

Survey of the Bible

Class 6: NT Letters, the Apocalypse, and the Bible in Worship

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PART 1: Gospel

We believe in God, the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

*We believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit
and born of the virgin Mary.*

*He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended into hell.*

The third day He arose again from the dead.

*He ascended to heaven
and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.
From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.*

*We believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church,
the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.*

PART 2: Pauline Epistles

The Pauline letters are so varied in content, purpose, background, and even theology that it's tough to say much by way of introduction that would apply to most all of the letters. Still, there are a few things we can keep in mind while reading any of the letters of Paul.

In most every letter, there is what scholars call the "Pauline turn". Most of the letters have similar two-part structure, where Paul spends the first part

talking theology, and then spends the second part talking practical application of the theology just talked about. This "Pauline turn" is usually marked by a "therefore" and marks the turn from theology to practicality.

Much ink has been spilled to determine what is a "core" of Paul's theology. Some say it's "union with Christ", others would say it's "justification by faith", and still others would argue that both of those are the same thing. Still, some sort of common "core" running through all of Paul's letters is elusive as long as we get so granular and specific. Indeed, it seems the only common thread running through all of Paul's letters is *the gospel*. All of these other proposed themes and "centers" of his theology miss the bigger backdrop of the life, death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. Though Paul might not explicitly walk through the events of that life much, they inform all that Paul says and encourages his readers in.

Below, you will find the letters talked about in what I feel is the most logical chronological order.

Acts in the Background:

Pentecost happens, Holy Spirit falls on people in Jerusalem for festival. These were people who--no matter their ethnicity--had taken on some level of Jewish cultural custom when they converted.

Persecution comes, scatters leaders.

Peter begins preaching in outlying area. Witnesses conversion of Cornelius, a man who experiences salvation and the Holy Spirit without taking on a single Jewish cultural trapping.

This sets the stage for racial tensions between Jews (who feel like Christianity is just a "denomination" of Judaism") and Gentiles (who feel like God is doing something new). This dominates much of Christianity throughout the rest of the New Testament.

Paul is converted and spends the next 14 years being disciplined, discipling others, learning, growing, being confirmed by Peter as the Apostle to the Gentiles, and planting the Galatian churches.

On his way back through the region, he collects money to bring famine relief to Jerusalem, almost as a peace offering from Gentiles to the Jews.

He then sets up shop in Antioch, the new hub of Christianity after the persecution started. Begins planning his first missionary journey.

Missionary journey 1 takes place, he encourages the Galatian Churches along the way and return back to Antioch when done.

Once back, he receives word that conservative Jews called “Judaizers” had gone behind him and told the Galatian Churches that Paul wasn’t an apostle and that he was wrong about not having to become “fully” Jewish to be a Christian.

Galatians

Called “mini-Romans” sometimes because it deals with much of the same content. It’s written against the Judaizers. Very forceful. He establishes his authority, tells his story, even talking about how he called out Peter. Stresses freedom in Christ from ritual purity. Faith brings right relationship, not ritual. Points to Abraham. Encourages them not to use this as a license to sin.

The Judaizers now go to Paul at Antioch; he then insists on Jerusalem Council to decide this issue with finality.

Jerusalem Council occurs, they side with Paul. Send a letter to the churches.

Paul’s 2nd missionary journey begins.

He ministers in Galatia again, meets Timothy. Founds Philippian Church. Founds Thessalonian Church, but while there, the Jews conspire to kill him, causing him to leave early.

He goes to Athens and preaches. Not many people are converted. He goes on with new zeal to Corinth and plants that church. While there, he checks up the Thessalonians, whom he had to leave early. They have issues.

The Thessalonian Correspondence

1 Thessalonians

The church had two questions for Paul: **when would Christ return**, and **what about those people that have already died** before Christ returned? Paul says that no one can know when he will return, but that believers should continue working and living and being obedient. As for the dead folks, they will be raised at the end of time.

