An Introduction to the New Testament

CRAIG BLOMBERG
Overview

Title: Understanding the New Testament
Speaker: Dr. Craig Blomberg, Denver Seminary

This course is an overview of the content and themes of the New Testament by Dr. Craig Blomberg. There are twelve messages that will introduce readers around the world to what at the very least has been almost universally viewed as one of the great collections of literature in this world’s history, but for Christian believers is far more - being their sacred book, or collection of sixty-six books, believed to be God’s very word to humanity and thus making it crucial for followers of Christ to understand it, to apply it, and to obey it.

GOALS

1. Understanding of the background of the New Testament and it’s importance.
2. Know the major divisions of the New Testament and which books belong within each division.
3. Know the similarities/differences between the Gospels.
4. Ability to summarize the content and major application of each book of the New Testament.

REQUIREMENTS

1. 12 sessions
2. 2 hours per week (lesson and discussion)

PREREQUISITES

None

FORMAT

Audio and video (slides)
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Broadly evangelical. Our materials are broadly evangelical, governed by our Statement of Faith, and are not tied to any one church, denomination or tradition.

Partners. We provide the content and delivery mechanisms, and our partner organizations provide the community and mentoring.
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Dr. Craig Blomberg has taught at Denver Seminary since 1986. He is currently a distinguished professor of New Testament. Dr. Blomberg completed his Ph.D. in New Testament, specializing in the parables and the writings of Luke-Acts, at Aberdeen University in Scotland. He received an M.A. from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and a B.A. from Augustana College with majors in Biblical Studies, Spanish, and Music. Before joining the faculty of Denver Seminary, he taught at Palm Beach Atlantic College and was a research fellow in Cambridge, England with Tyndale House.


**EDUCATION**

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M.A., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School  
B.A., Augustana College
We are pleased that you have chosen to use materials from BiblicalTraining.org. We trust that you will find them to be of the highest quality and truly helpful in your own spiritual growth and that of your church. Please read through the following guidelines; they will help you make the best use of this guide.

**WEEKLY SCHEDULE**

**Listen or watch the lesson.** The lesson for each chapter is designed to be listened to outside of your meeting. Each lesson lasts for an hour. This is a crucial step. If the meeting time with your fellow students is going to be productive and encouraging, everyone in the group needs to have listened to and wrestled with the lesson.

**Take notes.** This guide has the outline for each lesson with a summary of the teaching for each major point. If you are unable to take notes while listening to the lesson, please work through the guide at some point before your meeting.

**Questions.** Each chapter closes with a series of questions. Some of the questions are data based, confirming that you understand the information. Other questions are more reflective, helping you move beyond the important accumulation of knowledge to challenging you to think through what you are learning about God, yourself and others, and finally to application. Our encouragement is to think through your answers before your meeting and then use the meeting to share your thoughts and interact with others.

**Meeting.** Meet together with your group.
MEETING TOGETHER

While some people may have to study on their own, we strongly recommend finding a group with which you can study.

A group provides encouragement to finish the class.

Interacting with others, their understanding and insight, is the most effective way to sharpen your own thoughts and beliefs.

Just as you will need the help of others from time to time, so also they will need your help.
If you are leading the group or mentoring an individual, here are some suggestions that should help you.

**Your role is to facilitate.** This is not an opportunity for you to teach. In fact, the less visible role you take, the better. Your role is to listen and bring out the best in the other people.

**Preparation.** Be sure to have done your homework thoroughly. Have listened to the lesson and think carefully through the questions. Have an answer for each question that will get the conversation going. A great question is, “What is the Lord teaching you this week?”

**Creativity.** What works to help one person understand may not help another. So listen to the conversation and pray that the Lord help you bring out the greatest interaction among all the people.

**Correct error.** This is difficult. If someone says something that isn’t right, you don’t want to come down on them, telling them they are wrong and shutting down their participation. On the other hand, if you let an obvious error pass, the rest of the group may think you agree and what was said was correct. So look for gracious ways to suggest that perhaps the person’s comment was incorrect.

**Focus.** Stay focused on Jesus and the Bible, not on church or religious traditions.

**Lead the discussion.** People don’t want to listen to a sharing of common ignorance. Lead by asking questions that will prompt others to think.

**Silence.** Don’t be afraid of silence. It may mean nothing more than people are thinking. But if the conversation lags, then ask thought-provoking questions to get the discussion started, and then step out of the way.
Discipleship. Be acutely aware of how you can mentor the people in the group. Meet with them for coffee. Share some life with them. Jesus’ Great Commission is to teach people to obey, and the only way this happens is in relationship.

Men and women. Be aware that men and women tend to learn differently. Don’t ask the men to become women in how they answer.

Privacy. All discussions are private, not to be shared outside the group unless otherwise specified.

Goal. The goal of this study is not just increased knowledge; it is transformation. Don’t be content with people getting the “right” answers. The Pharisees got the “right” answer, and many of them never made it to heaven (Matt 5:20).

Relationships. Share everyone’s name, email and phone number so people can communicate during the week and follow up on prayer requests. You may want to set up a way to share throughout the week using Slack or WhatsApp.

Finish well. Encourage the people to make the necessary commitment to do the work, think reflectively over the questions, and complete the class.

Prayer. Begin and end every meeting with prayer. Please don’t do the quick “one-prayer-covers-all” approach. Manage the time so all of you can pray over what you have learned and with what you have been challenged. Pray regularly for each individual in the meeting.
Why and How Should You Study the New Testament?

LESSON OVERVIEW

There are many reasons why studying the Bible is informative and profitable. Effective approaches you use to study the New Testament will take into account questions of introduction, exegesis, theology, and application. Your conclusions will be affected by your presuppositions and the extent to which you allow your previous knowledge and life experience to be part of the process.
WHAT IS THE NEW TESTAMENT?

1. The New Testament Canon

   A. The 27 books of the New Testament

      Rather than one individual book, the New Testament is composed of twenty-seven different sacred and authoritative books.

   B. Definition of “canonization”

      The coming to understand the collection of works that compose the New Testament as uniquely inspired and God-breathed.

2. The genres of the New Testament

   A. The Gospels (biography)

      1) Books: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John
2) **Definition of gospel**

“Good news”

3) **The content of the four Gospels**

Each of the four Gospels describe selected events from the life of Christ according to the particular interests of their authors and particular needs of their audiences.

4) **The reason for having four Gospels**

Each tells the story of Jesus in a somewhat different, though not contradictory, fashion.

5) **The order of the four Gospels**

Likely corresponds to the order in which some Christians in the early centuries of the faith believed that the Gospels were written. Matthew also provides the best bridge from the Old Testament to the New Testament.
B. Acts of the Apostles (history)

1) Books: Acts

2) Defining the genre of Acts

Lacking a single leading character, Acts may be thought of more along the lines of the broader history writing of the ancient Mediterranean world.

3) The content of Acts

Acts describes selected events believed to be of particular significance in the first generation of the life of the early church.
C. Letters (Epistles)

1) Paul’s letters

Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, and maybe Hebrews

2) The order of the Pauline Epistles

Their order in the sequence of the New Testament is simply that of decreasing length; first with letters written to entire churches, followed then by letters written to individuals.

3) General Epistles

Called the General Epistles because at one time they were believed to have been written to more than one single church.

Books: maybe Hebrews, James, 1 & 2 Peter, 1, 2, & 3 John, and Jude
4) The order of the General Epistles

While there is uncertainty, the best guess is that the order corresponds to the order of importance in the earliest stages of the Christian faith.

D. Apocalypse

1) Books: Revelation

2) Definition of revelation

A highly symbolic description of present and future events in light of questions about the way the world will end.

3) The content of Revelation

A letter containing seven letters to seven churches in Asia Minor; a prophesy referring to things
that will happen in the future and explains God’s intentions for the churches in the present time.

WHY STUDY THE NEW TESTAMENT?

1. The literary reason

The Bible contains great literature that has impressed many with profound nature of its thoughts, the elegant way many passages are phrased, and great poetry and prose.

2. The historical reason

A book or collection of books that has had the demand and impact that the Bible has had is surely worth knowing about regardless of one’s nationality, culture, or world view.
3. **The contemporary reason**

As persons try to understand the beliefs that motivate people for political action, humanitarian aid, educational purposes, and countless other features, an understanding of the New Testament and the many ways it has been interpreted is crucial.

4. **The academic reason**

The New Testament makes claims which thoughtful, growing, educated people should know, understand, and evaluate, to examine, to see if they are true.

5. **The personal reason**

6. **The professional reason**

For the best possible understanding of the New Testament documents for the sake of teaching and applying the Bible to themselves and to others.

HOW SHOULD WE STUDY THE NEW TESTAMENT?

1. **Questions of introduction**

Who wrote it? To whom? When? Under what circumstances? Why was it written?

2. **Questions of interpretation**

How should the book be outlined? What is its overall structure? What are its main points? What is clear? What is disputed? What are the best solutions?
3. **Questions of theology**

What are the key themes overall? Is there a unifying or central topic? Are there any problems or difficulties with these main themes?

4. **Questions of application**

What are some key points that can be applied to life and ministry today?

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

What are the possible viewpoints or presuppositions or understandings or faith commitments or lack thereof that we employ or should employ in coming to study these texts?
1. Three main perspectives

A. The religious viewpoint

Predisposition in favor of reverencing the text as containing the very words of God meant to be believed and obeyed

B. The irreligious viewpoint

A more skeptical perspective

C. The Christian viewpoint

This series of lectures represents a distinctively Christian worldview.
2. Diverse Christian perspectives

A. The conservative evangelical perspective

Belief that the Bible contains accurate historical information, normative theological truths that we are meant to believe and obey, and ethical practices that are binding on all humans

B. The liberal perspective

Treats the Bible as a collection of documents that is not uniquely authoritative and ought to be analyzed carefully and accepted only to the extent that science, philosophy, and current thought will allow

C. Denominational perspectives

1) The Eastern Orthodox perspective

2) The Roman Catholic perspective
3) The Protestant perspective

4) Other perspectives (e.g., Mormon, Jehovah’s Witness, etc.)

SHOULD WE EVALUATE THE NEW TESTAMENT FROM OUR PERSPECTIVE?

1. Two Approaches

   Blank slate vs. Coming with all of our beliefs, education, convictions and commitments

2. Blended Approach

   We admit it is impossible to have a blank slate, but we’re not so cemented in our predispositions that we cannot learn or grow in understanding.
A. We should critically analyze the text and weigh the evidence.

Allow the weight of the evidence to be the guiding factor, knowing that where there is great weight we must be willing to adapt our understanding.

B. We should search the Scriptures.

Scripture is always the authority, regardless of how persuasive an argument or individual may be.

C. We should be open to learning something new.

Be open to having your mind, behavior, and your commitments changed by something new.
QUESTIONS

1. Why might it be important to understand the different “genres” of the New Testament? What difference might it make in how we read the various books of the New Testament?

2. This study identified a number of different reasons for learning about the New Testament. Which of these reasons comes closest to the reason that you are learning about the New Testament? Can you think of any other reasons? How might you use some of these reasons to encourage someone else to learn more about the New Testament?
3. The study identified four different kinds of questions that should be addressed in studying the New Testament. Why are these all important? Which of these interests you the most? Why?

