

Getting to Know Your Bible

Part 2: The New Testament

The following document is a summary of the Zoom Bible Study Sessions offered at
Allander Evangelical Church from September to December 2020.

NEW TESTAMENT

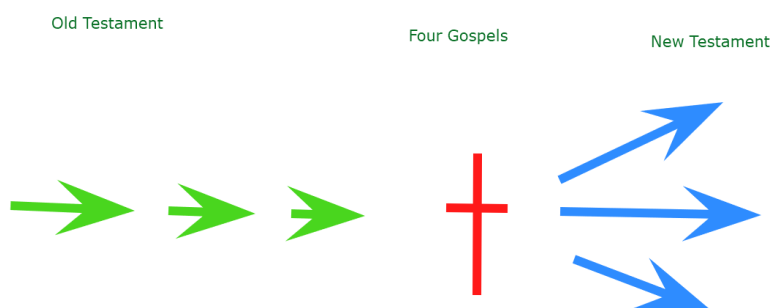
The Old Testament survey revealed that God's purposes for His people were not fully realised: more was to come. That 'more' is the New Testament with the coming of the promised Messiah and the prospect of true salvation. Indeed the NT is the presentation of the gospel that Paul was not ashamed of because, "*it is the power of God unto salvation, to the Jew first and to the Gentiles*".

The timing and effectiveness of that coming was facilitated by all that happened during the 400 year gap between the OT and the NT. Various empires took over including Persia, Greece and Rome. By and large, Israel was left to govern itself and follow its religious observance. However, Alexander the Great and his successors sought to extend Greek influence so that by the time of the NT the lingua franca, especially for written purposes, was Greek. The Old Testament, as it was, resulted in the LXX or Septuagint – a Greek translation widely used, especially among the scattered Jews of the diaspora. Other books were written, now formed into the Apocrypha, useful for providing information about the period, but not considered equal to Scripture by Jerome then and by the Reformers later. Greek culture also introduced conceptual thinking which became crucial in understanding the logos – the Word made flesh – and other theological concepts widely used by Paul in the epistles.

But, first and foremost was the coming of Christ, His reception by believers and the subsequent 'explosion' by the Holy Spirit in the Book of Acts, as the message spread and was shared among the churches in the then known world.

That leads us to the New Testament comprising the Four Gospels, Acts, the Epistles and the book of Revelation.

The structure of the NT can be looked at in two different ways. The story of Jesus - the promised Messiah – is so significant that it merits a place of its own as shown in this diagram:

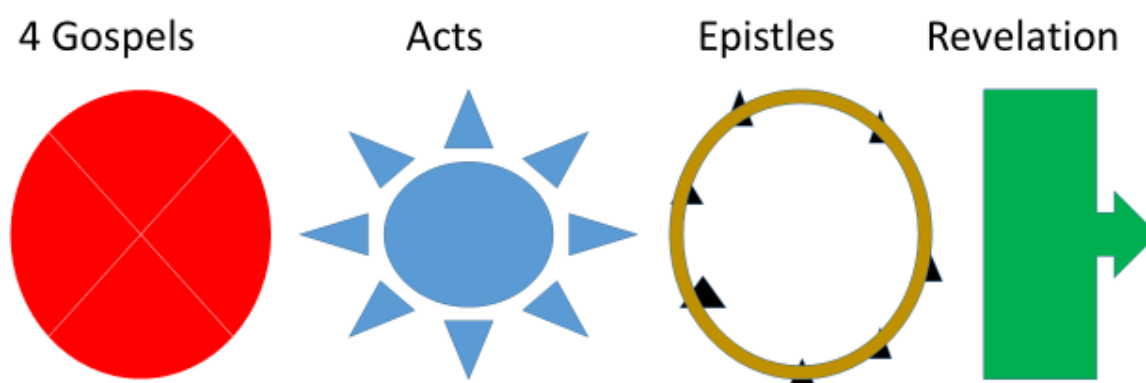


It is so important that four evangelists record it. The story of the children of Israel and their release from Egypt had two accounts as did the story of God's people under the Monarchy, but this one had four to make doubly sure. It is the heart of the Bible Message that "*God*

was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself". And that *"the grace of God has appeared bringing salvation"*.