2 Thessalonians

This church was obsessed with end times. They had received a fake letter supposedly from Paul saying that the return of Jesus and the Resurrection already happened and they missed it. Paul gives them signs of the end to look out for to assure them it hasn't happened yet. The last half is joyful thanksgiving and assurance they are indeed saved.

Paul then goes to Ephesus with Priscilla and Aquila, who were on their way there "from Italy". They were probably leaving Italy because of the Edict of Claudius, which was issued around 49 C.E. and kicked all the Jews out of Rome. REMEMBER THIS.

Paul return to Antioch. Plans for and begins his 3rd missionary journey. While on this journey, he plants the Ephesian Church and ends up setting up shop in Ephesus, staying for three years. While there, he receives word the Corinthians aren't doing very well.

The Corinthian Correspondence

There were actually 4 letters sent between Paul and the Corinthians. Paul writes a letter to them to see how they're doing. We don't have this letter today. They write back telling of their situation and offering some questions for Paul. He responds.

1 Corinthians

This is actually letter 2 to the Corinthians. It seems that their main problem is that the congregation has split among four different "styles" of the

Christian life. These styles are caricatures and misrepresentations of some of the teachings of some of the early prominent leaders in Christianity:

- Paul: libertines; could live as they like
- Cephas (Peter): legalists; Christian life= strict adherence to law
- Apollos: philosophers; He was from Egypt, probably influenced by Philo, brought together Greek and Jewish thought, but was more Greek than Jewish in nature. They probably felt they had a wisdom higher than Paul's and that Paul wasn't "impressive" rhetorically.
- Christ: mystics; they felt they had direct contact with Christ through mystical experiences

This letter masterfully answers the questions from their letter while also correcting the misunderstandings of these groups. It's complicated.

They don't repent, so Paul travels there in person. They fail to repent. Paul returns and hears of some of the criticisms they had of his visit. Many scholars believe he writes 2 Corinthians 10-13 in which he defends himself, attacks his critics, one ups them on mystical experience, warns them of another imminent visit. After sending this letter, Paul suddenly feels bad. He travels to meet them, but on the way, Titus catches him and says that they finally repented. Paul then writes 2 Corinthians.

2 Corinthians

Written from a beat-up man to broken people. Structure:

- I know things have been tough, but like I said, I am an apostle, and suffering comes with the territory
- This is who you and I should pick up the pieces both between us and in your church
- Give random advice about many things, clearing up any left-over misunderstandings, rooting everything in the Gospel and trying to talk about these things in a way that brings joy to the reader
- Then talks about the future hope they all have together as Christians
- Then asks for their support of the Jerusalem churches

He then travels to Corinth for three months to continue picking up the pieces of their relationship. While there, he writes Romans.

Romans

Around 49 C.E., the "Edict of Claudius" was issued, expelling all Jews from Rome. This is why Paul journeyed to Ephesus at the end of his first missionary journey with a husband/wife church planting team named Priscilla and Aquilla. They went to Ephesus after being kicked out of Rome by Claudius. Well, this edict occurred and the Roman church became purely Gentile (due to the absence of most Jews). Most edicts died with the emperor and in 54 C.E., Claudius died, causing Jews to once more flood the city of Rome and, therefore, the Roman Church. Needless to say, racial tensions begin to rise dramatically. And so, Paul writes the book of Romans. Romans is not a systematic theology of Paul. Many core Pauline theological ideas are not found in the book.

So, how does Paul deal with "racial reconciliation"?

First off, it's not by talking about how great each group is, their contributions to society, and encouraging the two groups to just think more highly of each other. Instead, Paul opens up the letter talking to the Gentiles, saying that even though they had God *screaming* who he was to them in all of creation, they instead made idols out of the created world and rejected God. In Chapter 2, Paul looks at the Jews and says not to feel better about themselves, because even though they *had* the prophets and the Scriptures, they rejected God time and time again as well.

