

# Course Study Guide

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**NT217**

***New Testament  
Basics: Things We  
Thought We Knew***

By Dr. Craig Blomberg

Updated 2014

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**Our Daily Bread  
Christian University**

# Lesson 1 Study Guide

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**NT217**

***New Testament  
Basics: Things We  
Thought We Knew***

What Are We Going To Do With  
The New Testament?

Updated 2014

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# Objectives

This lesson prepares you to more effectively study each New Testament book. You will gain insight into the historical setting in which the New Testament characters lived and to which the books were addressed. You will begin to work with four questions that serve as guidelines for studying each book.

When you complete this lesson, “What Are We Going To Do With the New Testament?,” you should be able to:

- Explain how the four hundred years between the Old Testament and New Testament helped shape New Testament culture.
- Name and use four types of questions that will guide the study of each New Testament book.
- Be equipped to gain an understanding of the New Testament truth and apply it to your daily life.

## Scripture Reading

Read Matthew 1-9.

# Transcript

## Course Title: New Testament Basics: Things We Thought We Knew

### Lesson One: What Are We Going to Do With the New Testament?

#### I. Introduction

Welcome to a survey of the New Testament.

##### A. Why Read the New Testament?

There are many reasons why people today are interested in this collection of books that is nearly 2,000 years old. For some, they recognize its literary artistry and appreciate the ways in which the Scriptures have influenced much of the world's great literature over the past two millennia. For others, the reason is more academic or historical, recognizing the importance of the person of Jesus over the course of human history, and particularly for history in Europe and North America, as Christianity grew from a tiny sect to a worldwide religion. Other people's interest in studying the New Testament is of a more personal, or even professional nature as they seek to become better students of those documents they believe to be God's Word and serve Him, perhaps in a full-time Christian capacity.

##### B. Goal of This Series

Our goal in this series is to present a survey of the New Testament that is aimed particularly at those who have some familiarity and acquaintance with the contents of the New Testament, but perhaps have never studied all of the books in a complete, systematic way. We also reflect a broadly based evangelical perspective. We are believers who take God's Word seriously. And those commitments of that faith position will influence the remarks that we make at many points along our way. However, we will try to be very conscious and conscientious of dissenting scholarly opinions on crucial issues.

#### II. Organization of the New Testament

Before we get started, however, it is important to ask the question, "What is the New Testament?" We perhaps today think of it as a book, when in fact it originated as a collection of twenty-seven different books, or more precisely scrolls—the papyrus and parchment on which these documents were first penned. The New Testament begins, in the canonical sequence in which we have it today, with four books that are identified as the Gospels—the Gospels according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

##### A. Gospels

The word gospel comes from a Greek word that means "good news." These four books were

called “good news” by the early Christians who first collected them together because they believed that Jesus, the primary character who features in these stories, brought the greatest good news to humanity that this world has ever known. As a literary form or genre, the Gospels resemble works of history and works of biography, while not perfectly matching any other known documents from the ancient world. They are written in the style and the form that leads us to expect that their authors were trying to communicate truth about the events and the people they narrated and described.

The four Gospels are put in the order that we have them in—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John—probably because that was approximately the order that the early church thought they were written in, with one exception. The gospel of Matthew probably was not first; that seems to have been Mark. But the gospel of Matthew was placed first because it provided the greatest link with the Old Testament, the body of literature that Christians, like the Jews, from when they first emerged already believed was sacred and authoritative and inspired by God. So Matthew, the most Jewish of the four Gospels, comes first; then Mark, Luke and John, probably in that order because that was the sequence in which they were written.

## B. Acts of the Apostles

The fifth book of the New Testament is traditionally entitled the Acts of the Apostles. It reflects selected events of the first generation of Christianity after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. However, it tells us very little about most of the twelve apostles and centers its attention instead on two particular characters—Peter, who was one of the Twelve, and Paul, who was not, but who came to have a vision of the risen Christ and who numbered himself as equal to the apostles.

## C. Pauline Epistles

After the book of Acts come thirteen epistles or letters, all attributed to the apostle Paul. These are: Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon. The order here is not a particularly theological or religious one. It seems that these letters have been grouped together starting with the longest and proceeding to the shortest. First we have the letters written to Christian congregations, and then we have the letters written to Christian individuals—Timothy, Titus, and Philemon. And where two letters appear written to the same church or individual, then they are grouped together, slightly breaking the decreasing sequence of length.

## D. General Epistles

After the letters that are attributed to Paul come eight other epistles. The first of these is the letter to the Hebrews, which does not claim to have been written by a specific person in the text that has been preserved. The early church was divided between those particularly in the Latin West or the emerging Roman Catholic Church, who thought it was from the apostle Paul. Those in the Eastern or more Greek Orthodox wing of the church thought it was from someone else; but of the many suggestions that were made, all were close followers or companions of Paul. Because of this uncertainty, the letter to the Hebrews was placed immediately following

the collection of letters that were attributed to Paul. It was not placed in the order and the sequence of the letters that its length would have otherwise suggested.

The remaining seven epistles are often called the Catholic or General Epistles. Catholic, here, simply means universal or that which was written to a wide, diverse area or region; or it was also understood as a group of Christian churches rather than just a single church or individual. These letters include: James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2, and 3 John, and Jude. Why in this order—James, Peter, John, and Jude? Here we are less sure, but the answer seems to have to do with the order of prominence of the four authors of these General Epistles in the earliest years of Christianity.

James, we learn about from the first half of the book of Acts, the half-brother of our Lord, was the chief elder or leader of the church in Jerusalem in its earliest days. Peter, who becomes much more prominent not long afterwards, eventually becomes the first bishop of the church in Rome. John is frequently portrayed in the Gospels and the Acts as the “companion,” though slightly less prominent than Peter. And Jude, another half-brother of our Lord, is clearly the least well-known of the four. So it may simply be that they were arranged in this decreasing order of prominence, accounting for the sequence: James, Peter, John, and Jude.

