

**Understanding the New Testament**  
*Luke 1:1-4, Romans 1:1-7, Rev 11:15-19*

Well here we are ready for our third leg of the journey on our road trip thru the bible. If you remember in the first section we looked at three claims the bible makes about itself.

What were they?

1. The bible is the inspired word of God
2. The bible is the infallible word of God
3. And the bible is about salvation in Jesus Christ,

Then we explored how to begin to understand the Old Testament by learning about the different kinds of literature in it.

Anyone want to try naming them? Narrative, Law, Wisdom, Poetry and Prophecy.

And we ended off our exploration on a bit of a cliff hanger, we saw that God had promised to do something about the sin and rebellion in Israel, and in our world,

and so the OT ended without a conclusive answer that God had acted on this promise. It just leaves us wondering how and if he will.

But before we do that I want to ask you – what is good news?

So today we're going to look at the good news the NT which proclaims that God did keep his promise, and similar to the Old Testament the NT proclaims this good news in three different voices, three types of writing.

Fortunately the NT is shorter than the OT – only 27 books, and has only three types of writing. Gospel, Epistle, and Apocalyptic.

Now remember how confusing and weird things got when we tried to use one type of writing, like using poetry to do what the law was supposed to do, or visa versa?

The same holds true for the types of writing we find in the NT. They each have a distinct purpose and job and we need to be able to identify what they are so we know what they are trying to do.

## Gospel

Gospel is very similar to narrative, but with one important difference. Gospel literature is written with the purpose of persuading you to accept that Jesus Christ is the messiah that God had promised to send.

Like narrative it weaves together smaller stories and characters and introduces you to the main character Jesus Christ, but there is a persistent downbeat through the whole story which is always trying to persuade the reader to believe in Jesus as the messiah and to come to faith in him and that's what distinguishes it from regular narrative.

Now all the gospels were written between 50-70AD, approximately 20- 40 years after Jesus death, which makes them very reliable historical documents about the life and ministry of Jesus.

But they are not necessarily meant to be "history" as we understand it today. Today, we think of history as an "unbiased chronological sequences of facts and events" but that

is not history that's just surveillance video tape. And it's especially not how ancient people thought of history. Any event is open to a multitude of interpretations as to what it means and its significance,

and the gospels are the arguments for seeing the life and work of this man called Jesus of Nazareth as the answer to God's promise to send a Messiah. Contrary to what we think today, truth is not found by taking an "unbiased approach" so we can find some common thread among many perspectives.

It's only God's perspective that is wholly correct and so truth is found when God opens your eyes to see it, as he opened the eyes of the disciples and followers of Jesus so they could see his life and work as the messiah.

And so they wrote down why they were convinced Jesus was who he claimed to be and presented it to others so they might consider it and believe as well.

Now the question is often asked "why do we have four gospels?" and if you've done a bit of reading in them you'll

notice that they are actually a bit different from each other. This is because they each disciple was convinced by different aspects of Jesus life and ministry, and because they each wrote for a different audience, and used a different presentations to persuade them about who Jesus was.

Mark – The first gospel to be written. It was written to people who were already Christians but whose faith in Christ would be severely tested by the Roman persecution under Nero. So it emphasizes the connections between Jesus and suffering.

Luke / Acts - Was written by a gentile for other gentiles, people who weren't Jewish, to convince them that because of Jesus, they too could now part of God's chosen people. The book of Acts is really a continuation of Luke which gives the solid empirical evidence that gentiles were becoming part of God's family.

Matthew - Structured his gospel so that it resembled the first 5 books of the OT. Why? Because he was writing to convince the Jews, and he wanted to use what the Jews respected and

believed in to help them see that the OT had predicted Jesus was the promised messiah.

John – Was written for people who liked to explore new religions and new ideas. It has a more theological emphasis than the other gospels but then some people like that. They are attracted to prophets and wise teachers but John wanted to help people move beyond that to see Jesus as the Son of God. It's not just about teachings it's about who the teacher really is.

#### Tips for Reading Gospel

1. Read the whole gospel so you can get a sense of how the smaller stories fit together with the larger purpose.
2. Ask, "How is this trying to persuade me to believe in Jesus Christ and the fulfillment of the OT promise God made?"
3. Then ask "Am I persuaded? Why?"

Ok, so that's gospel, let's look at Epistle.

## Epistle

Epistle is just the Greek word for “a letter” The books of *Romans*, *1 & 2 Corinthians*, *Galatians*, *Ephesians*, *Philippians*, *Colossians*, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, *1&2 Timothy*, *Titus*, *Philemon*, *Hebrews*, *James*, *1 & 2 Peter*, *1 & 2 & 3 John* and *Jude* are all letters.

These were written to either specific churches or individuals and were concerned with giving instruction on how these believers should be living their Christian life.

They address specific issues such as what the church should be teaching, how the church should be acting, how to live in society as a Christian but staying different at the same time, lots of direct practical instruction for their recipients.