And so, Paul's answer in Chapter 3 to racial tension is this: "Therefore all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God". The answer is not "each of your cultures is so great! If only you could see the other group as awesome, you wouldn't have these problems". Instead, it's "if only you could each see that you actually both suck, and what you have in common is not how great your respective cultures are, but instead that you both need God."

After highlighting the problem, Paul goes on to talk about how this need to be resolved by *both* groups: faith. The rest of the book unpacks this.

Here's the general flow of thought throughout the book:

- Chapter 1: Gentiles suck.
- Chapter 2: Jews suck.
- Chapter 3: therefore, everyone sucks. We all have a COMMON need for Christ.
- And a common solution: faith, as exemplified in Abraham (appealing to Jews).
- Our common faith brings common peace, because...
- our common need comes from our common forefather, Adam.
- We have a common Savior who's reversed this: Jesus.
- So where death was, now life is; so we're now dead to sin, alive to God.
- Therefore we're slave to *righteousness*, not the law (Jews).
- But, don't forget, the law is still good (Gentiles) because it reveals sin.
- Even in Paul! "What I want to do I don't do...wretched man I am!"
- This leads to Romans 8: in spite of your division "there's now no condemnation."
- Nothing can separate us from the love of God!
- But what about the Jews? Weren't they separated from God's love?
- Romans 9-11, the thesis: "The word of God has not failed"
- This promise of love is not based on ethnicity (Jews), nor fickle human choice (Gentiles), but on God's choice in election.
- Always, among God's visible people, God has chosen a smaller group that this promise applies to.
- Jewish history has shown they've always been hard-hearted, as they are now.
- Paul is confident their hearts will soften eventually.
- "Oh the depths of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!"
- But, in light of all the weighty stuff we've talked about, nevertheless, "I appeal to you, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies (plural) and a (single) living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God"
- The rest is practical and personal stuff to the church.

Paul then feels led to go to Jerusalem, even though he knows they want to kill him there. He goes anyway. Ends up in prison (see last week's notes). While in prison, he writes the following letter.

Colossians

- encouraging, but also correcting
- written to combat the "Colossian heresy"
- scholars don't know what that is:
- sort of like Judaizers, plus some mystical stuff (like the "Christ party" in Corinth)

Philemon

- written same time as Colossians (Philemon was member of Colossian church)
- Paul is trying to follow law (remember, he's in prison!) while subtly encouraging Philemon to release Onesimus
- Did he do it? We don't know, but about 40 years after this, Ignatius writes of an Onesimus at the church in Ephesus who is "a man of inexpressible love" and "an excellent bishop".

Ephesians (Laodiceans)

- Colossians makes reference to letter to the Laodiceans that is to be passed around church to church
- As a letter would go to each church, heading would be changed
- many scholars think Ephesians is that letter (in fact, the oldest and best manuscripts don't say "Ephesus" in beginning).
- Paul spent LOTS of time in Ephesus, this letter says nothing to them. Weird.
- Beautiful book (Chapters 1& 2 are *amazing* to try and memorize).
- First three chapters: theology; second three: application.
- Main theme: all the riches and privileges we have in Christ.

Philippians

- They had helped Paul financially. This is his thank-you note.
- Happiest and most personal letter.
- Considers how to have joy in the midst of many different things

See last week, for more information on this historical reconstruction, but what I feel is the most reasonable summary of what happens from here, based on the evidence is this:

Paul gets out of this imprisonment, continue preaching all the way to Spain (as he said he wanted to do in Romans 16--the early church father Clement said that Paul was able to preach to "the furthest reaches of the West", and there are even very old Spanish that say they were planted by Paul"). A couple of years later, he then gets caught up in the Neronian Roman persecution and, in either 64 or 66 C.E. he is imprisoned and subsequently beheaded for his faith. While in prison though, he writes the Pastoral Epistles.

Pastoral Epistles

These are very different than his other letters. All of his other letter were written to churches to address issues. These are written to individuals, simply to encourage them and give them advice on how to lead their churches well after he's gone.