#### E. Revelation

The final book, the twenty-seventh in the New Testament, is Revelation, sometimes popularly called the book of Revelations—although no text in Greek or any of the modern translations uses the plural and probably for a reason. Although John received many visions from Jesus about what he describes in this book, they are all seen as comprising a unity—one unified revelation of Jesus Christ. The Greek word translated “revelation,” however, is the word from which we get in English the term “apocalypse,” and it means something much more than contents being revealed. It refers to a literary form that was well-known in the ancient Jewish and Greco-Roman world, often a highly symbolic description of past, present, or future events. These concepts were all brought together from the perspective of those who believe that God would bring human history to a climax and that He would decisively intervene at times in a cosmic or even supernatural way to wind up or bring about a close to human history as we know it—to vindicate His people, His faithful followers, and to bring judgment upon His enemies.

### III. Questions to Ask the Text

We will have much more to say about each of these literary forms and each of these parts of the New Testament as we look at each book, one at a time. But we need to make one other introductory set of comments at this point; that is, to briefly rehearse the kinds of questions that we will be asking of the texts as we survey them. Primarily, we are thinking in terms of four kinds of questions of the many that could be brought to documents such as those found in the New Testament.

#### A. Historical Background

The first are types of questions of introduction or historical background. Along the way, we will

be asking questions in more detail and trying to provide the answers as to who wrote each of these books, under what circumstances, the question of what time, what date, to what specific audiences facing what unique set of problems. These questions will be crucial as we try to move from then, 2,000 years ago in a culture far away and very removed from many modern cultures, to applying the text to our Christian lives today. Early on, we will spend a couple of lessons setting the stage for the historical background to the entire New Testament period. Without this kind of context, it is very easy to take texts out of their original context and make them mean something that their original authors could never have intended, or that the original readers could never have understood.

## B. Interpretation

The second type of question is a question of interpretation or exegesis, leading out of the text what the main ideas are in the sequence and in the structure, trying to understand a little bit of the outline or the narrative flow of the author's thoughts in each book. Then, commenting on a more difficult task, exegesis concentrates particularly on some of the more difficult problems for interpreters that have taxed commentators throughout church history.

## C. Theology

The third type of question is a question of theology. This is a more synthetic question: Having worked through a book sequentially, having pointed out its main contents, having stopped perhaps briefly to speak about some interpretative problems, what then emerges as the central lessons that the original author wanted to communicate? Some additional questions to ask: What were the original tasks, what types of commands to be obeyed, what kinds of examples to be followed or to be avoided? In short, what does this book teach about the major doctrines of the Christian faith? These are questions of theology.

## D. Contemporary Application

Fourth and finally, we will try to deal with questions of contemporary application. In some ways, this is the hardest to cover in a brief survey because every culture, every audience, every individual interpreter will find him or herself in unique circumstances, and therefore applications will vary. There may be as many applications as there are listeners or watchers of this series, but the meaning remains the same in the text even as the applications vary.

## IV. Intertestamental Period

With those preliminary comments, we are ready to begin with several sections of historical background, first of all, to the entire New Testament. Here we want to divide our comments into two major categories: first, the broader socio or political developments, the types of things you would expect to read about in a history book of the ancient world of any culture; and secondly we want to look at those more distinctively religious components that make up important background to a study of the New Testament. With the remaining time, we are going to limit ourselves to the more socio-political developments of the history of the centuries, leading immediately up to the writing of the New Testament and the events that the New Testament narrates.

The New Testament did not emerge in a vacuum, nor was Christianity birthed following its founder, Jesus, without many significant events that led up to its formation. All the first Christians and all the writers of the New Testament believed that they already had sacred Scriptures, what in those days were simply called “the Scriptures,” or even “the writings,” but which Christians eventually came to call the Old Testament or the Hebrew Scriptures to distinguish them from these twenty-seven new books, newer writings known as the New Testament. The New Testament, therefore, must be seen as self-consciously claiming to be the culmination of the history that was described in the Old Testament, and the fulfillment of many of the promises found in those earlier thirty-nine books.

But the Old Testament was complete sometime in the fifth century B.C. The last book chronologically to be written was probably also the book that appears at the end of the English sequence of the Old Testament canon, namely the writing of the prophet Malachi. Conservative scholars usually date the prophecy of Malachi to approximately 425 B.C. That leaves more than four complete centuries for history to continue. This is often called the intertestamental period, leading up to the time of Jesus and the events that created and birthed the New Testament.

#### A. Persian Empire

Now when Malachi died, nothing particularly changed in Jewish history that would have led secular historians to mark off a new era in the history of the world. Those who are familiar with the last books of the Old Testament will recall that the Jews had been languishing in exile under several foreign oppressors; but the Persian government allowed, particularly the ruler, those who wanted to return to the land of Israel. Then under successive rulers, they began to rebuild the temple and the entire city, the capital city—the holy city of Jerusalem. This was underway during the period of the latest writing prophets, and for roughly another century things continued relatively unchanged under various Persian emperors.

#### B. Greece

But a decisive new period of Middle Eastern history begins with the rise of Alexander the Great, a Macedonian or Greek general, who in a very short period of time, perhaps roughly thirteen years, conquered almost all of what Persia had previously held under its control—a wide swath of the land of the Middle East, and eventually amassed the greatest empire known in the ancient Near Eastern times.

Alexander died in the year 323 B.C., not before including Israel as part of his subjugated lands. But his generals, among whom his empire was divided, continued the process which we may call the beginning of a period of Hellenism or Hellenization that comes from the Greek word *Hellas*, which simply was the name in Greek for the country of Greece. Hellenization was the process that spread the influence of Greek language, Greek culture, and Greek religion throughout all of the ancient Middle East, leaving it forever changed in its wake.