4. Why is it important to understand the different “perspectives” that people bring with them when they read the New Testament? What is your perspective? How might it influence the way you read the New Testament? How might this be a good thing? How might it be a bad thing?
LESSON OVERVIEW

The nations that controlled the nation of Israel prior to and during the writing of the New Testament affected the political and cultural climate in which it was written. The influence of the Greek religion and the relationship between Jews and Gentiles is an underlying theme throughout the New Testament. Roman rule in Israel and the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in A.D. 70 are significant to both Judaism and Christianity. The four main groups in Judaism were the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and Zealots.
THE HISTORICAL & POLITICAL BACKGROUND OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

Four eras of political influence

1. The Persian Era (425-330 B.C.)

   A period of Persian occupation and rule over the nation of Israel.

2. The Greek Era (331-160 B.C.)

   Alexander the Great conquered more territory than any ruler had previously held in that part of the world; Israel came under Alexander’s rule in 331 B.C.

   A. The spread of the Greek language

   The Greek language became the common second language of any people or peoples who needed to do business, travel, or speak to any other than their native neighbors.
B. The spread of Greek religions

With the spread of the Greek language came the spread of Greek religions, challenging any people who believed theirs was an exclusive religion; this caused increasing turmoil among the Jews.

3. The Hasmonean (Maccabean) Era (167-63 B.C.)

Named after Judas Maccabeus’ great grandfather, this era was an era of independence for the Jews in Israel.

A. The Jewish Revolt

Judas Maccabeus led a Jewish revolt, successfully ridding the city of Jerusalem, its holy temple, and the entire land of Israel from the Seleucid power.

B. The Growing Tension between Jew & Gentile

Strong conservative Jewish backlash against the most offensive Greek practices of the day
4. **The Roman Era (63 B.C. - fifth-century A.D.)**

In 63 B.C. the Romans entered Israel and into the holy city of Jerusalem.

A. **The Roman culture**

Rome and its infrastructural and cultural advances were more of a positive benefit for Jesus and the first generation of his followers than it was a problem.

1) **A common language - Greek**

Enabled the message, or for that matter any message, to be spread widely without it having to be translated into a dozen or more languages.

2) **An empire wide transportation/ communication system**

State-of-the-art by the standards of the ancient world.
3) **The Pax Romana (Roman Peace)**

The peace that existed between nationalities in the Roman empire proved to be advantageous to Christians.

4) **Roman law**

The judicial system in the Roman empire was the best that part of the world had ever known.

B. **Roman persecution**

With the Emperor Nero in A.D. 64, things took a substantial turn for the worse.

1) **Nero’s persecution (A.D. 64-68)**

Persecution broke out in Rome and nearby areas in Italy.
2) Domitian’s persecution (A.D. 94-96)

Persecutions breaks out in a more widespread fashion.

3) Significance of A.D. 70

The date at which the Jewish zealot rebellion, an attempt to once again gain independence for Israel, was decisively put down.

THE RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

Five different religious identifications in the Greco-Roman world

1. The Greek religions

The classic myths about the various gods and goddesses in Greek thought; elements of nature and different portions of the universe deified with elaborate stories explaining how they came to be; growing doubt surrounded the Greek gods with increased scientific knowledge.
2. Emperor worship

The belief that the emperor becomes a god initially upon his death or even during his lifetime; many began to doubt the deity of the emperors when some showed themselves to be cruel tyrants and therefore mortal.

3. The mystery religions

These were small, elitist cults of various kinds open only to those willing to go through a rigorous, sometimes eccentric process of joining.

4. Greek philosophical systems

Appealed to those usually in the upper classes who alone had enough free time to study with an existing philosopher, thus a certain elitism prevailed.

A. The Epicureans

“Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow you may die.”
B. The Stoics

Taught the accepting of ones predetermined fate courageously

C. The Cynics/Skeptics

The most pessimistic and countercultural of the various philosophers

5. The Gnostics

Taught that the material and immaterial worlds are quite separate and different from one another, that matter is by nature evil and only spirit good.

THE JEWISH BACKGROUND OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

Four leadership groups who were prominent; the vast majority of all Jews were not a member of one of these groups.
1. **The Pharisees (and Scribes)**

Expert students of the law, both the written laws of Moses in the Old Testament as well as the oral interpretations and additions that had begun centuries earlier.

“In the world but not of it.”

2. **The Sadducees**

While they did not explicitly deny God, they questioned seriously belief in an afterlife or any resurrection of the dead, thus making it possible in good conscience for them to compromise with Greek culture.

“Both in the world and of it.”
3. **The Essenes**

The separatists of the day, removing themselves from what they believed to be the corrupt world and occupied themselves with a disciplined, communal lifestyle; Most famous group of Essenes are those who lived at Qumran, where the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered.

“No in the world and not of it.”

4. **The Zealots**

Those who hoped to repeat the Maccabean miracle but who were brutally slaughtered in a revolt beginning in A.D. 67 and culminating in A.D. 70; God helps those who help themselves.

“No in the world, but of it.”
QUESTIONS

1. Why is it important for us to understand the historical and political context in which the New Testament books were written? Do you think it will make a difference in how you understand the New Testament? Why?

2. Did you find it helpful to reflect on the religious background of the New Testament? Read Acts 17:18. How does understanding these religious perspectives help us understand the groups mentioned in these verses?
3. What have you learned about the Pharisees and Sadducees? Read Acts 23:6-8. How does understanding the Jewish background of the New Testament help you understand this passage? Why is that important?

RECOMMENDED READING

An Introduction to the Canon and Text of the New Testament

LESSON OVERVIEW

How and why were the books in the New Testament chosen to form the canon we have today? The three major criteria are that the writings be uniquely relevant, non-contradictory with previously acknowledged revelation and genuinely going back to an apostle or close associate of an apostle. The four Gospels have similarities and differences in their content and writing style. Matthew, Mark and Luke have so many similarities that they are called the synoptic Gospels. John is significantly different in content and style from the other three.
1. **What is “Canon”?**

   From the Greek *kanon*, which refers to a measuring rod or a form of measurement; the canon of Scripture asks how the various books were measured, or analyzed, in order to determine what would be considered uniquely sacred.

2. **The Hebrew Scriptures**

   The thirty-nine books of the Hebrew Scripture have been taken over by Protestants without any changes.

3. **The OT Apocryphal Books**

   A number of books produced by Jews during the period between the Old and New Testaments.
4. The Pseudepigrapha

A large number of additional Jewish writings that were excluded due to false ascription of authorship.

HOW WAS THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON DETERMINED?

1. Why were any books added to the Old Testament Canon?

A. The open-ended nature of the Old Testament

The Old Testament, particularly the prophets, was open ended and looked forward to a coming age when a Messiah, a descendant of David, would come and liberate his people.
B. The establishment of the New Covenant

Just as the record of the establishment of the first covenant with Israel was accompanied by a written record and revolution, so also it was natural for Christians to expect that a written record and revelation should accompany the New Covenant.

C. Jesus’ promises to the disciples

Jesus prophesies that he would lead his disciples into all truth and help them to remember everything that had been spoken to them, thus suggesting that part of the Spirit’s role would be to inspire individuals who had followed Jesus to record their accounts.

2. Why these particular 27 books?

All were traditions either about the nature of Jesus’ person and work, his teachings and ministry or immediate developments of that tradition in the first century’s decades.
A. They were widely accepted by the Church as uniquely true and inspired.

Uniquely true, inspired, valuable, relevant for Christian thought and life.

B. They were linked to an Apostle.

All were written by someone who had direct experience of the risen Lord or one who was a close follower of such a person.

C. They did not contradict previous Scripture.

The New Testament books were seen as appropriate, logical, natural supplements to, and fulfillments of the Hebrew Scriptures.
3. **What about those writings that were left out?**

There are no other books from the first century that still exist or that we know about that would be a candidate for inclusion in the canon.

**A. The Apostolic Fathers**

Wrote letters to Christian communities and appear to have understood their writing didn’t have the same authority as the apostolic writing.

**B. The New Testament Apocrypha**

Additional second through fifth-century Gospels, Acts, and Apocalypses like the Book of Revelation and one or two additional letters beyond the era of the apostolic fathers.

**C. The Gnostic Writings**

Long, rambling, esoteric discourses about God's ways with humanity and elaborate hierarchies of angelic and demonic beings; most second to fifth century.
D. What if we found new writings?

The fact that God had allowed it to disappear and not be used for two-thousand years or so suggests that he did not see it as crucial for his church in each era of human history.

IS THE TEXT OF THE NEW TESTAMENT RELIABLE?

1. The number of manuscripts (i.e. copies)

More than 5,700 Greek manuscripts were copied by hand finding their origin in the originals; whereas having ten or more copies of any other works from antiquity is considered fortunate.

2. The nature of the discrepancies

The vast majority of discrepancies are the misspelling of a word, accidentally omitting a word or letter or a portion of a word, or repeating all of those things by mistake; occasionally, deliberate changes were made to smooth out something that appeared to be awkward in terms of style or puzzling in terms of content.
3. Some longer disputable passages

There are about a dozen places in the New Testament where an entire verse or two are in question and only two instances where entire stories most likely ought not be attributed to the original manuscripts.

A. The ending of the Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6:13)

A conclusion using language out of Chronicles may have been added: “For Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever, Amen.”

B. The ending of Mark (Mark 16:9-20)

C. The woman caught in adultery (John 7:53-8:11)
4. The verse and chapter references

Verse and chapter references were not added until the middle ages. Subsequently, modern versions use footnotes to explain any discrepancy found within a particular verse.

THE FOUR GOSPELS

1. The similarities and differences among the Gospels

Having four uniquely authoritative accounts rather than one creates issues in regards to similarities and differences.

A. “Harmonies” of the Gospels

Side by side comparisons of the Gospels and how they record the same events or stories.
B. The “Synoptic” Gospels

Matthew, Mark, and Luke are often called the Synoptic Gospels because of their similarity and reasonably close parallels between the three books.

C. The uniqueness of John

John is more unlike the Synoptic Gospels than like them.

2. Other early sources of information about the life of Christ

Outside of the New Testament there is comparatively little historical mention of Jesus.

A. What other sources do we have?

A few Roman, Greek and Jewish historians mention Jesus briefly; most notable is Josephus, who goes into more detail.
B. What can we learn about Jesus from these sources?

Jesus did exist; he was a Jew who lived in the first third of the first century; he was born out of wedlock; he was a popular teacher who gathered a number of disciples; he attracted large crowds and held countercultural perspectives; he was arrested by the Jews, convicted by the Romans, and executed under Pontius Pilate; his followers believed he raised from the dead and is therefore believed to be the Messiah.

C. What should we conclude from this information?

Though there are not many references to Jesus, it is amazing that Jesus is referenced even that many times given that historians were employed mostly for political figures and the well to do during that time.

3. Methods for explaining the differences among the Gospels
A. The traditional approach

Do our best to arrange them into one life of Christ in one plausible, chronological sequence that does justice to all of the data in the Gospels.

B. Source criticism

Beginning in the 1700s, individuals began comparing the Synoptics in minute detail and concluded that Mark was the earliest and Matthew and Luke each relied on Mark as their primary source.

