance upon their enemies . . . For all the prophets it was a day to be feared.

In the New Testament, both in the parables of Jesus and in the Epistles, we are warned over and over again that it is a day that will come unexpectedly and we need to be ready at all times.

There is an implication of a cyclical eschatological event in the way that the coming events are tied to the past . . . These declarations about the day of the Lord and those announcing the return of Jesus use "day" and "year" as the markers of the great eschatological events.

## The Time Is Now

Throughout Scripture there is the basic understanding that we live in the present, should remember and learn from the past, should plan for our descendants to remember the great events of our present, but that we look forward to the future. The consistent call from the Torah, the Prophets, and the wise men is for action in the present.

- We are to obey the law now.
- We are to repent of our sins now.
- We are to speak the proper word now.

It cannot be any other way.

We only have this present moment in which to act.

## Eternity

There are two basically different ways that eternity is understood in Scripture. The one is the concept of a very long time or enduring for all time, and the other is that eternity is something outside of the boundaries of creation.

When *lanetsach*, *tamid*, or *kol hay yamim* are used in the Old Testament it is clear that the writer means "for all time," "continually," or "all the days" respectively.

The uncertainty arises with the use of the variations of *olam* in the Old Testament and *aion* in the New Testament, and these are the most common words translated as "eternal," "everlasting," "forever" or "eternity."

What God does and what God is, is enduring and consistent. This seems to be the implication of the frequent use of the term in connection with the covenants that God makes and His *chesed* that lies at the heart of the covenant.

We must note that "forever" may be conditional. The covenants were conditional upon the observance of the covenant.

In the New Testament we do have references using *aionas* that imply an understanding of eternity as a long time.

It is in the writings of John that we confront clear evidence that eternal life is understood to be a qualitative difference in life that can be a part of the believer's life in the present.

Jesus defines eternal life as knowing the only true God and Jesus sent by God (Jn 17:3).

Paul, who contrasts death as the wages of sin with eternal life as the gift of God (Rom 6:23), also links possession of eternal life to the present explaining that commitment to God leads to holiness that results in eternal life (v 22).

## The Sabbath Cycles

The work of creation ended with the establishment of a holy day on the seventh day. In that day God rested and fellowshiped with His creatures. The day became the appropriate time for creation to forget about tending to their needs and their work and instead tend to the relationship that they enjoyed with God himself.

### The Manna and the Sabbath

- After the first creation story that ends in Genesis 2:3 and all through the centuries in which the ancients and even the Patriarchs of the Jewish nation lived, there is no mention of the seventh day or the Sabbath.
- Before the Law was given to Moses on the top of that mountain, God used the gift of manna to instruct Israel in the importance of setting aside a day in which they could forget about themselves and rest in the wonderful relationship that God was offering them.

### The Sabbath and the Law

- Four of the 15 verses of the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20 are given over to the statement and explanation of Sabbath.
  - A day to be kept holy
  - A day when work should cease
  - A day of celebration

### Routine Worship

- The keeping of the Sabbath day became a part of the routine of Israelite worship and culture.

## The Sabbath Cycles

### The Sabbatical Years

- The concept of Sabbath not only occurs in connection with the week of seven days but was extended to the concept of the seventh year being holy.
- There is no evidence in Scripture that the plan was actually observed.

### The Jubilee

- The 50th day after a festival Sabbath was a very special day, the day for the feast of the firstfruits.
- The 50th year, the year of Jubilee is elaborated in Leviticus 25.
  - The return of land and buildings to the original owners
  - Freedom is to be given to those Israelites who have been sold into slavery, both parents and children.

### The New Testament and the Sabbath

- Jesus had a different view of the Sabbath from the view that had been developed by the Jewish leaders.
- The Sabbath was a time to gather in the synagogue or Temple, read Scripture, and worship.
- Jesus' basic understanding of the Sabbath was that it existed for the benefit of humankind.
- There is no sense in which Jesus brushed aside the importance of taking the Sabbath as a time for fellowship with God, but it is very clear that He perceived the day to be one established for the benefit of humankind and that it was perfectly right to do good and care for necessities on the Sabbath.

## The Sabbath Cycles

### The Sabbath Rest

- The Book of Hebrews explains many of the rituals of the Old Testament and gives us an interpretation of the Sabbath . . . the writer discusses the failure of Israel to gain the rest that God intended for them in Canaan.
- The rest for the people of God has been ready since the beginning.
- We are the ones who can enter into the rest by ceasing from our own works and accepting the work of Christ our High Priest.
- The essence of the Sabbath then is the fulfillment of that fellowship we can have with God through Christ Jesus our Lord.

### The Culmination of the Sabbath

- The Book of Revelation, which lays before us the end of time, does not mention the word "Sabbath." The book begins with "the Lord's Day," that vibrant day that expresses the new way that is opened to us by Jesus Christ our Lord.
- The rest, the peace that passes all understanding, that begins when we invite Christ to rule our hearts and minds, reaches its climax with this wonderful event, enabling us to bow before the very throne of God Almighty.

## Messianic Hopes—Isaiah 9—12

Georg Frederick Handel's inspired *Messiah* gives eloquent testimony to the longstanding Christian conviction that the messianic prophecies of Isaiah find their perfect fulfillment only in Jesus. No one before or since has so completely "fit" the ancient dreams for the ideal king. God's Spirit had stirred within the prophet's breast a longing for what had never been before. Past glories dimmed by comparison. A greater than David was envisioned.

Handel, like Christians before and since, understood these prophecies different from Isaiah's first hearers. And better. Living this side of the Messiah's first coming gives us a new perspective. Isaiah stood in the shadows cast by the bright light before him, seeing dimly through squinting eyes. We look backward, aided by the light of Christ, seeing clearly with eyes wide open.

We AD readers of Isaiah enjoy a privilege that was not granted to his 8th-century BC hearers. But let us not hurry too quickly from the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC to the 21st century AD, or even to the first century. We must not forget that the messianic oracles of Isaiah 9—12 offered meaningful hope to their first hearers. Time permits us to focus only on selected excerpts.

**Hope for Hopeless BC Readers (9:1-7).** When Tiglath-Pileser III invaded Palestine in 734-732 BC, he cut off the northern regions of Israel and made them Assyrian provinces (2 Kings 15:29). Survivors of the invasion faced a serious faith crisis. Isaiah 9:1-5 assures those, embittered against both "their king and their God" (8:21-22), of a reversal of fortunes in the future. Once in darkness, death, and despair, they would enjoy light, life, and joy. As Gideon's stunning defeat of the Midianites (see Judges 6—8) freed Israel from oppression and bondage, so the northern tribes would be delivered again.

What was the occasion for this surprisingly hopeful prophecy?<sup>77</sup> On first reading, it might seem to have been a royal birth (15:6). But this was more likely Isaiah's salute to Judah's new king on the occasion of his accession to the throne. "The night of liberation is followed by the day of coronation."<sup>78</sup> Israel's royal ideology held that Davidic kings became adoptive sons of Yahweh upon their enthronement.<sup>79</sup> The nation experiences a new birth.

Isaiah's wish for the new king reaffirms Yahweh's extravagant promises to David. His salute sparked the hopes of his generation for an ideal leader, who would be all a king should be. Uzziah, Jotham, and Ahaz certainly fell tragically short. Hopes in Judah ran high with the coronation of young King Hezekiah in 727 BC. "Oh, that the new king may be endowed with the 'zeal of Yahweh' to succeed where his predecessors failed! Oh, that he may perfectly embody the ancient ideals of kingship! The wisdom of Solomon to be a wonderful counselor! The valor of David to be a godlike military hero! Oh, for a king who cares for all his subjects like a father! A king who will bring peace to a troubled nation! A king who will reunite the divided kingdoms!"<sup>80</sup> God save the King!"

**The Ideal King of BC Hopes (11:1-5).** Hezekiah began as a promising reformer but somehow got in the same old rut as his predecessors.<sup>81</sup> Isaiah's early optimism (9:1-

7) gave way to cold realities. During Hezekiah's reign Assyria wiped the Northern Kingdom off the map (in 722/21 BC). Continuing invasions by the superpower in the following decades left Judah under Hezekiah little more than a "stump"<sup>82</sup> compared to the towering tree, which had been the United Kingdom under David and Solomon. After 701 BC it was nearly all downhill. Hezekiah's wicked successor, Manasseh, all but extinguished Judah's hopes for a righteous king.<sup>83</sup>

But God had not given up on David's dynasty. He inspired the prophet with new optimism for the future. A fresh "Branch" would sprout from "the stump of Jesse." A future descendant of David—whose father was named Jesse<sup>84</sup>—would yet emerge to fulfill the prophet's vision for the ideal king. The same Spirit who inspired the vision would enable the "anointed one" to fulfill these ideals.

The term "messiah" comes from the Hebrew word meaning "anointed one." It arose from the fact that oil was ceremonially poured upon the king's head at the time of his coronation. Yet it was not oil, but the Spirit it symbolized, that empowered the king to rule. Only the Spirit could endow him with the extraordinary spiritual insight necessary to "delight" in a life of submission to God.<sup>85</sup> Isaiah reminded his people that the nation's hope was not in its kings but in their God. Only by his Spirit could any king govern in a wise, judicious, and just fashion. Only as he obediently submitted to the rule of Yahweh could he deal compassionately with the oppressed and sternly with the oppressor.<sup>86</sup>

The embers of nationalistic hope seemed to glow brightly again under good King Josiah (reigned 639-609 BC). But his untimely death disappointed these hopes. The exile of his son Zedekiah, Judah's last king, to Babylon in 586 BC seemed the fatal blow. The Southern Kingdom came to a final end.<sup>87</sup> Only a dim spark of hope survived for David's descendants (2 Kings 25:27-30).

During the trauma of Babylonian Exile, disciples of Isaiah brought together the fragments of his prophecies into the book. We can only surmise what hope it engendered among the captives. This much we know. When the Davidic dynasty was only a faded memory, the returned exiles of the fifth century BC tried to resurrect a Jewish national existence in Palestine. The Persian governor of Judea, Zerubbabel, briefly revived the dream.<sup>88</sup> He was a descendent of David with a name that fit the old expectations—"shoot of Babylon." But again, hopes were dashed on the rocks of reality. He wasn't the one. Such repeated dashed dreams and deep disappointments gave rise to the Messianic hopes of the Jews.

During the intertestamental period the family of Mattathias, a descendant of the tribe of Levi, led a successful revolt against their Greek overlords. These Maccabees led Judah during much of the second and first centuries BC. Under the Maccabees the Jewish people enjoyed a time of independence that had not been theirs for centuries. But the Maccabees were not even from the tribe of Judah. What did they have to do with God's promises to David?

Internal rivalries between the successors of the Maccabees cost them their hard-won autonomy. The new world power Rome intervened in Palestine in 63 BC and eventually appointed as "King of the Jews" an Idumean (Edomite) named Herod (reigned 40-4 BC). Hopes for the dynasty of David were all but extinguished.

**Hopes Fulfilled for AD Readers (9:1-7; 11:1-5; Matthew 1—4; Luke 2).** It was not the kind of event that made the local news, even in the tiny village of Bethlehem.



In the closing years of Herod's reign a peasant girl gave birth to her first child in a cave that served as a shelter for cattle—c. 4 BC.<sup>89</sup> Her fiancé was a descendant of David. By marrying her, he accepted her son as legally his, making him a descendant of David.<sup>90</sup> Tales of angels and stars were enough to prompt the paranoid King Herod to order all the male infants in Bethlehem put to death. Even this did not merit mention in the news. What were a dozen babies—more or less—given Herod's atrocities? Somehow, one baby managed to escape the slaughter only to fade into obscurity.

Around AD 28 dormant messianic hopes began to stir with the appearance of a remarkable prophet, John the Baptist. Like earlier prophets he called Israel to repent in preparation for the coming Messiah. He decried the abuses of Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great, with a boldness that reminded people of the prophet Elijah of old. Like many before him, his unwelcome criticism brought him imprisonment and eventually execution.<sup>91</sup>

About the time John was imprisoned, a carpenter from Nazareth in Galilee also began a prophetic ministry. Among those who had joined John's movement for righteousness, he was the now-grown child who had escaped Herod's plot some 30 years earlier. His name was Jesus. Many of his followers were persuaded that he was the long-awaited Messiah. But he repeatedly disappointed their expectations. Even John, who contributed to their opinion, in prison seems to have had second thoughts. "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" (Mt 11:2).

Jesus' ministry of preaching, teaching, and healing attracted considerable following among the peasant masses. But not all who came to listen were would-be followers. His frank words made him enemies among the religious and political establishment. Eventually the feuding Jewish religious parties briefly put aside their differences to eliminate a common enemy. Collaborating with the occupying Romans, they had him crucified—a fate normally reserved for slaves and anarchists. Disappointed followers returned to their BC-lives. "We had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel" (Lk 24:21). Now, once again, hopes were crushed beneath the heels of violent, sinful men.

Easter Sunday morning changed all that. Discovery of the empty tomb and encounters with their dead master persuaded Jesus' followers that God had vindicated Jesus by raising him from the dead. Resurrection! The last age had dawned! God was fulfilling his ancient promises to Israel. If true, Jesus must have been more than a prophet and miracle worker. But who was he? Who is he? Although everything was changed, nothing was changed. Jesus had died a criminal's death, but was now alive. Yet Roman tyrants were still in control. Nothing in popular messianic expectations prepared Jesus' followers to deal with such contradictions. And yet within only weeks they were making an audacious claim in the streets of Jerusalem, where he had been executed. "God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:36).

If Jesus was the Messiah, his followers could no longer read their Bibles as they had before.<sup>92</sup> Jesus filled the old Scriptures with new significance. Passages that had never before been understood to refer to the Messiah were now considered messianic prophecies. For one reason—they seemed to refer to Jesus, the Messiah. Traditional messianic prophecies that did not seem to fit Jesus were reinterpreted. Although they were not true in a literal sense, they were spiritually true. Or although they were not true of his first advent, they would be true of his second advent.<sup>93</sup> The conviction that

God had fulfilled his promises to David's family in Jesus of Nazareth determined everything.

Matthew saw the words of Isaiah 9:1-2 filled full by Jesus' ministry in Galilee (Mt 4:12-16). This, in turn, became the clue that led the Church to incorporate Isaiah 9:1-7 into the liturgy of Christmas Day. Who, aware of the birth narratives in Matthew 1-2 and Luke 2, could read Isaiah 9:6-7 and not think of Jesus? Georg Frederick Handel certainly was neither the first nor last to see the *Messiah* in the words of Isaiah.

Who, aware of Jesus' receipt of the Holy Spirit at the time of his baptism, could read Isaiah 11:2 and not think of Jesus? Who, aware of Jesus' compassion for the outcasts, could read verse 4 and not think of him? Who, reflecting upon his sinless life, could read verse 5 and not see in him the perfect embodiment of the character of the long-hoped-for King of Righteousness? Certainly, no Christian. In Jesus Christ human hopes are fulfilled; ideals, realized.

Some may be put off by the fantastic imagery that concludes Isaiah 11 and continues in chapter 12. Don't be. Leave the prosaic world behind you. Come, see the world as God would have it. Come, see the world as it will be—a world of peace and praise. When you return to the "real world," you may get nostalgic for a place where you've never been. Even better, you may get a vision for the world as it might be and cooperate with God's plan to turn that dream into reality. In the meantime, songs of peace and joy—poetry set to music—remind us of the Savior God from whom all blessings flow. They praise him and testify to his greatness.

**A World at Peace (11:6-9).** "It's a dog-eat-dog world," they say. The law of the jungle is the survival of the fittest. Predatory animals attack the vulnerable, the young, the weak, the old, the sick, the defenseless. Wolves eat lambs; leopards, young goats; lions, yearling calves; bears, cows. Innocent children die from the bites of venomous snakes that might only make adults ill. It's not fair. It's not pretty. It's not just. It's just the way things are.

But don't imagine for a moment that Isaiah is simply making a plea for vegetarianism. It's not that he's just seen *Wild Kingdom* for the first time and is sickened by the latest video record of the realities of the food chain. The fact is that sheep have digestive systems efficiently designed to convert grass into wool and meat protein. Neither their God-given instincts nor digestive systems allow carnivorous wolves to survive on grass.

More than domestication would be called for to transform wolves, lions, and bears to a diet of hay. It would take more than training from birth to persuade predators to live at peace with their natural prey. They would need to be well-fed, and no amount of grass would suffice. Such a revolution would require transformed digestive systems. But to focus on the hope of redesigned entrails and instincts for predatory animals would be to read Isaiah's poetry as prose and miss the crucial point of his prophecy entirely. This is the second part of his poetic vision of God's new order under the King of Righteousness (Isa 11:1-9).

Isaiah's concern was not merely with a change in the rules of the animal kingdom. Nor was it a hope whose fulfillment awaited some distant millennium. If so, human tastes will also need to be radically changed. Otherwise, I'll be sorely disappointed if prime rib is not on the menu of the future messianic banquet.

The problem Isaiah addressed was not simply the senseless slaughter of innocent animals for blood-thirsty appetites. The problem was not a deficiency of fodder. It was a shortage of the “knowledge of Yahweh” (15:9; see 1:3; 2:3; 10:13). This does not imply that education was the solution. The problem was the human failure to do God’s will—disobedience. The problem was that God’s people were behaving like animals. The rich were preying on the poor. The powerful were taking advantage of the weak and vulnerable. Justice was being perverted. And the king was a part of the problem, not its solution (see 11:3-5; 10:1-4; 3:14-15). The survival of the poor “lambs” is threatened by the insatiable appetites of the powerful “prowling lions” (see 5:17, 29).

Vicious, cut-throat competition in the world of commerce and industry today is more beastly than in the prophet’s day. If lions lay down with lambs, it’s only to take advantage of them. Business success is a deadly game in which the small are swallowed up in takeover bids by the rich. The rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Jungle ethics justifies natural instincts, greed, selfish ambition, self-centeredness, and pleasure-seeking. Pragmatism justifies any means to achieve these ends.<sup>94</sup>

It is precisely this approach to life that Isaiah envisions will not be tolerated by the Messiah (Isa 11:1-5)—nor practiced by his subjects. Christians cannot don their three-piece business suits and wing-tipped shoes like 21st-century armor and justify “making a killing” in the marketplace, simply because that’s the way things are in the corporate jungle. Isaiah’s vision gives no indication that its fulfillment must await the millennium. Business as usual must come to an end now. Competition must give way to cooperation. The survival of the fittest must give way to the thriving of the weakest; the law of the jungle, to the law of love. To those who object that such a world does not exist, the poet replies, “Ah, but wouldn’t it be wonderful if it did!” And because God is the author of peace,<sup>95</sup> it may and it will.

**A World at One (11:10-16).** The perspective of this prophecy is apparently the 5th century BC (11:12; see 10:20). The exilic prophet envisions the return of the dispersed people of Israel and Judah to Palestine in a kind of second Exodus. There, the remains of the populations of the two nations will enjoy a renewed existence in a reunited Israel. They will put aside the differences that have divided them for half a millennium and join forces to conquer their perennial enemies—the Philistines, Edomites, Moabites, Ammonites, Egyptians, and Mesopotamians. The hope for this “remnant,” on the one hand, seems to be expressed in crassly nationalistic terms (15:14-16; see Ps 72:1-11). But its horizon explodes parochial limits to include all “peoples” and “nations” (15:10, 12).