Whichever way we look at NT structure, whether as Four Gospels and the rest or four separate sections, the Gospels are intrinsically linked with Acts. Not only did Luke write both his Gospel and the Book of Acts but Jesus himself told His followers to *"tarry in Jerusalem" until they were endued with power from on high by receiving the promised Holy Spirit*. And, in that way the Bible represents the Trinity: God the Father in the OT, Jesus, God the Son in the Four Gospels, and the Holy Spirit in Acts and the rest of the NT.

The four sections can be shown together in this way:



The Four Gospels present the story of Christ from four different angles yet have an undisputed common core depicting the Life, Death, Resurrection and Ascension of the Lord Jesus. That is followed by the Book of Acts where the gathered followers were endued with the Holy Spirit and became *"witnesses unto Me"* in Jerusalem, Judaea, Samaria and the uttermost parts of the earth. From this witnessing churches came into being, each of which faced internal and external challenges. Correspondence between the apostles and them, and some measure of communication among themselves, resulted in the Epistles, the existing copies from a wider volume of correspondence giving advice and encouragement and teaching in relation to their growth and welfare. Those churches were reviewed in Revelation in the light of a glorious vision of Jesus and all that he had accomplished: the report was not good. They were warned about their current state and give insight into what would happen. Complex though that turned out to be the outcome was assured

Subsequent studies will take each of these sections in turn.



Of the New Testament sections clearly, the Four Gospels take pride of place. That the story of Jesus is told by four different evangelists is significant in itself. The redemption from Egypt and the journey to the Promised Land was told twice (Deuteronomy) as was the story of the nation in the Land (Chronicles) but this one is told four times from different perspectives. The variation in these accounts underline the authenticity of the accounts: they are not duplicates but complementary reports written with slightly different emphases.

The first is Matthew.

Along with the other synoptic Gospels (Mark and Luke) Matthew follows a similar sequence and reports the same kind of material. Indeed there are suggestions that they used each other's sources, both written and oral, but tamping their own personalities, dispositions and purposes on their account.

Where Matthew is concerned, we look at the features of his account and at the structure of the material.

Matthew was a Jew, a Tax collector and later one of the disciples who responded to the call of Jesus. Little else is known about his life and work other than what we can glean for his Gospel. That he was a Jew is reflected in the genealogy going back to Abraham (as opposed to Luke's Adam), the frequent quotations from the OT prophecies, attention to the Temple and the Law and recognition of the roles (however unfavourably) occupied by the Pharisees and their Jewish religious zeal.

It can also be said that Matthew was taken up with the concept of royalty. The wise men came to look for “the king of the Jews”. The Kingdom, whether of heaven or of God (Both interchangeable) is another of his emphases, along with a recognition of authority.

Matthew also seems to be systematic in the way he arranges material with similar elements gathered together: miracles in chapters 8,9; parables in chapter 13, etc; and the etchings in distinct sections (e.g. the Sermon on the Mount, 5-7).

Matthew - Features

• Jewish	OT prophecies fulfilled
• Royal	Kingdom
• Systematic	Clusters
• Authority	
• Teaching	I say unto you
• Actions	Miracles
• Commands	Go ye

Indeed one of the hallmarks of his presentation is that of distinctive teaching sections, such as the Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5-7, where he gathers together teaching that was delivered perhaps on different occasions but which cohere together in important emphases. They also relate loosely to the other events in the ministry of Jesus. They also form a sequence.

This first section sets out the core message. It represents the essence of the teaching and the integrity of it. It is real and genuine, very different from superficial external actions. So, thoughts are seen equal to actions, sincerity and genuineness essential to expression, and priorities made paramount (seek ye first). And those priorities guide action and mark the difference between the wise and the foolish.