C. Form criticism

Twentieth century emphasis on the oral traditions of the first century and the role that a common oral tradition plays in the similarities and variants of the Synoptics.
D. Redaction criticism

Later twentieth century focus on the role of Matthew and Luke as editors, smoothing out or emphasizing certain themes in Mark’s text.

E. Other methods

Growing understanding and focus on the sociology of the cultures into which the Gospels were written and the literary artistry of the Gospels.

4. Explaining the uniqueness of the Gospel of John

Jesus teaches in very different ways, in very different language, and at times with quite different concepts in John’s Gospel than in the Synoptics.
A. The traditional explanation: familiarity with the Synoptics

Because John was the last and latest to be written, he did not want to repeat what had already appeared in the Synoptics.

B. The modern explanation: unfamiliarity with the Synoptics

Assumption that John was so different from the Synoptics was not because he knew them and chose to go in a different direction, but because he did not know them or at least he was not relying on their contents and their wording.

C. A hybrid approach: familiarity with the stories

John probably did not have copies of Matthew, Mark, or Luke that he owned, that he could refer to, but on the other hand there was a familiarity with all the stories contained therein.
QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think the early church believed it was important to establish which books of the Bible were “canonical”? Does it change how you view the New Testament to know that these books were intentionally and thoughtfully selected as being uniquely authoritative and inspired?

2. Does it bother you to realize that there are differences and discrepancies among the various copies of the New Testament? How might our confidence in the sovereignty of God and the continual work of the Holy Spirit help us deal with our concerns in this area? How could you encourage someone who was struggling with whether these discrepancies meant they could no longer trust the Bible?
3. In what ways are the four Gospel accounts similar? In what ways are they different? Why are these differences important? Why might these differences also cause problems?

4. What do you think of the various ways that people have come up with to explain the differences among the Gospels? How might each of these help us understand how the Gospels were written?
5. Pause for a moment and put yourself in the place of the biblical authors as they sorted various sources (source criticism) and oral traditions (form criticism), editing them together (redaction criticism) to present an account of Jesus’ life that would be meaningful in their cultural context (socio-historical criticism). How can this help you appreciate these authors and what they accomplished? How was the Holy Spirit involved in all of this? Why is that important?

**RECOMMENDED READING**

Introduction to the Gospels

LESSON OVERVIEW

This lesson is an introduction and overview to each of the four Gospels. We’ll look at the term, gospel, and the genre of gospel. Understanding the circumstances surrounding the writing of each Gospel helps us better understand the central themes of each book. We’ll look at the major themes of each book and how to apply them.

INTRODUCTION

1. Definition of Gospel (euangelion)

Formed from two Greek words meaning “good news”; used to refer both to the good news Jesus preached as well as the accounts of his life and ministry themselves.
2. The Gospels as ancient biographies

Different than modern biographies in that they are very selective in the events and episodes they portray and spend a disproportionate amount of time recalling the events that led up to the individuals death.

THE GOSPEL OF MARK

1. Background

A. Author

Authored by John Mark, the companion of Paul as identified in the book of Acts; authorship is attributed by the traditional title of the book, but Mark is nowhere explicitly identified as the author in the book.

B. Date

Likely prior to A.D. 62, but may range from late 50s to early 70s depending on how one dates Luke’s Gospel.
C. Purpose

Mark is concerned to emphasize aspects of Jesus’ life and ministry that can bring encouragement and comfort to Christians in Rome during a time of increased hostility and persecution.

2. Major themes

A. Jesus as “Son of God”

Christians claimed that Jesus was the unique Son of God, God in human form, over against the common practice of viewing emperors as divine men.

Mark 15:39

B. Jesus as “Christ”

Jesus is the Jewish Messiah, the promised deliverer. Messianic Secret found in Mark as Jesus frequently tells people to keep secret that he is the Christ.
Mark 8:27-30

C. Jesus as “suffering servant”

The entire flow of thought of the book and the emphases found in numerous passages points to the suffering servant imagery of Isaiah.

Isaiah 53; Mark 10:45

D. The disciples’ inability to understand

Mark highlights the disciples and other followers of Jesus inability to comprehend what Jesus was teaching.

Mark 8:31-33
3. Application

Mark helps us understand the fundamental themes and events of Jesus Christ’s life.

It encourages Christians in the midst of adversity.

THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

1. Background

A. Author

Traditionally ascribed to Levi, also known as Matthew, one of Jesus’ twelve disciples and a converted tax collector.

B. Date

A date of about A.D. 63 is most probable, just shortly after Mark having been written.
C. Purpose

Writing an account of the gospel to Jewish Christians in the eastern part of the Roman Empire, perhaps in Jerusalem or Syria.

2. Major Themes

A. Jesus as “teacher”

Matthew emphasizes Jesus as a teacher like Moses and adds five major blocks of teaching to Mark’s narrative.

1) The Sermon on the Mount

Matthew 5-7

2) The commissioning of the twelve

Matthew 10
3) The parables

Matthew 13

4) The teaching on humility and forgiveness

Matthew 18:1-6; 15-35

5) The “woes” and the second coming

Matthew 24-25

B. Jesus as “Son of David”

Jesus is descendant of the lineage of kings, thus he fulfills Old Testament prophecy.

Matthew 9:27; 15:22; 21:9, 15
C. The progression of the gospel offer

The gospel is offered first exclusively to the Jews and later culminates in the Great Commission.

Matthew 28:16-19

D. Jesus’ fulfillment of the Old Testament

Jesus’ fulfillment of the Law and Prophets is emphasized throughout Matthew, demonstrating that he is a legitimate candidate to be the Messiah.

Matthew 5:17-48

3. Application

Matthew is most helpful for those with a Scriptural background, stimulates the mission of the Church, and provides material for ethical reflection.
THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

1. Background

   A. Author

      Traditionally ascribed to Luke the beloved physician and companion of Paul.

   B. Date

      Two options: if Acts concludes as it does because Luke is writing concurrently, A.D. 62 is the best approximation; if the time of writing does not correlate to the conclusion of Acts, after A.D. 70 is the best approximation.

   C. Purpose

      Luke writes to address the most excellent Theophilus to compose this Gospel so that he might know the certainty of the things about which he had been taught.
2. Major themes and application

A. The humanity of Jesus

Luke emphasizes Jesus compassion for the outcast of society such as Gentiles, Samaritans, tax collectors and other notorious sinners, the poor, and even women.

Luke 4:31-41; 5:12-26

B. Jesus as “teacher”

Including twenty parables not told in any other Gospel, Luke highlights Jesus’ role as a teacher and teller of parables.

Luke 15-16
C. The power of prayer

Luke 18:1-8

D. The importance of the Holy Spirit


E. The importance of stewardship

The importance of the rich to be good stewards and care for the poor, to give generously or sacrificially, and recognize Jesus’ concern for the poor.

Luke 16:10; 19:19-26
THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

1. The background of John

A. Author

Attributed to John, one of Jesus’ twelve apostles and one of the inner three along with his brother James and Peter.

B. Date

Late 80s or even more probably in the decade of the 90s when John was a very elderly man ministering in and around the cities of Asia Minor

C. Purpose

John writes to address a majority Gentile Christian population, but still a key core of the populace from Jewish backgrounds, that they might believe and have life in Jesus name.
2. Major Themes

A. Jesus as “Son of God” and “Christ”

John writes so that they might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.

John 20:31

B. The importance of evangelism

Meant to encourage the Christians churches in and around Ephesus in their evangelistic mission with those in their midst

John 3:16-21
C. Jesus as “Word of God”

Jesus is the logos, who is God, and is God’s creative expression of communication to humanity.

John 1:1

D. Jesus as “Lamb of God”

The Passover sacrifice

John 1:29, 36

E. Jesus as “God Incarnate”

John 10
F. The “I am” sayings

An illusion to Exodus 3:14 and the name God revealed of himself to Moses in the burning bush.

John 6:48; 8:12, 58; 10:9, 11; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1

G. The presence of eternal life

John 3:16; 6:35-71

H. The miracles as key signs pointing to Jesus’ identity

John 9:1-41

I. Jesus’ private teaching of the disciples

John 13-17
1) The unity between the Father and the Son

2) The unity between the Son and his followers

J. The eternal security of the believer

John 6:39

3. Application

The best Gospel for a non-Christian to learn about Jesus’ unique claims to divinity that call for a response

An excellent place for a new Christian to begin to study the Gospels in most detail.
QUESTIONS

1. Read Isaiah 53, Mark 8:31 and Mark 9:12. How do these passages help you understand who Jesus was and what he did? How could you use these passages to encourage someone who was enduring persecution or suffering?

2. One of the key themes for the Gospel of Matthew is that Jesus is a teacher. Spend some time looking through the Sermon on the Mount to see what kinds of things Jesus taught about (Matthew 5-7). Pick one part of the Sermon and spend some time reflecting on what it would have been like to hear Jesus preach these words to his disciples. What would it be like to hear him preaching these words to your church today? How should you live in light of these words?

3. Read Luke 2:52. What does this verse tell us about the humanity of Christ? Why is the humanity of Christ such
an important issue for Luke? Why is it important that we understand the humanity of Christ today? Read Hebrews 2:17-18. How can Christ’s humanity be a source of encouragement for us?

4. Read John 1:1-18. What does it mean to say that the ‘Word’ became ‘flesh’? What can you do this week to reflect more deeply on what an amazing truth this is? What can you do this week to help someone else understand and appreciate this truth?

RECOMMENDED READING

LESSON OVERVIEW

By comparing the texts of the Gospels, we can trace the major periods, activities and teachings of Jesus’ life. Matthew and Luke describe events surrounding Jesus’ birth and childhood. We can trace major events in the life and ministry of Jesus by following the order of events in the Gospel of Mark.

AN OVERVIEW OF JESUS’ LIFE

1. Jesus’ birth (6–4 B.C.)

   Original estimations were off by a few years because of uncertainty about the date of Herod’s death; Herod is now understood to have died in 4 B.C., thus Jesus was born shortly before his death.
2. Jesus’ adult ministry (A.D. 27-30 or 30-33)

The necessary times for Christ’s death in which Passover fell on a Friday were A.D. 30 and 33; taking into account Luke’s reference to the fifteenth year of the emperor Tiberius, A.D. 27 or 28 is the most viable beginning of Jesus’ ministry.

A. The Passover narratives in John

John’s Gospel uniquely records two, or possibly three, Passover trips of Jesus to Jerusalem.

B. Jesus’ three-year ministry

Based on John’s Passover accounts, Jesus likely had a two and a half year to three and a half year ministry.

1) The phase of obscurity

Where Jesus was not yet well known
2) The phase of popularity

Where Jesus was considerably liked by the masses

3) The phase of rejection

Where opposition to him grew leading up eventually to his execution

THE BIRTH OF JESUS IN MATTHEW AND LUKE

Matthew and Luke begin their accounts of the life of Jesus with incidents surrounding his birth.

1. The fulfillment of OT prophecy

Jesus described as both fulfilling specific prophesies as well as fulfilling Old Testament typologies.
2. **The virgin birth**

   Jesus was conceived of the Virgin Mary and biologically there was no human father involved satisfying the need for Jesus to fully God and fully man.