To what historical reality did the prophecy look forward? If it was intended literally, the prediction was mistaken. Only a small percentage of the exiles ever returned to Palestine. No political reunion of the divided kingdoms occurred. Instead, the returned Judeans and the Samaritans grew increasingly estranged and hostile. It is improbable that the prophecy’s fulfillment looked forward 2,500 years to latter-day events in the recent history of the modern state of Israel (in 1948 and/or 1967). Those who interpret it in this way are compelled to ignore many (as yet) unfulfilled aspects of the prophecy. It is even less likely that it was intended to refer to still future events of the end time.

The poetic language of the prophecy points to a fulfillment in the inclusion of the Gentile nations in the worship of Yahweh. The conquest of the enemies of God’s people, described in military metaphors, refers to the evangelization of the nations (see 12:4). Even this spiritual fulfillment was not realized by the returned exiles. The

religious parochialism of Ezra thwarted Israel from fulfilling its mission to be “a light for the Gentiles” to bring God’s “salvation to the ends of the earth” (Isa 49:6). Early Christians saw the fulfillment of such prophecies in its Spirit-empowered mission to the Gentiles.<sup>96</sup>

By God’s mercy nearly 2,000 years have passed since then. Estimates are that half the world’s 6 billion people alive today have never once heard the good news of salvation. We cannot rest easy until they do. It is God’s intention that people “from every tribe and language and people and nation” should worship him for eternity (Rev 5:9).

**A World at Praise (12:1-6).** The hard discipline of the Exile behind them, the redeemed remnant raised its hymn of thanksgiving to God, praising him for its deliverance (compare Isaiah 40–55). Just as Israel sang praises to Yahweh following his victory over the gods of Egypt at the Red Sea (Ex 15:1-18), so they praised him for this second Exodus. In fact, 12:2 quotes a portion of the earlier song (v 2; Ps 118:14). Just as God sustained Israel in its earlier pilgrimage to the Land of Promise, so he would sustain the exiles on their return to the land. And he will sustain us as well.

“With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation” (Is 12:3), points beyond the life-sustaining physical drink God provides to more profound realities—his loving grace and saving presence (see Ps 36:89; Jn 4:10). The second Exodus, like the first, was a testimony to Yahweh’s care for his people. Uprooted from the land, the captives learned that he was the God of all the earth, as well as “the Holy One of Israel” (Is 12:6). Thus, even Gentile nations were invited to join the worship of Yahweh (vv 4-5). He was not the exclusive property of Israel. But her historical precedence was not to be ignored. She was the means by which he chose to make himself known to the entire world.

The call to “shout aloud and sing for joy” in verse 6 are repeated in Isaiah 44:23; 52:9; and 54:1. In each of these instances they call for the returned captives to praise God for his deliverance. These were “the redeemed of the Lord,” delivered to gather again with his people “from east and west, from north and south” to worship at the second Temple (Ps 107:1-2). Redemption was to be the occasion for testimony to other people and praise to God.

The poetry of Isaiah 12 is a celebration of the joy of worship. Because we serve Israel’s God, their deliverance is ours as well. But beyond these events we celebrate the new exodus Jesus Christ effected by his saving death (see Lk 9:31). And we each celebrate our own deliverance from exiles of various kinds. We have drunk deeply from “the wells of salvation.” Thus, we, too, are invited to tell unbelievers of our Redeemer God and to praise him for his unfailing love. By acknowledging him as the source of our life and freedom, we find our joy (15:3, 6). But we praise God not only for what he has done, but for who he is. Trustworthy Savior. Holy God. Great and exalted.

**Note:** The preceding part of the lesson is partially intended to give hermeneutical guidance in reading prophetic literature. It is dishonest to read one portion of the prophecy as intended to address hearers in the eighth century BC and arbitrarily assign another portion to Jesus’ earthly ministry and yet another to his second

coming. Prophets spoke to address their contemporaries. The entire prophecy was addressed meaningfully to its first hearers/readers. Secondary references to the coming of Christ hundreds of years in the future were not originally intended by the prophet. But the prophecies held out hopes that were never realized in the OT era. Looking back from the perspective of God's final revelation in Christ we see a fuller significance than the prophets or their original audiences ever imagined. The appropriateness of some of these prophecies to Christ seems more than coincidental. Some biblical interpreters refer to this as the *sensus plenior*, "fuller sense," which perhaps God intended all along. But it may be presumptuous to speculate what God intended; perhaps it is best only to affirm that Christian convictions about Christ compel us to read the OT with spectacles that those before his coming did not possess. Persuaded that Jesus was God's definitive Word to humanity, the NT writers consciously told the story in such a way as to highlight the fulfillment they assumed. Thus, for example, Psalm 22, which was neither intended nor understood previously as prophecy, significantly shapes the way in which the Gospel writers narrate the crucifixion of Jesus. Unfortunately, we do not have the advantage of hindsight as it relates to the Second Coming and eschatology. We can only guess what these prophecies might look like from that vantage point.

## Resurrection of the Dead

### 1 Corinthians 15:1-58

Although some interpreters set Paul's preaching of the death and resurrection of Christ in tension, Paul himself did not. The gospel message of the saving death of Christ is powerful precisely because God raised him from the dead. Paul's repeated references to God's "power" (in 1:17, 18, 24, 25; 2:4, 5) anticipate this treatment of the resurrection as the supreme manifestation of that power in chapter 15. Apart from the resurrection of Christ, "preaching is useless" (15:4) and the gospel is a lie (v 5).

Paul emphasizes not only the centrality of the resurrection to the Christian gospel but its essential futurity. Several features throughout the letter suggest that Paul considered Corinthian eschatology to be collapsed, overrealized, or spiritualized. Paul stresses not only the futurity of the Resurrection but its corporeal character. It is not some kind of natural immortality of the soul that he proclaims, but bodily resurrection. And beyond this he also stresses that it is "dead people" who are raised.

First Corinthians 15 has three major divisions and a conclusion.

- The first division—verses 1-11—serves as an introduction to the entire chapter and presents the resurrection of Christ as the heart of the gospel message. Both the second and third parts conclude with paraenesis—exhortations to proper behavior.
- Part two—verses 12-34—makes the case for the fact of the Resurrection as essential for the achievement of God's redemptive purposes. Paul concludes part two with an exhortation to his readers to stop sinning (vv 33-34).
- Part three—verses 35-58—concerns the mode of the Resurrection.
- Its conclusion calls the Corinthians to positive Christian activity in the light of the victory Christ provides as the Victor over death (v 58).

**The Message of the Resurrection (15:1-11).** Paul's purpose in these verses is not to prove that the resurrection of Christ occurred. Both he and his hearers take that for granted. His purpose is to remind them of the central place of Christ's resurrection in the gospel. This is one point where, despite their other differences, all Christians agree. Thus, Paul concludes, "Whether, then, it was I or they, this is what we preach, and this is what you believed" (v 11). As frequently in the letter, Paul stresses their common ground with Christians in all the churches (see 4:17; 7:17; 11:16; 14:33b, 36), their catholicity.

Paul's reference to the resurrection of Christ as "on the third day" (v 4) probably does more than merely date the event. The Gospels report Jesus' predictions that he would be raised on the third day (see Jn 2:19-22; Mk 8:31; 9:31; 10:34; 14:58; 15:19; parallels). But the phrase "according to the Scriptures" would seem to suggest a fulfillment of the OT expectation of the third day as the day of divine vindication (see Hos 6:2; Jon 1:17 [Mt 12:40]; 2 Kings 20:5; Ps 16:8-11; 110:1 [Acts 2:25-36]).

**Grace (15:9-11).** Paul's unworthiness of the title "apostle" arises from his notorious pre-Christian persecution of believers (15:9; see Acts 7:58; 8:1-3; 9:1-6; Gal 1:13, 23; Phil 3:6). Paul assigns his transformation from persecutor to preacher as due to "the grace of God" (v 10). His claim that this grace was "not without effect" is another way of insisting that he did not receive the grace of God in vain (2 Cor 6:1). Grace is

not merely God's willingness to overlook a person's shortcomings. Rather, it enables a person to work effectively for God. In fact, Paul insists that by the effective working of the grace of God in him, he was able to work harder than those who were apostles before him (v 10). By doing so he exalts, not himself, but the grace of God in his life (see 1:2; 2:1-5; 4:8-13; 7:17; 9:15-23; 14:33).

**The Fact of the Resurrection (15:12-34).** It is only at this point in the discussion of Paul's resurrection that we learn what occasioned it. "Some" of the Corinthians were saying, "There is no resurrection" (v 12). Paul's approach to this denial is first to detail the awful consequences that would follow "if" this were true (vv 12-19). Second, he considers the consequences of the fact that Christ has been resurrected (vv 20-28). They are the certainty of the resurrection of all believers and of the final destruction of death itself. Third, he notes the personal contradictions that are suggested by the Corinthians' and his own practice, "if" there is no Resurrection (vv 29-32). Finally, he concludes with a series of three exhortations (vv 33-34).

**If Christ Has Not Been Raised, All Is in Vain (15:12-19).** In 15:1-11 Paul rehearsed the gospel, at the heart of which stands the resurrection of Christ. On this the apostles agree. Faith in this message stands as the basis of the Corinthians' Christian existence. Although they take for granted his resurrection, "some" of them deny the "resurrection of the dead" (v 12). Paul challenges the logic of their belief in verses 12-19 with a series of seven hypothetical constructions, stating the awful consequences "if" there were no Resurrection.

We do not know what the Corinthian denial of the Resurrection specifically involved. Did they believe, like the Sadducees, that death ended it all? Did they espouse a Greek notion of the immortality of the soul and reject only bodily resurrection? Did they understand their conversions as a spiritual resurrection and so reject the future resurrection (see 2 Tim 2:17-18)? If they rejected the future, bodily resurrection of the dead, how did they understand the resurrection of Christ? It is unlikely that they conceived it as Paul, the (former) Pharisee, must have. The point of 1 Corinthians 15:35-56 may be to correct their conception of the mode of resurrection existence. But for now, his concern is to establish the fact of the Resurrection.

Paul reasons from the general to the specific. If there is no general resurrection, then there can have been none in the specific instance of Christ (vv 13, 15b, 16). If they were right, then he and the other apostles were wrong. The consequences of this are ghastly. Paul's preaching is not only futile but false and he's a liar (vv 13 and 14). Not only is the Corinthians' faith worthless and empty, but they are still hopeless sinners (vv 14, 17). To deny their future deliverance from death is to deny their past deliverance from sin, which would have required a denial of their own experience. If there is no Resurrection, Christian believers who have died are "lost" (v 18). Their fate is no different from that of unbelievers.

To deny the resurrection of the dead is not merely to nitpick about indifferent, esoteric theological opinions. (Such as, How many angels can dance on the head of a pin?) It is to undermine the very basis of the Christian faith. Paul is persuaded that Christ's death is without saving significance, if God did not raise him from the dead. If he did not, faith in Christ is a vain fantasy, an empty hope, without reality. To deny the Resurrection is to restrict one's vision to this life only; there is no future (v 19). In 1 Thessalonians 4:17 Paul describes the future hope as simply—"we will be with the Lord forever." But this is already a present, though partial, reality according to

1 Thessalonians 5:10: "He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him." The believer's present possession of the Spirit is a foretaste of future fulfillment (Rom 8:23; 2 Cor 1:22; 5:5; Eph 1:13-14). Present salvation consists in the hope, awakened by the Spirit, for the consummation of what God has already begun. According to Rom 8:24, "In this hope we were saved." This makes implausible a translation of 1 Cor 15:19 that would modify "hope" with "only." To do so would suggest an unthinkable depreciation of the abiding Christian virtue of hope (see 13:13).

Paul's claim in 15:19 is open to yet another misinterpretation. Some take "only for this life" to imply a depreciation of present Christian existence—that he considered "heaven" the necessary compensation for an otherwise miserable existence on earth—that Christians trade off earthly pleasures for heavenly treasures. This would suggest that the apostle operated on what must be seen as the lowest level of moral reasoning: Turn or burn! Salvation conceived as fire insurance. Be good to earn a reward. Such a view renders Christ and the Christian life as merely utilities, means to selfish ends. But does Paul see the present as only a "holding action" until the release of death? Nothing in his letters otherwise suggests that he denigrates present Christian existence. And it is unlikely that he does so here. As noted above, he sees the Christian's future hope as only the continuation and completion of the believer's present life in Christ, not compensation for it.

Christians "are to be pitied more than all men" (v 19), if there is no resurrection of the dead (v 12). But they are pitiable, not because they have forfeited their "pie" here and now and still get no "pie in the sky by and by." They are to be pitied because their entire lives are lived on the basis of an illusion, "if Christ has not been raised" (v 14). All the awful consequences of the Corinthian denial of the resurrection of the dead (vv 13-19), not the lack of heavenly compensation, are the reasons for the pity. With the loss of the future hope, the past and present dimensions of the Christian life are empty as well.

But all this is only hypothetical. Paul constructs this straw man precisely because he knows he has a match to ignite it. The fact is, as Paul will insist in the next section, "Christ has indeed been raised from the dead" (v 20). And his resurrection is the assurance of the resurrection of believers, because the resurrected Christ reigns as Lord.

**Since Christ Has Been Raised, He Reigns (15:20-28).** Central to this passage is the conviction that the Risen Christ "must reign" (v 25). A reign implies not only a monarch but also a "kingdom" (v 24) and subjects. The metaphorical expression "under his feet" (vv 25 and 27) also conveys the notion of subjection. Paul's concern is to stress the universal implications of Christ's reign. Nothing is excluded from subjection to Christ's cosmic Lordship, except God the Father.

The purely hypothetical nature of verses 12-19 is confirmed by the opening words of verse 20: "But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead." If denial of the general resurrection excludes the specific instance of Christ's resurrection, then the fact of his resurrection implies the inevitable necessity of the resurrection from the dead. This is the point of the identification of Christ as "the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep" (in v 20b; see v 23). "Firstfruits" in OT usage refers to the first fruit ready for harvest, which were presented to God (Lev 23:9-14). This was at once a recognition that the whole harvest rightfully belonged to him and an expression of the confidence that the balance of the harvest would come to maturity. Sleep was a widely used



euphemism for death and implies nothing about the consciousness or unconsciousness of the dead.

Paul substantiates his claim concerning the implications of Christ's resurrection in verses 21 and 22. Adam is the man through whom death first came to be; Christ, the man through whom the resurrection of the dead first became a reality. The contrasting experiences of the two men have implications for "all" people. But how universal are these implications? Empirical evidence demonstrates the universality of physical death. All people, understood within the biblical tradition as descendants of the first man—Adam—inevitably die.

Does Paul presume that Christ's resurrection is equally universal in its results? Will all people without exception be made alive? If so, does this support so-called universalism? That is, does Paul assume that finally all people will be saved? The apostle's consistent emphasis elsewhere upon the necessity of the human response of faith as an essential condition for receiving the gift of salvation life argues against a universalistic interpretation here. Verse 23 similarly suggests a more restricted circle, specifically only "those who belong to [Christ]," as the beneficiaries of the Resurrection.

Several considerations make it unlikely that Paul's intent was to argue for two resurrections, a resurrection to eternal life and a resurrection to eternal punishment (as in Dan 12:2). His concern throughout 1 Corinthians 15 is with the fate of believers. He betrays no interest in the future destiny of unbelievers. Furthermore, he does not say that all will be resurrected, but made alive.<sup>97</sup> If it is improbable that this refers to universal salvation, it is equally unlikely that the first "all," applied to Adam, has universal implications while the second, applied to Christ, has only limited implications.

The way out of this hermeneutical logjam seems to be to take seriously both prepositional phrases "in Adam" and "in Christ." Both function to restrict the inclusiveness of "all." It is not simply that "all die," but that all whose existence is defined by Adam die. So it is that not "all" without exception "will be made alive," but only all Christians.<sup>98</sup>

"But each in his own turn," which begins verse 23, responds to the implicit question, When will believers be made alive? Paul's answer introduces something of an eschatological timetable. He identifies three acts in the final drama. In each Christ is the central actor, although the drama begins and ends with God the Father. First, the event that marks the beginning of the end is the resurrection of "Christ, the firstfruits" (v 23). Of course, God is the unnamed Prime Mover in this event. Second, the next event is the parousia of Christ. Although his resurrection foreshadows and forecasts the resurrection of all "those who belong to him," their resurrection awaits his second coming (v 23). Third, in the final act, the consummation of history,<sup>99</sup> Christ "hands over the kingdom to God the Father" (v 24a).<sup>100</sup>

Paul complicates his description of the major events in the eschatological drama by referring to related events in verses 24b-28. Although considerable ambiguity remains, the main lines of the interpretation seem clear enough. Before Christ "hands over the kingdom" (15:24a), "he must reign" first (15:25a). Although Paul does not state precisely when Christ's reign began, he seems to take for granted that its inauguration was the Resurrection (as in Phil 2:6-11; see Rom 1:4; Acts 2:23-36; Eph 1:20-23). Citing Pss 8:6 and 110:1, he identifies the beginning of Christ's reign as

that moment when God put “all his enemies,” in fact, “everything under his feet” (vv 25 and 27; see Heb 1:13; 2:6-9). By doing so, God enthroned Christ as the rightful Lord of the cosmos. But God’s subjection of everything to Christ did not mean the end of all opposition to God. Christ reigned as Lord of a kingdom in rebellion against its legitimate Master.

Christ’s contested reign will continue only “until he has put all his enemies under his feet” (1 Cor 15:25a)—i.e., until his rule as Lord-designate becomes fully realized and he is Lord-indeed. This is the “end” (v 24) of his reign in two senses—its goal and conclusion. He reigns for the purpose of destroying God’s enemies (v 26). And he will reign only until he has completed this task (vv 24 and 28a). He will abdicate his reign “after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power” (v 24b; see Eph 1:21; 2:21; 3:10; 6:11-12; Col 1:16; 2:9-10, 15; Rom 8:38). These enemies would seem to be sinister, demonic, personified forces of evil that frustrate God’s saving purposes. That these are no ordinary opponents is clear from the specific identification of “the last enemy to be destroyed” as “death” (v 26).<sup>101</sup> The defeat of death would seem to be the necessary precondition for the resurrection of the dead, unless it is merely a picturesque way of describing it (vv 50-54).

If the resurrection accompanies the Second Coming (v 23), and if the end comes after Christ has defeated God’s last enemy (vv 24-26), then the second and third acts of the eschatological drama may be expected to occur simultaneously. But if not simultaneously, they occur in such close proximity as to allow no room for a millennial reign between them. In fact, verses 20-28 suggests that if Jesus Christ does not reign during the present age, he will never do so. Thus, the imagery of Revelation 20, the only biblical passage to refer explicitly to the millennial reign, must be interpreted in light of this passage, and not vice versa.<sup>102</sup>

Paul does not identify the nature of Christ’s present struggles against evil, which are involved in the execution of his office as Lord. In what does Christ’s ongoing destruction of evil consist? Do his struggles occur only in the heavenly sphere or do they have earthly counterparts? Is this merely picturesque imagery—figurative language with no literal reference?

Are we to see Christ’s victories only in the “sacred” (“religious” or “spiritual”) realm of earthly existence—say, in effective evangelism? Should we assume that Christ’s battle against evil is reflected in the apostles’ struggle against “arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God” (2 Cor 10:5)? Should we assume that effective Christian labors are the earthly manifestation of the victory Christ is winning over the powers that resist God’s unhindered rule (see 1 Cor 15:57-58)?

If we take Christ’s cosmic Lordship seriously, are his victories to be seen also in the supposedly “secular” conquests of evil? Is his rule manifested in the release of uneducated millions from the slavery of illiteracy and superstition? the emancipation of slaves? the elimination from the planet of small pox and other dread diseases? the collapse of totalitarian Marxist governments? the repeal of unjust laws? the election of righteous government officials? In what does Christ’s ongoing destruction of evil consist? In what historical events are we to see the outworking of God’s ultimate purposes for the universe?

