

I. Introduction: What Is the New Testament?

The words “New Testament” don’t tell us a lot about the content of the New Testament. Actually a better title might be “The Greatest Story Ever Told” or “How to Get Out of the World Alive” or “The Story of Jesus and His Salvation.” But we call it the New Testament because of its relationship to the Old Testament. The Old Testament begins the story; the New Testament completes it. The Old Testament without the New Testament is a story that stops in the middle, and the New Testament without the Old Testament is a story that starts in the middle. So we call them “Old Testament” and “New Testament” because they are intended to be read together.

A. The Sad News in the Old Testament

The Old Testament begins in Genesis 1 and 2 with the story of how God created us for a relationship with Him. But Genesis 3 tells us that the God/human relationship was fractured when sin entered the world. The rest of the Old Testament records story after story of how the people God created for a relationship with Him rebelled. It contains the tragic story of the chasm that sin has built between God and the people He created.

B. The Good News in the New Testament

But while sin is still with us and continues its destructive work, God has provided the solution to our sin problem in Jesus Christ. The New Testament repeats the theme over and over again: Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners. If you’ve ever wondered what the major theme of the New Testament is, that’s it. Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners. Those words are taken from Luke’s gospel and summarize what God wants us to know. He has provided a way out of sin’s deathly trap. Jesus explained His purpose this way, “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him” (John 3:16–17 NASB).

Some people have heard this news so often they hardly even respond to it anymore. Others have never heard it before and are amazed by it. It's important to pause for a moment and examine your own response to this amazing news of God's gift to the human race. How does this good news affect you?

II. The New Testament Books

You will notice that we refer to "books" as we look at the New Testament. That's because, like the Old Testament, the New Testament is made up of a series of books within a larger book called the Bible. So when you hear a reference to the Bible as a book, and you hear a reference to various portions of the Bible as books, don't be confused by that. We just use the term book in both of those ways when we refer to the Bible. In this course, we will study the twenty-seven books in the New Testament.

So what is this New Testament? Well, it's a collection of twenty-seven books that make up the story of Jesus coming to earth, launching His message into a worldwide movement, instructing those who become His followers about how they should live as Christians, and then culminating the story with His return to earth in the book of Revelation. In this lesson we will group the twenty-seven New Testament books into four categories: the Gospels, the book of Acts, the Epistles, and the book of Revelation.

III. The Gospels

There are four gospels that tell us the story of Jesus. They tell us about how God became human and dwelt among us. It's the most magnificent story you could ever imagine. Nobody could make this up. It's just too fantastic. But make no mistake as you read the Gospels, Jesus intended us to understand that He was fully God and fully human. He was none other than the God-man, the Son of God who came to save the world from sin.

1. God Spoke. In fact, the New Testament book of Hebrews, written to Jewish Christians, tells us in its opening verses that God spoke to our fathers through the prophets "in many portions and in many ways" (Hebrews 1:1 NASB). That's a reference to the Old Testament. The author was addressing Jewish Christians who were considering the option of going back to Judaism because of the persecution Christians were suffering. This writer had to

convince them that they should not abandon their commitment to Jesus. But although he didn't want them to return to Judaism, he had to affirm its teaching because it too had come from God. So in his opening statement he validated the Hebrew Scriptures, what we call the Old Testament, by making it clear that God had spoken it to the Hebrew fathers through the prophets.

2. God Spoke Again. But then the writer said God has spoken again in these last days in His Son. The biblical story wasn't finished with the prophet Malachi, the last Old Testament book. There was a four hundred-year period of silence before God spoke again, but He did speak again. And this time He spoke to us through His Son, Jesus Christ. The biblical record of how God made Himself known by speaking to us in Jesus is recorded in the four gospels.

3. Jesus the Incarnation. We refer to God taking on human form in Jesus Christ as the incarnation. God became flesh. He was God incarnate. We can understand God's love; we can understand God's grace; we can understand God's power because we see it at work in another human, Jesus Christ, the God-man. That's what the four Gospels are about. They're about the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

But one of the gospel writers, Luke, wrote another book called Acts. There he makes it very clear that when Jesus ascended back into heaven, His work continued. Luke tells us that Jesus sent His Holy Spirit back to earth and continued His mission to save the world from sin through His followers. The story of the New Testament isn't only the story of Jesus at work while He was physically here on earth, it also tells of Jesus' ongoing work through His people.