3. **Jesus’ infancy**

   Emphasis on the testimony of angels, of shepherds, of the Magi, and speak of peace to people of good will, introducing Jesus as the one who will be Christ and Lord.

4. **Jesus’ childhood**

   Luke contains the only story of Jesus’ childhood, the story of Jesus at the temple as a twelve year old boy; the emphasis in this story appears to be on Jesus humanity, rather than his divinity.
THE PHASE OF OBSCURITY

1. The beginning of Jesus’ public ministry

A. The starting point in Mark & John

Mark’s Gospel begins at the phase of obscurity, whereas John’s Gospel begins with a prologue describing Jesus from eternity past and thereafter picks up with Jesus in the context of the ministry of John the Baptist.

B. John the Baptist

John is the prophet come to herald, to testify, to witness to the coming of the Messiah preaching a message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins and baptism.
2. Jesus’ Baptism

A. Baptism in Judaism

In Jewish circles it was required of those converting to Judaism from other religious backgrounds

B. The reasons for Jesus’ baptism

Jesus was baptized not because he needed to repent himself of any personal sin, but in order to identify with John’s ministry and message and put his stamp of approval on it.

Baptism may have also been a way to identify with the collective sin of the children of Israel and certainly as an opportunity for his Heavenly Father to testify that Jesus is his beloved son.
3. **Jesus’ temptation**

Following his baptism, Jesus is immediately driven into the wilderness where he is tempted by Satan.

A. **Common to all three Synoptics**


B. **The three temptations**

1) *Turn stones to bread*

2) *Rule all kingdoms*

3) *Jump from the Temple*
C. The significance of the temptation

1) These temptations are common to all people

1 John 2:16

2) Jesus is just like us, yet without sin

Hebrews 2:17-18

3) Jesus can sympathize with our weaknesses

Hebrews 4:14-16

4) We can resist temptation as well

1 Corinthians 10:13
D. Events unique to the Gospel of John

Additional information about Jesus’ opening phase of obscurity found only in John’s Gospel.

1) The four main episodes

a) Turning water into wine

Jesus turns water into wine at a wedding in Cana, symbolizing the old deluded water of Judaism was being replaced by the new powerful refreshment of Jesus.

John 2:1-13

b) Clearing the temple (the first time)

A protest against worship being replaced by commerce and an opportunity for Jesus to predict his own resurrection and to speak of his body as the new temple.
c) Jesus and Nicodemus

Jesus tells Nicodemus that physical birth as a Jew in the covenant family of God is not sufficient, rather one needs to be born again.

John 3:1-21

d) Jesus and the Samaritan woman

This encounter serves as a reminder that if we wish to be on board with the heart of God’s plans, we must always make sure that a heart for the poor and the marginalized and those discriminated against in our world take a central place in our ministries.

John 4:1-45
2) A new and more universal salvation

Salvation moves beyond the walls of the temple to the fields ripe for harvest becoming more readily available to the Gentile and outcast.

THE PHASE OF POPULARITY

1. Introduction

Because the authors’ intent was not to provide a chronological account of Jesus ministry, it is impossible to arrange a study of Jesus ministry in such an order.

2. Jesus announces the Kingdom & calls for repentance

Mark 1:14-15
A. The Kingdom as the heart of God’s ministry

“Kingdom of God” is the most common way that Jesus describes the heart of activity through his ministry.

B. The nature of the Kingdom

The Kingdom refers not so much to a place as to a power; God acting in strength in the ministry of Jesus.

C. The nature of repentance

A change not merely of mind or heart involving apologies but a change of action

3. Jesus calls the first disciples

Like the twelve tribes of Israel formed from the twelve sons of Jacob in Genesis, Jesus is constituting a new and true and freed Israel led initially by these twelve disciples.
4. Jesus’ healing ministry

A. Miracles and mythology

If one does not believe that God exists then miracles are just myths designed to teach spiritual truths; if God does exist, then miracles follow naturally.

B. Miracles as testimonies of the Kingdom

The most fundamental meaning of the miracle stories in the Gospels have to do with a demonstration of the arrival of the kingdom and of the king of that kingdom, thus bearing witness to Jesus’ identity.

5. The ‘conflict’ stories

Also known as pronouncement stories, because they all climax in a key declaration or pronouncement of Jesus; each of these stories arouses controversy and conflict.
A. The healing of the paralytic

Pronouncement that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins, an authority understood in Jewish circles as reserved for God alone.

Mark 2:1-12

B. The calling of sinners

Jesus calls sinners repentance and to become his followers because it is the sick, not the healthy, who need a doctor

Mark 2:13-17

C. The Sabbath laws

Jesus claims to be the Lord of the Sabbath, determining what does and does not violate the commandment about resting on the Sabbath.
Mark 3:1-6

D. The true family

Those who do Jesus’ will, who become his follower are his true family, and his biological family does not take priority over his spiritual family.

Mark 3:31-35

6. Jesus’ public ministry challenged

Jesus’ supernatural powers are attributed to the devil to which Jesus in turn responds by suggesting that such a charge comes perilously close to the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

Mark 3:31-35
QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think it is important for believers to reflect on Jesus’ birth and childhood? Why is the Virgin Birth important? Do you think that understanding Jesus’ birth and childhood has any significance for life and ministry today? Why or why not?

2. Read Hebrews 4:14-16. According to this passage, why can we draw near to God’s throne with confidence? What difference might this make in our prayer and worship lives? How can this help us appreciate the importance of Jesus’ life on earth?
3. According to Jesus’ message, what lies at the heart of God’s ministry? How might this affect the way that we understand the Gospel? How can we make this a more prominent part of our own lives and ministries?

4. What can we learn from the controversies and challenges that surrounded Jesus’ public ministry? How can this become a source of motivation and encouragement to us in difficult times?

RECOMMENDED READING

LESSON OVERVIEW

The public ministry of Jesus, also described as the “Great Galilean” ministry, is described in different ways in all four Gospels. After his public ministry, there was a phase in which the ministry of Jesus is characterized by growing rejection of him, leading to his death and resurrection.

THE END OF THE PHASE OF POPULARITY

1. The parables

Parables form the most characteristic and distinctive form of Jesus’ teaching in the Synoptic Gospels.
A. The purpose of the parables

The parables were most often meant to reveal or illustrate the nature of God’s Kingdom, yet at times served a concealing function.

B. The nature of the parables

There is not necessarily hidden symbolism contained within every detail, rather it is more important to focus on the main characters of the parable to look for a central point.

C. The parable of the prodigal son

Through the three main characters we learn that God always delights in the return of his children, that we are not to begrudge God’s generosity to the wayward, and it is God’s nature to show great mercy and compassion to his people.

Luke 15:11-32
D. The Good Samaritan

We ought to imitate the mercy shown by the Samaritan; religion or religious duty should not ever be used as an excuse for not showing love; we are to show love and compassion even to our enemies.

Luke 10:29-37

2. The nature miracles

Not first of all as simply signs of Jesus’ compassion, nor merely to serve humanity in response to faith, nor merely to respond to the lack of faith in a given individual, but to demonstrate who Jesus is and to bring people to worship him.

A. Resurrection from the dead

Mark 9:30-32
B. Walking on water

Mark 6:45

C. Calming the storm

Mark 4:35

3. Jesus’ teaching on Kingdom ethics

Jesus rejects and contradicts the oral laws of the Pharisees and foreshadows a time when the law of Moses will no longer apply.

Mark 7:1-8:22
4. **Jesus confessed as Messiah**

   Peter confesses Jesus as Messiah, yet still lacks understanding because he rejects Jesus’ prediction that the Messiah must suffer.

   

   Mark 8:27-9:1

5. **Additional material in Matthew**

   A. **The Sermon on the Mount**

   A summary of Jesus’ ethical ideals, challenging us to greater spiritual maturity but never allowing us to think that we have arrived.

   

   Matthew 5-7
B. The sermon on mission

Jesus sends out the twelve to replicate his ministry of preaching and enacting the Kingdom; emphasis on the urgency of the mission and expectation of persecution.

Matthew 10

C. The sermon on the parables

Matthew’s expanded treatment of Mark 4

Matthew 13

D. The sermon on humility

Sermon spoken just to the disciples on humility, forgiveness and discipline in the church.
6. A Harmony of the Gospels (Part 2)

Matthew 18

E. The sermon on last things

Jesus teaches on the destruction of the temple, the tribulation, and his second coming and encourages faithful Christian living at all times so that one is prepared for Judgment Day whenever it might come.

Matthew 24-25

6. Additional material in Luke

Luke portrays Jesus on a long journey to the cross, arranging content thematically dealing with Jesus’ ministry to the poor and teachings on prayer, the ministry of the Holy Spirit, and Jesus’ concern for women.
7. Additional material in John

John’s major focus is to narrate the various times that Jesus travels to Jerusalem at Jewish festival celebrations and the teachings and claims and controversies that he generates there.

A. Jesus healing on the Sabbath

Jesus heals on the Sabbath and claims that he can work just as his Heavenly Father works on the Sabbath.

John 5

B. The feeding of the 5,000

John links the feeding of the 5,000 to Jesus’ sermon in Capernaum about being the bread of life.

John 6
C. Jerusalem ministry

Jesus as the light of the world and the life-giving water as fulfillment of the tabernacle rituals.

John 7-9

D. Jesus as the Good Shepherd

In association with the Feast of Dedication, John records Jesus referring to himself as the Good Shepherd in contrast with the evil shepherds of Israel.

John 10
THE PHASE OF REJECTION

All four Gospels begin to follow a similar sequence of events and the events are narrated in chronological form.

1. The key turning point – raising Lazarus

The most dramatic miracle that Jesus performed which leads to the claim by Jesus that he is uniquely the Resurrection and the Life.

John 11

2. A changing message

As Jesus journeys toward Jerusalem the emphasis shifts to his teaching: on divorce, childlike faith, and removing any stumbling block to wholehearted obedience.

Mark 10; Luke 18-19
3. Passion Week

A. Entering Jerusalem

Jesus’ triumphal entry as the high point of his popularity as he rides into Jerusalem on a donkey fulfilling the messianic prophecy of Zechariah 9:9.


B. Clearing the temple

Confronting the Jewish leaders through clearing the temple, Jesus shows the corruption and the lack of access to Gentiles present there and symbolizes the coming destruction of the temple.

Matthew 21:12-17; Mark 11:15-19; Luke 19:45-48
C. Cursing the fig tree

The final nature miracle of Jesus’ ministry, demonstrating the coming destruction of the unrepentant generation in which he finds himself in.

Matthew 21:18-22; Mark 11:12-14

D. Confronting the Jewish leaders

Confrontation on who is the authority over the temple, the resurrection, the greatest commandment, and the identity of the second Lord in Psalm 110.


E. Sermon on the Mount of Olives

F. The Last Supper

A Passover meal commemorating Israel’s redemption from Egypt celebrated by Jesus and his disciples.

Matthew 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:17-20

1) The bread and the wine

Jesus institutes additional symbolism to the traditional bread and wine of the Passover meal; they represent his body and blood about to be sacrificed for the sins of the world.