The answer to such questions is more than academic. Extreme answers have crippled pessimistic, pietistic, conservative-evangelicalism, on the one hand, and socially

activist, humanistic liberalism, on the other. Wesleyans have tried (with limited success) to find a balance between revivalism and social reform. If Christ is Lord of all, we cannot be content to segregate life into sacred and secular compartments. He would be Lord of all.

Unless we are content with a stance of pious agnosticism—the assumption that we cannot know God’s assessment of earthly events, we cannot be neutral or passive in the face of Christ’s active opposition to evil. What does appropriate Christian activism require? Are we merely to applaud Christ’s victories and mourn setbacks to his Kingdom purposes? Or are we to join with him in his struggle against evil, devoting our talents, energies, influence, and resources to the accomplishment of his purposes? With what causes should we align ourselves? Are we to be social activists or disengaged from such concerns? Should we enlist in the pro-life or pro-choice causes? Advocate war or peace? Seek racial and sexual equality or preserve the status quo? Support capitalism or socialism? If neutrality is impossible, does our allegiance to the Lordship of Christ call us to opposition to all earthly causes, however noble they may appear to be? We cannot be deterred from deciding to act simply because decisions are difficult.

It is equally difficult to identify what it might mean for God to be “all in all” (v 28). In a world in which this is not presently the case, what this future status of God specifically involves remains a mystery. To become a reality depends on Christ’s defeat of all God’s opponents. Once he has quelled the rebellion, he will hand over the rule of the kingdom to God the Father (v 24). Christ voluntarily surrenders his interim lordship to God (v 28). In this light, for God to be “all in all” must mean, at the least, that he has *total sovereignty*.

This much is clear. When God’s kingdom comes in its fullness, his will shall be done as perfectly on earth as it is presently done in heaven (see Mt 6:10). All humans and all the created order will conform to his purposes (see Rom 8:19-22; Phil 2:10-11; Eph 1:9-10; Col 1:15-20). For God to be “all in all” will involve the universal recognition that “from him and through him and to him are all things” (Rom 11:36). Division will end, unity will prevail, and God’s rule will be unchallenged. We are not told how this will be accomplished and sustained. Will God finally give up on his millennia-long experiment with freedom? Will he abandon the tactic of persuasion in favor of coercion? The only language the Bible has to describe this future order is so thoroughly figurative as to permit no definitive answer.

**If Christ Has Not Been Raised, All Is Meaningless (15:29-32).** This section resumes again the hypothetical constructions as in verses 12-19. “If” there is no resurrection, neither the Corinthians’ conduct nor Paul’s make any sense. If life is meaningless, morality doesn’t matter.

There is no consensus among interpreters as to what baptism “for the dead” might involve.<sup>103</sup> Both Paul and his readers knew full well. Whatever the obscure practice involved, he took a noncommittal stance toward it, neither endorsing nor condemning it. He mentioned it only to point out the contradiction between their practice and their professed denial of the resurrection.

If there is no resurrection, why does Paul regularly put himself in jeopardy (v 30)? Again, precisely what his practice involved is uncertain. Presumably he refers to the mortal perils he faced in the fulfillment of his apostolic mission (see 1 Cor 4:9-13; 2 Cor 1:8; 4:7-12; 6:3-10; 11:30-33; Gal 4:12-16; 1 Thess 2:2, 14-16), not to

publicity-seeking, foolhardy, hourly stunts. His claim, "I die every day" (v 30), refers to the same life-endangering activities. In this context, he is not speaking metaphorically (as he does, e.g., in Gal 2:19-21) but hyperbolically. Faithfulness to his calling placed him in the very real danger of losing his life on a regular basis (see 6:8-13; Rom 8:36; 2 Cor 1:8-10; 4:10; 11:23).

Denial of the resurrection undermines moral urgency (1 Cor 15:32). It is not simply that Christians do good in order to be rewarded and avoid evil so as not to be punished. Nevertheless, "if the dead are not raised," there is no moral accountability.<sup>104</sup> Then the tranquilizing pursuit of pleasure in the face of despair—"Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die" (Isa 22:13)—becomes attractive. Why would anyone pursue a mission that entailed the experience of considerable pain in the cause of a "gospel" predicated on a fraud and possessing neither help in the present nor hope for the future (see 1 Cor 15:12-19)? To live for a lie and die for nothing would be the ultimate form of folly.

**Exhortations (15:33-34).** The Epicurean pursuit of pleasure—eating and drinking—was considered by its first-century opponents to be the epitome of moral dissolution. In this context, Paul's mention of "some who are ignorant of God" (v 34) seems to identify those in the Corinthian Christian community "who say that there is no resurrection" (v 12). The ethical implications of the fact of the resurrection from the dead occasion three brief moral exhortations in verses 33-34. Those who denied the resurrection were having a negative influence on the majority of the community.

**The Mode of the Resurrection (15:35-56).** Having established the fact of the resurrection in verses 12-34, Paul turns in this section to a discussion of its mode. To explain the nature of resurrection existence he draws upon botanical, zoological, and astronomical analogies (vv 35-41). He insists that the resurrection is both spiritual and bodily (vv 42-44a). He resorts again to the Adam-Christ contrast (vv 44b-49; see vv 21-22) to bolster his arguments, before conceding that the nature of resurrection existence finally remains an impenetrable "mystery" (vv 50-57). He concludes this section and the entire discussion of the resurrection from the dead with three exhortations (v 58; see vv 33-34).

**Analogies (15:35-41).** Paul introduces this major section of his discussion of the resurrection with what appears to be a hypothetical question. The opening words, "But someone may ask," anticipate a potential objection arising from the preceding discussion. They prepare for the mutually clarifying questions, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?" (v 35). The first might be interpreted to mean, "By what means are dead people raised?" or, "By what power are they raised?" But the second question makes it clear that his concern was with the *mode*, not the means of resurrection existence. The question's formulation makes it clear that Paul could conceive of no other resurrection mode than some kind of bodily existence. Paul characterizes any reader who would ask such questions as "foolish" (v 36). To demonstrate their folly he appeals to analogies.

**The Resurrection Body (15:42-44a).** The application of these analogies becomes explicit only in verses 42-44a. "So it will be with the resurrection of the dead" (v 42a). The resurrection body is not "spiritual" in the sense of "immaterial" but in the sense that it is "supernatural"—a body suited to "the eschatological existence that is under the ultimate domination of the Spirit."<sup>105</sup>

**Christ and Adam (15:44b-49).** In this section Paul returns to the earlier Adam-Christ contrast (vv 21-22) referring to Gen 2:7 to elaborate on the contrast between the “natural” and “spiritual body” (v 44b). As a result of his creation, “the first man Adam became a living being” (v 45a). Presumably as a result of his resurrection from the dead, Christ, “the last Adam [became] a life-giving spirit” (v 45b).

By referring to “the first . . . Adam” and “the last Adam” Paul intends to point out a contrastive resemblance between Adam and Christ (as he also does in Rom 5:12-21). In what sense are the two alike and yet different? First, whereas Adam received life as a gift, Christ gives life. And whereas Adam is described as “physical,” Christ is described as “spiritual.” The physical Adam came chronologically earlier than the spiritual Adam (v 46). “The first man” was of earthly origin; “the second man,” of heavenly origin (v 47; see v 49). Paul identifies the material from which Adam was made—“dust” (see Gen 2:7), but says nothing of Christ’s substance. Both Adams became founders of human families, the one’s destined to death; the other’s, to life (see 1 Cor 15:22). Those who belong to the earthly man’s family are, like he, of earthly origin. Those who belong to the heavenly man’s family are, like he, of heavenly origin (v 48). “Just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven” (v 49). Here Paul seems to suggest that the Christian’s resurrection body will be like that of the Risen Christ. But this offers little help to those of us denied a resurrection appearance.

**Mortal Clothed with Immortality (15:50-57).** Paul begins verse 50 with two roughly parallel negative declarations. Both sentences use the verb “inherit.” The first insists that “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God”; the second, that “the perishable [cannot] inherit the imperishable.” The language of inheritance involves acquiring possession of or receiving something as a gift. In verse 53, Paul changes the imagery and insists that “the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable.” Humans as presently constituted are doomed to die. To acquire deathless qualities, we must be changed.

What does Paul mean by “the kingdom of God”? The parallel with “the imperishable” suggests that Paul’s usage is not simply to be equated with the kingly rule of God, partially realized on earth, as in the Synoptic Gospels. Instead, here as earlier in 1 Corinthians, it seems to identify the realm of resurrection existence—what we customarily mean by heaven. The expression “flesh and blood” seems to mean “humankind.” But the context would seem to identify not simply humans per se, but humans as “perishable,” “mortal,” “earthly” creatures of dust (vv 50, 53, 47-49).

The “mystery” does not seem to be a rational explanation for the resurrection. It is instead information concerning the circumstances of living believers at the time of the resurrection. Believers who are alive at the time of the Second Coming will experience a transformation as radical as the resurrection of those who die before Christ’s return. “We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed” (v 51).

It is not simply death, but “flesh and blood” that must be overcome, or rather transformed. Although “the perishable” cannot enter resurrection existence directly, when Christ returns, “the dead will be raised imperishable” and the living “will be changed” (v 52). When mortal existence gives way to immortality, then God will eliminate death from human experience (v 54). Death is defeated, robbed of its victory, its sting removed (v 55).

The metamorphosis of the living and the resurrection of the dead will occur instantaneously—"in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye," and simultaneously—when Christ returns—"at the last trumpet" (v 52; see 1 Thess 4:16; Mt 24:31; Rev 11:15). Just as trumpets announced the dawning of the new year in Israel's ancient festival cycle (Lev 23:23-25; Num 29:1-6), so they will announce the dawning of the new age.

At the Second Coming God will raise the dead "never to die again" and change the dead into "what cannot die" (1 Cor 15:52-53, TEV). It is apparently in this sense that we shall become like the Risen Christ (see v 49). "For . . . since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him" (Rom 6:9). When Christ comes again, the God who raised him from the dead "will also give life to [our] mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in [us]" (Rom 8:11).

In 1 Corinthians 15:55 Paul quotes Hosea 13:14—"Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" The rhetorical question addresses death-personified with a taunt, mocking its defeat. Paul's point seems to be that sin, as the cause of death, will be finally eliminated with the return of Christ? Is it to suggest that resurrection ends the possibility of human sin and rebellion, that man's moral probation is over? Or is it only to celebrate the final defeat of both Death and Sin, conceived as personal powers.

Although God will only in the future deprive death of its victory, he is presently giving "us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor 15:57). In what does our victory consist? Does Paul have in mind the present freedom from sin that may mark the Christian's existence (see Rom 6)? Or is he referring to the paradox of life in the midst of death vividly expressed in 2 Corinthians 4:10-16? Perhaps Paul's point is simply that the victory Christ is winning by defeating God's enemies (1 Cor 15:20-28) is our victory as well. Just as the benefits of his death and resurrection accrue to us, so his future victories will be for us.

**Conclusion: Victory (15:58).** Christ's resurrection from the dead in the past, his ongoing defeat of God's enemies in the present, and the future certainty of his final conquest of death provides the basis for the conclusion of 1 Corinthians 15. Paul's "therefore" reaches back to the consequences of Christ's resurrection described in verses 20-57. On the basis of his victory, which is ours as well, Paul makes three appeals.

The first and second are essentially synonymous—"Stand firm" and "Let nothing move you." The third appeal exhorts the Corinthians to give themselves "fully to the work of the Lord." The motivation for their work was the knowledge that their "labor in the Lord [was] not in vain." The effectiveness of Christian activity is based on the certain victory of Christ. Empowered by the Spirit of the Risen Christ and motivated by the privilege of participation in his winning cause, the Christian may invest his or her energies fully in "work" that is assured of ultimate success.

But what kinds of "work" or "labor" did Paul have in mind? Did he refer to evangelism and other specifically Christian activities? Or was his vision more inclusive? If Christ's present activity is the defeat of all the enemies of God in every realm of life, are the Christian's activities less extensive? Are we also to think of efforts to conquer political oppression and dreaded diseases as among the victorious human labors that contribute to Christ's final victory? If so, "the work of the Lord" requires the dedicated efforts of the entire body of Christ, not simply the ordained clergy. Even mundane tasks take on eternal significance.

## God with Us—Revelation 21 and 22

What will heaven be like? John's vision of the final hope of Christians is quite different from much contemporary talk about heaven. He does not visualize people going up there, but "heaven" coming down here. Unlike the vague hopes of "cultural Christians," he does not imagine that everyone will go there. Heaven, as the home of God, is prepared only for a holy people. And unlike the prejudiced and the parochial imaginations of some so-called Christians, however, John expected that heaven to be populated by redeemed people of every race and social class.

But John does not use the familiar language of heaven, so we refer instead to "the new order." His intent to make his readers homesick for a reality they had never experienced—to help them turn their backs on the values of the order of existence dominated by Rome and all it represented. The language he employed in his description can scarcely be taken literally. But if this is only imagery, what must the reality be like! In the face of a world in which men and women sell their souls for money, John portrayed a world in which gold was so insignificant they paved streets with it (Rev 21:21). Encouraging to the persecuted Christians of Asia, such imagery may trouble modern Christians who imagine they can have their gold and heaven too. God with us (vv 1-3) makes everything new (vv 4-8) in the holy city (vv 22-27).

**God Is with Us (Rev 21:1-3).** John saw the realization of Isaiah's vision of a new heaven and a new earth (Is 65:17-25; 66:22; Mt 19:28; Rom 8:19-21). Thus, the passing away of the first heaven and the first earth cannot mean the end of the created order, but its renewal/recreation. Nor does no longer any sea suggest the literal absence of large bodies of water in God's new order. "The river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God" (Rev 22:1) must be "what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal" in John's earlier vision of heaven (4:6).

The "sea" that will disappear is the home of the dragon and the beast (Rev 13). What will be absent in the new order is all that this "sea" had come to represent in the old order—rebellion, unrest, turmoil, chaos, separation. For John, on the island of Patmos, separated from home, the Aegean Sea was not a thing of beauty. It reminded him of the old order—of death, mourning, crying, pain, evil, and night (21:1, 4; 22:3, 5). In God's new order, "righteousness is at home" (2 Pet 3:13, NRSV). This is the eternal home of a holy God and his holy people.

The transformation of the old order would make it a fit place for God and his people to live together in a fellowship they had not enjoyed since the ancient rupture in the Garden of Eden (see Gen 2–3). Heaven and earth would be one. As an urban-dweller, John's vision of the new order was not like Isaiah's vision of "the great outdoors" rid of the violent struggle to survive (as in Isa 11). It was instead of the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. The description of the Holy City, new Jerusalem, relies on imagery largely borrowed from Ezekiel 40–48.

That this is imagery pure and simple is clear from the city's description, prepared and ready "as a bride" beautifully dressed for her husband. As in Revelation 19:7 and 21:9-21 the Church Triumphant, the holy people of God, is metaphorically identified as the bride of Christ (cf. Isa 49:18; 54:6; 61:10; 2 Cor 11:2; Gal 4:26).

The description of the new Jerusalem in Revelation 21:9-21 cannot be taken literally by any stretch of the imagination. Revelation never refers to the earthly city Jerusalem by that name (see 3:12; 11:8; 21:10). Consider the dimensions of this Jerusalem—a cube 1,500 miles on each side. The entire Holy Land occupies a territory of only 150 by 70 miles. It is perhaps no coincidence that 1,500 miles is the distance from Jerusalem to Rome. New Jerusalem is pictured as a gigantic cubic apartment building with a perimeter of 6,000 miles. Reading such picture language should lead us, not to break out our calculators, but to contemplate the magnitude and attractiveness of the Church God has in mind. The cube symbolized the city's perfection (see 1 Kings 6:19-20). The dimensions John uses are all multiples of 12—the symbolic number of Israel's tribes and of the apostles of Christ. There can be no place more perfect than this.

John saw not only the end of the old order but the dawning of a new intimacy between God and human beings. Gone was the radical transcendence that made God seem inaccessible and aloof. A heavenly voice thundered the news with divine authority. "Now the dwelling of God is with men." Of course, the new order is not a males-only fraternity. What John meant was that God will live with "the human race" (NAB). The word "dwelling" in Greek is *skene*—"tabernacle." Because it shares the same consonants as the Hebrew term "Shekinah"—the glorious presence of God with his people, the two concepts were often equated.

"They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God" (cf. Ezek 37:26-28; Is 7:14; 25:8; 35:10; Zech 2:11; 8:8; Mt 1:23; 18:20; 28:20; Jn 1:14; Rev 7:17). "The voice from the throne gives the permanent guarantee of those privileges which have always been enjoyed by those who, refusing to be at home in the old order, have lived as citizens of the city whose builder and maker is God" (Heb 11:8-16). The new order will be heaven because God will be there.

The immediate presence of God brings an end to sorrow and all that caused it. For with the coming close of God, "He will wipe every tear from their eyes" (cf. Isa 25:6-8; 35:10; 51:11; Rev 7:17). "There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (cf. Rev 7:16; Mt 5:3-12; 1 Cor 15:24). John's vision of the future is remarkably similar to Paul's thoroughly apocalyptic understanding of Christian conversion in the present. "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Cor 5:17; cf. Gal 6:15). The new order of reality will only complete what God has already begun to do in the lives of his people.

**God Makes Everything New (Rev 21:5-8).** When God renews the created order, hope becomes reality. God, who was seated on the throne (cf. Rev 1:8; see 4:1-11), assured John, "I am making everything new!" (cf. Isa 43:19). God's promises are already being fulfilled (see Rev 19:9). The trials of the old order are really birth pangs announcing the coming of the new (see Rom 8:18-25). God said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." John, put this in your book; you can count on it!

The fulfillment of God's promise brings history to its consummation. Thus, God could say, "It is done" (cf. Rev 16:17). The work of redemption has been accomplished.

The remarkable words reported of the risen Christ in Revelation 1:8 seem less shocking as the words of God, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End" (see also the notes on 22:13). God is the source and destination of all that



exists. The end is not an event but a person. "From him and through him and to him are all things" (Rom 11:36; cf. 1 Cor 8:6; Col 1:16). In the new order, God will be "all in all" (1 Cor 15:28, NRSV).

God, the hidden object of all human striving, promises, "To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life" (cf. Isa 55:1; Jn 4:10-14; 7:37-38; Rev 7:17; 22:1, 17). "Life-giving water" (NAB) is God's free gift of himself to all who will receive him (see Rom 3:24). No one will be dissatisfied with the new order.

The conditional promises of the risen Christ to the churches of Asia are paraphrased as the words of God. All who conquer "will inherit all this" (see Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21; cf. Gal 4:4-7; Rom 8:14-17). The nature of the inheritance is not defined in terms of material wealth nor is the promise realized only upon the death of the Father. It is not gifts but God himself who is the heritage of believers. The ancient promise to the Messiah will be the experience of all God's people: "I will be his God and he will be my son" (cf. 2 Sam 7:14; Ps 89:26-27; Jn 1:12; 2 Cor 6:18; 1 Jn 3:1-3). The new order will be one unending, joyful family reunion (see Rev 22:3-5).

The reminder that sin is not welcome in the new order diverts John's attention briefly to the sad fate of the unbelieving and the heinous sins they refused to forsake. Finally unrepentant, they are like the devil. The new order is not for everyone. Only the holy will be there. Those who live in self-obsession will share the awful fate of Satan and his cohorts. "Their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death" (see 19:20 and 20:14-15). What a contrast between the life-giving water and the lake that drowns its victims!