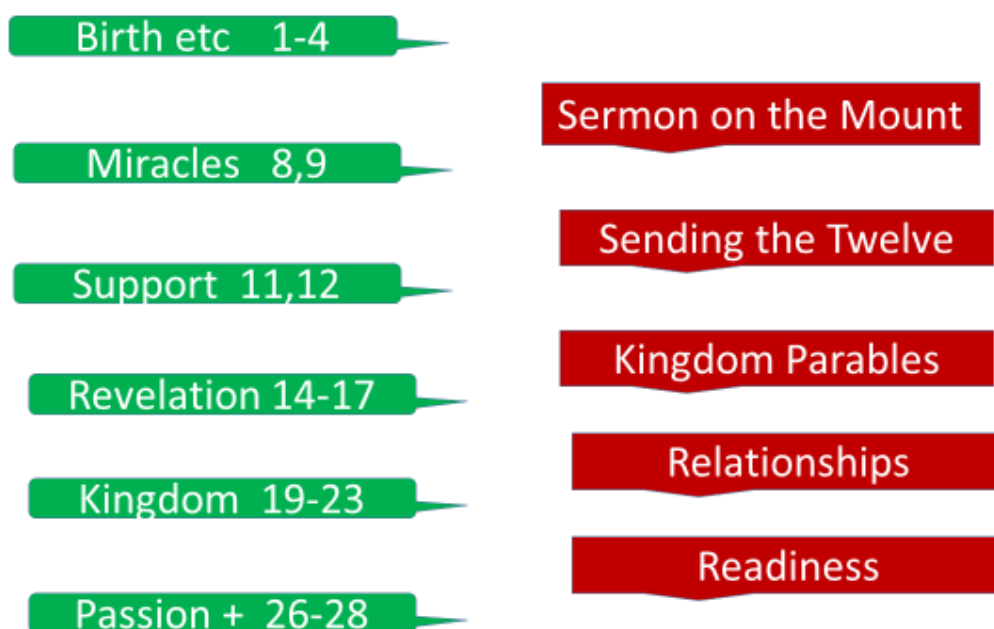
The next section (chapter 10) sees the sending out of the Twelve to disseminate the message and encounter various responses, not all of them favourable.

The parables of the kingdom in chapter 13 give insight into the nature of the process. The message (seed) is delivered and needs to be accommodated. Though small its potential is considerable but may find itself accompanied by lesser alternatives (weeds).

During this time Jesus continues to minister, especially healing people so that the issue arises as to who he is. In response to that direct question Peter declares: You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. That confession was followed by the Transfiguration, confirming His deity and the fact that they were with Him in this mission.

The fourth section deals with relationships among them in this privileged situation. Naturally for them was the question of who was the greatest but they are taught how to tolerate and cooperate with each other guided by healthier perceptions.

The final section is then concerned with the end time and their role as stewards of the kingdom. They have a responsibility to be alert, to use their opportunities and 'talents' effectively and to recognise that the practice of the kingdom is in ordinary aspects of living (e.g. a cup of cold water).



That is a sequence that has lessons for us. Christian ministry, being servants of the kingdom, is possessing a genuine product (the gospel), disseminating it, nurturing it, being responsible in our behaviour and always concerned for its welfare and wellbeing in a way that God can trust us.

The Gospel then finishes with full account of the passion of Jesus through His trial, arrest, crucifixion and resurrection leading to the ascension where, in a true Matthew focus Jesus declares that "all authority is given unto me, Go ye therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the father. That is the Great Commission.

Mark covers similar ground but from a different perspective, as we shall see.

Mark

Mark is the shortest of the four Gospels and generally accepted as the earliest, written by John Mark who is mentioned in Acts as the servant companion of Paul and Barnabas. It is also recorded by Clement that Mark wrote his Gospel from what Peter told him. It, therefore has a sense of sharpness with an immediate 'eye-witness' element that is much closer to the immediate events.

While nearly all of Mark is 'included' in the other three Gospels Mark still has characteristics of his own that stand out. These are seen in the way he presents his material and in the portrait he provides of the Lord Jesus.