2) Anticipating the coming banquet

The disciples are instructed to repeat the ceremony as a memorial but also in anticipation of the coming banquet when Jesus will feast with all of his followers of all ages.
3) Jesus’ teaching and prayer

Johns adds a considerable amount of teaching that Jesus gives in the context of the Last Supper, teaching which prepares his disciples for his death, the coming ministry of the Holy Spirit, and the relationship within the Trinity.

G. The Garden of Gethsemane

Jesus and his disciples spend some of his last hours at the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus fervently prays to the Father.

Matthew 26:30; 36-46; Mark 14:26, 32-42; Luke 22:39-46; John 18:1
QUESTIONS

1. Read Luke 15:11-32. What does this parable reveal about the nature of God’s love and grace? In what ways are you like the younger son? In what ways are you like the older son? What can you do this week to reflect God’s love and grace in your home and/or workplace?

2. Read Mark 4:35-41. What does this story reveal about Jesus? What does it say about the disciples? Are there areas in your life where you are fearful and need to learn to trust Jesus more? What can you do this week to remind yourself that Jesus is Lord over that issue as well?
3. This study emphasized the ‘urgency’ of the disciples’ mission (cf. Matt 10). How urgent is this mission today? How urgent is the mission in your own life? In your church?

4. Read John 17:11. Why do you think Jesus emphasized Christian unity so much in his prayer? How do you think this relates to the existence of so many Christian denominations? Can you think of any ways in which your church could work toward greater unity and cooperation with other churches?

RECOMMENDED READING

A Harmony of the Gospels (Part 3) and Introduction to Acts

LESSON OVERVIEW

The events surrounding the arrest, trial, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus, and an introduction to the Book of Acts.

THE PASSION OF CHRIST

1. The trial of Jesus

All four Gospels narrate various hearings of Jesus before Jewish and/or Roman authorities.
A. Jesus before the Annas

Jesus brought first to Annas, the father-in-law of the current high priest Caiphas and previous high priest.

Matthew 26:57-68; Mark 14:53-65; Luke 22:54-65; John 18:24

B. Jesus as the Messiah

“You say that I am” not a denial but an implication of the authorities; Jesus acknowledging that he is Christ.


C. Peter’s denial

In contrast to Jesus’ bold confession is Peter’s cowardly denial before maid servants and other people of little power.
D. The charge against Jesus

Jesus is charged with blasphemy because of his reference to himself as the Son of Man, in so doing transgressing the boundaries between humanity and divinity in Jewish thought.

Matthew 27:1; Mark 15:1; Luke 22:66-71

E. Jesus before Pilate and Herod Antipas

Forbidden to instigate their own capital punishment, the Jews seek a trial before Pilate and Antipas, ultimately resulting in Jesus' execution.

2. The Crucifixion

A. The nature of crucifixion

Normally took place over a two to three-day period as the condemned individual died slowly and finally by suffocation, unable to lift his head to breathe.


B. The death of Jesus

Jesus dies unusually quickly, within three to six hours on the same day that he was put on the cross.

1) Historically

Quickness of Jesus’ death can historically be attributed to having had received the whippings from the Roman authorities.

2) Theologically

Quickness of Jesus’ death can theologically be attributed to an emphasis on the voluntary nature of his sacrifice.

C. The seven last sayings of Jesus on the cross

1) “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.”

Forgiveness offered to his enemies in their presence; a remarkable distinctive of Jesus’ ministry and of the Christian faith.

Luke 23:34
2) “Truly I say to you, today, you will surely be with me in paradise.”

A reminder that eternal life is available to the truly penitent even when it is in the very last moments.

Luke 23:43

3) “Woman behold thy son. Son, behold thy mother.”

Jesus remained concerned for his family and close friends and followers even in his agony.

John 19:26-27
4) “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

This is the moment Jesus senses that he is bearing the sins of the world and the separation from God for the first time.

Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34

5) “I thirst.”

Both physical and spiritual anguish following God’s departure.

John 19:28

6) “It is finished.”

Both the drink he refuses to swallow and his spiritual mission of atonement on the cross.
7) “Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit.”

Despite the agonizing sense of abandonment, he remains trusting with childlike faith in the God who had promised to raise him from the dead after his agony.

Luke 23:46

THE RESURRECTION

1. The significance of the resurrection

The most spectacular miracle and most central event and doctrine flowing from Christ’s life and defining the Christian faith.
2. Alternative explanations of the resurrection

A. The swoon theory

Jesus never quite died on the cross, only appeared to, and revived in the cool of the tomb and escaped.

B. The stolen body theory

The disciples stole Jesus body, but this requires them to have built their religion, for which many of them died, on a known lie.

C. The wrong tomb theory

The women went to the wrong tomb, but the Jewish leaders would only have to produce Jesus’ body from the correct tomb to disprove them.

D. The hallucination theory

Yet, more than 500 had experienced the risen Christ.
E. The late legend theory

Suggests that originally the Jews believed only that Jesus lived on in spirit and not in body, but over time the story took on more details making it sound as if it were a bodily resurrection.

3. The resurrection accepted

A. Paul’s testimony

Paul speaks of the resurrection using the technical language of oral tradition in the context of Christian doctrine

1 Corinthians 15
B. The women as eyewitnesses

All four Gospel accounts stress that women were the first witnesses, an unlikely invention in an age in which women were most commonly disallowed as legal witnesses in legal courts.

C. Sunday worship

Despite the appearance in the Old Testament that the Sabbath could not be changed, the fact that Jesus resurrected on a Sunday was enough for the early church to move it to Sunday.

D. Jesus worshipped despite the crucifixion

To an orthodox Jew Jesus’ death on the cross is akin to being hung on a tree and therefore cursed by God, yet Jesus is still worshipped as cursed by God for the sins of the world.
E. The solidarity of early Christianity

While the followers of other would be messiahs disbanded after the death of their leader, the early Christians stood in solidarity.

F. The glorified body

Jesus’ resurrected, glorified body gives us hope of a glorified body in the life to come.

INTRODUCTION TO ACTS

1. Background to the book of Acts


A. The Author of Acts

B. Date:

Probably best dated to A.D. 62

C. The audience of Acts

Primarily Gentile Christians, perhaps somewhat more well-to-do than the addressees of the other Gospels.

2. The Purpose of Acts

A. To show the progress of the Gospel

Acts 1:8

B. To show the shift from Jerusalem to Rome

Acts 8:26-40
C. To show the shift from Jewish to Gentile

Acts 10:1-43

D. To show the ministry of the early church

Luke highlights the ministry of key figures in the early church, scarcely mentioning the twelve disciples.

E. To show the ministry of Peter & Paul

First twelve chapters focus on Peter; chapter thirteen to twenty-eight focus on Paul.

F. To defend Christianity from criticism

3. Possible outlines of Acts

A. Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, the end of the Earth

Acts may follow the progression from Jerusalem to the end of the Earth.

B. “The Word of God grew and spread…”

Secondly, Acts may follow the theme of the Word of God growing and spreading, as Luke repeats this refrain six times in the book.

4. Outline of Acts

A. Acts 1:1-6:7

1) Date: A.D. 30-32
2) **Jesus’ resurrection appearances and ascension**

The ascension demonstrates that the period of resurrection appearances is over, that God has now exalted Christ to his former heavenly position.

3) **The day of Pentecost**

In chapter two the Holy Spirit is poured out at Pentecost to indwell permanently all believers from the moment of their conversion onward.

4) **Civil disobedience**

Jesus’ followers are forbidden to the speak in the name of Jesus, but their reply is when God’s and human laws or rules conflict, we must obey God.
5) **Caring for the poor**

Jesus followers are to care for the poor, first within Christian circles and then beyond, namely in the form of communal sharing.

6) **Barnabas vs. Ananias and Sapphira**

Positive and negative examples of caring for the poor; Ananias and Sapphira as a warning to the early church.

7) **The first deacons**

Helpers with practical skills that compliment the spiritual leaders; principle about the delegation of authority crucial to solving problems in leadership and in ministry.
B. Acts 6:8-9:31

1) Date: A.D. 33-47

2) The stoning of Stephen

Stephen becomes the first Christian martyr, and this and subsequent persecutions merely cause the fledgling church to spread out and grow.

3) Philip’s ministry in Samaria

Includes the conversion of a sorcerer, Simon the magician, and the converting of an Ethiopian eunuch.
4) The main theme: The Word of God spreading to the unlikely

The Word of God is spreading to people who by Orthodox Jewish standards would have been most unlikely candidates for repentance and incorporation into the people of God.

5) The work of the Spirit debated

Debates on the coming and going of the Spirit, the timing of baptism, and a potential second or delayed blessing.

6) The conversion of Saul

Saul has a dramatic conversion and goes on to use his Gentile name, Paul, when he begins ministering primarily in Gentile circles later on in his Christian life.
QUESTIONS

1. Look at “The seven last sayings of Jesus on the cross.” Pick one and spend a little time reflecting on it. What does it tell you about Jesus’ experience on the cross? How can this saying help you appreciate what Jesus did?

2. Read 1 Corinthians 15:12-19. According to Paul, why is it so important that we believe in the resurrection? How often do you reflect on the importance of the resurrection? What can you do this week to remind yourself of how important it is that Jesus was raised from the dead?
3. Read Acts 2:38. What is the “gift of the Holy Spirit”? Why do you think that it is important for Christians to understand that they have received the gift of the Holy Spirit? How does it help you to understand that you too have received the gift of the Holy Spirit?

4. Look over the various purposes of the Book of Acts. Which of these do you need to understand better? What can you do this week to develop a deeper understanding of this theme?

**RECOMMENDED READING**


*From Pentecost to Patmos: An Introduction to Acts through Revelation*, by Craig Blomberg, pp. 9-43.
Acts (Part 2), Galatians, and 1 Thessalonians

LESSON OVERVIEW

A summary of the book of Acts beginning with the third major section starting at Acts 9:32. Also, a summary of the background and contents of Galatians and 1 Thessalonians.

ACTS (PART 2)


   The gospel advancing in those portions of Israel that had God fearers.
A. Peter’s vision

Dramatic vision from heaven that Peter receives as God is preparing a Gentile centurion to receive a messenger from him.

B. Cornelius’ conversion

Peter preaches the gospel and Cornelius receives salvation along with those accompanying him.

C. The Gospel moving out

The gospel is moving out to God-fearers and not just full-fledged Jews.


A. The focus shifts to Paul

Focus on the ministry and missionary journeys of Paul
B. The pattern of Paul’s ministry

Paul begins by preaching to Jews wherever he goes, then moves on to preach to the Gentiles.


A. The first missionary journey (13:4–14:28)

Spanning the dates A.D. 47-49, Paul’s first missionary journey follows a rural path and includes ministry in Cyprus, a journey to Pisidia as well as other journeys.

B. The Jerusalem council (15:1-35)

The council was convened to discuss the requirement of circumcision for Gentile adult men who come to faith; conclusion is that, theologically, salvation is through faith alone and, but practically, some restrictions may be opted into for the purpose of unity.
C. The second missionary journey (15:36-18:22)

On his second journey, Paul revisits earlier churches, encounters Lydia and experiences the first European converts, is arrested in Philippi, makes what comes to be known as his Mars Hill speech in Athens, then lastly visits Corinth before returning to Antioch.