**God Is in the Holy City (Rev 21:9-27).** The angel mentioned in 21:9 is the one who had earlier invited John, "Come, I will show you the punishment of the great prostitute, who sits on many waters" (17:1). Thus, the visions of fallen Babylon in Revelation 17-19 stand in sharp contrast to the visions of the new Jerusalem in 21-22. The same angel now invites John to view a quite different sight. "Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb." This is the Holy City, new Jerusalem.

John notes that there was no temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. This may seem to contradict the earlier imagery of Revelation that refers to the dwelling place of God as a heavenly temple (see the notes on 3:12 and 7:15; see also 11:1, 19; 14:15, 17; 15:5-6, 8; 16:1; 17:1). The point is the same, however. The city is the heavenly temple. Gone is the distinction of the sacred and the profane. The entire city of God is a "Sanctuary." This city is a place whose citizens—every one a priest (see Rev 1:6)—are wholly committed to the worship of God alone (cf. Jn 4:21). This is their all-consuming passion. God's presence permeates the entire city (cf. Isa 24:23; 60:1, 19). Transcendence has been replaced by immanence. "The Lamb," Revelation's favorite designation for Christ (see the notes on Rev 5:6, 8, 12, and 13) is scarcely distinguished from the Father. The two constitute a single temple. The new order is preoccupied with worship.

John makes the same point with another striking image (21:23). God's glory alone and unmediated, provides the citizens of New Jerusalem with all the good that light provided in the old order. John does not say that there was no sun, moon, or lamp—only that they were unnecessary, superfluous (cf. Isa 60:19-20; Jn 8:12). "Now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then

I will know fully, even as I have been fully known" (1 Cor 13:12, NRSV). In the new order, knowing God will be enough.

John's earlier visions reported divine judgment visited on the nations (11:18; 13:7; 14:8; 16:19; 17:15; 18:3, 23; 19:15; 20:8) and their kings (see 6:15; 16:14, 16; 17:2, 18; 18:3, 9; 19:18-19). In 21:24 he holds out another hope. The nations will walk by the light of the Holy City. The kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it (see 1:5). God does not simply destroy the old order; he transforms it. All that is truly valuable in the old order will be taken into the new. Revelation 21:26 parallels 21:24 (still citing Isa 60:11). The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it. "The treasure and wealth of the nations will be" there (NAB). Nothing of real value in this world will be missing in the new order.

John foresees the fulfillment of the hope of Isaiah 60:3-11 (also cited in Rev 15:4): "All nations will come and worship before [God], for [his] righteous acts have been revealed" (see Rev 10:11; 12:5; and 22:2). This might suggest that the wicked nations are ultimately spared, that judgment purges but does not destroy them. But such hopes for universal salvation are challenged by many other biblical passages. The slain Lamb "purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation" (5:9). Thus, the point is that redeemed people come "from every nation, tribe, people and language" to stand "before the throne and in front of the Lamb" (Rev 7:10).

Revelation 21:25 makes much the same point as 21:23 (citing Isa 60:11 and Zech 14:7). John's experience made it impossible to imagine an unwallled city. But a 200-foot high (wide?) wall (see Rev 21:17) could scarcely defend a 1,500 mile high city. Each of the 12 gates of the Holy City were made of a single pearl (see v 21). (Just imagine the size of the oyster!) But these gates are purely decorative. Since there are no enemies to fear, they will never be shut. The city's perpetual day leaves no room for the violence sinful people perpetrate in the night of the present evil order. The new order is a place of perfect safety.

Nothing is excluded from the new order except what is not holy (v 27). As in verse 8, this serves as a warning to John's readers. Because the judgment of the wicked and the renewal of the natural order will cleanse the earth, nothing and no one unholy will ever enter the Holy City (cf. Isa 52:1). The new order will be the home of the sanctified. No one who does what is shameful or deceitful should expect to have a part in the new order of holiness (Rev 21:8). Only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life (20:12 and 15) will share in the splendor of the Holy City. The new order is for the "called, chosen and faithful followers" of the crucified and risen Christ (17:14).

Three times the epilogue of the Book of the Revelation reports the words of the Risen Jesus, "I am coming soon!" (22:7, 12, and 20). "The time is near" (v 10) reinforces the same urgent message. Nearly 2,000 years of history have made it impossible to understand this to mean that the literal end of the world was about to occur. If this is what John intended, he was mistaken. Have 2,000 years made Revelation irrelevant? Or does the Church still risk its right to the tree of life by compromising with fallen Babylon? Has God's gracious delay of judgment lulled the Church into joining ranks with the scoffers (see 2 Pet 3:3-15a)? "Where is this 'coming' he promised?" (v 4).

Has the Church lost the vision of Father Abraham, who "was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (Heb 11:10)? Or of Moses,

who “regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward” (v 26)? Were those who steadfastly refused to trade the new order for a stake in the present world order misguided fools? The Book of Revelation says “No.”

All who prepared themselves for the Second Coming across 20 centuries and eventually died without seeing it have come to the end of their personal world. And so will we. Every life history has an end—sooner than anyone expects.

**Keep the Words of This Book (Rev 22:7-11).** To keep “the prophetic message of” (NJB) Revelation is not simply to cherish or protect it. And it is not merely to “believe” that Christ is coming soon. It is to follow its instructions. It is to be constantly ready for Christ’s return by repenting of known sin, living a holy life, resisting the pressure to compromise with the world’s perverse value system, and worshiping God alone. Those who do so are assured of a happy future. Those who do not are faced with the solemn warning of 22:11.

Reproved again (vv 8-10; see 19:10) for trying to worship an angel, John was reminded, Worship God! This is the central message of the entire book. For to do so is already to participate in the life of the new order in the midst of the old (see 4:10; 5:14; 7:11; 11:1, 16; 14:7; 15:4; 19:4). Every glimpse of the new order offered in the visions of Revelation is a scene of worship.

The angel instructed John: “Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book” (22:10). Unlike Daniel, who was told to do the opposite (Dan 8:26; 10:14; 12:4, 9), John was assured that the time of the prophecy’s fulfillment was near (1:3 and 22:7 and 12). At the least, this presumes that the message of the book was relevant to the churches of Asia to whom John wrote (see chs 1; 2; and 3). Did John misunderstand the revelation, or have most interpreters misunderstood the Revelation?

At first glance the message of 22:11 seems strange. The spirit of prophecy and the earlier invitations of the book both call people to repent (see vv 4, 16, 21-22; 3:3, 19; 9:20-21; 16:9, 11). But this verse is not a denial of the possibility of repentance. It is, in fact, a warning to those who would delay repenting. Over time, behaviors become habitual; patterns, fixed; character, formed. And it becomes virtually impossible to change. Death-bed repentances are rare. And once Christ returns, the opportunity to repent is over (see Mt 25:10; Lk 13:25; 2 Pet 3:9-15).

When the end comes, those who do wrong continue to do wrong; those who are evil continue to be evil; and those who do right, continue to do right; and those who are holy continue to be holy (see Dan 12:9-10; Ezek 3:27). The older people get, the more like themselves they become. The time to repent is now, while there is still time to change.

**The Reward of the Faithful (Rev 22:12-15).** The words of Jesus in 22:7 are repeated in verse 12. “Behold, I am coming soon!” (see 3:11). In this instance, it is followed with the reminder, “My reward is with me” (cf. Isa 40:10; see Rev 11:18). The basis for rewards (and punishments) Christ will distribute is the same as in 20:13. “I will give to everyone according to what he has done.”

In 22:13 Christ refers to himself in the words that identify God the Father. “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End” (see 1:8; 21:6; cf. 1:17). Jesus Christ is fully God (see 22:16).

According to 22:14 those who will participate in the new order are those who “have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (7:14). The present tense—“all who are washing their robes” (TLB)—may be significant. The persecuted Christians of Asia were not to imagine that they could depend upon their past experience of conversion. The present crisis called for continuing faithfulness to the slain Lamb (see Rev 17:14; cf. 1 Jn 1:7). The blessing the faithful may expect is the eternal life in the new order. In the terms of this vision, this entails entrance through the gates into the city new Jerusalem and the right of access to the tree of life (see 22:2 and the notes on 21:22-27).

There is no salvation outside the Church (22:15). Only those who are part of the being-saved community on earth will be a part of the finally-saved community of the new order. The list of seven vices that excluded people from the Holy City was not posted in the public squares of the Asian cities to which the Book of Revelation was sent. These were warnings to those inside the churches of the need to remain faithful.

The warnings largely repeat the cautions sounded in verses 8 and 27. There was no room for compromise with the enemy. People were either inside or outside the saved community. In the earlier passage evildoers were cast into hell; here they are merely “outside” the city of God. Both images convey the same reality (see 2 Thess 1:9). If these are mere images, what must be the awful reality of life eternally separated from God!

**An Invitation and a Warning (Rev 22:16-19).** The epilogue of the Book of Revelation repeats many of the themes of its prologue. Both present an exalted view of Jesus Christ. “I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches” (22:16; see 1:1, 4, 11; and chs 2 and 3). In Greek the word “you” is plural. The message was not for John alone but for all who would receive it as the revelation of Jesus Christ.

The Spirit refers to the Holy Spirit. His presence in the lives of believers anticipates in the present the future intimacy with God that will characterize the new order (22:17; 2 Cor 1:22; 5:5; Eph 1:14). He assists struggling Christians as they pray (Rom 8:26). But he also challenges the unbelieving world to change its mind about Christ (Jn 16:7-11). The bride is the ideal Church (see Rev 19:7; 21:2, 9). The plea of both is “Come!”

In the present context this is not a prayer for Christ’s return, as it is in Revelation 22:20. It is an invitation for all to accept Christ’s offer of salvation. John urged those who heard the public reading of his prophecy (see the notes on 1:3) likewise to invite unbelievers, “Come!”

As long as Christ’s coming is delayed, the door of opportunity remained ajar, and there is time to repent. Thus, John repeated Christ’s offer in 21:6, “To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life.” The offer is an open invitation: “Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life.” God’s saving grace to its recipients—to “anyone who wants” it (TLB) was “without cost” (NASB). But it was not cheap. It was purchased at great personal cost to God—the death of the Lamb (see 1:5; 5:9; 7:14). In Revelation 22:18, the good news of salvation becomes a warning of the dangers of rebellion. “I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book” presume that the book was intended to be heard (see 1:3). John warned his hearers

not to tamper with the message God had revealed to him. If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book (see Rev 11:15-18; cf. Deut 4:2; 7:32). The intent of John's caution was not to discourage people from attempting to understand the book or from assisting others in doing so. It was instead to warn those inclined to "improve" the book by deliberately distorting its message. Don't even think about it!<sup>106</sup>

The punishment for perverting the message of the Book of Revelation by corrupt additions takes the typical form of biblical justice. Punishment will be in kind. Those who do "x" will have "x" done to them (see Rev 11:18).

The warning continues in 22:19—this time to anyone who takes words away from this book of prophecy. The caution was not to discourage editors from offering studies of selected passages from Revelation. It was directed against efforts to misrepresent the book's message by self-conscious omissions. The punishment for doing so again takes the classical form of biblical justice. "If anyone cuts anything out of the prophecies in this book, God will cut off his share" (NJB) of final salvation. God will take away from him his share in the tree of life (see v 2 and the notes on v 14) and in the holy city (21:1–22:5), which are described in this book.

**Benediction (Rev 22:20-21).** The explicit prayer, "Come, Lord Jesus," appears to be a Greek translation of an Aramaic formulation from the earliest church in Judea. Remarkably, the apostle Paul preserves it in transliteration in his first letter to Greek-speaking Christians of Corinth—"Maranatha" (1 Cor 16:22, KJV). It seems to have been a prayer Christians repeated whenever they celebrated the Lord's Supper. It was a constant reminder of his saving death, his living presence, and the sure promise of his return (see 1 Cor 11:26).

# Lesson 19: Future Hope

## Due This Lesson

Review of biblical passages  
Reading of NDBT selections  
Resource summary/response  
Journaling

## Learner Objectives

At the end of this lesson, participants should

- summarize the main strands of biblical eschatology

## Homework Assignments

Review the following biblical passages: Psalm 18,19; Matthew 5-7; 8:5-13; 19:16-21; 20:20-28; Philippians 2:1-13; James 3:1-12; 1 John 4:13-21. Prepare theological statements that these verses/chapters seem to support.

Read the following sections in NDBT: Holiness; Humility and Pride; Righteousness.

Identify a mature Christian who has modeled to you a life well-lived. Interview that person, asking what biblical passages and principles guided his or her major life decisions. Take verbatim notes on the answer. Summarize and evaluate your interview in about two pages.

Make a list of criteria that you would use to determine who should be called great and list Biblical characters that fit your criteria.

Write in your journal. Reflect on your sense of hope. Do you tend to be optimistic or pessimistic in most areas of life? How does that affect your faith?

## Isaiah 24–27

“Isaiah Apocalypse.” Its name derives from its similarity to the Book of Revelation—Greek: *apokalypsis*. Here the prophet exploits all the resources of poetic symbolism at his disposal to paint his portrait of “the day of the Lord.”

### The Lord’s Banquet (25:6-9)

- Zion’s hill, as the earthly residence of Israel’s God, was unique. For it was here in the Jerusalem Temple that he had chosen to make his presence known.
- “The LORD Almighty” in Hebrew is *Yahweh sebaoth*, literally “Yahweh of hosts.”
- At Yahweh’s enthronement “all peoples” would be invited (v 6)
- Early Christians conceived of the heavenly banquet as the consummation of the union between Christ, the sacrificial Lamb, and his Bride, the Church (Rev 21:9). Thus, final salvation is “the wedding supper of the Lamb” (19:9).
- The banquet is a celebration of salvation, which we are persuaded has already begun . . . For Christians the Lord’s Supper celebrates our present and future communion with our Lord.
- Only those whose meat it is to do the will of God (Jn 4:34) will enjoy a part in the messianic banquet. Only those who trust in the Lord alone will dwell in the coming celestial city of God.

### The Lord’s City (26:1-6)

- The setting of God’s new start for his redeemed people will be a new Jerusalem.
- The previous generation had trusted in vain that the presence of the Temple in their midst insured them against the threat of judgment, no matter what they did (see Jer 4:4-15).
- National security was to be found only in Yahweh, not in the compromising political alliances.
- Unless ours is the Lord’s city, we build in vain (Ps 127:1), even on Mt. Zion.

## Isaiah 24—27

### **The Lord's Salvation (26:16-21)**

- Invasion by foreign superpowers brought great distress to the people of Israel and Judah (v 1). Assyria and Babylon were instruments of God's discipline for his people.
- As in Isaiah 25:8, the imagery of resurrection in 26:19 refers to the reconstitution of the nation.
- We cannot save ourselves. We cannot keep ourselves saved. We cannot improve on the salvation that is God's alone to give.
- Deliverance would come, but not before he had punished the nations he used to execute his sentence of judgment on his wayward people. They, too, would know the sting of his justice.
- We know that the age of final salvation has dawned with the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. And yet, we also know that the days of our exile in an alien land are not yet over.



# Lesson 20: The Way to a Perfect Life and True Greatness

## Due This Lesson

Bible review  
NDBT reading  
Interview paper  
Criteria and Bible characters considered to be great  
Journaling

## Learner Objectives

At the end of this lesson, participants should

- be able to describe the biblical concept of perfection and greatness

## Homework Assignments

Review the following Bible Passages: Exodus 34; Ruth; Jonah; Luke 1; John 13; Romans 9–12; Ephesians 2; Philippians 2; and 1 Timothy 1. Prepare theological statements that these chapters/books seem to support.

Read the following sections in NDBT: Blessing, Faith, Faithfulness; Gentleness, Grace; Healing; Hospitality; Mercy/Compassion; Poor/Poverty; and Ruth.

Read **1** of the following:

- Resource 20-6, "Covenant Loyalty—Ruth"
- Resource 20-7, "Mercy—Romans 12"

Write a 1-page summary.

Rent and watch **1** of the following videos/DVDs:

- *Babette's Feast*
- *Tender Mercies*
- *Unforgiven*
- *Les Miserables*

Those who select/assigned the same title will need to work together—by email correspondence or group meeting—preparing a brief synopsis of the film watched. Select a short film clip that is the real key to the biblical/theological theme. Select a student to present the synopsis and film clip to the entire class.

Write in your journal. Reflect on your life in relation to the biblical concepts of perfection and greatness.

## Perfect in the Old Testament

The roots that are used most frequently to express some form of perfection are:

- *Shlm*, which carries the primary meaning of whole and proper
- *Tm*, which carries the concept of complete integrity and rightness

They imply that the subject is as it ought to be and not deformed or flawed.

***Tam***—the word implies righteous living

- Genesis 6:9; Job 1:8
- Genesis 17:1
- Psalms 18:30, 32; 19:7; 37:37; 64:4

***Shalem***—The root of this second most common word associated with “perfection” implies that the proper state of being—maturity, relationship, completeness—has been or is to be achieved.

- Deuteronomy 25:15
- 1 Kings 8:61
- Isaiah 38:3
- 1 Chronicles 28:9
- 1 Kings 15:3
- 1 Kings 15:14

There is an expectation in the Old Testament that human beings would behave with integrity that produces the kind of relationships that would result in the well-being of the person, the family, the nation, and above all in the relationship with God.

## Perfect in the New Testament

***Akribos***—The term *akribos* implies a perfection of accuracy.

- Luke 1:3
- Acts 18:26; 23:15; 23:20; 24:22

***Teleios***—Implies the perfection of being finished, ended, mature, or complete.

- Matthew 5:48
- Matthew 19:21
- John 17:23
- Romans 12:2
- 1 Corinthians 13:10
- Galatians 3:3
- Ephesians 4:13
- Philippians 3:14
- Colossians 1:28
- Hebrews 2:10; 5:9; 9:9
- Hebrews 6:1
- Hebrews 7:11; 19: 10:1
- Hebrews 12:23
- James 1:4; 2:22
- James 3:2
- 1 John 4:17-18

***Katartidzo***—Perfect, mend, prepare, restore, fit properly, be perfect and be joined perfectly

- Luke 6:40
- 2 Corinthians 13:11
- Hebrews 13:20-21
- 1 Peter 5:10

## Great in the Old and New Testaments

The words translated as “great” in the Old Testament seldom refer to moral greatness.

- *Gadol*—indicating large size or weight or power
- *Rab*—abundance, much, a large quantity

The only connection that these words seem to have to moral greatness in humans is to the lack of it, for they are frequently used to describe the great sin and sins of Israel and of Judah or of kings and nations.

They are also used to describe the greatness or power or strength and wisdom of God.

- Proverbs 24:5
- 1 Kings 4:29

*Kbd* is sometimes used to express greatness or heaviness but is most frequently translated “glory” and used to describe that aspect of Yahweh; or “honor” where it is used of God and humankind.

- 1 Kings 3:13; 2 Chronicles 1:11
- Proverbs 15:33; 18:12; 22:4; 29:23

Three Greek words are usually translated “great.”

- *meGas*, also translated as “large,” “mighty” and “strong”
- *polus*, also translated as “many,” “much,” “abundant” and “plenteous”
- *meizon*, a comparative also translated as “elder”

Differences in the Old Testament use of “great”

- absence of applying the adjective to sin
- use of the word as a noun
  - Luke 1:15, 32
  - Matthew 5:19; Luke 6:35
  - Matthew 20:26; Mark 10:43

## Old Testament Personages

### Enoch, Noah, and Job

Are noted as perfect or persons who pleased God

These men teach us that the indicator of a blameless or perfect person is faith, an obedient life lived in fellowship with God.