Now we don't have time to go into each letter explain who wrote it, why, who it was addressed, what the situation was the prompted the letter to be written etc... But let me recommend to you that you invest in a Study Bible, if you don't have one...get one.

You can go to Amazon.com and order one for aprx. \$20.00.

All of this information and more is printed up before each book in the bible, along with notes on the verse which help to explain them. A study bible is invaluable if you are going to do any reading of the scriptures. I highly recommend getting one, preferably the NIV version.

Now if you read these letters you'll notice that in many of them, they always start with a summary of what Jesus Christ has done, who he is and what that means. Then after they have spelled out the gospel they move on to the instruction.

The implication is that obedience to the instruction spelled out in the letters is simply a response of gratitude to the good news. Salvation is what makes obedience possible.

It also shows that the writers are taking the essence of the gospel message and trying to figure out, with the help of the Holy Spirit, how to apply it to different contexts and cultures. In these letters we have three different cultural contexts, Jewish, Greek, and Roman.

These letters work out the implications of the gospel message in each of these different contexts. **Tips for Reading Epistles**

1. **Find out who wrote it**, why, to whom and for what purpose
2. **Identify where the** letter transitions from gospel message into specific application
3. **With the background** info you know, try to make sense out of how or why the writer applies the gospel in that context.
4. **Ask if we would apply** the gospel in the same way today? Why or Why not?
5. **Use NIV Study Bible**

The principle with the epistles is that the writers were working out the implications of the gospel in their cultural settings, we can learn from their wisdom of how they did this to guide us as we take the essence of the gospel and work it out in our cultural setting.

This is not an easy task or one that we will all agree on but if we can at least agree to use the scriptures as our guide then we

have a basis to work with. The problems come when differing Christians don't agree to use the bible as the only rule for faith and life and they determine how they will work out the gospel in our culture on something else, personal opinion, public opinion, scientific research or even church tradition.

We may have our disagreements, but let us always agree to look to the scriptures as the authority on how we should apply our faith to our cultural context, and **the Epistles give us precedent and instruction on how we should** do this.

Alright, now we move on to the really fun one,

### **Apocalypse**

We typically know this type of writing is being characterized by predicting cataclysmic world ending events. When something really devastating happens we say "it's apocalyptic."

But apocalypse really **means "the lifting away of the veil" to reveal something**. So this literature in the bible is meant to

show the readers something that couldn't be known unless it was revealed.

So the book of Revelation in the bible is exactly that. It records visions of things that are normally hidden from human view and knowledge as they are revealed to the apostle John.

Though it may seem strange and fantastic to us as we read about these visions, and perplexing to try to understand what it means, we need to keep in mind that this book was revealed to be a message of *extreme hope* for the early persecuted church who was expecting Jesus to come back very soon.

The book of Revelation gives them a glimpse into what is going on behind the scenes, at how God is ordering human history and aligning it with his redemptive plans.

The basic message is that in spite of the natural disasters, wars, persecutions, and the rise of false teachings and false religions – Jesus Christ will still return. In fact the early Christians, and us, are encouraged to see these events around us as proof that Christ will return, and that the plan is exactly on schedule.

### Tips for reading the Apocalypse

1. **It's all about symbolism.** Learn what the symbols mean and represent.
2. **The visions are structured into 7 periods,** each presenting a brief synopsis of world history as a battle ground between God and the devil.
  - The first vision focus's mostly on the beginning, and the end vision mostly on the end and the focus shifts in between as the visions go along.
3. **It's an encouragement and a reminder to make sure that we align ourselves with the winning side** – the Kingdom of God, even if that means undergoing suffering or persecution in the present.

If the book of Revelation has always intrigued you, or you've been turned off from it because its been misused by certain fundamentalist groups to justify US foreign policy in the middle east, or predict when Jesus is going to come back etc... then I highly recommend reading **Anthony A. Hoekema's book**

“The Bible and the Future” and if you Google this you can read the entire book online for free!

So we’ve traveled through the New Testament and we’ve heard the good news from three different voices, gospel, epistle, and apocalypse, that Jesus is the promised answer to the question that the OT prophecy left us with – “How will God fulfill his promise to make the world a better place?”

The different genres in the NT are there to take us through a progression in response to that question. The gospel seeks to convince us of the good news, the epistles help us to learn how to apply it to our lives and our culture, and the apocalypse reassures us that our decision to give our allegiance to the Kingdom of God will not be vain.

So listen to the scriptures anew this morning with what you have learned.

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So really what we are beginning to see is that both the OT and the NT are really all about Jesus, and that is what we are going to explore next week. A famous theologian once said the NT is in the OT concealed, and the OT is in the NT revealed.

We’re going to find out more about that next week because even though we are trying to make things a bit simple for you so you can go and read the bible to check out if its claims are true, we don’t want to be simplistic and ignore some of the questions that are raised by saying Jesus is the answer to the OT promises. Let’s tackle them and learn exactly how it works so that our faith in Christ is strengthened. Amen.

Lets Pray.