D. The third missionary journey (18:23-21:16)

Paul travels to Ephesus and ministers there for three years, ultimately resulting in a riot, and concludes his third journey back in Jerusalem where he takes up an offering for impoverished Christians there.

E. The trials of Paul in Jerusalem and Caesarea (21:17-26:32)

Paul is arrested and imprisoned in Jerusalem due largely to rumors that he sought to abolish the law; after being imprisoned for two years without legal reason, Paul appeals to Rome and is assured by God he will be able to go, giving him confidence when he hears of, and is later able to thwart, an attempt on his life.

As God had promised, Paul is transported to Rome, but not before Paul is shipwrecked on the island of Malta and later saved by a commercial vessel.

4. Four Key Theological Emphases

A. God oversees the progress of the Church.

Nothing happens accidentally.

B. The message of Christianity centers on the resurrection of Jesus.

 Forgiveness of sins is thereby available to anyone who repents.
C. The offer of salvation is for all people.

Salvation is for all nationalities, all geographical regions, and all religious backgrounds on the same terms: faith in Christ apart from good works.

D. The Church will flourish despite opposition.

Opposition cannot stop the progress of the Church.

5. Two key applications

A. Understanding the nature of salvation

Salvation comes through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ, is outwardly symbolized by baptism, and is inwardly ratified by the Holy Spirit

B. Looking for lessons for the Church today

Identify the constants, yet be flexible in the methods.
GALATIANS

1. Background

A. Recipients:

Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe

B. Date: A.D. 49

Between the first missionary journey and the Jerusalem Council and before the declaration on unclean foods

C. Paul’s use of the word “bewitched”

Language applicable only to very superstitious, traditional, pagan, magical beliefs or occult practices, which were dying out in the first century, thus further promoting an earlier dating of the book.

Galatians 3:1
2. Keys to understanding Galatians

A. Understanding the law

The circumstances of the letter involve the debate over keeping the law.

B. Debating with the Judaizers

Paul and Peter debate the Judaizers who argue that Gentiles must become Jews first in order to become Christians.

3. Outlining Galatians

Three major segments, roughly two chapters each

A. Paul defends his authority (1:1-2:14)

Paul recounts his calling from God, his mission being affirmed by God, and his rebuke of Peter.
B. Paul defends justification by faith alone (2:15-4:31)

Paul point to Abraham having been justified by faith, the temporary nature of the law, and that salvation is for both Jew and Gentile because salvation is not based on human efforts.

C. Paul describes the nature of Christian freedom (5:1-6:17)

Freedom from the law, not from morality, therefore faith is expressed through love and a life directed by the Spirit which cannot be produced by the law, rather the gospel fulfills the law.

4. The Theology of Galatians

A. The charter of Christian liberty

Martin Luther calls Galatians the charter of Christian liberty because it is a foundational document defining how Christians become free.
B. Perverting the gospel through requirements for salvation

In teaching that certain works are required for salvation, we condemn ourselves and others; in restricting or advocating certain actions for the sake of evangelism, Paul bends over backwards.

1 THESSALONIANS

1. Background

A. Date: About A.D. 50

Shortly after Paul planted the church in Thessalonica

B. Recipients:

The fledgling church at Thessalonica, whom Paul had spent just a short few weeks with
2. Outline

A. Greeting and exhortation (1:1-3:13)

Paul praises God for the Thessalonians and esteems them as an example to the churches because they understand that the gospel is God’s divine word; this section serves as an encouragement to continued growth.

B. A call to godly living (4:1-5:28)

An exhortation toward living a holy life in light of Christ’s return and the forthcoming rapture, when believers will be caught up to meet the Lord in the air and will serve as the welcoming party for the Lord’s return.
QUESTIONS

1. What was the significance of Peter’s rooftop vision in Acts 10? Why do you think it was so difficult for Peter to accept the gospel being given to the Gentiles? What groups of people or persons would you have difficulty sharing the gospel with? Spend some time this week in prayer for those people.

2. On all three of Paul’s missionary journeys he experienced persecution. How did Paul respond in the face of this persecution? In what ways are you persecuted for the gospel? How do you respond?
3. From the book of Galatians, what passages would you use to defend the truth that salvation is by grace through faith alone, and not by works of the law? Why would these verses be a source of comfort to the believer? How could someone use these verses to condone sin?

4. In light of the second coming of Jesus, how should this motivate a believer to live? How much time do you spend thinking about and praying for the return of Christ? What about your life would look different if you knew the Lord was returning tomorrow?

RECOMMENDED READING

*From Pentecost to Patmos: An Introduction to Acts through Revelation*, by Craig Blomberg, pp. 43-149.
LESSON OVERVIEW

A major theme in 2 Thessalonians is “the Day of the Lord.” There are common themes and teachings in 1 and 2 Thessalonians. 1 Corinthians emphasizes the themes of Jesus’ death and resurrection, as well as the importance and use of spiritual gifts, and how we conduct ourselves in relation to those who are pursuing Christ and those who are not.

2 THESSALONIANS

1. Debated theme: the day of the Lord (2:1-2)

   Continued discussion on Jesus second return from the first letter to the Thessalonians.
A. The fear of missing the day of the Lord

Either the Thessalonians had become convinced that Jesus’ return was imminent following Paul’s first letter and therefore feared they had missed it in time, or Gnostic teaching guised as Paul’s teaching had infiltrated the church teaching only the hyper spiritual would be aware of Jesus’ return.

B. The problem of laziness

Some in Thessalonica were sure that Jesus was coming so soon that they were willing to stop working and simply wait for the end to arrive; alternatively there may have been some who assumed wealthier Christians would take care of them.

2. Signs that the day of the Lord approaches

Paul stresses that there are certain public signs that must take place prior to the return of the Lord.
A. The man of lawlessness (2:3-4)

The antichrist of Revelation who is a powerful anti-religious figure who will desecrate the temple of God and masquerade as a Christian.

B. The restrainer (2:6-8)

A power or person who will restrain the man of lawlessness; possibly a strong world leader, the Spirit of Christ, the Church, or the hand of God.

3. Key theological themes in 1 and 2 Thessalonians

A. The return of Christ is certain despite apparent delays.

It will come quickly, suddenly, and unexpectedly, like a thief in the night.
B. We do not need to fear that we have missed the day of the Lord.

There are certain signs still to be fulfilled so that even today in the 21st century we do not have to worry that we have somehow missed this event.

4. Key Applications from 1 and 2 Thessalonians

A. All believers must stay alert for the end.

The end could come at any time.

B. Do not presume that there is still a lot of time before the end.

Jesus could come at any time, or our physical lives could come to an end at any time.
C. Do not presume that the coming end means you do not need to plan for the future.

Just as Jesus could come any minute, it could be some time before he comes, therefore we must plan for the future.

D. Do not misjudge the direction of human history.

Despite scientific and technological progress, humanity is just as fallen as ever.

E. We can be confident that God’s causes and people will triumph.

We should take every step to ensure that we are trusting fully in Jesus and his gracious salvation for us so that we are on the winning side on the final day.
1 CORINTHIANS

1. Historical background

   See the opening paragraphs of Acts 18 for historical background.

A. The reason for writing the letter

   The Corinthian church was young and in need of instruction; there were divisions in the church; the Corinthians had asked some questions; Paul needed to correct misunderstandings from a previous letter.

   1 Corinthians 1:10, 7:1, 5:9

B. Date: A.D. 54-55

   Paul is writing from Ephesus towards the end of his third missionary journey.
C. Location: Ephesus

2. An outline of 1 Corinthians

A. Greeting and thanksgiving (1:1-9)

Conventional elements of a Greco-Roman letter; thanksgiving is couched in the form of a prayer.

B. Divisions in the Church (1:10-4:21)

There are divisions in the church that are rooted in competing philosophies, spiritual pride, class differences, and celebrity worship; Paul responds admonishing them to focus on the cross (1:18-2:5), discern true wisdom (2:6-16), to rely on God as the source of growth (3:1-23), and to uphold servant leadership (4:1-21).
C. Three topics of concern (5:1–6:20)

Paul addresses incest, lawsuits among believers, and sexual immorality.

D. Responding to the principle of celibacy (7:1-40)

Celibacy is not an absolute for the Christian life, but it is to be the norm outside of marriage, thus Paul qualifies celibacy for different groups; Paul continues by discussing divorce.

E. Food sacrificed to idols (8:1-10:33)

Three basic principles for navigating morally neutral issues: do not cause a weaker brother or sister to stumble; do not eat food that is part of idol worship; ensure that morally neutral practices lead others to Christ.
F. Head coverings (11:1-16)

Application is sending the proper cultural signals that one is sexually faithful to one’s spouse and religiously faithful to God in Christ.

G. The Lord’s Supper (11:17-34)

There are people who are taking the Lord’s Supper without recognizing the body of Christ.

H. Spiritual gifts (12:1-14:28)

Paul discusses the giftedness of the body (12:1-31), the primacy of love (13:1-13), and the gifts in Christian worship (14:1-40) including prophecy and tongues, the appropriate use of gifts, the silence of women in the services, and proper evaluation of prophecy.
I. The resurrection (15:1-58)

Jesus’ resurrection points to our own bodily resurrection where we will be given perfected sinless bodies with Christ and fellow Christians forever.

J. The collection for the saints (16:1-24)

A collection for the impoverished believers in and around Judea; encourages planned, generous giving.

3. Key theological themes of 1 Corinthians

A. The centrality of the cross (2:2)

Paul has decided to know nothing among them but Christ and him crucified, thus the cross is the unifying theme of his message.
B. The significance of the resurrection (15:1-58)

Crucifixion is meaningless without the resurrection.

C. Love and unity as the ground of Christian behavior (13:1-13)

Both the governing principle and the necessary prelude to successful evangelism is love and unity.

D. The mark of Christian community: service not competition (3:1-23)

The most significant way of distinguishing God’s people from the world’s is the mark of humility to serve others above self rather than compete for status.
4. **Key applications from 1 Corinthians**

1 Corinthians is the most detailed and practical New Testament letter as it deals with a huge array of problems.

**A. The balanced Christian life**

Paul refuses to exclude morally neutral behavior but rather seeks theological balance.

**B. Principles for the right use of certain practices**

Where morally neutral behavior can be used for building up the church, we ought to seek to use them as such.

**C. The importance of “yes, but” logic**

Our first thought should be how to relate to culture, but there will be some things that cannot be affirmed.
QUESTIONS

1. Paul gives several reasons why the Corinthian church was divided. Do you see any of these in your church today? Of the ways in which Paul deals with divisions inside the church, which do you think is the most important? How would you deal with divisions in your church?

2. How should “stronger” members in the faith deal with “weaker” members in the faith concerning morally neutral practices? What are principles that Paul gives to help the church in this area? What are some examples of modern day activities that are not sin, but should possibly be restrained from if they would cause others to stumble?
3. Do all believers have at least one spiritual gift according to 1 Corinthians 12:4-11? Why has God given spiritual gifts to believers? What are your spiritual gifts? If you don’t know, how would you find out what your gift is? Are you being a faithful steward of your spiritual gift, using it for its intended purposes?