1 Timothy, Titus, & 2 Timothy

These leaders were facing things in their churches that he had faced throughout his years in ministry. These are his words of encouragement about how they should act as leaders at their churches in light of the problems. The letters focus on three areas: correct beliefs about God and the Gospel (what they believe); proper Christian behavior and relationships (how they act), healthy church leadership (how they are led)Last letter before Paul died. 2 Timothy is his last letter we know of. They are is final words to a beloved brother he was very close to.

PART 3: General Epistles

Hebrews

Completely anonymous, nobody knows who wrote it. Definitely not Paul. Origen: "only God knows the truth as to who actually wrote the epistle". Looking at all of the scholarship, this is the best reconstruction I can deduce:

- It looks like it's written to Jewish Christians (perhaps in Rome)
- If in Rome, it could be after the troubles of the Edict of Claudius in 49 C.E., but before the worst of Nero's persecution in Rome in 64 C.E., instead just as it was beginning (early 60s C.E.?)
- Jewish Christians, in light of the persecution, had grown lax in their faith and were tempted to start trying to "appear" Jewish because that faith was accepted by the Romans. Some of them were even considering going back to Judaism altogether.

Hebrews' argument: the main point of all the OT stuff is to point to Christ, not for you to keep doing it now that he's come. **Christ is superior to anything Judaism can offer.**

Three main points: The superiority of Christ, the superiority of his priesthood, and the superiority of his sacrifice. The author then spends the rest of the book doing all he can to convince his readers to stick with Christ regardless of what persecution comes. He tells them they're in good historical company and reminds them of the terror of life under the law and the freedom of life under Christ.

James

- Probably not the leader of the church in Jerusalem
- Maybe the first book written of the New Testament, perhaps late 30s into mid-40s C.E. (after Stephen, before Paul)
- Reflects concerns of church in Jerusalem before any ethnic/racial tensions between Jew/Gentile began, but still discrimination from Jews

- How life should be lived as a faithful Jewish Christian, how to distinguish oneself from the other Jews around you.

1 Peter

- Written to persecuted Christians, but not "formally persecuted". More likely just general societal dislike.
- Three sections: who we are, how we mature, how we behave, how leaders serve

2 Peter

- Probably the last book of the Bible written. Most every scholar in existence believes that this book was not actually written by the apostle Peter (even conservative ones)
- Two purposes: counter false teaching and to strengthen the faith of Christians waiting for Christ's return
- Three parts: Grow in holiness, watch out for false teachers (adapts most of Jude here), be certain of the coming judgment of God

1, 2, & 3 John

- Remember when we talked about the Gospel of John, and how it may have gone through two editions (with the second one adding Chapter 1 and 21 and maybe Jesus' prayer in 17)? Well, it seems like 1 John may have been written at the same time as that second edition. The beginning the Gospel (which looks a lot like the beginning of this letter) was added, and the end, to counter some false beliefs (port-Gnosticism, probably and Docetism) that existed in John's Church community in Ephesus.
- In light of these conflicts, 2 John seems to have been written first, warning the church of these people.

- By the time 1 John is written, the church has been torn apart by these people. The writer of 1 John stresses love and right behavior in the community, trying to explain to younger believers why this hardship happened and what happened to all of those that left.
- 1 John is not, technically, a letter. It doesn't have an introduction, greeting, author identification, and even a proper benediction. It's more like a sermon or pamphlet that may have been passed around the church.
- The earliest Church Father references to 1 John call it a "introduction" or "explanation" of the Gospel of John to correct those that may have tried to distort its teaching to their own aims.
- The earliest commentaries we have on the Gospel of John are actually from heretics that still accepted it as correct. They may have been from communities that were originally part of John's Church. We know that early Gnostic appealed quite often to John to make their case.
- The Gospel uses many *Jewish* ideas of "light" and "dark"--as well as other seemingly-dualistic ideas--that, in the hands of *Greeks* end up meaning very different things than in Jewish thought. This might have led to the problems John's church faced.
- Many scholars believe that the letters of John were written to "save" the Gospel of John from this.
- No one quite knows absolutely what order these were written in, but scholars are confident that the same person wrote these letters and the Gospel--or at least the same *community* of people, led by John.
- Ultimately, all three letters deal with reactions by the community to these splits and heresies and troubles going on.