### Abraham

- Was instructed to walk before God and be perfect—blameless
- Being blameless or perfect is not a matter of being flawless in every aspect

### Joseph

- The Spirit of God guided him
- Being a man of God is tied to the maintenance of his relationship to God that included conduct in harmony with character of God

### Leaders in Israel

- None of the great leaders or prophets of the united or divided kingdoms are called perfect.
- The expectation was obedience to the instruction of Yahweh and presentation of sacrifices to cover failures both known and unknown.

### The Perfect King

- David was chosen because God looked for “a man after his own heart” (1 Sam 13:14).
- He was perfect even though flawed and sinful. How could this be? We need to remember that *shalem* is not flawlessness or sinlessness, but rather the maintenance of a right relationship toward God.

## Biblical Expectations

### Psalmist's Advice—Psalm 119:11

- Knowledge of the Torah, the instruction from God, is of primary assistance in discovering what sin is and how to live to avoid it.

### Micah's Classic Statement—Micah 6:8

- Act justly or do the things that are right and good.
- Love mercy—*chesed*.
- Walk humbly with your God.

### Jesus' Standard of Love and Commitment

- Jesus expected true righteousness, the observance of the spirit of the Law.
- Jesus expected true love for God that is only possible when we love our fellow humans.
- Jesus expected his followers to participate in the work of the cross, to follow him and take the good news of the kingdom of God to the entire world.

### Control of the Tongue—Matthew 5:37; 15:11

- Jesus declares that lies told even when not under oath are of the evil one.
- Jesus also reminds us that the character of a person is revealed by what comes out of his or her mouth.
- Isaiah 6
- James 3:2 and 17

### Control of the Mind—Philippians 2:1-11

- Paul is appealing for a mind-set that is Christlike. He describes the mind-set as one of service—servanthood.

### Servanthood and Greatness—Matthew 20:26

- Servanthood is a declaration of one of the foundation principles for society. Greatness arises from meeting the needs of people.

### Be Perfect—Matthew 5:48

- Perfection is behaving in the same kind and loving way to all people.
- Perfection belongs to those who take the road with Jesus.

## Covenant Loyalty—Ruth

Quotations from NRSV unless otherwise stated

Women's stories are often submerged in the Bible, which generally gives far greater prominence to men. Of course, this reality reflects the patriarchal culture of ancient Israel. Therefore, we should expect that the Bible's rare glimpses into the lives of the women of God are extremely important. Consider the story of Ruth—a tale of two broken women—a mother whose life is shattered—who seems, for a time, to be abandoned by God; and her remarkable foreign daughter-in-law, who becomes God's agent in putting both lives back together again.

The story of Ruth is set "in the days when the judges ruled" (Ruth 1:1). If you have visited the Book of Judges lately in your devotional journey through the Bible, you know that these were days of social and religious chaos—violence and apostasy, war and bloodshed, rape and murder. And so far we've mentioned only what the heroes of the story do. "In those days [of anarchy] there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Jud 21:25, NASB).

And to make matters worse, "there was a famine in the land" (Ruth 1:1). Invading armies will do that to a country. Crops cannot be planted on time when armies are camping in your fields. If you have followed the news from sub-Saharan Africa in recent years, you have seen how devastating civil strife can be, especially when combined with unpredictable weather. Floods delay the planting of seed, and then drought comes when rain is needed most. Locusts devour the sparse crops that grow. Grain intended for seed must be eaten to survive. Disaster begets disaster and disease. People become desperate. Chaos and starvation leave people no reason to stay on their land any longer. Peace-loving people become refugees. And that is how the book of Ruth describes this family—resident aliens.

Elimelech, his wife, Naomi, and their two sons—Mahlon and Chilion—move from Bethlehem in Judah to the land of Moab. Perhaps it is only coincidence, but several clues in our story lead us to conclude that these names are important. In Hebrew, "Bethlehem" means "house of bread"—how ironic that it should be the setting for a famine and family disaster! "Elimelech" means "God is my king"—but God seems to have abandoned this family to fend for themselves. "Naomi" means "pleasant"—a name she comes to disavow in preference for the name "Mara," which means "bitter." "Mahlon" means "sick" and "Chilion" means "dying."

The stories in Genesis about how the patriarchs got their names make us suspect that there's a story behind these names too. We can only guess that Naomi's children were not the strapping young men their farming parents had dreamed of. Subsistence living will do that. In two-thirds of our world even today, half the children born die before age five. Mahlon and Chilion survived to adulthood, but their father died in their land of exile and left their mother a widow. What kind of God can't care for his people any better than this?

As often happens under such circumstances, in the land of Moab the young men married Moabite women. These were not interracial marriages; they were interfaith marriages. Moabites worshiped the god Chemosh and did so in ways that Israel found particularly detestable. Naomi knew that Israel and Moab were distant relatives. But

conflicting claims to the same territory had led to enmity between the two peoples. The Moabites were descendants of Lot, the nephew of Father Abraham. But family relations were strained in that the children of Lot—Moab and Ammon—were the fruit of the incestuous relationship between Lot and his own daughters. And to top it all off, Moab had denied the people of Israel passage through their territory when they were returning home from Egyptian slavery. So serious was the rift between Israel and its neighbor nations that the Law provides: “No Ammonite or Moabite or any of his descendants may enter the assembly of the LORD, even down to the tenth generation” (Deut 23:3, NIV).

The Hebrew narrator does not tell us what Naomi thought about the heritage of her daughters-in-law. It may be more than a matter of curiosity that their names reflect something of their two different characters. In Hebrew the name “Orpah sounds like ‘rebellious’ and Ruth sounds like ‘refreshing.’”<sup>107</sup> Naomi learned that not all foreigners are alike.

Then, as if the family had not experienced enough tragedy, after 10 years in Moab, both of Naomi’s sons died childless. When famine came, at least the family had each other. Now the family was reduced to the brink of extinction. From wife to widow, from mother to childless, Naomi is stripped of her identity. But at least she and her daughters-in-law face the most vulnerable state imaginable in the ancient world—widowhood—together. In the midst of tragedy, Naomi experiences the kind of loyalty and devotion—loving-kindness—from her daughters-in-law associated with the activity of the Lord elsewhere in Scripture.

A rumor from back home brings a glimmer of hope into our tragic story. “Some time later Naomi heard that the LORD had blessed his people by giving them good crops; so she got ready to leave Moab” (Ruth 1:6, TEV). Although Ruth and Orpah are willing to go to Naomi’s homeland, she urges them, “Go back each of you to your mother’s house.” She blesses them with the words, “May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me” (Ruth 1:8). She urges the young women to go on with their lives, to find happiness with new husbands, kisses them good-bye; and weeps with them.

At first, both women insist on accompanying Naomi to her homeland. But she is adamant. “Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me?” (NIV) “It is better for you to return to your own people. Do I have younger sons who could grow up to be your husbands?” (Ruth 1:11, TLB). It was Israel’s custom, sanctioned by the law of levirate marriage (Deut 25:5-10), that the brother of a deceased husband was to marry a childless widow, so that his family line should not be lost and the widow cared for in her old age: Go home. I’m too old to get married again. Even if I married tonight and had sons, would you wait until they had grown up? No, my daughters, that’s impossible. “The LORD has turned against me, and I feel very [bitter about what has happened to you]” (Ruth 1:12-13, TEV).

This is our first hint of what Naomi thought about all these tragic events. She had come to love her daughters-in-law as daughters. But she was a bitter woman. She felt as if the Lord had abandoned her—that her tragedy was divine punishment, visited upon her and those she loved. Once back in her homeland, she tells the people of Bethlehem:



"Do not call me Naomi;  
call me Mara,  
for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me.  
I went out full,  
but the LORD has brought me back empty.  
Why do you call me Naomi,  
since the LORD has witnessed against me  
and the Almighty has afflicted me?" (Ruth 1:20, NASB).

The ancient storyteller reports that Orpah heeded her mother-in-law (Ruth 1:14). But Ruth refused, in words that are perhaps the most profound expression of human loyalty found anywhere in the world's literature: "Do not urge me to leave you or turn back from following you; for where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus may the LORD do to me, and worse, if anything but death parts you and me" (Ruth 1:16-17, NASB). When Naomi saw that Ruth was determined to go with her, she quit arguing with her (v 18). The two walked on in silence to Bethlehem, arriving in mid-March, just in time for the barley harvest (v 22).

Time does not permit us to do more than briefly summarize the rest of the story. And that's a shame, for we have just arrived at the point where the Hebrew author's characteristic way of telling the story begins. Over 50 of the book's 85 verses are taken up with dialogue, so it is obvious that he prefers to tell his story through conversations.

Ever-resourceful Ruth immediately takes it upon herself to care for the needs of the two women by gleaning in the fields behind the grain harvesters. Israel's Law made provision for the poor to provide for themselves by gathering any heads of grain that dropped or were left behind by the harvesters (Lev 19:9-10; 23:22; Deut 24:19). "Chance led" Ruth to a field that happened to belong to Boaz (Ruth 2:3, NJB), a socially prominent and wealthy relative of Naomi's deceased husband (vv 1-2). While she was gleaning, Boaz just happened to arrive at the field from Bethlehem (v 4). Although the biblical author uses this language, it is clear he doesn't believe for a moment that this was pure coincidence.

Boaz greeted his reapers: " 'The LORD be with you.' They answered, 'The LORD bless you.' Then Boaz said to his servant in charge of the reapers, 'Who is this young woman?' The servant answered, 'She is the Moabitess who came back with Naomi. She said, 'Please, let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the reapers.' So she came, and she has been on her feet from early this morning until now, without resting even for a moment' " (vv 4-7, NRSV).

When Boaz learned that Ruth was Naomi's daughter-in-law, he showed her the same loyalty and kindness she had shown her mother-in-law. He offered protection for her as she gleaned, gave her more food than she could eat at mealtime so there would be leftovers for Naomi, and made her work easy and more prosperous by secretly instructing his harvesters to drop some grain deliberately for Ruth.

Still unaware of the identity of her benefactor, Ruth asked, " 'Why have I found favor in your sight, that you should take notice of me, when I am a foreigner?' But Boaz answered her, 'All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before. May the LORD reward

you for your deeds, and may you have a full reward from the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge!’ Then she said, ‘May I continue to find favor in your sight, my lord, for you have comforted me and spoken kindly to your servant, even though I am not one of your servants’ ” (vv 10-13).

When Ruth returned home that evening with two-thirds of a bushel of grain, in amazement Naomi asked, “ ‘Where did you glean today? Blessed be the man who took notice of you.’ So Ruth told her mother-in-law she had worked with Boaz. Then Naomi prayed, ‘May the LORD bless this man. The LORD’s kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!’ Then she told Ruth, ‘The man is a relative of ours, one of our nearest kin’ ” (vv 19-20, NRSV).

Remarkable, isn’t it? A simple act of kindness begins to sweeten Naomi’s bitter spirit. Will Boaz’s kindness to Ruth restore her faith in the God she thought had abandoned her? Is there still hope for this family? At this point in our story, there is only a glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel. The poverty of the two widows is not instantly alleviated by a stroke of good fortune. Ruth continues to glean with Boaz’s servants for another two months—throughout the barley and wheat harvests (v 23).

In chapter 2, it is Ruth’s initiative that sends her to the fields of Boaz in search of food. In chapter 3, we discover that Naomi is also a resourceful woman, as she assumes the role of match-maker. She sends Ruth to Boaz’s grain threshing-floor in search of a spouse. Her plan is as desperate as it is provocative. She urges Ruth to end her mourning for her dead husband, to put on her best clothes and finest perfume, and to discover whether Boaz will see in her something more than Naomi’s loyal daughter-in-law.

When Ruth proposes marriage to Boaz at the threshing floor in their midnight meeting, following Naomi’s directions, Boaz is at first startled. Not recognizing her in the dark, he asks, “Who are you?” Moved by Ruth’s request that he fulfill his family responsibilities to her dead husband, he prays, “ ‘May you be blessed by the LORD, my daughter; this last instance of your loyalty is better than the first; you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich. And now, my daughter, do not be afraid, I will do for you all that you ask, for . . . you are a worthy woman’ ” (Ruth 3:10-11).

But there is a problem with the plan. Boaz explains that, although it is true that he is a close relative, a closer relative exists than he. He promises to speak to the nearer kinsman-redeemer about the matter in the morning. In the safety of the predawn light, Boaz gives Ruth the equivalent of 80 pounds of barley to take back to Naomi as a pledge of his good intentions. (vv 13-17).

When Ruth arrives back at home, Naomi asks, according to most English translations, “How did things go with you, my daughter?” (v 16). But the Hebrew text actually says, “Who are you?” That is, are you Ruth or Mrs. Boaz? We are not told how Naomi reacts when she learned of the complication to her plan presented by the nearer relative. The two women wait nervously and impatiently to see how things will turn out (v 18).

You’ll have to study on your own the curious business transaction described in chapter 4. Suffice it to say that it just so happened that “no sooner had Boaz gone up to the city gate and sat down there than the nearer next-of-kin, of whom Boaz had spoken, by chance came passing by. So Boaz said, “Come over, friend; sit down here.” And he went over and sat down (Ruth 4:1, adapted). Once again, the Hebrew narrator teases

us with the thought that answered prayers are merely coincidence. Both he and we know better.

The nearer kinsman, who declines to redeem Ruth, remains forever anonymous. But the elders of Bethlehem, who witness the transaction, pray for Boaz and Ruth, requesting the LORD that they, like the ancient patriarchs and matriarchs of Israel, may be blessed with children who will make them proud and famous (vv 11-12).

"So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When they came together, the LORD made her conceive, and she bore a son. Then the women said to Naomi, 'Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel! He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him.' Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse. The women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, 'A son has been born to Naomi.' They named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David" (vv 13-17, NRSV).

What a heart-warming story! Nevertheless, at first glance, the book of Ruth does not seem to be a particularly religious book. Unlike other Old Testament books, it treats one episode in the life of an ordinary family from Bethlehem, not the exploits of Israel's spiritual/historical/political giants. It deals with relatively unimportant people and unimportant matters. There are no obvious miracles in the story—no angelic visitors, burning bushes, parted seas, or manna from heaven. On closer inspection, we discover that God is, in fact, the central character in this story. But what kind of God is it who chooses to guide the story from behind the scenes?

This God is the cosmic ruler of the created universe. He is "the Almighty," who left Naomi bitter (Ruth 1:20-21). He was supposed to oversee the world's moral order. He was supposed to dispense appropriate rewards and punishments. He was supposed to connect consequences to their corresponding human actions. But God disappointed Naomi.

And yet Ruth, chapter 1, verses 20 and 21 are unique. Elsewhere the book consistently refers to God as "Yahweh." Represented simply as "the LORD"—in all capital letters—and a few times as "Jehovah" in the King James Version, Yahweh is the covenant name of Israel's God. He revealed himself to Moses at the burning bush as the "I AM." He is not the god of the philosophers, but the God of the fathers and mothers—the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Ex 3) and the God of Rachel, Leah, and Tamar (Ruth 4:11, 12). He is the God who was with Joseph when he was sold into slavery in Egypt (Gen 37–50)—the God who took the side of slaves and overthrew the powerful of Egypt (Exodus)—the God who cares about widows and orphans (Ex 22:22-24; Ps 146:9). And Yahweh is the God who redeems prostitutes, for we learn in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus that Boaz's mother was Rahab, the harlot who hid the Hebrew spies on their mission to Jericho, and whose family was spared when the city was destroyed (Mt 1:5).

Yahweh is the God who invited a childless, elderly couple to become parents of a great nation, not only to be blessed, but to be the means of blessing all nations of the world (Gen 12:3). It was Israel's God, Yahweh, not Moab's god, Chemosh, whom the Moabitess Ruth embraced when she chose to follow Naomi back to her homeland (Ruth 1:16). God was taking care of this family all along, even during the times when it seemed he had abandoned them.

The story of Naomi and Ruth deals with the daily lives of an ordinary Israelite family. Compared to other biblical books, the book of Ruth views the way God works in that sphere from an unusual theological perspective. God acts as the hidden cause of all the gracious events that “just happen.” God does not act intermittently, but continuously. Though he may appear to step into the scene at given key moments, he is actually and actively there every moment. Never forget giving God his due. The story of Naomi, and Ruth, and Boaz is about how God uses the faithfulness of ordinary people to do extraordinary things.

The story of Ruth is an important reminder of the neglected doctrine of divine providence. God is acting continuously in the events of history to bring about his redemptive purposes. This is as true when God gives food to his people following the famine (Ruth 1:6) and when he enables Ruth to conceive (Ruth 4:13) as in those times when things just seem to happen—when life seems far from miraculous. Throughout most of the story, God acts indirectly, through coincidence and human agents. Instead of casting aside God’s involvement in the story, the indirectness increases our awareness of his presence. Extreme understatement serves as an effective overstatement to stress forcefully that Yahweh is indeed very much at work.

Throughout most of the story of Ruth, only the words of the main characters remind us that God is present at all. God’s name is invoked in prayers (Ruth 1:8-9; 2:12, 19, 20; 3:10; 4:11-12), every one of which is answered before the story is complete. And God’s name is invoked in recent blessings recognized as from his hand (2:19, 20; 4:14). Naomi even affirms with bitterness that God is somehow involved in the tragedies of her life (1:20, 21).

Read the prayers of the book of Ruth closely and you will see that human deeds of kindness and covenant-loyalty form the basis of every petition. Human deeds, not direct divine intervention, are the means through which Yahweh exercises his rule in the book. God’s activity is hidden behind the actions of human agents. Ruth gets a husband and Naomi, an heir. But both answers to prayer come through human initiative, not obvious, divine intervention. Human acts of covenant-faithfulness are Yahweh’s acts. But the characters in our story recognize God’s activity only after—not before or during—the fact.

One illustration may demonstrate the point. In Ruth 2:12, Boaz prays that God will reward Ruth’s loyalty to Naomi by giving her refuge under his “wings.” And so, when Ruth petitions Boaz to marry her in 3:9, she pleads, “Spread your cloak over your servant, for you are next-of-kin.” The Hebrew words translated “wings” and “cloak” are identical. Boaz will answer his own prayer by the same covenant-faithfulness for which he commends Ruth.

The Book of Ruth holds out the practice of covenant-loyalty—loving kindness—as the ideal lifestyle of the people of God. The Hebrew author knows that faithfulness in the face of life’s adversities requires extraordinary commitment.

Consider, first, the two daughters-in-law. The narrator does not criticize Orpah for her decision to obey Naomi and return home. She represents one who does the ordinary, the expected. There is nothing wrong with her conduct—except that it is not loyal-love. By contrast, Ruth represents one who does the extraordinary, the unexpected. There is no desire or appeal to rejoin her Moabite family, remarry, and live as her contemporaries would. She is committed to Naomi’s people and God. Even in

Bethlehem, she refused to seek a husband for her own advantage (3:10). She sought a marriage for Naomi's benefit. In such compassionate devotion she stands out as one who lives the life-style of covenant-loyalty.

Second, consider the contrast between Boaz and the unnamed kinsman (4:1-8). The kinsman turns out to be practical in character, one who gladly passed on his duty to someone else when there is no economic advantage to him. One may not fault him for this action, for Israelite custom permitted it—but it is not loving-kindness. By contrast, willing to sacrifice his own means, take on the responsibility for two impoverished widows, Boaz far exceeded his kinsman and modeled the extraordinary demands of covenant-faithfulness.

The Hebrew word *chesed* may be translated covenant-loyalty, loving-kindness, devoted-faithfulness, even grace. This is what New Testament authors have in mind when they use the Greek word *agape*. Such "love" is far more demanding than syrupy sentimentality that most have in mind when they use the word. *Chesed* is a free and gracious act, moving one beyond the call of duty, to assist another. It transcends the bonds of community, of religion, of race.