4. Why is the resurrection so central to the Christian message? What arguments does Paul give in 1 Corinthians 15?

RECOMMENDED READING

LESSON OVERVIEW

The outline and summary of the content of 2 Corinthians includes themes like financial stewardship and Christians being “ambassadors of reconciliation.” Romans finds its theme in 1:16-17, the Gospel is the power of God for salvation for both Jews and Greeks. The books of Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon are known as the “Prison Epistles.”
1. Background to Second Corinthians

A. Mixed reactions to the previous letter (2:1-4)

The reaction in Corinth to Paul’s letter appears to have been mixed.

B. Different ‘tones’ in chapters 1-9 and 10-13

Chapters 1-9 are more positive, whereas chapters 10-13 sound much more negative; debate over why there is a shift in tone.

C. A proposed resolution

Chapters 1-7 serve as a positive response to proper understanding; chapters 8-9 are an encouragement toward needed progress; chapters 10-13 address areas still to be grasped.
D. **Evidence of another letter**

Paul references another letter written to the Corinthians since 1 Corinthians.

2 Corinthians 2:9; 7

E. **Date: A.D. 56**

Written following Paul’s third missionary journey while his way to Corinth from Ephesus for the third time.

2. **Problems in outlining**

   A. **The hardest letter of Paul to outline**

Because of the separate parts of the letter, it is difficult to outline.
B. The possibility of different letters

Some have interpreted the digressions throughout the letter as separate letters within 2 Corinthians, though there is no textual support for this approach.

C. The possibility of Jewish thinking

It is possible that Paul is following a logic that follows a typical Jewish outline by linking words and themes each leading to the next.

D. The possibility of symmetry and parallelism

Paul may be retracing the words and themes in reverse order in chapters 6 and 7, creating some symmetry and parallelism between the beginning and ending sections.
3. Key theological themes in 2 Corinthians

A. The role of suffering in the Christian life

Paul has repeatedly received comfort from God as he has gone through tough times, so that he might bless others by sharing that same comfort with them.

Suffering should lead to repentance if sin has been involved, yet we should not assume that suffering is always a result of sin.

When we allow God’s grace to sustain us in suffering others can more clearly see than in normal situations that it is God who sustains and empowers us.

However severe suffering may be in this life, it is more than compensated for by the present glory of the New Covenant.

2 Corinthians 1:3-11; 3:18; 4:7-11; 5:1-10, 17; 6:4-10
B. Being ambassadors of reconciliation (5:11-21)

We are called to help others overcome their alienation with God by repenting and trusting in Jesus as well as functioning as peacemakers and helping people to be reconciled one with another.

C. Not being unequally yoked (6:14-7:1)

Believers are not to worship false gods or be yoked in any context, particularly in worship, with those who do not share our faith.

D. Financial stewardship (8:1-9:15)

Generous or stingy giving in the material realm will have consequences for God’s generous or stingy blessing of us in the spiritual realm.
E. Paul’s authority (11:21-33)

Paul compares his credentials with these false teachers focusing most exhaustively on the suffering he has endured.

F. Dealing with a “thorn in the flesh” (12:1-10)

Mystery ailment or bodily injury that refused to go away which resulted in Jesus saying to Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

4. Key applications from 2 Corinthians

Suffering need not lead us to despair for God uses suffering and will sustain us in the midst of suffering, therefore suffering should be expected as the norm for the believer.
ROMANS

One of the most well know and influential New Testament letters and the most systematic exposition of salvation as God has provided it in Christ for humanity.

1. Background to Romans

A. Author: Paul

The first church chronologically to which Paul is writing which he did not personally establish or found.

B. Recipients: Christians in Rome

Possibly Jewish pilgrims to the first Pentecost after Jesus’ death who had returned back to Rome after hearing Peter preach and thereby becoming believers in Jesus who then began the church there.

C. Purpose

Clarification of the gospel and disclosure of plans to visit to Spain.
D. Date: A.D. 57

Paul writes at the very end of the third missionary journey as he is departing from Corinth.

2. An outline of Romans

A. Thesis: not ashamed of the gospel (1:16-17)

The main point throughout Romans is that the gospel is salvation for both Jews and Greeks and is appropriated entirely by faith.

B. God’s wrath against ungodliness (1:18-3:20)

God’s wrath demonstrated against the Gentile (1:18-32) and against the Jew (2:17-3:8) thus pointing to the sinfulness of all humanity (3:9-20)
C. Justification by faith (3:21-5:21)

Serving as an elaboration of the thesis, Paul points to Abraham as an example of justification by faith and then develops the results of justification.

D. Sanctification through the Spirit (6:1-8:39)

In the process of sanctification though there is struggle there is freedom from sin, from the law, and from death.

E. The role of Israel in God’s plan of salvation (9:1-11:36)

Answering the question of why more Gentiles than Jews are becoming believers Paul points to the frequent disobedience of Israel and details what went wrong and the future of Israel.
F. The ethics of Christian living (12:1-15:13)

The basic principle is renewal, with the individual task of exercising spiritual gifts in love and tolerating others in love.

G. Conclusion (15:14-16:27)

Paul concludes with detailed travel plans and closing greetings.

3. Key applications from Romans

All humans are sinners and separated from God; the process of reconciliation involves justification, sanctification, and glorification; the truly reconciled person will exhibit substantial behavioral changes.
THE PRISON EPISTLES (PART 1)

Called the Prison Epistles because Paul was writing from Rome while on house arrest as described at the end of the book of Acts.

1. The background of the Prison Epistles

A. The books

Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon

B. The author:

Accepted Pauline authorship: Philippians and Philemon

Debated Pauline authorship: Ephesians and Colossians
C. Recipients

Philemon was written to Onesimus.

Colossians was written to the church in Colossae.

Ephesians was probably a circular letter written to the churches near Ephesus.

Philippians was written to the church in Philippi.

D. Date

Philemon, Colossians, and Ephesians - A.D. 60-61

Philippians - A.D. 61-62
2. Exegetical highlights in the Prison Epistles

A. Exegetical highlights in Philemon

Onesimus, a runaway slave, is sent back to Philemon (10-12) and Paul asks Philemon to receive him as a brother in Christ. (17)

B. Exegetical highlights in Colossians

The deity of Christ is stressed (1:15-20; 2:9) and the so called Colossian heresy is combated, resulting in an emphasis on the importance of godly behavior (3:1-17) and the household code (3:18-4:1).

C. Exegetical highlights in Ephesians

Ephesians begins with the predestining and electing role of God (1:3-14), moving to an emphasis on salvation by grace alone (2:1-10) and then the mystery of unity in Christ (2:11-22); the second half of the book discusses spiritual gifts in relation to the unity of the church (4:1-16), and finally right relationships for authority (5:22-6:9).
QUESTIONS

1. Will believers suffer in this life? What are reasons given for why God allows suffering in 1 Corinthians 1:3-4, 9, 11? Did God answer Paul’s prayer in 1 Corinthians 12:7-10 to remove his suffering? Why not? How do these verse help us deal with a health/wealth/prosperity gospel that says believers should never suffer? How can these verses help us when we suffer?

2. What does Romans 1:16-17 reveal about the power of the gospel? According to Paul who stands condemned before God? Why do you think God chose faith in Christ, instead of good works, as the criterion for salvation? What is sanctification and how does it work in the life of a believer?
3. What three specific relationships are mentioned by Paul in Ephesians 5:22-6:9? What are some implications for husbands and wives? What are some implications for parents and children? What are some implications for employer/employee relationships?

RECOMMENDED READING

*From Pentecost to Patmos: An Introduction to Acts through Revelation*, by Craig Blomberg, pp. 203-341.
Common themes and applications from the Prison Epistles and the Pastoral Epistles are theologically significant as well as practical in their application in daily life. Hebrews emphasizes Jesus as the great High Priest and includes warning passages against committing apostasy. James emphasizes the relationship between faith and works in a way that complements what Paul writes in his letters, even though it sometimes seems contradictory at first.
THE PRISON EPISTLES (PART 2)

1. Exegetical highlights in Philippians

   A. A personal letter (1:3-11)

      Less clear outline because of format as a personal letter dominated by reports of well-being.

   B. Christ’s example of humility (2:5-11)

      An extremely important statement about the person and work of Jesus, his preexistence, his equality with God, his complete humanity in the incarnation, and the horribly agonizing death he was willing to die on the cross.

   C. The impossibility of denying the lordship of Christ (2:10)

      It will be impossible to deny Christ’s deity and lordship when he appears on earth at his return in glory.
D. A brief biography of Paul (3:4-6)

What once was of great pride and value Paul now considers as rubbish or dung.

E. God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility (2:12-13)

The command to continue to work out one’s salvation is immediately followed by the reminder of the promise that God is the one who enables people to do precisely that.

F. Promises about prayer & the peace of God (4:4-7)

Not to be anxious about anything, but to bring everything with thanksgiving to the Lord in prayer.

G. The strengthening grace of God (4:13)

Whether in prosperity or in poverty we can be content in all circumstances by the power of the Spirit.
2. Key theological themes in the Prison Epistles

A. Key theological themes in Philemon

Christian freedom means equality before God (16); love for other believers (5)

B. Key theological themes in Colossians

Christ is preeminent over all (1:15-20); Christ's work on the cross is complete (1:21-23).

C. Key theological themes in Ephesians

Christ's work on the cross informs our understanding of the church (2:1-22); we have spiritual responsibilities to live out godly lives (4:17-32); we must recognize that all Christian life is spiritual warfare (6:10-20).
D. Key theological themes in Philippians

We should rejoice in all circumstances (4:4).

3. Key Applications of the Prison Epistles

A. Philemon

The more we can gain through others voluntarily supporting our leadership the better relationships we will develop, but there are times when authority must be exercised.

B. Colossians

One of the best epistles for someone to read for a short explanation of who Christ is.
C. Ephesians

The second-most detailed and systematic summary of the Christian message both in doctrine and in life after the book of Romans.

D. Philippians

Second-most important statement of joy despite suffering after 2 Corinthians and a model of how to encourage others.

THE PASTORAL EPISTLES

1. The background to the Pastoral Epistles

A. The books:

1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus
B. The author:

Paul, yet all except very conservative scholars doubt if Paul is the author of these three letters.

C. Dates: A.D. 62-68

Most scholars date these letters to the 80s or 90s after Paul has died, treating them as pseudonymous.

Best dating is probably after the end of the book of Acts with 1 Timothy and Titus being written after Paul was released from the house arrest in Rome, placing them between A.D. 62 and the death of Nero, under whom Paul was executed, in A.D. 68.

D. Recipients:

Timothy and Titus, who were functioning as pastors of local churches in Ephesus and the island of Crete; the churches Timothy and Titus represent.
2. Exegetical highlights in the Pastoral Epistles

A. Criteria for church leaders

The most detailed treatment of the requirements for an elder, overseer, and pastor, including the most famous and controversial criterion “the husband of one wife.”

1 Timothy 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-16

B. Deacon vs. elder

Key distinction is the teaching role of elders and the restriction of women from occupying the role of elder because it is an authoritative teaching office.

C. Additional topics

The importance of sound doctrine

1 Timothy 6:3-10; 2 Timothy 2:15-19; Titus 2:1-15
3. Theological Themes and Application of the Pastoral Epistles

The major theme is the importance of a well-organized church, therefore we need to have a biblical understanding of how churches should run and function and we need to follow biblical patterns for leadership regardless of our respective traditions.