Jude

- Says it was written by a brother of Jesus.
- The letter could have been written anytime from 50 to 80 C.E.
- Main point is to condemn heretical teaching and behaviors that had come against his readers.
- Seem to be written to Jewish Christians living in a largely Hellenistic culture.
- Quotes apocryphal works.
- its structure implies that it was meant to be a sermon delivered in worship services in the form of a letter.

PART 4: Revelation

Revelation is the New Testament book of worship. It's sort of our Psalms. It has more songs of worship than any other book of the Bible outside of Psalms. It's actually meant to be encouraging and joyful, not scary. It's written to suffering and persecuted Christians in Asia Minor.

This is the Biblical picture of history: the kingdom of God grows bigger and bigger until Christ returns. Yes, as the light grows brighter, more of the dirt is seen, but it's only because God's Church is growing. It will not fail.

The pop culture view of Revelation is one of the church failing so bad that God has to come in and clean house. This is not seen anywhere in church history until about 150 years ago and even now isn't believed by most of the world's Christians--mainly just Americans.

Revelation is genre of Apocalypse: highly symbolic, lots of images, references and numerology. Best used with a commentary. But, key to interpretation: whatever you think it's saying has to have actually meant something to first-century persecuted Christians. If your interpretation doesn't, then it's probably wrong. A rapture, an anti-Christ, and the veiled political movements of Iraq, Iran, Russia, and China 2,000 years later would not help them.

Most scholars (and indeed, Christians throughout Church history) have found it fairly clear that most of the bad stuff in Revelation is referring to the fall of Rome. Scholars argue about which Roman persecution is in the background here, but not really that it's definitely Rome being talked about. Some Roman allusions:

- The seven headed beast = the seven emperors of Rome.
- 666 = the Hebrew numerology name for Nero.
- The wounded-but-not-dead head of the beast = Rumors of Domitian's death were widely circulated and were false
- Domitian had demanded that citizens worship him as "Lord and God"

The point of the book to the original audience: Be encouraged. God is still present and worthy to be praised. Just as Christ suffered and is now

exalted and ruling and reigning, so will you. Those who hurt you will be judged, but that's not the main point. The main point is that Christ will make all things new such that things like this are no more. Also, know that your every trial is moving the story all the more along to that glorious day when the sky will split and Christ will return, and

"God will be with them in person ... God will wipe away all tears from their eyes. There will be no more death, no more grief or crying or pain. The old things have disappeared ..."

The book, and the Bible itself--and all we've talked about the eight weeks--ends with these words:

"He who testifies to these things says, "Surely, I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! The grace of the Lord be with all. Amen."

Amen indeed.

PART 5: The Bible & Spirituality

Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of your holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

--Collect for Second Sunday in Advent, Book of Common Prayer

From ideas to practice....

How do we move from the Facts of the Bible to the God of the Bible? From knowing the Bible, to knowing the Person? From Scripture being informational to formational?

The Meeting Place of God

Review: The Bible is not the passive "Revelation of God". It is the place through which the Holy Spirit actively "reveals God". When it comes to the Bible, start thinking in verbs, not nouns. The Bible is simply a meeting place for God and his people, where he might meet them as he desires, by His Spirit.

When we meet God in Scripture, its the convergence of four things: Us and our faith, God and His Spirit.

So the task of the Christian that wants to meet God in Scripture is this: **stir up and feed your faith and cry for the Spirit.**

And that's scary. It means we can't control or manufacture our "meeting with God". And the simple fact is that many times, we will cry out for the Spirit and he won't seem to show up. But we can *never* separate the Spirit from our Bible reading and study. This is why Jared prays a "Prayer of Illumination" each week before the sermon.