Not surprisingly, Mark's Gospel is **curtailed** in that he leaves out aspects such as the genealogies, the birth stories, and, possibly, the resurrection appearances. His Gospel starts with the action and is concerned with actual events, the teaching often coming incidentally. The account is full of **activity** where Jesus responds to need, heals the sick, and addresses situations with an element of **power** that is quickly recognised, especially by the evil spirits and acknowledged by the ordinary people as well as noted by the religious leaders. The Gospel is also **concentrated** with many incidents packed into a single chapter. For example, in Chapter 1 the story goes from Jesus' initial ministry to a busy sabbath in Capernaum with casting out evil spirits in the morning synagogue meeting, returning home to find Peter's mother-in-law requiring to be healed and crowds gathering at the close of the day longing to be – and were – healed. Then early next morning, **busy** again with crowds clamouring for attention and much ground to be covered. So much of this action is described in terms of **urgency** with the words immediately, straightaway, etc frequently used to describe them. Yet, despite the success and popularity Mark makes frequent mention of Jesus' concern to keep these matters **private**, not to spread abroad what people have encountered but to allow others to discover for themselves. Allocating nearly half of his Gospel to the events of the last week Mark highlights the **challenging** nature of Jesus' ministry. He disturbed the status quo and represented a 'new, more excellent way'.

The Jesus whom Mark presents **emerges from below**, one of the people, found as one of the throng who came to be baptised by John. He is **approachable** easily found by the ordinary people among them yet already standing out as someone different. He responded (immediately) to both the influential Jairus and the unknown lady in the crowd. Mark depicts Jesus as a **servant** at everyone's beck and call, constantly and repeatedly in demand here and there. Yet, He is a **challenge**. There is reaction towards Him from both the religious authorities and especially from the evil spirits who recognise him. But, others respond with repentance and belief and behaviour.

Paradoxically, the active servant becomes passive as the authorities subject him to rejection, betrayal, crucifixion and death. Yet, He rises from the dead, triumphant.

It is in this respect that the Gospel finishes abruptly with the resurrection and nothing. That is where the 'addition' to the Gospel, not found in the earliest of manuscripts but

sufficiently evidenced to have been endorsed by the early church and included in our Bibles relates the resurrection appearances and the commissioning of the followers to “Go into all the world and preach the gospel – with signs (action) following” – just as the Saviour, the Son of Man, had come not to be served but to serve.

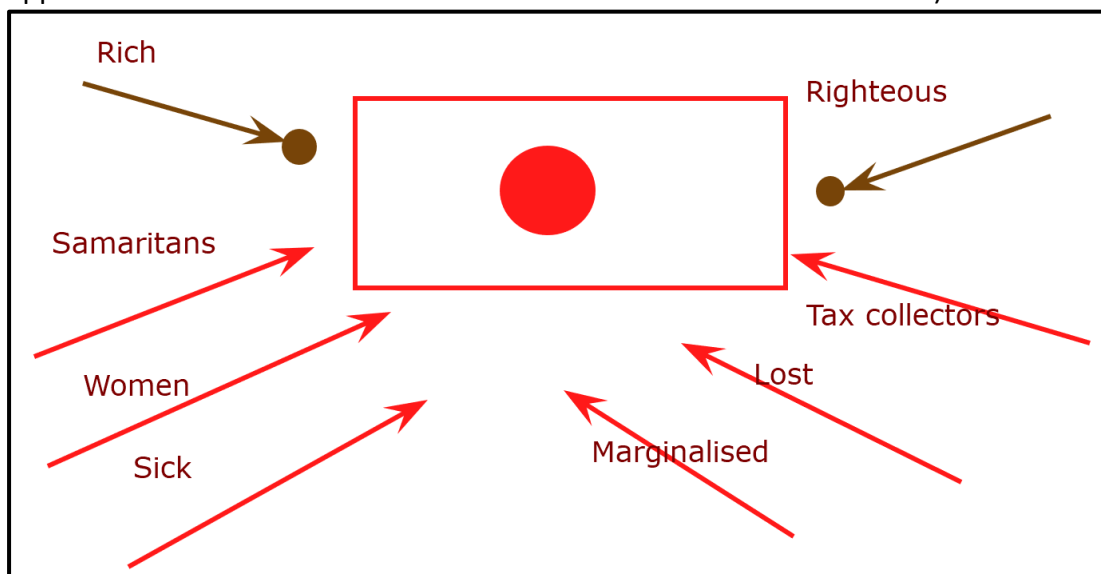
We now turn to Luke.

Whereas Matthew was concerned with Jesus’ authority and teaching Mark, in contrast, presents Jesus as a Servant and constantly active. What about Luke?