To love in this biblical sense is risky business. What kind of courage did it require for Ruth to abandon her birth-family to follow Naomi? What kind of courage did it take for Ruth to ask Boaz to marry her? She could not anticipate how he might react to her feminine forwardness—with anger, embarrassment, awkwardness, or acceptance. And what was demanded of Boaz to marry Ruth? He could not anticipate how the elders at the city gate might react to the old man's plans to marry the young foreigner. For both Ruth and Boaz the potential gain is worth the risk. So both do what love demands.

And what about us? Whatever our personal tragedy, the Book of Ruth offers good news: When you come to the end of your rope, remember God is at the other end. God really is working all things together for your eternal good and his loving purpose, even if it doesn't seem like it at the moment (Rom 8:28). And if that purpose is that we should become like Jesus Christ, we should not be surprised when we encounter a cross along the way.

But the Book of Ruth is also a reminder to the rest of us of the demands of steadfast-love, covenant-loyalty, unselfish devotion. God used the selfless love of Ruth to restore the hopes of her embittered mother-in-law. Perhaps God seems to be far away in the experience of some among us—because we have failed to put feet to our prayers, because we have been unwilling to take the risks that love demands, because we have been waiting for some miraculous divine intervention—when God is urging us to take the initiative so that he can act through us.

### Closing Thoughts

Unless I am mistaken, there are some mothers or fathers in our churches who, like Naomi, are bitter over life's disappointments and disasters. Perhaps, they have suffered the loss of a spouse or the death of a child. Or, perhaps, their children have not turned out as they dreamed. The bright, healthy, successful child they hoped for is instead dyslexic, handicapped, struggling with a debilitating disease, strung out on drugs, languishing in prison, or wasting his or her life in self-destructive or irresponsible behavior.

Or, perhaps they have not lived up to their own expectations as “super-mom” or “great-dad.” They feel guilty and frustrated because the demands of their jobs have compromised their maternal/paternal ideals.

Perhaps, there are some in your churches who have lost their marriage as a result of divorce.

I have no idea what other family tragedies are destroying some people in your churches right now. Whatever the problem, can you be Ruth or Boaz to them and encourage them with the good news that God has not forgotten them?

Again, unless I’m mistaken, there are married women in your churches who mourn for the children they longed to have, but have been denied them. Their biological clocks are ticking and their chances of ever becoming a mother seem slim. Their doctor has asked, “Why don’t you consider adoption?” But they’re just not sure this is right for them. They ache for the child they never had. The very mention of the word “abortion” makes their blood boil as they think of those women who’ve thrown away the baby they’re dying to have.

Again, I may be mistaken, but I imagine that there are single men or women in your congregation who never planned to be single. They dreamed of finding that “right person.” But she or he has yet to appear. And their hopes are fading. They dreamed of having a family, but somehow cats are not quite what they had in mind.

Perhaps there are some in your churches who find themselves living in \_\_\_\_\_ (wherever), but for them it’s “Moab.” They live here as “resident aliens.” They just don’t seem to fit in. They’re not even sure you want to. They long for news from home that will give you reason to return to their roots. But the news has been long in coming and things are only getting worse.

Perhaps, there are some in your church who are bitter because they have lost a spouse, or a child, or a parent. No, “lost” is not the right word. They know where they are—dead. And there’s no bringing them back. Coming to church is an unwelcome reminder of their loss and loneliness.

They have played and replayed in their minds the tape of a love gone sour, of a life that seems headed down a dead-end street, of dreams turned to nightmares, of hopes turned to ashes. They have cried in the night, “If only . . . .” But what’s done is done. And so they sit in their private misery in God’s house. “Don’t call me Naomi. Don’t call me happy. Don’t remind me of my loss. Call me Mara. Call me bitter. For God has dealt bitterly with me” (adapted from Ruth 1:20).

## Mercy—Romans 12

Paul begged the Roman Christians to commit themselves fully to God by appealing to “God’s mercy.” They were to do this because God deserves it and because God provides the opportunity to serve. The appeal is based on God’s already experienced mercies, described in Romans 1–11.

Divine mercy is more than God’s inclination to wink at sin or his willingness to forgive sinners. Mercy is not merely another way of saying that God loves sinners despite their sin, although that’s true enough. The usual definition is right as far as it goes: it is God’s unmerited favor to the undeserving. But more is involved than a gift, empowering, enabling, or enduing. Mercy gives its recipients a task and the strength to do it.

Consider Romans 1:5. Paul says that he received “grace and apostleship”—a task and the wherewithal to perform it. But more than that, he received a purpose for living—to bring non-believers to faith in and obedience to Jesus Christ. We have not been called to be apostles, but all of us who are a part of the Church have been called to do God’s work in the world. Romans 12:3-8 insists that we have all received gifts of service of various kinds. And because God has given us all different gifts, we should use them.

An overview of the first 11 chapters of Romans reveals more fully just what mercy involves. Allow me to summarize.

In the first 3 chapters Paul writes that the gospel is the incredibly good news that God has made a way of salvation for all people. But, this good news meets head on the bad news that all are responsible sinners—sinners by choice, hopeless slaves of sin, dead in sin, and deserving of judgment. This is just as true for godless pagans as for the religious folk—all are sinners. This depressing state of affairs could hardly be called gospel were it not for God’s grace. God in his righteous love has done through Jesus Christ what sinners could not do for themselves. In his loving-kindness, God has been faithful to his covenant promises despite human unfaithfulness.

God freely offered Jesus Christ as the means by which all sin could be forgiven, as the one and only means of salvation to all who will simply receive it by faith. That is, in a response of trusting obedience. Because all who are put right with God are justified freely, by God’s gift, no one can boast; no one can claim to own God; no one deserves his grace.

In Romans 4, Abraham is the Old Testament proof that salvation is a gift, not a reward for services rendered. Abraham’s faith in God was not a work that merited God’s promise. The promise came first. Faith was Abraham’s grateful response that received it as true, despite all the evidence to the contrary. Abraham was childless and 100 years old and his 90-year-old wife in menopause when God promised this unlikely couple that they would be the parents of a multitude of descendants so great they could not be numbered. Upon hearing the promise both Abraham and Sarah responded as we would under similar circumstances—they burst into gales of laughter. But when baby Isaac was born less than a year later, God had the last laugh. Did you know that Isaac in Hebrew means laughter?

It was mercy that transformed the laughter of human impossibility into the laughter of rejoicing in the God for whom nothing is too hard. For Abraham faith meant coming to the end of his self-made schemes for securing the promises of God. It meant coming to an unswerving trust in the God who raises the dead and who calls into existence the things that do not exist. And so it is for us. Far from a work, faith is letting go of all my claims to phony self-righteousness to receive the gift of righteousness that is God's alone to give.

Romans 5 through 8 describe the consequences of justification by grace through faith alone. To be justified is to be put into a right relationship with God. It is possible on the merits of Jesus Christ alone.

God's love shown in Jesus Christ is not an exceptional act—as if God were normally a sensitive old grouch, who once upon a time decided to be nice. Paul reasons, "What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" (Rom 8:31-32).

Mercy is God's commitment of himself and his inexhaustible resources to humankind in Christ. It is God's total surrender of himself. And it is on this basis that Paul makes his fervent appeal: "Offer your bodies to God." Commit yourself to God.

How do we know we can trust God with our lives? Because Jesus Christ proved it on the Cross! Our confidence in God's mercy does not depend on the the word of just any man, not even an apostle, not the doctrine of any church, not even the Church of the Nazarene. Our confidence is not in preachers or professors. Our trust is in the God who deals mercifully with humankind.

Because God is who he is, he does not sanctify us without our permission. He gives us life. It is ours to decide what we will do with it. Paul's appeal to offer our bodies in service to God "as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God" gives him permission to make us agents of his mercy. This is what the life of sanctification is all about.

Total and unreserved commitment to God is the only appropriate response possible to the mercies of God—God's commitment of himself and his inexhaustible resources to fallen humanity in Christ.

Although Christ is God's gift for us, he is no less our Lord. Grace is not a license to return to our former lives of sin. Grace is a power that demands submission—a gift with the power to transform. Scripture knows of no gift "which does not challenge us to responsibility, thereby showing itself as a power over us and creating a place of service for us."<sup>108</sup> Christ is both our freely given salvation and God's legitimate claim on us, but a claim he does not exercise without our permission. Mercy received should result in mercy extended to others.

"None of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone. If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living" (Rom 14:7-9). "Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again" (2 Cor 5:14-15).



What does it mean to offer our bodies to God as living sacrifices? And what's to make us think that the issue here is sanctification? After all the terms "holiness" and "sanctification" nowhere appear in Romans 12:1-2.

What does God want me to do in offering myself to him? What does God want with my body? It seems reasonable to assume that Paul's appeal to offer ourselves to God as living sacrifices is not a call for suicide. Then what is life like on the other side, after the surrender of ourselves to God for sanctification?

The Christian life is lived out on this earth, not in heaven, and in bodies not as disembodied spirits. This calls for some serious reflection on how we are to live out our lives in the face of competing loyalties. Every day we live we are dying. We are exhausting our lives and time and talents on something. We are, as it were, offering ourselves up as "living sacrifices." We may not choose whether or not we will die. But thanks to the freedom we enjoy in Christ, we may choose for what and for whom we will live.

The language Paul uses here is clearly figurative, appealing to the imagery of sacrifice. What he means is simply this. As a thank offering to God, I give up my claim of a right to myself—a mistaken claim, since the life I enjoy is his twofold gift, by creation and redemption. I offer myself as a thank-offering freely, fully, and finally to my rightful Lord.

For evidence that the issue here is sanctification, turn to Romans 6:10-22. Notice that here Paul uses repeatedly the very same word "offer" or "present" in some translations. He explains that because we are Christians, we ought to offer or yield, present, or commit ourselves to God. We should make available to him our bodies, our capabilities, everything we are or ever hope to become. This yielding requires the totality of us. The result is holiness.

Bodily existence cannot be neutral. Human existence is never free in any absolute sense. We are always slaves to someone or something. But as Christians we are free to choose our master. Either Jesus Christ will be our Lord or some unworthy master will. In verse 15 Paul explains that our character is determined by our lord. We become like the one we serve. Thus we should make ourselves available to God as his instruments, his weapons in the service of right.

Paul uses every human analogy he can come up with to make his point. In addition to the imagery of ritual sacrifice and military service, Paul also uses the imagery of marriage in the opening verses of chapter 7 in yet another attempt to explain the meaning of sanctification.

The verb "offer/present" in Romans 12 calls for a decisive act of permanent commitment.<sup>109</sup> Since we continue to live after this moment, our yielding is only the beginning of a lifestyle of commitment, a full surrender of self-sovereignty to God, an unconditional abandonment of other dependencies. Offering ourselves to God is an act implying an ongoing activity, a crisis that begins a process. In gratitude to God for his already amply proven love and mercies, we place our redeemed selves fully at his disposal, to be used as he sees fit, where he sees fit, when he sees fit.

On the basis of God's already proven mercies, freely, intelligently, worshipfully, Paul urges us to offer ourselves to God as a gift to him. And when we do, an amazing thing

happens—God begins his ongoing work of transforming us into the likeness of Christ, which is the lifelong process of sanctification.

It is God, not total commitment, that sanctifies the believer, although this commitment is an essential prerequisite to God's transforming work. People may not sanctify themselves; it is the work of God. But redeemed people are truly free to retain or surrender their "rights" to themselves. Only with our permission will God perform the transformation that renews our Christian minds.

There are two things Paul says must happen. One is negative: Be not conformed. The other is positive: Be transformed.

The word "transformed" translates a Greek word that is the origin of our English word metamorphosis. We should expect not just a change of behavior but a change of essence—not just acting but being completely different. It is the indwelling Holy Spirit who is God's agent in effecting this inside-out transformation, reproducing Jesus in the lives of committed Christians (see 2 Cor 3:17-18; 2 Thess 2:13).

The process begins with the renewal of the mind, the thinking capacity, the character, the inner disposition, the very center of our personal lives (2 Cor 3:17-18; Eph 4:23-24; Col 3:10; Titus 3:3-7). Holiness is renewal or recreation in the image of God, the Creator (see Gen 1:26ff). The transformed life is the normal human life; it is to be the man, to be the woman God intended us to be when he made us.

To refuse to be conformed, J. B. Phillips' colorful paraphrase is: "Do not let the world around you squeeze you into its mold." The outside agent the Christian must resist is "the world."

The sanctified life is simultaneously a loving witness for God in behalf of the world and the lost men and women in it and a stern judgment by God against the world (see Jn 3:16; 1 Jn 2:15). God at once loves and hates the world. He loves the sinful people of this planet. But he hates the perverse systems we humans have created, the worldly values we espouse. We must resist that world that is turned away from God, in rebellion, and organized on the basis of illusion and idolatry. The sanctified life involves the paradoxical existence described in John 17—Christians are taken "out of the world" (v 6), to be "in the world" (v 11, see v 15), but "not of the world" (v 14, 16), "so that the world may believe" (v 22, see v 23). So what in the world is the "world"?

To be conformed to this world is to play the adult version of a child's game. It's called "follow the follower." Worldliness is not simply a list of habits that worldly people indulge in. And holy living is not simply defined by what sanctified people do and do not do. Just as worldliness is a mind-set, a value-system, so holiness is a renewal of the mind. It's not just that I do or don't do certain things, but I live on the basis of a new authority and I live for a new purpose. This renewal is the result of the transforming work of sanctification.

Paul uses the figurative imagery of sacrificial worship, inviting Christians, as a thank offering to God, to give up their mistaken claim to themselves. We are to place our redeemed personalities freely and fully at God's disposal, to be used as he sees fit, where he sees fit.

Paul says that our commitment to God, this yielding to him, and the resulting lifestyle of commitment, this attitude of yieldedness to God, is the Christian's "reasonable service" (KJV) or an act of "spiritual worship" (RSV; NIV) to God. Worship is not simply what we say at church in praise of God, but what he does for us, enabling us to praise him through our lives in the world. Worship is the service of God to the church and the church's service before God.

Worship that is "reasonable" involves more than ritual or awe. True worship occurs not only when the church is gathered, but when it is scattered as salt and light in the world. It is not primarily a religious activity, but a response of the whole person to God's mercy. "Christian worship does not consist [only] of what is practiced at sacred sites, at sacred times, and with sacred acts. It is the offering of bodily existence in the otherwise [worldly] sphere. As something constantly demanded [worship] takes place in daily life, whereby every Christian is simultaneously sacrifice and priest."<sup>110</sup> To talk about worship in this broad New Testament sense requires attention to ethics as much as to the etiquette of congregational gatherings. Worship is not merely a matter of taste or style; it is the true test of whether we understand the difference between right and wrong. We have already discussed this in Lesson 17.

The temptation to think of holy living as involving only formal worship is subtle and dangerous. God's concerns go beyond the "interruptions" in our daily routine. God's concerns go beyond faithful attendance at Sunday School, Sunday morning and evening church services, regular or special prayer meetings, revival campaigns, discipleship classes, calling nights, church socials, and the list goes on. Worship involves more than praise in the sanctuary!

God's demand on us extends to the supposedly "secular" as well as the "sacred" dimensions of life. God longs to guide every day of our lives, not simply our special days. Either the whole of Christian life is worship, and the gatherings and sacramental acts of the community provide equipment and instruction for this, or these gatherings and acts lead in fact to absurdity. True worship does not consist only of what is practiced at sacred sites, at sacred times, and with sacred acts. It is the offering of ourselves as living sacrifices in our day-to-day existence in the world.<sup>111</sup> To talk about worship in this broad biblical sense requires attention to personal and social ethics as much as to corporate and private spiritual disciplines.

True worship, as the believer's wholehearted response to God of commitment to a lifestyle of compassion, takes place primarily in the world and takes the form of service to our brothers and sisters. God wants practical, everyday religion. Religion that helps the helpless and empowers the powerless (see Jas 1:27; Mt 25:31-46). Religion that puts fine talk about love into action (see Jas 2:14-17; 1 Jn 3:17-18). Ritual can never replace doing right. Just seeking God is no substitute for seeking justice in the street (see Amos 5:21-24). Worship and prayer are not means of bribing God to give us security, justification, or emotional release. Sacrificial offerings, worship services, and private devotions are meaningful only in the context of a life of wholehearted obedience (see 1 Sam 24:23; Jer 7:21-26; 14:12; Hos 6:6; Mic 6:6-8). In all our flurry of religious activity have we lost the reality of true worship? Do our lips sing God's praises while our lives march to the world's beat?

True worship is expressed in the Christian conduct of our lives as wholes, not only within the four walls of a sanctuary from the world, but in the world as well. Another purpose of sanctification is witness, not primarily in the sense of talking, but more importantly in the sense of "walking." Worship in everyday life involves service in the

secular world. Christian existence cannot be a private matter. When God claims our committed lives, in and with us he reaches out to recapture his fallen creation. Only Christian lives that are oriented to the world do justice to God's will to rule the world. Only in this way do we put our prayer into practice, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

Our witness to and against the world cannot be so narrowly conceived as simply to focus on the sharing of our personal testimony in an evangelistic effort. The world's fallenness is not expressed merely or even primarily in the private sins of private individuals. Since the world is a complex social and political system, our witness must have social and political dimensions as well.

The ultimate purpose of God's sanctifying grace is the triumph of his will in the world—not just in private, but in public, not just on Sunday, but every day. Only this full-orbed holiness proves that God's will is good, acceptable, and perfect. The word translated "prove" in the King James Version has a twofold sense. It means, as the NIV translators have it, "to test and approve"—to test by experience and so approve. Our transformed lives are to demonstrate that God's will is "good, and pleasing, and perfect." It is to discover the will of God and to do it.

Our lives in the world should be an expression of our worship to God and a witness to the world of his reality. A sanctification that operates only within the sheltered sanctuary of the church building or in the friendly confines of our homes is not entire enough.

That's why Paul prays as he does in the familiar holiness text, "May the God of peace himself sanctify entirely. May your whole spirit, and soul, and body be kept blameless until the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The God who calls you to holiness is faithful and he will sanctify you" (1 Thess 5:23-24, GL).

Are we willing to pay the price of being a conscious and outspoken minority committed to the will of God in every aspect of life? Is God challenging anyone today to follow in the footsteps of our holiness predecessors who pricked a nation's conscience, opening its eyes to the evil of slavery determined solely by the "shade" of a person's skin? Is he challenging anyone to emulate those holiness activists who decried discrimination solely on the basis of the "shape" of a person's skin and rallied to give women the right to vote? The number of other positive examples could be multiplied, if space permitted.

The Christian life is graced—mercy received and given. It is a lifestyle committed to compassion.

# Lesson 21: Commitment to Compassion

## Due This Lesson

Review of Bible passages  
Reading of NDBT selections  
1-page summary  
Film synopsis/film clip  
Journaling

## Learner Objectives

At the end of this lesson, participants should

- describe everyday Christian living on the basis of steadfast love, mercy, or a lifestyle of compassion

## Homework Assignments

Review the following Bible passages: Genesis 50:15-21; Psalm 34; Psalm 37; Isaiah 53; Ecclesiastes 3:12-13; Luke 6; Romans 7:14-25; 1 John 2; 1 Peter 3:8-17. Prepare theological statements that these verses/chapters seem to support.

Read the following articles in NDBT: Evil, Serpent, Suffering, Poverty/Poor, and review the article on Sin.

Write out formulation statements covering the material from Lesson 21 that can be added to your catechism.

Rent and watch the A&E story of the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer or the Billy Graham movie *The Hiding Place*. Summarize how Dietrich Bonhoeffer or Corrie ten Boom did or did not act on the basis of sound biblical principles.