IV. The Book of Acts: Luke's Purpose and Message

Luke recorded the explosive growth of the Jesus movement in the book of Acts. The story begins with about 120 believers in the Jerusalem church; and by the end of the book of Acts about thirty years later, this church, this work of Jesus through His people, had spread all across the Mediterranean world. That explosive growth of Jesus' movement was confusing to people. Luke's purpose in writing Acts was to explain how this little obscure sect that was opposed by both the Jews and the Romans captured the Roman Empire! Luke tells us that it worked because it was the work of God. It succeeded because it was more than the work of devoted, ambitious men and women. It was the continued work of Jesus

through His people.

What's magnificent, what's wonderful is that Jesus is still at work today. He's still at work in His people, and He's still at work through His people. If we don't understand Luke's message in the book of Acts that Jesus is continuing to work through His people to change our world, we totally misunderstand what Christ and Christianity and the church is all about. So the book of Acts plays a crucial role in telling us that the same Jesus who came to earth and began His work is still at work in you and me today.

V. The Epistles: Their Purpose and Why They Matter

Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5:17, "If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!" (NIV). That is the core of Jesus' work—changing the world one person at a time. But what does that mean? What does it mean for you and me if we have accepted Christ as our Lord and Savior? What does it mean that we are a new creation, that old things have passed away, that all things are becoming new? Well, the next section of the New Testament is a series of twenty-one letters, or epistles, and their purpose was to instruct Jesus' followers in how to live this new life they found in Christ. These Epistles tell us that we have new ways of thinking about God and new ways of thinking about ourselves and our life's mission. We have new ways of thinking about our neighbors, our enemies, and our culture. We have new ways of thinking about the church and our role and responsibility in it.

As Jesus' followers, we don't think the way we would think if Christ weren't in our life. And because we think differently, we also live differently. So the Epistles are letters of instruction about how God's people should live. We refer to these books as "epistles" because they were written as letters. Although there are some technical differences between an epistle and a letter, the words can be used interchangeably. So you will sometimes hear these New Testament books referred to as letters and sometimes as epistles.

VI. The Book of Revelation: Its Crucial Message and Echo

The book of Revelation closes the New Testament on a high

crescendo. Jesus, speaking through the apostle John, gave this revelation to the church during a time of severe persecution. His purpose was to convince them that no matter how discouraging life gets, no matter how much it appears that God had lost control of their life or even of their evil world, they should not despair. The book of Revelation proclaims loud and clear that God is always in control and in the end He is victorious over Satan and his evil intentions. The book of Revelation assures us that Christ is coming back to earth; that He will restore order. It tells us that Christ, even though He is not now physically living on the earth, has not forgotten about His world. And He is coming back to change it.

The book of Philippians makes such a clear statement of Jesus' victory. Paul wrote that because Jesus humbled Himself and died on the cross, "God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus, every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:9–11 NASB).

VII. The New Testament Focus

Matthew's first words, which open the New Testament are, "The record of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah" (Matthew 1:1 NASB). The New Testament begins with Jesus. And John's closing words in the book of Revelation are "Come, Lord Jesus." (Revelation 22:20 NASB). Matthew's words, "the genealogy of Jesus," and John's words, "Come, Lord Jesus" can almost serve as bookends. The New Testament opens with Jesus and closes with Jesus. And everything in the middle is the story, the magnificent story of how Jesus came to give you and me a quality of life that would be absolutely impossible if He hadn't come. The central message of the New Testament is clear, and it's simple. Jesus came and offered forgiveness of sin and a new life. Don't miss this essential truth. Jesus forgave our sin and made it possible for us to spend eternity in His presence. But He also provided what He called an "abundant life" to all who want it. Being a Christian is much more than a ticket to heaven. It is a superior quality of life while we are on the earth. John tells us that Jesus made a stark contrast between the life He offers and any other approach. Jesus said, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10 NASB).

But for any one of us to realize the benefits of that abundant life, we have to accept God's free gift. We have to open the gift, and we have to faithfully live by its teaching. Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners. He said, "I didn't come to condemn the world. I came to save the world" (see John 3:17). The central question of the New Testament is: "What will we do with this magnificent gift that God offers us through Jesus Christ?" That's the message and that's the question of the New Testament. What will we do with Jesus Christ?