Little is known of Luke himself other than from various references. He was a Gentile. Probably from Pisidian Antioch, well versed in Greek, a physician and companion of Paul and co-worker with Joh Mark. His appeal is universal, far reaching and inclusive. He sets out to make use of existing accounts which, along with his own investigation, will result in an orderly story of the Lord Jesus from the beginning on to the history of the early church in what turns out to be a second volume: the Book of Acts.

It also overlaps with the end of the OT where Malachi records the promise of the forerunner (John the Baptist) and the coming of the Sun of Righteousness to a waiting people to a vacant Temple. That is where Luke starts with announcements to waiting souls that John the Baptist would be born to herald the way for the Messiah who would be born of Mary in due course. And so the Temple has a new High Priest after years of following a rota.

The suggestion is made that the Temple could be regarded as a Doctor’s surgery. **Patients** come to the Great Physician among whom are the lost (Luke 15, prodigal son etc; thief on the cross) the marginalised (Sacheus; tax-collectors; lepers; etc) women (to whom Jesus appeared after the resurrection and commended in different situations) Samaritans (Good



Samaritan and the one out of ten lepers who came back to say thank you). Some of these had been sought: all were welcomed.

But some were not treated because they effused the therapy offered. Among these are the rich (Rich Farmer who was “not rich towards God”, the rich man and Lazarus). Others were self-righteous (the Pharisee in the Temple who despised the tax collector). Sadly, none of them benefitted from the service offered.

This Doctor also had **patience**. He had time for people (he stopped to speak to Zacchaeus). He also examined what was happening (the birth stories in chapters 1 and 2; at Nazareth on the first sabbath; to the two disillusioned disciples on the road to Emmaus “ought not Christ to have suffered?”)

He was an effective doctor for he had what was needed to effect a cure. His **medication – or potions** - that ensured restoration and healing. One of these was prayer several examples of its application given in the Gospel. The other was the promise of the Holy Spirit as God’s enabling agent. His ministry began with: “the Spirit of the Lord is upon me”. It was also promised to the disciples / apostles as they were commissioned to be “witnesses unto me”.

How that was enacted will be seen in the Book of Acts after we have considered the fourth Gospel, the very different Gospel of John.

John

John, being later and more deliberate (“*These things are written so that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ and, believing, you might have life in His name.*”) leaves out much of the material that is found in the other three Gospels. They are synoptic, looking from the same kind of angle. But, John is different. He mulls over incidents that the others have either overlooked or perhaps were not aware of. John had inside knowledge. He reflected on the meanings and significance of what was happening. John is concerned with revelation.

The content of John is quite unique. He does record the feeding off the 5000, the anointing at Bethany, and the events around the crucifixion of Jesus but otherwise has material that none of the others have.

He begins with the containment of God’s thought in one Word which “*was made flesh and dwelt among us*”. That is followed by a collection of incidents involving individuals, largely, who come to **discover** Jesus for themselves in varying circumstances. But, the extent to which they benefit from that discovery depends on the degree of **reception** or believing on their part. Nathanael comes to believe, the guests at the wedding are astounded, Nicodemus becomes a follower, the woman at the well declares: “*come, see a man who told me all that I have done: is not this the Christ?*” And so throughout the Gospel.

The way Joh reports these incidents is also significant. Indeed they are often called signs: events with a special meaning or significance – pointing to something else. So, as in the story of the feeding of the 5000, the actual miracle is followed by a lengthy discourse explaining that Jesus is the Bread of Life, that He is the sustenance that they need, that “*the*

work of God is to believe on Him whom God has sent". There is so much more than the superficial and the immediate. This is about eternal life. Only Jesus has this to offer. And there is so much more to be learned.

Grasping that potential and plenty is made easier by using concepts, self-contained ideas which have a life of their own – little embryos capable of developing into much more. Among these are the well-known 'I am's, light, and life. Frequent mention is made of 'gift' and giving. The potential that is contained in Jesus is a gift of God, a gift from God as evidenced in the classic John 3: 16 – *"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life"* Yet, that gift is given out of grace for a purpose. Jesus refers to the concept of 'work' – an operation designed and desired by the Father to fulfil His redemptive purpose.