Write in your journal. Reflect on a time when someone reached out to you in loving-kindness. When was the last time that you saw someone in need and responded in loving-kindness?

## **Commitment to Compassion**

God's covenant relationship with Israel is a commitment to act with compassion on their behalf. This is mercy. It is not about deserving; but it is about keeping promises.

Mercy is God's faithfulness seeking the well-being of his people. It is not a disposition but a tangible demonstration of his loyalty to and solidarity in relationships. This is divine love and kindness in action. This is what grace does.

A mutual commitment to compassion forms the basis for community life among the people of God. But mercy extends beyond community boundaries to meet the needs of the helpless and marginalized of society.

The supreme biblical model of mercy is to be found in the other-oriented life, and saving death of Jesus Christ.

## 1 Timothy 1:12-17

Paul cannot resist giving thanks to God for the gift of the gospel. All his letters closely associate the gospel with Paul's personal reception and proclamation of the good news (1:11).

Even in his pre-Christian days, Paul was not a self-conscious rebel against God. It was misguided zeal for the Law, not rebellion, that led him to his blasphemy, persecution, and violence against Jesus and his followers (Gal 1:13-16; Rom 10:1-4). Because he "acted in ignorance and unbelief" (1:13), he was open to correction by God.

God did not show Paul mercy because he deserved it—that would not be grace. But grace extended must be accepted to be experienced.

Grace gives sinners the capacity to trust God and to lead trustworthy lives. It enables those who receive God's love to return it by a commitment to a lifestyle of compassion.

The first trustworthy saying . . . that "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners," sounds like a creedal confession. This is something we can believe in and proclaim with confidence.

This expression of Paul's gratitude for the gospel concludes with a formal doxology. "Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen" (1:17).

# Lesson 22: Overcoming Evil

## Due This Lesson

Bible reading  
NDBT reading  
Video report  
Journaling

## Learner Objectives

At the end of this lesson, participants should

- be able to describe the resources of biblical theology for dealing with the problems of evil that are inevitable in a fallen world

## Homework Assignments

Read 1, 2, and 3 John.

Review your notes on each of Lessons 1 through 22 and prepare a 3-page typed summary of the entire module. Your summary of each lesson should have each of the five components. Please, follow these instructions:

1. Give each lesson a one- or two-word title that captures its essential emphasis for you.
  2. For each lesson, compose in your own words a topic sentence—from 10 to 20 words—that summarizes the biblical theme surveyed.
  3. For each lesson, list three supporting biblical passages—the book and chapter—that in your opinion provide the most important scriptural basis for each theological theme surveyed.
  4. Identify the Article of Faith—or occasionally more than one article—for which each lesson provides the biblical foundation.
  5. For each lesson, write a thought-provoking question that might serve as the basis for an in-class discussion of the contemporary implications of this biblical theme.
- Do not think of the suggested page limit legalistically. It is fine if your summary is a bit longer or shorter, so long as it adequately fulfills the assignment.
  - Make enough copies of your summary to be able to give one to your instructor, keep one for yourself, and provide one for each member of your class.

Write in your journal. Have you been exposed to the idea that Satan is the personification of evil? What do you think of the idea? How do you respond? How much of what we think about the devil comes from Milton's *Paradise Lost*?



## Evil Enters Creation

The possibility of evil is established by the existence at the very heart of the garden—alongside the tree of life—of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

The tree with its *potential* to know good and to know evil is a part of creation, but such knowledge is only potential and not a part of the creative act. Evil does not appear as the result of the creative act of God but as the result of the rebellious act of humankind—as a result of sin.

### Evil and the Serpent

- The specific identification of the serpent with Satan does not take place in the Old Testament. This identification is made in the *Wisdom of Solomon*, an apocryphal book written during the intertestamental times.
- The identification appears in the New Testament in the *Book of Revelation*.
- Throughout the Bible serpents are associated with evil and sin, and control over them a sign of spiritual power.

### The Spiritual Sphere and Evil

- The serpent is introduced as the tempter in the Garden of Eden and is presented as one of the creatures of God, not as a spiritual being.
- Angelic beings make their appearance after the Fall, but nothing is said about their creation or the nature of their existence.
- The focus of Scripture is on humanity and our relationship to God, not on the nature of the spiritual realm.
- John Milton's *Paradise Lost* is the primary influence on many of our ideas about the fall of Satan.

## Satan as the Tempter

Satan is seen as the accuser, the tempter, who tests the mettle of those following God, and who eventually is pictured as the personification of evil.

The role of Satan and evil spirits as tempters and as doers of evil is expressed in various ways.

- In Samuel God sends an evil spirit to torment Saul after he was rejected as king—1 Samuel 16:14.
- James makes sure that we do *not* understand such temptations to be the work of God, for he emphatically states that God does not tempt . . . temptation arises from our own normal and perverted desires—James 1:13-14.
- The apocalyptic writers, especially in the Book of Revelation, see the believer simply caught in the evil that arises from the spiritual battle with evil.
- In Daniel the forces of evil are arrayed against the angels of God—Daniel 10:12.
- Paul reminds us that the battle against evil is a spiritual struggle—Ephesians 6:12.

The implication in all of these cases is that these forces cannot cause a person to be evil but can simply tempt and encourage to sin and the evil that flows from sin.

## Evil and Suffering

Throughout the Old Testament *ra* is used not only for evil deeds but also for events that are disastrous. It does not matter whether humankind or nature causes it . . . Suffering is the result of such evil.

The prophets consistently warned that the sinful and evil ways of the people—and not just the Israelites—would result in suffering, pain, and death . . . the sufferer was taking on himself the consequences of the sinful deeds of others . . . This is the picture of suffering that we have in the life of Jesus.

The concept of suffering occurring as a demonstration of God's glory or of loyalty to God—introduced in Job, and referred to by Jesus when he healed the man born blind—is rare!

## Root of Evil

The reading on evil in the *New Bible Dictionary of Theology* emphasizes correctly that evil does not have independent existence but is a perversion with sin as the root of evil. It is very real, but its reality does not belong to itself—it belongs to the good that has been corrupted and perverted. Humankind was created good with freedom to choose and evil emerged with the perverse use of that freedom, which resulted in slavery to sin.

## Small Groups

For the first 15 minutes work through the story of Joseph, grouping the story into acts—favoritism, dreams, sold by brothers, Potipher’s household, etc.

Make a listing of the bad things that occur in each act, identify to what extent these bad events can be viewed as evil, and note the response of the individuals involved.

What conclusions can be drawn regarding your understanding of the nature of evil, its development, its relationship to sin, and its relationship to God?

In the last 10 minutes your group will share and defend your conclusions with the class.

## **Destruction of Evil**

The ultimate solution to evil repeated many times in Scripture is its destruction.

This answer to the destruction of evil was not always on a national or societal scale.

- Murderers were to be destroyed—Numbers 35:16,17.
- Adulterers were to be destroyed—Leviticus 20:10.
- Idolaters were to be destroyed—Deuteronomy 13:1-5.
- Even incorrigible children were to be destroyed—Deuteronomy 21:18-21.

The key to the severity of the penalties is found in Deuteronomy where many times the death penalty is accompanied by the words: “You must purge the evil from Israel” (Deut 17:12).

Apocalyptic writers picture the ultimate destruction of evil as coming at the end when the old creation together with the evil that has corrupted it is removed from existence.

Banishment was an alternative solution that was applied in some cases—Cain, lepers, Exile, unrepentant sinner . . . The focus, like death, was the removal of evil from the family or community.

## **Preventing Evil by Doing Good**

Consistently throughout the Scriptures the ideal way to keep evil from happening is to do good.

The whole idea of the giving of the law was to let people know what was right.

Deutonomy 30:15-18

Isaiah 1:14-15

Micah 6:8

## Cleansing from Evil

The primary means for dealing with the source of evil was the sacrifice for sin.

1 John 1:7-9

Exodus 29:19ff

Leviticus 16

Hebrews 9:24-28

By sending to us the Holy Spirit to dwell in our lives and effect the cleansing of the inner person, He has empowered us to consistently follow the leading of the Holy Spirit—a leading that always moves us toward God and away from evil in our personal lives—a leading that enables us to face and overcome evil when it presents itself before us.

Old Testament recognition that cleansing needs to be more than symbolic

Psalm 139

Psalm 51

Jeremiah 33:8

Ezekiel 36:25, 33; 37:23

It is the knowledge of the word of God—the Torah, the instruction of God—coupled with the empowerment that comes through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, that enables the Church to be cleansed.



## **The Christian Response to Evil**

“Love your enemies” (Mt 5:44).

Throughout the Old Testament the objective was to carve out of the world, that is sadly contaminated with evil, a people of God who would live their lives doing good.

The focus in the New Testament shifts . . . It is no longer to be an attitude of self-protection but one of helpful outreach. The follower of Christ is transformed by the blood of Christ and empowered by the coming of the Holy Spirit.

## **Jesus' Guidance for Response to Evil**

Jesus gave us many instructions that would not be possible to perform if we did not have His presence with us. The sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5—7 is full of such instructions.

The response of the Christian to evil acts directed at him or her is to accept and forgive and seek the well-being of the one doing the evil.

Returning blessing for evil or overcoming evil with good changes the situation in which you are involved.

Acts 16:19ff

Acts 27:21ff

Even though Christians worked to overcome evil with good, they were still taught to avoid evil of every kind.

Mark 7:20ff

Luke 6:45

Romans 6:12

Romans 12:9

Romans 16:19

1 Corinthians 14:30

Ephesians 6:12

2 Thessalonians 3:3

2 Timothy 6:10

James 3:8

## Small Groups

Make a list of the essential points about evil that need to be taught to young or new Christians.

Formulate the statements that you might want to add to your catechism.

Do statements about the origin of evil and the existence of evil in the eternal realm need to be included in your list of beliefs?

## Unit 6: Review and Conclusion

### Lesson 23: Review

#### Due This Lesson

Bible reading  
Module summary paper  
Journaling

#### Learner Objectives

At the end of this lesson, participants should

- identify the more important features of biblical theology
- make progress in moving from theological affirmations to practical contemporary relevance

#### Homework Assignments

Read the following and write a 1-page response addressing how they contribute to or guide a catechism.

- *Manual* Articles of Faith
- *Manual* Covenant of Christian Character and Covenant of Christian Conduct
- Resource 23-2

Organize the formulation statements that you have been making each lesson into four approaches to the development of strong Christians:

- Essentials for children
- Essentials for teens
- Essentials for new members
- Refresher course for existing members

Examine some existing catechisms and discipleship training books—NPH lists many for youth and children as well as adult studies, examples include:

- *Discovering My Faith*, Word Action
- S.M. Miller, *I Believe*
- R.D. Troutman, *This Is My Church; Basic Christian Beliefs*
- J.W. Eby, *What Christians Believe*
- Stan Toler, Don Walters, Don Casey, *Growing Disciples*

Write in your journal. Reflect on where you are today in your journey of Christian maturity compared to where you were when this module began.

Bring your journal to class for evaluation. The instructor will be looking through your journal to assess the faithfulness to the assignment and the organizational method that was followed. The instructor will not be reading all the entries but will glance through and spot-check the seriousness of the entries.

## Johannine Letters

### Christology

- 1 John . . . emphasis is clearly upon the humanity of Christ.
- Insists that anyone who denies that Jesus Christ was and remains fully human is antichrist.

### Soteriology

- Emphasis upon the death of Christ as the means of salvation.
- 1 John draws significantly from the OT language of sacrifice to clarify the connections between Christology and soteriology—the necessary connections between the person and work of Christ and the divine means of human salvation.

### Ecclesiology

- 1 John treats this only indirectly. Its concern is not theoretical but practical. How to be the Church Christ called it to be?

### Heresy

- Was concerned primarily with espousing a personal opinion so strongly that one was willing to separate from other believers over these differences.

### Docetism

- Unable to accept either the genuine humanity or the reality of the death of Christ.

### Gnosticism

- Despised the material world in the interests of the spiritual.

### Ethics

- 1 John places strong emphasis upon sin and righteousness.

### Perfectionism

- 1 John insists that righteous ethical conduct arises inevitably from a sound Christology. It defines righteousness almost exclusively in terms of love.

## **Eschatology**

- Connecting 1 John's concerns for Christology and ethics is its emphasis upon eschatology.
- A focus on the Parousia—the second coming of Christ
  - The life of Christ serves as the model for the ethical life.
  - The return of Christ serves as the motivation for ethical seriousness.

## **Hamartiology**

- 1 John also reflects significantly on the nature and remedy for human sin provided by the death of Christ.
  - On the one hand, chapter 1 insists that no one can claim to have no sin.
  - But chapter 3 is equally insistent that no one who sins can claim to be a child of God.
  - Chapter 2 insists that the death of Christ is the means of salvation for the entire world.
  - And yet chapter 5 discourages even praying for one who has committed "a deadly sin," whatever that is.

## **Spirituality**

- Every time 1 John mentions the work of the Spirit in Christian experience, it seems to back off and stress again that Christological orthodoxy and ethical purity—specifically mutual love—are far more essential than any alleged spiritual experience.

The "theo-logic" that organizes 1 John is that theology and life are inseparable, any way you look at it. Those who fail to take the humanity of Christ seriously do not take the humanity of others seriously either. Their problem is not simply heresy—a mistaken and divisive view of Christ. It is a failure to love. It is a failure to take seriously this failure as the most serious of sins.

## Desired Outcomes of Educational Preparation

*From Handbook for Christian Ministries*

Education for service will assist the minister in the process of “being,” “knowing” and “doing.” These outcomes need to be integrated into the four elements of ministerial preparation.

For the minister “**to be**,” the desired outcomes are expressed in:

1. loving God with all the heart, soul, mind and strength and the neighbor as oneself as expressed in Christian holiness
2. a deep spirituality with an abiding sense of God’s call
3. existence as a person in relationship to the community of faith
4. unquestioned integrity and honor
5. compassion, patience and perseverance
6. self-discipline and self-control
7. humility, gentleness and sensitivity to others
8. passion and courage
9. wisdom and discernment
10. vision and commitment

For the minister “**to know**,” the desired outcomes are to have:

1. a thorough knowledge of the holy Scriptures and methods of interpretation
2. a clear understanding of Christian theology and especially the place of Christian holiness within it
3. a solid grasp of the history of the Christian church and its mission through the centuries
4. a knowledge of the Wesleyan theological heritage and traditions
5. a working knowledge of the disciplines of the spiritual life
6. an understanding of the significance, forms and place of Christian worship in the community of faith
7. a firm understanding of Christian personal and social ethics
8. a knowledge of communication theory and skills, especially preaching and including teaching and interpersonal skills
9. a clear understanding of the dynamics of Christian servant leadership, local church administration, and models of mission and ministry, and the similarities to and distinctions from secular models of leadership and management
10. an awareness of the brokenness of the human condition – both personal and societal
11. an understanding of the dynamics of the human life, groups within the local church and society, including marriage and family
12. a grasp of the span of human history and culture, particularly of the minister’s own context
13. an awareness of cultural trends and influences in contemporary society including religious pluralism
14. a knowledge of the operation of the polity and practice of the Church of the Nazarene
15. An awareness of the legal framework in the society in which the congregation functions.

For the minister "to do," desired outcomes are to:

1. model a godly life and vital piety
2. think prayerfully about personal, familial and congregational development
3. act with integrity and honor in all relationships
4. respond to others with the love of God
5. lead the people of God in worship, mission and service
6. equip the saints for the work of ministry
7. preach the Word of God with clarity in a culturally appropriate fashion
8. teach by word and example
9. evangelize the lost, feed the flock
10. articulate clearly the mission of the congregation and the Church
11. minister to the brokenness of persons and society
12. communicate the truth in love
13. listen with care and discretion
14. facilitate the ministry of all the people of God at the local level
15. organize the local congregation as needed and appropriate
16. assess the effectiveness of programs and plans
17. acquire skills in information technology and other media essential for ministry and mission
18. pursue life-long learning.



## Lesson 24: Catechism

### Due This Lesson

Reading  
Organization of statements  
Review of discipleship/training books  
Journaling  
Journals

### Learner Objectives

At the end of this lesson, participants should

- have the opportunity to bring together the most important aspects of Christianity and form them into a plan of instruction for the development of the congregation that is being served
- be able to evaluate their own attempts to communicate biblical theology in language intelligible to children, youth, and adults in their cultural setting

### Homework Assignments

Commit to be a lifelong learner of the Bible and its message.

## Small Groups

In your group first look at what the *expectations* are for the target group. What do we expect them to know, to do, and to be?

Then in your group try to come to an agreement for a *program—catechism*—based on what each of you has prepared throughout this module.

### Target Groups

- Children
- Teens
- New Believers
- Refresher Program

## Presuppositions

**The *Manual of the Church of the Nazarene*, Article IV reads:**

We believe in the plenary inspiration of the Holy Scriptures, by which we understand the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments, given by divine inspiration, inerrantly revealing the will of God concerning us in all things necessary to our salvation, so that whatever is not contained therein is not to be enjoined as an article of faith. (Luke 24:44-47; John 10:35; 1 Corinthians 15:3-4; 2 Timothy 3:15-17; 1 Peter 1:10-12; 2 Peter 1:20-21)

**The word “plenary” refers to the wholeness of Scripture.** The authority of Scripture is to be found in the canon as a whole, not in any individual part to the neglect of the whole. Every segment of the canon needs to be considered. A passage must not be isolated from the whole when you consider its authority as Scripture.

**By “inspiration” we emphasize the divine origin and authority of the Bible.** The church recognizes that the various human authors and editors who composed the books of the anthology we call the Bible were also spokesmen for God. These human words offer unique insight into the person, ways, and words of God himself.

**By “66 books” we mean the protestant Canon.** Although we recognize the devotional instructional and historical value of the Apocrypha, commentaries, and other spiritual writings; these 66 books of the Old and New Testaments provide unique authority as the expression of the Word of God.

**By “inerrantly revealing the will of God” we mean:** The Bible is a fully adequate expression of what God wants in everything relating to our salvation. This is a reminder that Scripture has a direction and concern and should not be looked to as the textbook for every area of study. Scripture is the basis for validating theological belief and authorizing right behavior (2 Tim 3:15-17). As Christians we accept the instruction of all scripture from the perspective of the New Testament.

**Note that Nazarenes do not insist that “the Bible is inerrant.”** Our concern is not with some speculative theory about what the Bible is. We have no interest in defending some officially sanctioned interpretation of the Bible. Our concern is with what the Bible does—“inerrantly revealing” God’s saving disposition toward us and deeds for us.