#### C. Seleucid and Ptolemy Rule

After Alexander died and his generals competed for his empire, things settled down, so that

largely the northern half of his empire came under the command of the Seleucids—after the name of one of Alexander’s generals, Seleucus I. The southern half of his empire came under the command of the Ptolemies. And unfortunately, if one looks at a map one sees that Israel is caught smack-dab in the middle area that was disputed between these two empires. For the first half of the period of Hellenistic influence, Israel remained under Ptolemaic control. For the second half, it came increasingly under Seleucid control. The Seleucids were less benign than the Ptolemaic overlords, and increasingly put taxation on their subjugated people. They tried to influence them away from their ancestral religions and encourage them to adopt Greek religion and practices, many of which were anathema to the Jews of that day.

Things came particularly to a head in the 160s B.C., after nearly a century and a half of first Ptolemaic and then Seleucid control. A Seleucid emperor by the name of Antiochus Epiphanes, Antiochus IV, took the name Epiphanes upon himself, meaning “the God manifest,” and claimed all kinds of things that were outrageous from a Jewish perspective. Not only did he claim to be God, but he tried to forbid all of the fundamental practices of Jewish religions such as reading the scrolls of Scripture, the Torah, or practicing circumcision. The worst feature of all of Antiochus’ evil deeds came in 167 B.C., when he desecrated the temple by slaughtering a pig on the altar in the holy place. This led to a guerrilla revolt as we would describe it today.

#### D. Maccabees / Hasmonean Dynasty

An aged priest by the name Mattathias and his sons—spearheaded by one named Judas, nicknamed Maccabeus, the “Hammerer,”—led an insurgence. This today would be considered a terrorist revolt, as he and a small band of greatly outnumbered Jewish freedom fighters headed for the hills, adopted unknown guerrilla tactics, and were able to overthrow the invading Syrian or Seleucid forces. This took place within a three-year period of time and liberated the temple. This liberation is still celebrated today with the Jewish ceremony or festival known as Hanukkah.

This then inaugurated a second major new period of intertestamental history that could be called the period of Hasidism, from a Jewish word meaning “the pious one.” It has also been known as the Hasmonean Dynasty, because this was the period in which Mattathias, Judas, and their successors, who all came from a family of an ancestor by the name of Hasmoneus, ruled. In short, it was roughly a century-long period of Jewish independence and a golden age in Jewish history.

However, there were negative side effects from this period. Because of all the warfare, because of the years of exile, Jews became increasingly polarized against the Gentiles or non-Jewish people who surrounded them and at times lived with them. They became, in many cases, more and more intractably opposed to false religions and cultural influences. Much of the hatred and animosity that we sense in reading the New Testament between Jews and Gentiles, an animosity that Christianity claims to be able to break down, is a result of this period of a hundred years or so of Jewish independence.

## E. Roman Influence

While all good things have to come to an end, and while the Jews were celebrating their new-found freedom in Israel, a new power was emerging from the West—the Roman Empire—which increasingly conquered Greek territory and eventually, by the year 63 B.C., was knocking on Israel’s door. In essence, Israel invited Rome to come in to solve an internal succession squabble. But what it amounted to was the end of freedom and the third and final period of intertestamental history that would carry right through the entire first century and the writing of all of the New Testament documents, namely the period of Romanization or Roman Rule.

Now at first, this was not a bad thing for the emerging church after the time of Christ and the first apostles. Thanks to Roman unification, the Greek language that had spread everywhere throughout previous centuries continued to be a common language, so the New Testament was written in Greek, read and understood by almost everyone. Excellent transportation and communication systems; the famous Pax Romana or “Roman peace”; the fact that Christians, like Jews before them were allowed limited self-government—all were boons to the spread of early Christianity. That was true during the time of the life of Christ and for about one generation later, but with the coming of Nero in the 60s A.D. we see the first instance of Roman persecution of Christians. Particularly, this persecution was tied to the fact that they began to recognize that Christians were not just another Jewish sect, and, therefore, they did not automatically enjoy the freedoms that the Jews had been granted.

In A.D. 70, however, Jews came under the target of Rome, as well as a rebellion by the zealot wing of the Jewish people in Jerusalem. This led to the Roman general Titus invading Jerusalem, burning the temple, destroying it almost to the ground and putting an end to a Jewish state in Israel as well. The year A.D. 70, from a secular point of view, is probably the most significant date for first-century history. There was one more brief Jewish uprising in the early second century, in the 130s, that was even more decisively squelched, but Judaism would never again be an independent nation until the 1940s.

Those brief comments, then, trace the political events that set the stage for the coming of Jesus and the events that will turn into the development of the New Testament.

# Discussion Questions

According to Dr. Blomberg, people study the New Testament for a variety of reasons. Why did you decide to take this course on the New Testament? What are your expectations for the course?

Why is it important to understand what took place during the intertestamental period? How will this help shape your study of the New Testament?

This lesson introduced four types of questions that students can ask as they study each New Testament book. Which of these four types stood out to you most? Why? How do you think this type of question will help your study of the New Testament?

# Further Study

## Suggested reading for this lesson:

Stedman, Ray C. *Adventuring Through the Bible: A Comprehensive Guide to the Entire Bible*.

Discovery House Publishers: 1997.

Read Chapter 1: “The Goal of God’s Word”

## Philip Yancey Devotional Savings Account - Matthew 6

But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.  
(Matt. 6:33)

Matthew 6, a continuation of the Sermon on the Mount, contains The Lord’s Prayer, perhaps the most famous prayer of all. Jesus gave it as a model of prayer, and it captures well the message of the kingdom: “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Jesus sought to bring the two worlds together, and the Sermon on the Mount explains how.