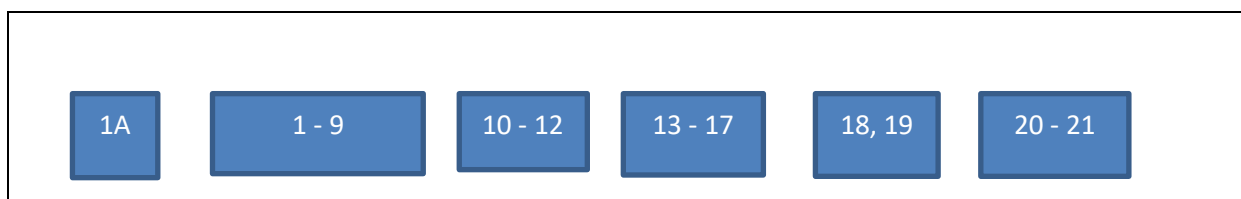
Put very simply, Jesus is the container of the life of God which we refer to as the Incarnation. Mathew, Mark and Luke faithfully presented that human 'container'. John, however complements their stories with an emphasis on the content – its potential, its quality and its extensiveness.

John also is significant in its structure of this material, something we will look at next time.

John structure

If we compare John with the other three synoptic Gospels it appears that they present the human side of Jesus: his authority in Matthew, His servanthood in Mark, and His humanity in Luke. When it comes to John he presents Jesus as the divine essence incarnated in flesh. It is the God-ness of Jesus that is highlighted so that, in seeing Him and believing in Him, they may receive the life of God, for *"in Him was life and the life was the light of men."*

Yet, although John follows roughly the life sequence of Jesus as recorded in the other three Gospels there does appear to be some significance in the order he arranges the material. It can be shown like this:



1: 1-18	1: 19 – 9	10 – 12	13 – 17	18 – 19	20 - 21
---------	-----------	---------	---------	---------	---------

It begins with the theological statement that God (the source of all being) was in the beginning and incorporated in Christ and given to the world as God's gift. Some received it

and were adopted as children: others – even his own – rejected Him. Those who did believe saw in Jesus the radiant glory of God as expressed in Hebrews “the exact image of His being”.

There then follows a series of incidents, each in a natural, ordinary, situation where individuals discover who Jesus is having encountered him in ordinary situations: at the wedding, at the well, waiting beside the Bethesda pool, at the Festival in Jerusalem, etc. each came to converse with Jesus who soon turned the conversation from material topics (food, water, birth, bread, sight, etc) to spiritual ones of life and revelation and belief.

Following this we have what could be called a pivotal section where Jesus continues the experience of discovery but now in deliberate actions of public disclosure. He proclaims himself as the Good Shepherd and the Way, Truth, Life; as the Resurrection and the Life; accepts and enjoys the anointing and the acclamation of the crowd during the triumphal entry. To the Greeks who sought to see Jesus he emphasises the need to believe but points out that *“the corn of wheat must die”* in order to produce fruit. At this stage in his public disclosure he broaches the subject of his death and resurrection – a fate that those who ‘believed in him’ could not understand or relish. It was a pivotal turning point made worse by the fact that, despite the benevolence of all his miracles and teachings (including the raising of Lazarus or the healing of the blind man) opposition to him was growing and becoming more and more vehement.

It became a parting of the ways between the believers and those who rejected him – unbelief that grieved Jesus but was forecast in Isaiah.