**Scripture is the foundational source of all Christian doctrine.** “Whatever is not contained therein is not to be enjoined as an article of faith.” Latter-day doctrines that have no biblical warrant have no place in the theology of the Church of the Nazarene. Certainly tradition, reason, and Christian experience inform and support our interpretation of Scripture. But we do not expect agreement on views that do not arise naturally from the scriptures themselves.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998, 115-40.
- <sup>2</sup> Palmer, 118.
- <sup>3</sup> Palmer, 122.
- <sup>4</sup> Copyright 2003 Church of the Nazarene. Used by permission of Sunday School Ministries and Holiness Today, June 2003. Created 1992 by Randy Cloud, Stan Ingersol, and William Miller. Revised 2003.
- <sup>5</sup> This article, used by permission, is available at [http://wesley.nnu.edu/wesley\\_conferences/wescon2002/hahn bible&christianfaith.htm](http://wesley.nnu.edu/wesley_conferences/wescon2002/hahn bible&christianfaith.htm)
- <sup>6</sup> See Carl A. Volz, *Faith and Practice in the Early Church: Foundations for Contemporary Theology*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1983, 139.
- <sup>7</sup> See Volz, 136.
- <sup>8</sup> See Gerald Bray, *Biblical Interpretation: Past & Present*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996, for just one example that recognizes some of the nuances of Scripture interpretation in the Dark and Medieval Ages.
- <sup>9</sup> See Arminius cited in F.F. Bruce, "The History of New Testament Study," in *New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Principles and Methods*, ed. I. Howard Marshall. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 33.
- <sup>10</sup> See Joel Green, "Scripture and Theology: Failed Experiments, Fresh Perspectives," *Interpretation* 56, No. 1 (January 2002) 5-20 (7).
- <sup>11</sup> Leonhard Goppelt, *Theology of the New Testament*, Vol. 1, *The Ministry of Jesus and Its Theological Significance*. Trans. John Alsup. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 256-57.
- <sup>12</sup> James D. Smart, *The Strange Silence of the Bible in the Church: A Study in Hermeneutics*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970.
- <sup>13</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970.
- <sup>14</sup> Heikki Raisanen, *Beyond New Testament Theology*, 1990, and Peter Balla, *Challenges to New Testament Theology: An Attempt to Justify the Enterprise*, 1997.
- <sup>15</sup> Joel B. Green, and Turner, Max, eds. *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000.
- <sup>16</sup> Green.
- <sup>17</sup> See Gerhard Hasel, *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate*, 1972, which has gone through 4 or 5 editions and Gerhard Hasel. *New Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate*, 1978, which, interestingly never moved past the first edition.
- <sup>18</sup> Green, 11.
- <sup>19</sup> Robert W. Jenson, "The Religious Power of Scripture," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 52 No. 1 (1999) 89-105 (98).
- <sup>20</sup> Christopher R. Seitz, *Word Without End: The Old Testament as Abiding Theological Witness*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998.
- <sup>21</sup> See Thomas G. Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989.
- <sup>22</sup> See Stephen C. Barton, "New Testament Interpretation as Performance," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 52 No.2 (1999) 179-208 for a review of such suggestions and his own proposal regarding the New Testament.
- <sup>23</sup> See James W. Thompson, *Preaching Like Paul: Homiletical Wisdom for Today*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000, 9-14, for a critique of a narrative only approach to preaching.

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<sup>24</sup> Robert G. Bratcher, "Toward a Definition of the Authority of the Bible," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* VI No. 2 (1979) 109-120 (113).

<sup>25</sup> The name Noah occurs in Numbers 26:33, 27:1, 36:11, and Joshua 17 each time as the name of one of the daughters of Zelophelod—an important case where daughters inherited when there were no sons.

<sup>26</sup> It is usually assumed that the reference is to the man, part of whose story is told in the Book of Job. Danel may be Daniel.

<sup>27</sup> There is a second Lamech, the father of Noah, and he is referred to in the later genealogies of Chronicles.

<sup>28</sup> Since the 24-hour day comes into being only on the fourth "day" of creation it indicates that the "it was evening and it was morning" that concludes each day's activity is a literary device and not a notation in a scientific record.

<sup>29</sup> Once again we have indirect reference to the sacrificial system that later became a part of covenant life. Also it is interesting to note that although fat today is considered unhealthy, fat in cultures where people do hard work and a lot of walking, is prized very highly. In many African cultures even today the most prized part of the animal is the inner organs with their fat.

<sup>30</sup> The Hebrew *chesed* is overwhelmingly translated "know" throughout Scripture, but translators use more than a dozen other words to convey its meaning in various contexts. It is commonly used as a euphemism for coitus and as a description of the relationship of God to the righteous. Psalm 1 indicates that because God does not know the way of the unrighteous they will perish. Approval, acceptance, and closeness are all aspects of its meaning.

<sup>31</sup> Schweizer, *Luke*, 48.

<sup>32</sup> Some of the inspiration for this part of the essay came from an article published several years ago in *One*. Some of the phrases here depend on Norman Habel, *Outback Christmas* (with paintings by Pro Hart; Willoughby, NSW, Australia: Rigby Publishers, 1981).

<sup>33</sup> Schweizer, p 51.

<sup>34</sup> Brown, *NIDNTT*, 2: 778.

<sup>35</sup> G. L. Thompson, "Roman Military," in the *Dictionary of New Testament Background*. Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 2000, CD version

<sup>36</sup> B. B. Blue, "Food, Food Laws, Table Fellowship," in the *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Developments*, Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids, eds. Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2000, 1998, CD version.

<sup>37</sup> D. J. Wiseman, "Arts and Crafts," in *The New Bible Dictionary*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1962 CD version.

<sup>38</sup> "Meal," Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, eds., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*. Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2000, 1998, CD version.

<sup>39</sup> Haenchen, 359.

<sup>40</sup> Against Haenchen, 357-58.

<sup>41</sup> Conzelmann, 83.

<sup>42</sup> Marshall, 190.

<sup>43</sup> Rob Wall as reported in J. B. Green, "Cornelius," in the *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Developments*, Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids, eds. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000, 1998, CD version.

<sup>44</sup> A somewhat different version of this exposition was first published as chapter 4 of my book, *More Holiness in Everyday Life*.

<sup>45</sup> The second line of each of the following quotations from the RSV has been adapted to imitate somewhat the gender-neutral language of New American Bible (NAB).

<sup>46</sup> *New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*

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<sup>47</sup> Samuel Terrien. *The Psalms and Their Meaning for Today*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1952, 200.

<sup>48</sup> All quotes for this paragraph are Terrien, 201.

<sup>49</sup> Charles Wesley, "O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing," *Sing to the Lord*, 147.

<sup>50</sup> Terrien, 201.

<sup>51</sup> *New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, 1118.

<sup>52</sup> Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*. Trans., Geoffrey W. Bromiley; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 49.

<sup>53</sup> Käsemann, 52.

<sup>54</sup> Bultmann

<sup>55</sup> Paul J. Achtemeier, *Romans*. Interpretation; Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985), 97.

<sup>56</sup> Achtemeier, 95.

<sup>57</sup> See Leviticus 11–16; Numbers 6; 19; 31. Roland deVaux. "Rites of purification and de-consecration," in *Ancient Israel*, vol. 2: *Religious Institutions*, trans. from the French original. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965, 460. Comments: "A mother had to purify herself after childbirth, because it made her impure, and a priest had to change his clothes after a sacrifice, because it made him a consecrated person. Yet this impurity is not to be understood as a physical or moral defilement, and this kind of holiness is not to be understood as a moral virtue: they are rather 'states' or 'conditions' from which men must emerge in order to re-enter normal life."

<sup>58</sup> In doing so, Jesus was not merely flying in the face of legalistic, latter-day, traditions. Some Old Testament laws warn of the dangers of indiscriminate contact with uncleanness (See Lev 13; 22:4b-9; 15; Num 5:2; 9:6-8; 16:26; 19; Deut 23). To come into close contact with lepers was to risk infection oneself. To be touched by someone suffering from a bodily discharge was to be made unclean oneself. To touch a dead body was to be contaminated. To associate with non-Jews was to put one's holiness in peril.

<sup>59</sup> Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 327-329; quotation from 327.

<sup>60</sup> William M. Ramsay, *The Westminster Guide to the Books of the Bible*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994, 425.

<sup>61</sup> Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According to Matthew*, 220.

<sup>62</sup> Betz, 296.

<sup>63</sup> Betz, 298.

<sup>64</sup> Betz, 304.

<sup>65</sup> The view of John Donahue as summarized by William R. Herzog II, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994, 235.

<sup>66</sup> Herzog, 258.

<sup>67</sup> The view of L. John Topel and William Loader as summarized in Herzog, 236.

<sup>68</sup> The view of T. W. Manson, as summarized in Herzog, 235.

<sup>69</sup> The view of Francis Willams, as summarized by Herzog, 236.

<sup>70</sup> *Wesley's Works*, 6:124-136, Sermon 50—"The Use of Money." This lesson does not pretend to represent an original contribution to Wesley scholarship. I have taken the liberty of condensing, rewording, and otherwise adjusting Wesley's eighteenth-century language to suit a twenty-first-century audience. This unconventional approach to documentation is the case even when I use what appear to be conventional quotation marks. Few of these are full and exact quotations. Strict quotations would have required more explanation than the time constraints this presentation allows. To have used scattered quotes, with ellipses, brackets, and transitional summaries would have made the lesson visually distracting and virtually unreadable. Notes provide interested readers with the necessary documentation to verify that I have not misrepresented

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Wesley. All references are to the 1872 Jackson edition of *Wesley's Works*, which has been frequently reprinted by various publishers. My research depends on versions of Wesley's Sermons available online at <http://wesley.nnu.edu>.

<sup>71</sup> Continuing to cite excerpts from Wesley's "The Use of Money."

<sup>72</sup> Continuing to cite excerpts from Wesley's "The Use of Money."

<sup>73</sup> This continues to depend on Wesley's "Use of Money."

<sup>74</sup> Again, this paragraph depends on Wesley's sermon on "The Use of Money."

<sup>75</sup> This and the next two paragraphs return to Wesley's sermon on "The Use of Money." He makes the same point in "On the Danger of Riches" (7:10).

<sup>76</sup> The Greek term translated "exercise of freedom" in verse 10 is *exousia*, "authority." It is related to the twice-repeated slogan Paul criticizes in 6:12 and 10:23, "All things are lawful." The implication of this term is the self-centered insistence, "I have the right to do whatever I please." The Corinthians apparently considered knowledge and individual rights as highest values, whereas Paul considered love and community responsibility supreme.

<sup>77</sup> The mood of hope is all the more striking for the doom and gloom of the preceding and following prophecies. Between Isaiah 9:1-7 and 11:1-5 the hand of Yahweh's wrath remains upheld (see 5:25; 9:12, 17, 21; 10:4).

<sup>78</sup> Otto Kaiser, *Isaiah 1-39: A Commentary*, trans. R. A. Wilson. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974, 128.

<sup>79</sup> See 2 Samuel 7; 23:1-7; Psalms 2; 21; 72; 89; 110; 132. In Psalm 45:7 the king is addressed as "god," apparently upon the occasion of the royal wedding (see vv 1-17). The titles "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (v 6) seem to make up the royal "protocol" of throne names given the kings of the Davidic dynasty at the time of their accession to the throne. Note David's four throne names in 2 Samuel 23:1. Egyptian Pharaohs of the Middle Kingdom were given five such names at their enthronement. See John Bright, "Isaiah—I" in *Peake's Commentary on the Bible*. London: Thomas Nelson, 1962), 497; Frederick L. Moriarty, "Isaiah 1—39" in *Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 2 vols. London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1968, 1: 272; and Kaiser, 128-30.

<sup>80</sup> Assyria's capture of the northern territories of Israel became the occasion for the last of the many military coups that marked the Northern Kingdom's violent history (2 Ki 15:29-30). This was only two or three years before Hezekiah assumed Judah's throne (2 Ki 18:1). Samaria was under siege by the Assyrians at the time of his coronation (2 Ki 17:1-6). Was the time ripe for Judah to seize the moment, restore the United Kingdom, and begin a new day?

<sup>81</sup> See 2 Kings 18—20; Isaiah 36—39.

<sup>82</sup> "The stump of Jesse" (v 1) refers to the descendants of David, whose father was named Jesse (see 1 Sam 16:1-13). Compare the similar prophecy in Jer 23:5-6. Although the imagery is different, Mic 5:2-5 similarly contrasts humble beginnings and noble endings.

<sup>83</sup> See 2 Kings 21—22.

<sup>84</sup> See 1 Sam 16:1-13. Compare the similar prophecy in Jer 23:5-6. Although the imagery is different, Mic 5:2-5 similarly contrasts humble beginnings and noble endings.

<sup>85</sup> "The *fear* of the LORD" (vv 2 and 3) is loving *reverence* for God (see Prov 1:7; 9:30; 31:30; Ps 111:10), not cowering terror.

<sup>86</sup> This summarizes-paraphrases the message of Isaiah 11:1-5 as the prophet's 8th-century BC hearers probably understood it.

<sup>87</sup> See 2 Kings 23—25; Jeremiah 22—29.

<sup>88</sup> See Ezra 2:2; 3:2, 8; Neh 7:7; 12:1, 47; 4:1-3; Hag 1:1; 2:2, 20-23; Zech 2:10; 4:6-10; 6:12.

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<sup>89</sup> The BC date for the birth of Jesus arose from mistakes in the original calculations establishing the calendar establishing the Christ-event as the midpoint of history.

<sup>90</sup> See Matthew 1–2 and Luke 1–3.

<sup>91</sup> See Matthew 3:1-17; 4:12-17; 11:119; 14:1-12; Mark 1:1-15; 6:14-29; Luke 3:1-20; 7:18-35; John 1:6-9, 19-36; 3:22-36.

<sup>92</sup> Jesus himself seems to have been responsible for this new insight into the Scriptures (see Luke 24:25-27; John 5:39-40).

<sup>93</sup> See, for example, Isaiah 11:6-16; 35:1-10; 65:17-25.

<sup>94</sup> How do the expressions commonly used to refer to life in the business-world suggest the extent to which business as usual is not sufficiently informed by the knowledge of the Lord? Consider, for example, “dog-eat-dog,” “cut-throat competition,” “survival of the fittest,” “climbing the corporate ladder,” “takeover,” “leverage buy-out,” “making a killing,” etc.?

<sup>95</sup> See Rom 15:33; 16:20; 1 Cor 14:33; 2 Cor 13:11; Phil 4:9; 1 Thess 5:23; 2 Thess 3:16.

<sup>96</sup> See Acts 1:8; 9:15; 11:18; 13:46-48; 15:14-18; 26:15-18; 28:25-29; Rom 15:8-13.

<sup>97</sup> This term seems to be used in the NT to refer to salvation-life. See John 5:21; 6:63; Rom 4:17; 8:11; 1 Cor 15:36, 45; 2 Cor 3:6; Gal 3:21; Eph 2:5; Col 2:13; 1 Pet 3:18.

<sup>98</sup> See further on the Adam-Christ contrast in 1 Cor 15:45-49. The same restricted universalism seems to be presented in Rom 5:12-21. Here Paul insists that the life-giving obedience of Christ is as all-inclusive as the death-dealing sin of Adam. Salvation in Christ is as universal as condemnation in Adam. This does not imply that since the time of Christ all people are saved without respect to their response of faith in God’s offer. Paul writes in Rom 5:19 that through Christ’s obedience “the many will be made righteous.” But he also says that “through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners.” Human beings are not sinners and subject to death solely because of the disobedience of Adam, but “because all sinned” (Rom 5:12). And yet, because of Christ, heredity need not be our destiny. We may choose to continue to live “in Adam” and die. Or, we may choose to live “in Christ” and truly live. Freedom to choose the part of the human family to which we belong is not natural. It is a benefit of God’s overflowing grace announced in the gospel.

<sup>99</sup> The NIV’s translation, “Then the end will come, when . . .,” assumes that the verb *estai* (i.e., “will come to be”) has been ellipsed. On this interpretation, *telos* refers to the final events of history, “the end or conclusion” (Bauer, s.v. *telos* 1b). This seems to me to be the most plausible interpretation. But since the Greek *eita to telos, hotan*, is literally, “Then the end, when . . .,” other interpretations are possible. Bauer (s.v. *tagma*) seems to prefer the interpretation of Johannes Weiss and Hans Leitzmann, which sees these as three distinct groups, rather than three moments in the eschatological drama. They are: “Christ, who already possesses life, the Christians, who will receive it at his second coming, and the rest of humanity (s.v. *telos* 2), who will receive it when death, as the last of God’s enemies, is destroyed.” Persuasive reasons exist for rejecting either a universalistic interpretation of the passage or an interest in the fate of unbelievers. Reasons also exist for locating the destruction of death as simultaneous to (if not the precondition for) the resurrection of Christians, not some later event (see below). Bauer (s.v. *telos* 1da) notes that some interpreters understand *telos* as an adverbial expression meaning “finally,” although this is normally only in the absence of the article (*to*).

<sup>100</sup> Paul only infrequently uses “kingdom” language. See 1 Cor 4:20; 6:9-10; 15:50; Rom 14:17; Gal 5:21; Eph 5:8; Col 1:13; 4:11; 1 Thess 2:12; 2 Thess 1:5; 2 Tim 4:18.



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<sup>101</sup> Perhaps Paul did not intend to suggest that these opponents were supernatural powers, but only symbolic representatives of “systemic evil.” Evil is more than the sum total of human wrongdoing. In this fallen world evil resides in the very fabric of human society. It has entrenched itself in the structures and organizations of earthly life. Thus, Jesus and Paul speak of “the world” or “the flesh” as if they are personal realities opposed to God and good. In fact, it is not “the world,” as the created order, they oppose, but the systems evil men organize against God. The world’s evil tentacles construct a web that entangles and exploits both the oppressed and their oppressors. Political and economic systems become “demonic” in character. Powerful bureaucracies, even when administered by comparatively just individuals, perpetuate injustice. Paul’s reference to “death” as “the last enemy” is a reminder of the faceless, anonymous evil that is an inherent part of life in the created order as it now exists. Violent storms take untold lives. Good people suffer and die. Innocent children are born dying with AIDS. Such evils need be assigned to no conscious decision of anyone, human or supernatural. But the evil of these tragedies is not lessened by this fact.

<sup>102</sup> Let me be perfectly clear. If this interpretation is correct, the so-called “millennial reign of Christ” is not to be expected at some future date subsequent to the Second Coming. It is occurring right now as he reigns as cosmic Lord with his glorified saints who await the resurrection and the consummation of the age. If this interpretation represents any of the traditional millennial views it is amillennial.

<sup>103</sup> Fee (762) claims that “at least forty different solutions have been suggested.” He classifies these into four different categories (765-767). The problem is less exegetical than historical and theological. No parallel in pagan or orthodox Christian practice is known to have existed. Yet Paul offers no critique of it (764).

<sup>104</sup> In Rom 14:19-12, Paul mentions that the resurrection of Christ made him “Lord of both the dead and the living” (v 9). This occasions his reminder that “we will all stand before God’s judgment seat” (v 10), that “each of us will give an account of himself to God” (v 12).

<sup>105</sup> Fee, 786.

<sup>106</sup> Do not misunderstand “this book” as a reference to the Bible as a whole. This verse offers no basis for excluding the Apocrypha and other books from the Bible. When John wrote these words the only Bible he knew was what we call the Old Testament. And his Bible, the Septuagint—the Greek translation of the Old Testament, included some books that were eventually rejected by most Protestants. It may also have lacked some books that both Jews and Christians now consider canonical—the Song of Songs; Esther; and Ecclesiastes. It most certainly did not include all of the books of the New Testament. Christians believe that the Holy Spirit guided the Church of the first five centuries in recognizing the books he had inspired. Revelation 22:18 and 19 are not a valid basis for maintaining a canon of precisely 66 books.

<sup>107</sup> Jan de Waard and Eugene A. Nida. *A Handbook on the Book of Ruth*, 2nd ed., UBS Handbook Series. New York: United Bible Societies, 1992, 8.

<sup>108</sup> Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980, 28.

<sup>109</sup> It is not the aorist tense of the verb “offer/present,” but the imagery of sacrifice that justifies this statement. Too much has been made of the aorist tense in holiness interpretation of passages such as this. Greek grammar alone is an insufficient basis for defending the view that entire sanctification begins in a crisis moment subsequent to regeneration. Some earlier scholars attempted to buttress the doctrine of holiness as a “second definite work of grace” by appealing to the aorist tense. We should be cautious about over-dependence on such arguments.

<sup>110</sup> Käsemann, 329.

<sup>111</sup> Käsemann, 327-29.