Know that God wants to meet his people deeply. Many times, even "dry times" when the Spirit does not come, even after crying out for Him, it is to stir your faith all the more, that you might eventually meet him all the more deeply.

How do we feed our faith? The sacraments, community, Scripture, prayer, and our own unique, personal ways.

This is the context in which this battle for meeting God is taking place.

The Soul's Breathing

When we approach the Bible, what do we actually do? What's the posture and framework of our souls? We let them breathe.

We *inhale* Scripture, but that's not the end. Inhaling too much will kill you. We *must exhale* as well, which is responding to the "nutrients" we have just received. The Christian family has found many ways to do both of

these things, and have sometimes even used different terms for this process. C.S. Lewis used the terms *contemplating* and *enjoying*.

This class

So where does this class fit into that?

Important Tension: the info in this class has been good, but not *necessary* to a full spirituality. The information is not *in itself* what brings about change and depth of spirituality.

So what good is it? Removing the barriers to *desire, access* and *meaning*.

The hope has been that this class has removed some of the things that keep us from the Bible. We're usually intimidated by a (real) perceived gap between us and the Bible. We don't know how approach it and access it, and even if we did, we wouldn't know how to gather meaning from it. This leads us to have a diminished desire to approach it at all.

If the Bible's like a window through which we look, hoping to see an amazing sunset, this class has, hopefully, been like window cleaner to see the sunset more easily, more clearly, and more accessibly; leading us to *want* to see that sunset all the more.

Some Practicalities:

First: *Pray, Pray, Pray*

- *Plead* with the Holy Spirit to come
- Without Him moving *we will not meet God no matter how often we open the Bible*
- Pray Scripture

Just Read

- Find a method. Do it.
 - Daily devotionals
 - The One-Year Bible
 - Book of Common Prayer
 - Revised Common Lectionary
- Read lots, read little.
- Study Intentionally, read casually

Stick very close to to Psalms

- Pray Psalms
- Take them clause by clause

Memorize

- Start with small verses.
- Suggestions: Isaiah 1, Ephesians 1 & 2, Romans 8
- Psalms are hard

Sacred Reading:

the Scholastic Way: sacra pagina

- focus on a particular text
- ask questions of the text
- ask questions of yourself from the text
- focuses on the objective, theological, cognitive
- might be easier to start here, but it's not the fullness

the Monastic Way: lectio divina

Since early 400s C.E., this has been in use in the Christian family. Oldest systematic way to read the Bible worshipfully. Four sections that one slowly moves through:

- **Reading (*lectio*):** short passage of Scripture, systematically chosen. The place and posture in which this is done is important. Begin with a brief one-line prayer to to prepare your heart. Read the text over and over until it's in your short-term memory. Submit yourself to these words. Let them form you and ask questions of you. Try and stop the impulse to quickly find the "nugget for the day" or "application".
- **Meditation (*meditatio*):** this is *slow*. Let the text inside of you and just ruminate in your heart. Try to "translate" the text into images, rather than words. Reflect on the text; maybe even journal your thoughts. Put yourself in the story in your mind--imagine how all five of your sense would be engaging in this moment. Spread your focus as equally as you can on the mind, emotions, and will. The Psalms are a great place to begin practicing this.
- **Prayer (*oratio*):** this is the time for our hearts to respond to what we have read and meditated upon. It is whatever the natural response of our heart is to this text. Sometimes it will be praise, others time confession, repentance, adoration, petition, etc. Be free in this. You will probably oscillate somewhat between Meditation and Prayer
- **Contemplation (*contemplatio*):** this is the culmination of the time in Scripture. Meditation and prayer flow out of us as communication to God. This is the most mysterious of the components of *lectio divina*. Having drawn near to God and communicated to Him, this is the time of silence and receptivity and communing with God. It is the sweetest part, and the most difficult to describe. It is inner stillness and wordless *knowing* and *resting*; it is sitting the very presence and prayer of Jesus Himself, by His Spirit.