At first glance, some of the advice may seem downright foolish: Give to everyone who asks, love your enemies, turn the other cheek, grant interest-free loans, don’t worry about clothes or food. Can such idealism ever work in the “real,” or visible, world? That was Jesus’ point precisely: Break your obsession with safety, security, thriftiness, self-righteousness. Depend instead on the Father, letting him take care of the personal injustices that come your way, trusting him to look after your daily needs. In a nutshell, the message of the kingdom is this: Live for God and not other people.

The message applies to rewards as well. Most of us look to friends and colleagues for our rewards: a slap on the back, a hero medal, applause, a lavish compliment. But according to Jesus, by far the more important rewards await us after death. Therefore, the most significant human acts of all may be carried out in secret, seen by no one but God.

As Jesus explained it, we are accumulating a kind of savings account, “storing up treasures” in heaven rather than on earth. Treasures so great that they will pay back any amount of suffering in this life. The Old Testament had dropped a few scant hints about an afterlife, but Jesus spoke plainly about a place where “the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of the Father” (13:43).

In their quest for a kingdom, the Jews had been looking for signs of God’s approval in this life, primarily through prosperity and political power. Beginning with this speech, Jesus changed the focus to the life to come. He discounted success in this visible world. Invest in the future life, he cautioned; after all, rust, a thief, or a lowly insect can destroy all else that we accumulate.

Life Question: Of the people you know, who best puts these principles into practice?

# Glossary

**Apocalypse** — A prophetic book or portion thereof written in apocalyptic style

**Epistle** — (Greek *epistole*, “epistle,” “letter”) - The term “epistle” indicates a form of written communication between two persons or parties, private or official. The epistle is among the oldest and most abundantly preserved types of texts from antiquity.

**Exegesis** — This is the process by which a text, as a concrete expression of a “sender” to a “receiver,” is systematically explained.

**Gospel** — (Anglo-Saxon *godspell*, “good news”) - the Anglo-Saxon translation of the Greek word *euangelion*, which is used by the New Testament writers only in the sense of God’s good news to humanity (Mk 1:15; 10:29).

**Hanukkah** — An eight-day Jewish holiday beginning on the 25th of Kislev, commemorating the rededication of the temple of Jerusalem in 164 B.C. after its defilement by Antiochus IV Epiphanes of Syria.

**Hellenism** — A term that may be used in various senses. It is sometimes applied to the whole of distinctively Greek culture, including that of the days before Alexander the Great (336-323 B.C.). It is more commonly employed of the civilization that spread throughout much of the ancient world in the wake of Alexander’s conquests.

**Intertestamental Period** — Denotes the history of post-exilic Judaism from the time of the completion of the book of Malachi to the destruction of the temple of Jerusalem (A.D. 70).

# Quiz

1. The name Maccabeus is related to this term:
  - A. Anvil
  - B. Hammer
  - C. Saw
  - D. Knife
  
2. The Persian empire fell in 331 B.C. to this ruler:
  - A. Antiochus IV Epiphanes
  - B. Caesar Augustus
  - C. Philip of Macedonia
  - D. Alexander the Great
  
3. The Seleucid control was this part of Alexander's empire:
  - A. Northern half
  - B. Southern half
  - C. Southwestern half
  - D. Central half
  
4. Which of the following is a term for "letter" or written correspondence between two persons or parties?
  - A. Gospel
  - B. Hellas
  - C. Epistle
  - D. Epiphanes
  
5. This Roman general ordered the temple in Jerusalem to be burned to the ground in A.D. 70 effectively ending the Jewish war:
  - A. Julius Severus
  - B. Titus
  - C. Nero
  - D. Antony
  
6. The second major period of intertestamental history could be called the period of Hasidism which means:
  - A. "The pious one"
  - B. "The silent one"
  - C. "The prayerful one"
  - D. "The worshipful one"

7. Initially, the Roman Empire helped to spread Christianity by:
  - A. The use of the Greek language
  - B. The transportation and communication systems
  - C. The famous Pax Romana
  - D. All of the above
  
8. The Jewish exile written about in the Old Testament was officially ended by the ruler of:
  - A. Egypt
  - B. Assyria
  - C. Persia
  - D. Greece
  
9. Which of the following is a negative side effect of the century-long period of Jewish independence during the intertestamental period?
  - A. Mattathias, Judas, and their successors ruled.
  - B. The temple was destroyed during this period.
  - C. Hanukkah became an official Jewish festival.
  - D. Jews became increasingly polarized against the Gentiles surrounding them.
  
10. How did Antiochus IV Epiphanes desecrate the temple?
  - A. By slaughtering a pig on the altar in the holy place
  - B. By burning it to the ground
  - C. By claiming to be God outside the temple
  - D. None of the above

Answers: 1. B 2. D 3. A 4. C 5. B 6. A 7. D 8. C 9. D 10. A

# Lesson 2 Study Guide

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***New Testament  
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Thought We Knew***

What Life Looked Like In  
Jesus' Time

Updated 2014

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**Our Daily Bread  
Christian University**

# Objectives

The New Testament church was planted in and commissioned to influence a culture dominated by Greco-Roman and Jewish culture. This lesson will help you understand many of the specific issues and questions the New Testament books were written to help Christians address in their walk with God.

When you complete this lesson, “What Life Looked Like in Jesus’ Time,” you should be able to:

- Name and explain the meaning of major religious ideas that competed for people’s allegiance in New Testament times.
- Study each New Testament book with increased insight into the culture in which it was written.
- Make informed comparisons between the New Testament culture and your culture as you apply first-century truth to present-day issues.
- Generate accurate and relevant applications from New Testament literature to your daily life.