1 Timothy 5:1-25

HEBREWS

1. The background to Hebrews

A. Author: unknown

Possibly Paul, Silas, Barnabas, Luke, or Apollos but regardless certainly someone associated with the apostle Paul.
B. Recipients: unknown

Possibly written from Rome to Jerusalem or written from outside of Rome back to the church in Rome.

2. An outline of Hebrews

A. The supremacy of Christ (Hebrews 1:1-14)

1) Over angels (Hebrews 2:5-18)

2) Over Moses (Hebrews 3:1-6)
3) Over old priesthood

Hebrews 4:14-7:28

4) Over the Old Covenant

Hebrews 8:1-13

5) Over the Old Testament heroes

Hebrews 11:1-12:3

B. The five warning passages

It is possible to profess Christ, become active in church, and appear for a time to have the characteristics of a Christian only to ultimately reject the faith; Calvinists say such individuals thereby shows themselves to have never known Christ, whereas Arminians would say it is possible to genuinely be saved only to turn your back on the faith later in life.
C. Jesus as the Great High Priest

Jesus is a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek, and if Melchizedek’s priesthood is superior and Jesus has a priesthood like that, he also is superior and his priesthood is superior to the Jewish high priests.


D. The supremacy of the New Covenant

Hebrews 8:1-13

E. The nature of faith

Hebrews 10:19-12:3
3. Key theological themes in Hebrews

A. Christ alone is sufficient for salvation

Hebrews 1:1-4

B. Do not fall away

Hebrews 5:11-6:12

4. Key applications from Hebrews

Salvation is found only in Christ and must be demonstrated by a changed life that perseveres to the end, therefore we should not presume another’s spiritual state.
JAMES

1. The background of James

A. Author:

James, the half-brother of Jesus

B. Recipients:

Jewish Christians in the Diaspora

C. Date: A.D. 44-49

Circumstances of this community appear to be one of largely poor, marginalized, agricultural day laborers akin to what we might today call migrant workers.
2. Three key topics of James

A. Trials and temptations

Internal nature of temptations and external nature of trials; temptation and the seductive power of sin should be shunned, but the maturing process of trials should be welcomed.

James 1:2-18

B. Wisdom and speech

Emphasis on right godly behavior, the use and proper stewardship of the tongue, and wisdom being a gift from God, all resulting in a high standard for teachers.

James 1:5-8,19-27; 3:1-18
C. The right use of riches

God shows special favor to the poor, therefore we should care for the poor but not discriminate against the rich.

James 2:1-13; 5:1-6

3. A subordinate topic in James: faith vs. works

Justification by faith alone in Paul vs. faith and works in James.

Galatians 2:15-16; James 2:14-26
A. Different definitions of faith

For James, faith is mere intellectual assent; for Paul, faith is full-orbed trust in Jesus.

Galatians 5:6; Ephesians 2:10; Philippians 2:12-13; James 2:19

B. Different views of works

James describes works as done as evidence of salvation; Paul describes works as done to attain salvation.

C. Different problems being addressed

James is addressing Jewish faith and Christian works and Paul addresses Christian faith and Jewish works.
4. **Key applications from James**

Those who claim to be believers should have a changed lifestyle, particularly in regards to the areas of speech and money.

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**QUESTIONS**

1. How are God’s sovereignty and your responsibility spoken of in Philippians 2:12-13? What does Paul mean when he says to work out your salvation with “fear” and “trembling?” What two things does Paul say God is doing in you?

2. What are the criteria for an elder and a deacon in 1 Timothy 3:1-13 and Titus 1:5-16? Why is it important for a leader to meet these criteria? What does your church think about whether both men and women can fill these roles? Why does your church think that is the best way of understanding these criteria?
3. How would you identify a false teacher of the gospel? What are some marks of false teaching given by Paul in 1 Timothy 1:2-11, 6:3-10, 2 Timothy 4:1-5, and Titus 1:10-16?

4. How is the supremacy of Jesus spoken of in the book of Hebrews? What was the role of the High Priest in the Old Testament? What is the significance of Jesus functioning as our High Priest today? Take some time this week to meditate on Hebrews 2:17-18 and 4:14-16.
5. What is the role of works in James 2:14-26? How would you respond to someone who claimed that there is a contradiction between James and Paul in regards to the role of works in salvation? If good works are a fruit of salvation, what is the warning that James is giving? What response should this prompt from us?

RECOMMENDED READING

*From Pentecost to Patmos: An Introduction to Acts through Revelation*, by Craig Blomberg, pp. 343-439.
LESSON OVERVIEW

A dominant theme of the book of 1 Peter is how to live during times of suffering, particularly when that suffering is a result of being persecuted for your faith. In 2 Peter and Jude we learn of the importance of holding on to central truths of the faith, especially in the midst of others teaching heresy. The Letters of John teach on the incarnation, obeying Christ, and loving one another. The messages in Revelation for seven specific churches are also relevant for churches and individuals today. Much of Revelation is written in an apocalyptic style and contains imagery of the last days.
1 PETER

1. The background of 1 Peter

A. Author:

Peter, the early leader of the twelve and one of the three inner core who were close to Jesus throughout his life.

B. Recipients:

Christians in the Diaspora

C. Date: early 60s

Prior to the persecution and Peter’s death under Nero, but persecution appears to be looming on the horizon, therefore the early A.D. 60’s fits best.
2. Outline and exegetical highlights of 1 Peter

A series of antidotes on ways of thinking and behaving in all kinds of suffering.

A. The true identity of Christians (1:1-2)

Christians are strangers because their citizenship is in heaven.

B. An eternal perspective on suffering (1:3-12)

However intense suffering may be, it is extremely temporary compared to all eternity.

C. Rallying around one another (1:13-2:10)

A calling to make the church a refuge, a place of love and holiness and care and nurture for one another when the world is hostile.
D. Being a good citizen in society (2:11-3:7)

Just as slaves who cannot yet gain their freedom are to obey their masters and wives who are married to unbelieving husbands must continue to lead exemplary lives, we need to be exemplary citizens.

E. The “spirits in prison” (3:18-4:6)

A description of Christ going and announcing to Satan and his demonic hoards in the realm of the dead that they were defeated.

F. Baptism as the outward sign of an inward commitment (3:21)

The ritual does not save, but rather the trust in Christ and the repentance that accompanies it.
G. Victory in suffering (4:12-19)

We preach the Gospel to as many in this life even when harassment and persecution accompany that because those who have responded properly are living eternally with God.

H. Servant leadership (5:1-11)

Sacrificial self-giving leadership on the part of those elders of the church

3. Key theological themes and application from 1 Peter

Christians are called to endure persecution patiently; prayer may be more effective than rebellion in overcoming problems, yet we must participate in the corrective process as well.
2 PETER AND JUDE

1. The background of 2 Peter and Jude

A. Authors:

2 Peter: Peter

Jude: Jude, the half-brother of Jesus

B. Recipients: unknown

The readers are not specified at all in either letter.

C. Dates

2 Peter: mid to late 60s

Jude: sometime before 2 Peter
2. The key themes of 2 Peter and Jude

A. To conserve Christian teaching in the midst of heresy

In three main areas: the inspiration of Scripture; the immorality of the false teachers; the denial of Christ’s return.

2 Peter 1:20-21, 2:1-22, 3:1-13; Jude 3-16

B. Holding fast to the central truths of the faith

Christians must know what beliefs are central to their faith which beliefs put their salvation in jeopardy, and take care not to let church leaders teach or practice them.

2 Peter 1:3-15
C. Explaining suffering in the world

Explanation for why God has not already brought an end to human history as we know it: he is not desiring any to perish.

Jude 17-23

THE LETTERS OF JOHN

1. The background of 1, 2, and 3 John

A. Author:

John, the Apostle
B. Recipients

1 John: Christians around Ephesus

2 John: A house church in Ephesus

3 John: An Unknown Christian Named Gaius

C. Date:

Late 80s or early 90s

D. Purpose

To combat Gnostic and Docetic tendencies and to balance understanding of Jesus’ humanity and deity.
2. Three key themes in the letters of John

A. Believing in the incarnation

1 John 2:7-11

B. Obeying Christ’s commandments

1 John 2:1-6; 5:18

C. Loving one another

1 John 2:7-14; 4:7-21; 2 John 4-6

3. Problem of perfectionism

Use of continuous present tense points to the fact that true believers will live transformed lives and thereby find assurance based on present realities.
1. The background of Revelation

A. Author:

John, the apostle

B. Recipients:

Seven churches in Asia Minor

C. Date: A.D. 90

Written during the persecution of the emperor Domitian.

D. Genre:

Apocalyptic and prophecy
2. Interpretive grids for Revelation

A. Various views on the millennium

Premillennial, post-millennial, or amillennial approaches to understanding the return of Christ.

B. One perspective on the issue

A post-tribulational, premillennial perspective does most justice to the work.

3. An outline of Revelation

A. Opening (1:1-20)

Jesus, now as the triumphant returning judge, commissions John to announce what must soon take place.
B. Letters to the churches (2:1-3:22)

Reflects the full range of obedience through disobedience of representative churches in John’s world

C. A heavenly scene of praise (4:1-5:14)

Praise ensues when Christ appears, described simultaneously as a lion, the king of all creatures in the universe, but also as a sacrificial lamb reflecting his completed, atoning work on the cross.

D. Three sets of seven visions (6:1-18:24)

1) The seven seals

As seals on a scroll that must be removed before one is able to read the contents, the suggestion is that they are not the tribulation, but rather the precursor to it.
2) The seven trumpets

Reminiscent of the supernatural plagues unleashed by Moses against Egypt, yet with greater intensity.

3) The seven bowls

The bowls of God’s wrath, only after which do we read that it is all finished and we move to Christ’s return and judgment.


Christ will end opposition and the thousand year reign will ensue followed by the release of Satan and then the final judgment, culminating in the new heaven and new earth.
4. Key theological themes of Revelation

God’s people will have to endure suffering (2:8-11) but will be protected from his wrath (7:1-17); God always seeks to bring people to repentance (9:20-21), thus the end times will be marked by worldwide spread of the gospel and increasing evil.

Christ will return and put an end to all opposition (19:1-21) and all people will be divided into two camps, those against him experiencing hell, a reality outside the new heaven and the new earth, and those on his side experiencing heaven (20:11-15); ultimately Revelation can be summed up as “Jesus wins” (21-22)!

5. Key applications from Revelation

Search your soul and ask if you are one of Jesus’ people. Have you trusted him as Lord and Savior?

Hell is a conscious reality that people who reject Christ are destined for.
QUESTIONS

1. What role should the believer play in society according to 1 Peter 2:11-3:7? Why do you think that living a godly life in the public arena was so important to Peter? Have you given anyone a reason to doubt Christ by how you have lived your life in public or at home? What example did Christ leave for us to follow?

2. Read 1 John 3:16-18. How are we to love others? What are some tangible ways you might love someone this week?
3. Of the seven churches mentioned in Revelation 2-3, which one might most accurately describe your church? Why?

RECOMMENDED READING

*From Pentecost to Patmos: An Introduction to Acts through Revelation*, by Craig Blomberg, pp. 441-560.