## Scripture Reading

Read Matthew 10-18.

# Transcript

## Course Title: New Testament Basics: Things We Thought We Knew

### Lesson Two: What Life Looked Like in Jesus' Time

#### I. Introduction to Religious Developments

In this second lesson, we want to turn from historical and political developments that set the stage for the formation of the New Testament to more overtly religious developments, even while we recognize that the ancient world knew nothing of the separation of church and state, as is found in some modern countries, and so the division is always somewhat artificial. But it is an interesting and significant question to ask oneself, "If I were living some place in the Middle East, at approximately the time of Jesus' birth, what would have been the religious options available to me?" How did they appeal to certain segments of the populace and not to others? And how did Jesus' teaching and Christianity, as it grew following his life and death, relate to the various religious options and diversity of the first-century world?

#### II. Greco-Roman Religion

We may divide our thoughts into two broad headings: first of all, the larger Greco-Roman Empire, into which Israel found itself, and then secondly, the more specifically Jewish options, particularly for someone living within Israel. The first century has been described by many historians as a time of a crisis of the conscience for many conventional Greco-Roman people and thinkers. The most well-known form of Greco-Roman religion, belief in the ancient myths, was increasingly being abandoned in favor of other alternatives.

##### A. Mythology

There no doubt were plenty of people who still believed in the mythology of centuries past to one degree or another. Originally, it had found its appeal as a kind of substitute for primitive science. Apollo was the sun-god who drove his fiery chariot across the sky every day, thus accounting for the movement of the sun as it appeared to people from the earth. Bacchus, or other gods of wine, Artemis, the goddess of love, Mercury, the messenger-god, and many others that are well-known to students of the ancient Greco-Roman mythologies, in turn each helped to explain some particular practice of nature or example of human behavior, delights of appetites and virtues and of vices. But the problem was that by the first century many of the exploits of the gods and ancient myths had already been surpassed by human emperors from the time of Alexander the Great onward. Human emperors had conquered larger territories than even the gods of Greece and Rome were said to be able to rule. And science, primitive though it was by modern standards, had already discovered the natural laws of cause and effect that account for much of the course of the events of the universe. Therefore, the myths were increasingly receding in significance.

It's not coincidental that one place in the New Testament where we see evidence of Greek mythology, the story in Acts 14 of Paul and Barnabas at the town of Lystra being mistaken for the Greek gods of Zeus and Hermes, was in a very backward and isolated place, where the old traditions often died the hardest. But if people were not as much following the ancient myths as they once had, then what other Greco-Roman options were there? Well, a quite new one with the rise of the Roman Empire, particularly in the lands in the eastern part of the empire, was that of emperor worship. This was a religious option that grew gradually.

## B. Emperor Worship

Initially emperors were only deified by acclamation by the Roman senate after their deaths. Caligula, who reigned from 37 to 41 A.D. claimed to be a god while he was alive, and most people thought he was insane. It was not until the mid-60's A.D., with the emperor Nero, where such claims, partly under duress, began to be taken more seriously. By the first century, by the time we come to the time of the writing of the book of Revelation, the emperor Domitian was actually requiring all the people in the empire to offer a pinch of incense to him and to say the words, "Caesar is Lord." This early Christian religion, like Judaism before it, could not do. The persecution that Christianity eventually had to face as a result of emperor worship is a significant part of the religious background to the first century and the rise of the New Testament. But in Jesus' day, at the very beginnings of this period, we must realize that offering a sacrifice on behalf of the emperor was seen by most people in the empire as little more than a patriotic act. It really did not define the depths of their religious identification.

## C. Mystery Religions

The third option, then, is what scholars have called the mystery religions. These were a collection of very diverse, often new, movements, many influenced from the East, including from Egypt, that define themselves in a variety of ways; but all claim to have some secret revelation, known only to the initiates into the rites, into the cults, of these particular fraternal organizations. All of them had defining ceremonies that characterized what the cult would do when it assembled. Sometimes these were very serene—various forms of meditation. The corn-god, Demeter, was the object of one such mystery religion in which one simply meditated and reflected on an ear of corn. Others could be very bizarre, such as the blood baptism of the Cybelene cult, in which a priest was put in a pit in the ground and a bull was slaughtered and sacrificed on wooden latticework above the priest so that the blood would drip down and baptize, as it were, the new priest of this cult.

There have been scholars who have examined apparent or alleged parallels between so-called baptismal rites in Christian baptism or between fellowship meals and the Christian celebration of Communion or the Eucharist. For the most part, however, the mystery religions were quite different than Christianity, with two important exceptions. More clearly than in many traditional forms of Greek religion, the mystery religions held out the clear promise of eternal life, as in fact Christianity did as well. And a second, very radical development of many of the mystery religions was to claim that all people, all genders, all walks of life, slave and senator alike, were equal in the eyes of the gods and goddesses. And whatever class distinctions may have dominated their lives by day, when the cult met secretly at night, these barriers were done

away with. Christianity, too, would take on great prominence, as Paul would put it in Galatians 3:28 by saying that in Christ there is neither slave nor free, Jew nor Gentile, male nor female.

#### D. Philosophical Schools

Still a fourth option, perhaps more limited in its influence because of the rigors it demanded, was the option of the philosophers, to become an itinerant follower of one of the famous philosophers, past or present, in the Greco-Roman world. The Epicureans, were well known for their slogan “eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we may die,” although they were not as hedonistic as perhaps that slogan might suggest. More commonly, they simply sought to cultivate what today we would consider the arts—theater, fine company, fine meals, fine wine—to enjoy life, and to eliminate as much pain as possible.

The second option, dating from at least three centuries before Christ but still quite popular in the first century A.D., was the Stoics, who in some ways were the opposite or the counterpart of the Epicureans. They too wanted to maximize pleasure and diminish pain, but did so by removing the extremes of delight in which the Epicureans indulged—care for the body by disciplining it so that one felt neither the intense rigors of suffering that one could not control or indulge in those things that might prove destructive to a person.

Theologically, the Stoics were pantheists; that is, to say that God is everything and in everything—while the Epicureans thought that the gods, if indeed they existed at all, were too remote to be knowable. It is very fascinating to watch the apostle Paul in Acts 17, dialogue with both Stoic and Epicurean philosophers, and in a sense to play off each other, one against the other. Against the Stoics he says that God is the Creator of all the earth. But against the Epicureans he says that God is not far from us, and, quoting a Stoic poet, says, “In him we live and move and have our being.”

There were other less well-known philosophies. One of them, the Cynics, we still use the word today, were those hippies, you might call them, of the ancient world: the vagabonds, the beggars, the unkempt, those who believed that one took care of the body only so much as to sustain its most basic needs and to depend on others for sustenance to free up the mental life, the spiritual life, for thinking about things above and beyond this material world. There are some parallels to the itinerant ministry of Jesus and the hardships and rigors that He and His disciples faced, but again the differences seem to outweigh the parallels.

#### E. Gnosticism

Yet another significant development in the Greco-Roman world was the rise of a religion known as Gnosticism, apparently coming out of roots going all the way back to the philosopher Plato, but imbibing in certain Jewish and more recent Greco-Roman elements. By the first century, there was a movement emerging that was very world-denying in nature. It’s what scholars call dualistic. They believed that the material world was by nature evil because, in fact, in the myths of the Gnostics, Creation itself was a mistake, was an act of fallen emanation from the godhead—a sort of impersonal, abstract entity that decided to rebel against the otherwise remote and unknowable God of the Gnostics. And in creating matter, this emanation

did something bad. Therefore, unlike Judaism and Christianity, one tries to deny oneself, even normal bodily appetites; although, ironically, occasionally, the Gnostics went to the other extreme and said in essence, “If matter doesn’t matter, then let’s just indulge the body without limits.”

This Gnosticism, by at least the mid to late first century, began to combine itself with certain elements of early Christian teaching, so that the savior for the Gnostic, which traditionally had been seen as *sophia*, the Greek word for wisdom, a reference to the kind of self-knowledge that recognized the divine spark that lived within all human beings. That self-knowledge or self-salvation began to be translated to Jesus. Jesus could be equated with Sophia, as the savior. And at least by the very latest New Testament documents, particularly the epistles of John, we seem to see Christianity having to confront a rather developed form of Gnosticism, though we will point out in our lessons on our epistles of Paul that there are hints of at least Gnosticising tendencies that the early church has to confront even earlier.

### III. Jewish Religion

But the Greco-Roman world is only one of the major worlds in which someone could have lived in the first century. Clearly all the first Christians were Jews. And while it’s true that some Jews did commit apostasy and adopt Greco-Roman forms of religion, most were very faithful to the traditions of their ancestors. What then are the options that one could be, one could have been, if one was born and raised as a Jewish boy or girl? In the pages of the New Testament, we read of three major Jewish sects, and from the writings of the Jewish historian of the first century, Josephus, we read of a fourth.

#### A. Am-ha-Aretz (People of the Land)

Sometimes we may read the New Testament and think that Jewish people had to find themselves in one or the other of these four, and that all four together accounted for a majority of Judaism. This is simply not the case. The vast majority, at least 80 percent (some would say as high as 95 percent) of all first-century Jews, belonged to no particular sect at all. They were the ordinary working people—the fishermen, the farmers, the small-tradesmen or artisans, the craftsmen, the carpenters. They were disparagingly called the Am-ha-aretz, “the people of the land,” by the Jews who were in one of the sects of leadership—disparagingly because they did not have the zeal for the law or the concern to fulfill God’s commands down to every jot and tittle that some of these other sects had. And it is probably not surprising that the vast majority of all of Jesus’ first followers emerged from these “people of the land”: ordinary people who had kept a faithful hope for a Messiah—for a liberator, for a savior to come—even if they had neither the time nor the interest nor perhaps even the ability to study the law in such meticulous detail, or to follow some of the more extremist tendencies of the Jewish sects.

#### B. Pharisees

But what about the small minority of those who do fall into one of the other four identifiable categories? There is, on the one hand, the group known as the Pharisees, often linked together in the New Testament with scribes. A scribe was simply a profession, one who had learned to copy the Hebrew Scriptures over and over again by hand, and in the process, became very

familiar with them and frequently, therefore, an expert in the law. There were scribes in several of the different sects and those who were affiliated with no sect at all. The majority of those we encounter in the pages of the New Testament seem to have been Pharisaic scribes.

The Pharisees, who were a sect, were those who were intensely devoted to finding ways to apply the Torah, the Hebrew Law, to every aspect of contemporary Jewish life. Even though there are 613 commands in the Law, they certainly did not cover every situation in life and certainly not all the changes in situations in the centuries following the giving of the Jewish Law. We perhaps know the Pharisees best for some of Jesus' conflicts with them, some of His blistering invectives in which, in Mathew 23 particularly, over and over again He calls them, along with the scribes, hypocrites. But we must realize that the Pharisees themselves formed many different kinds of perspectives in ancient Judaism. Not all, perhaps not even a majority, were hypocritical, and even those who Jesus so labeled would not necessarily have been viewed so by the Jewish populace. The Pharisees, in fact, were the most popular sect among the ordinary people of the land.

Christian practices of synagogue worship, which transferred over into church worship, understandings of the law as fulfilled in love, even specific debates over ethical questions such as divorce or paying taxes reflect in many cases a Pharisaic background, even if Jesus almost always puts a little different spin or twist onto what the Pharisees were doing or saying. If one wanted to be brutally honest and reflect the dynamic of the first century, one would have to say that the conservative, evangelical Christian, the one who today has a very high view of Scripture and wants, in detail, to apply it to every aspect of life, is probably the closest parallel to the ancient Pharisee. How shocking, then, when such people at times fall into legalism and are accused of perverting what is intended to be a vibrant relationship with God into a religion of a long set of dos and don'ts. Christians, too, particularly the conservative ones, must be careful lest they wind up being more like the Pharisees than unlike them.

### C. Sadducees

But there were other groups. There were the Sadducees, a slightly smaller group, who disagreed with the Pharisees on a number of major issues. Where the Pharisees had adopted new laws, what came to be known the oral law, written down only about two hundred years after the time of Christ in the Jewish document known as the Mishnah, where the Pharisees believed that God continued to inspire Moses, not only to write down certain laws, but to preserve other oral traditions; the Sadducees, by way of contrast, accepted only the canonical, written, Hebrew Scriptures. As a result, they also were more skeptical of such doctrines that were not clearly or frequently found in the Scriptures, and particularly in the Mosaic Law: doctrines such as belief in the resurrection, or belief in angels, belief in predestination or a full-orbed life to come.

Pharisees, on the other hand, had continued to develop in their thinking, and again were much closer to many of the early Christian beliefs. Paul, on trial for his life on several occasions towards the end of the book of Acts, appeals to the fact that he is a Pharisee rather than a Sadducee and, as a result, splits the council, splits the Jewish Sanhedrin. Some want to come to his defense, and others do not. The Sadducees' more literal application of the law, however, meant that they were unable to survive the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70. They believed

that the only way to have forgiveness of sins was to continue to offer literal sacrifices, whereas Pharisees, believed that a prayer of repentance, beseeching God earnestly for forgiveness and then acting upon that repentance by means of a changed life—could bring about forgiveness when a literal animal sacrifice was impossible to offer. Not surprisingly, therefore, it was primarily the Pharisaic branch of Judaism that survived the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in A.D. 70, whereas the Sadducees quickly died out.

#### D. Essenes

A group that does not appear by name on the pages of the New Testament is nevertheless a very significant one. This is the group of Jews known as the Essenes. And in the last 50 years or so, their work has become particularly well-known and famous because of the discovery of a large library of scrolls on the shores of the Dead Sea in Israel, at a site known as Qumran. The Essenes were a monastic group, although we do know from other writers that at times they lived in enclaves in major cities as well. But more so than any other Jewish group, they believed that the only way to please God was to withdraw themselves from society, to a certain measure, and more scrupulously attempt to follow in detail the commands of the Torah, the Hebrew Scriptures. They developed some distinctive doctrines, such as the belief in the coming of two Messiahs, one priestly and one kingly, since those roles in the Old Testament were assigned to different sons and tribes of Israel.

There are many parallels in the writings of the Qumran community that have been discovered to different teachings or concepts of the New Testament—the Beatitudes, for example, concern for the poor, or the use of the term “Son of God” as a Messianic title. Some have even suggested that John the Baptist might have had contact with the Essenes because of parallels in his style of ministry. Some have gone even further and seen Jesus as an Essene, although this is much less likely. So that, although they do not appear by name on the pages of the New Testament, what we have learned from the scrolls of Qumran about this one distinctive sect has illuminated significantly our understanding of the first-century Judaism into which Jesus was born.

#### E. Zealots

The final specific group we want to mention are the Zealots, the freedom fighters. Emerging sporadically with brief terrorist movements throughout the first century, they finally coalesced in the 60s A.D. and attempted to overthrow Rome. As we mentioned in the last lesson, they failed miserably. Undoubtedly, they hoped that the liberation of the temple, as happened under the Maccabees, celebrated at Hanukkah, would repeat itself; but, for whatever reasons, this time it failed. And their sect, too, was decisively obliterated. We see evidence that the Romans destroyed Qumran. And presumably the Essenes did not survive A.D. 70, leaving, therefore, only the Pharisees as that movement that would emerge and turn into what we call rabbinic Judaism, the Judaism that would grow up alongside of, though often in opposition and contention with, Christianity.

## F. Summary of Jewish Religion

How can we sum up the Judaism of the first century? Irrespective of whether one fell into one of these specific sects or not, there are key badges, if you like, that defined the Jewish identity of almost everyone: for males, certainly circumcision set them off from their Greco-Roman neighbors, keeping the Sabbath one day out of seven as a day of rest and a day of worship, their distinctive Scriptures, the Torah with all of its commands, and their unique understanding of themselves as God's chosen people in a distinct piece of geography. The problem was that they were not living in freedom in that land, and therefore Messianic expectation was ripe, was high, for someone who would come and deliver them and be a liberator. Unfortunately, the longed-for messiahs were little more than generals or military rulers, so that when Jesus and Christianity emerged claiming that the Messiah has come, the job description does not always match that of conventional expectation. But with this brief overview, we are at least somewhat better equipped to turn to the New Testament and understand the various religious movements described or presupposed there.

# Discussion Questions

What lessons, both positive and negative, can Christians today learn from the perspectives expressed by religious sects that existed within 1st century Judaism (particularly Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and Zealots)?

Where do you see examples of the three schools of philosophy discussed in this lesson (the Epicureans, the Stoics, and the Cynics) in the world today?

How might gnosticism in the Greco-Roman world have presented challenges for early Christianity?

# Further Study

## Suggested reading for this lesson:

Stedman, Ray C. *Adventuring Through the Bible: A Comprehensive Guide to the Entire Bible*.

Discovery House Publishers: 1997.

Read Chapter 3: “God Has Spoken in These Last Days (The New Testament)”

## Philip Yancey Devotional

### The Mathematics of Legalism - Matthew 18:21-19:12

“How many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?” Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.” (Matt. 18:21-22)

Although legalists, at first glance, may seem “righteous,” Jesus warned against the subtle dangers of legalism. Oddly, it tends to lower a person’s view of God. If I manage to meet all the requirements of a strict rule book, I may begin to feel secure about my own goodness. I may think that I have earned God’s approval through my own efforts.

People who questioned Jesus in person—both his enemies the Pharisees and his friends the disciples—sought a precise list of rules so that they could strive to meet those obligations and thus feel satisfied. To such people, Jesus shouts a loud “No!” We never outgrow our need for God; we never arrive in the Christian life. We survive spiritually only if we constantly depend on God.

In the first story in this passage, Peter tries almost ludicrously to reduce forgiveness to a mathematical formula: Let’s see, exactly how many times must I forgive someone? Six? Seven? Jesus mocks the question and tells a profound story about God’s forgiveness, so all-encompassing that it defies all mathematics.

Next, the Pharisees try to pin down a formula for divorce. Once again Jesus avoids the answer they want to hear and points instead to the principles that undergird all marriages.

These examples illustrate how Jesus usually handled questions about specific problems. When a pious man asked which neighbors he should go about loving, Jesus told of the Good Samaritan who showed love even to his enemies. Jesus didn’t tell a rich person to give away 18.5 percent of his belongings; he said to give them all away. He didn’t restrict adultery to the act of intercourse; he connected it to lust, adultery of the heart. Murder? In principle, that’s no different from anger.

In short, Jesus always refused to lower the sights. He lashed out at every form of legalism, every human attempt to accumulate a list of credits. The credit goes to God, not us. The chief danger facing legalists is that they risk missing the whole point of the gospel: It is a gift freely given by God to people who don’t deserve it.

Life Question: When has it been hard for you to forgive someone?

# Glossary

**Essenes** — A Jewish communal sect that existed in Palestine during the ministry of Jesus. They affected great purity. They originated about 200 B.C. and disappeared from history after the destruction of Jerusalem.

**Gnosticism** — The name, derived from the Greek word *gnosis* (“knowledge”), given to a complex religious movement that in its Christian form comes into clear prominence in the 2nd century. The Greek language differentiates between rational, propositional knowledge, and the distinct form of knowing obtained not by reason, but by personal experience or perception. It is this latter knowledge, gained from experience, from an interior spark of comprehension, that constitutes gnosis.

**Josephus, Flavius** — A Jewish historian (c. A.D. 37 - c. A.D. 100). He was a native of Palestine of priestly descent who received a thorough education based on study of the Jewish law. During the siege of Jerusalem (A.D. 70) he acted as interpreter to Titus, with whom he returned to Rome, as his surrender had earned him the hostility of the Jews.

**Pharisees** — (Hebrew “separated ones”) - A Jewish religious party. The name occurs in Josephus and in rabbinic sources, as well as in the New Testament. Unlike the Sadducees, who tried to apply the Mosaic Law precisely as it was given, the Pharisees allowed some interpretation of it to make it more applicable to different situations, and they regarded these oral interpretations on the same level of importance as the Law itself.

**Qumran** — The site of some ruins of an Essene monastic community at the northwestern end of the Dead Sea, about eight miles south of Jericho. It was near here that the first of the so-called Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in 1947, to be followed by further finds in later years.

**Sadducees** — A Jewish politico-religious sect opposed to the “Pharisees.” The name is probably derived from the high priest Zadok (2Sa 8:17). They probably originated at the time of the Hasmoneans and stood for the interest of the priestly aristocracy and the rich.

**Zealots** — A sect of Jews that originated with Judas the Galilean (Ac 5:37). They refused to pay tribute to the Romans, on the grounds that God was the only king of Israel.

# Quiz

1. According to Acts when Paul is on trial for his life, Paul was a member of this Jewish sect:
  - A. Sadducees
  - B. Pharisees
  - C. Essenes
  - D. Zealots
  
2. Ancient mystery religions all:
  - A. Claimed to have some secret revelation
  - B. Were known only to initiates
  - C. Had defining ceremonies that characterized the individual cult
  - D. All of the above
  
3. Dr. Blomberg discusses two major categories of religion in this lesson. They are:
  - A. Greco-Roman religion and the Jewish religion, particularly those in Israel
  - B. Greco-Roman religion and ancient myths
  - C. Jews and Gentiles
  - D. None of the above
  
4. Sophia is a Greek word for:
  - A. Wisdom
  - B. Knowledge
  - C. Sophomore
  - D. Intelligence
  
5. The ancient site of Qumran is located:
  - A. Southwestern end of the Sea of Galilee
  - B. Northwestern end of the Mediterranean Sea
  - C. Northwestern end of the Dead Sea
  - D. North of Jericho
  
6. Theologically the Stoics were:
  - A. Monotheists
  - B. Deists
  - C. Pantheists
  - D. Atheists
  
7. This Jewish sect was the most popular among the ordinary people of the land:
  - A. Sadducees
  - B. Scribes
  - C. Essenes
  - D. Pharisees

8. Which best describes the Epicurean philosophy?
  - A. “Don’t anger the gods”
  - B. “Eat, drink, and be merry”
  - C. “Let the spirits guide you”
  - D. “You are what you eat”
  
9. Which of the following religions was not prominent in the Greco-Roman world?
  - A. Mythology
  - B. Emperor worship
  - C. Worship of Allah
  - D. Mystery religions
  
10. Who were the Am-ha-aretz?
  - A. Jewish high priests
  - B. Roman Stoic teachers
  - C. Jewish people of the land
  - D. Sadducee teachers

Answers: 1. B 2. D 3. A 4. A 5. C 6. C 7. D 8. B 9. C 10. C