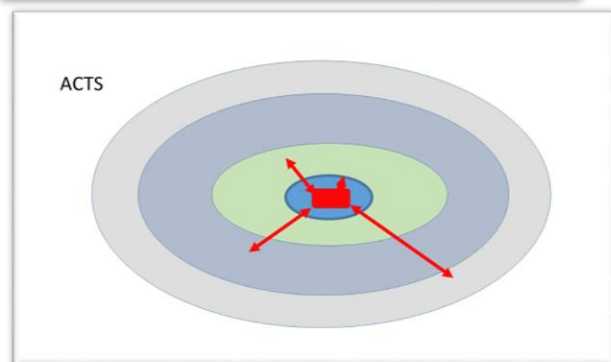
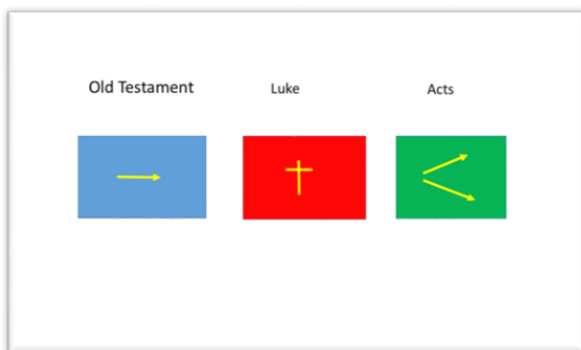
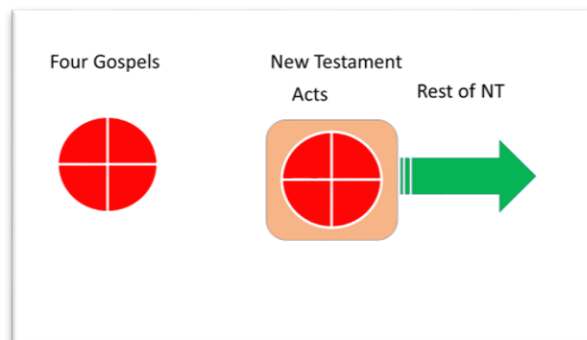
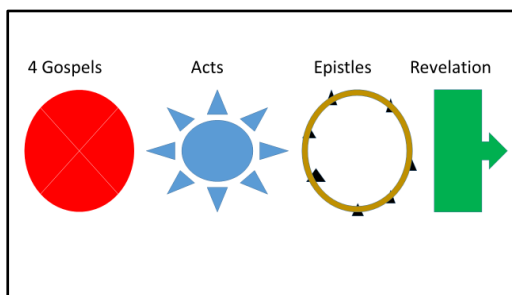
In providing private insight for the believers we have the discourse in the Upper Room prior to his passion where he makes it clear to the followers what is going to happen and what the situation is. Serving them by washing their feet he sets an example and exhorts them to love (and identify with) each other for he is about to leave them. He is the Way and must be the pioneer. Going before. Yet, he will not leave them as orphans but provide a Comforter the Holy Spirit who will guide them. As those who have been born from above they will need to sustain that new life by abiding in Him and produce fruit. The Holy Spirit will enable them and they will be further supported by the prayer Jesus prayed for them and those who believe through their testimony.

The next section – chapters 18 and 19 – share content with the other three evangelists in that they record the betrayal, arrest, crucifixion and resurrection of the Lord Jesus at the hands of the opposing authorities. This, too, was foretold by Isaiah and the prophets. It is bare fact, not nuanced perception. For, whatever perspective each of the writers had, whatever special feature they noticed, however they wished to present Jesus to their readers, one central fact cannot be changed: the Cross and all that is implied in that. It became the repeated message in the Book of Acts and is the central truth of the Gospel: *“Christ died for our sins, according to the gospel”*

The detail that concludes John’s Gospel, however, reverts to the Johannine emphasis. Jesus appears to Peter and John, to Mary Magdalene, to the gathered disciples and then, significantly, to ‘doubting Thomas, who responded with “My Lord and my God”’.

An awareness of that ‘Lord and God’ followed when, having returned to fishing (their normal occupation) the disciples were astounded to be confronted by the risen Jesus. They had failed in their catch but, at Jesus’ command to ‘cast the net on the right side of the boat’ they caught 153 – an enormous load. Furthermore, He provided them with breakfast and challenged Peter as to the extent of his allegiance to his Lord and was given a pastoral commission. Even in these incidents, John remembered in detail what happened and what was said; and highlights the fact that the Risen Jesus is the Divine Enabler both for their normal work (fishing) and for the new task of ‘feeding my sheep’.

Acts



- Acts
- Accidental Peter
 - Deliberate Paul

There is a very definite link between Luke's Gospel and Acts in that the one ends with the charge to wait in Jerusalem for power and the other opens with that same command and relates what happened next when the disciples were now on their own without their risen Lord; yet with a clear commission and mandate: "*You shall be witnesses unto me*".

Acts

We look at the two phases of their response to that commission: 1 – 12 – Accidental with Peter dominant and 13 – 28 – Deliberate with Paul as the main character.

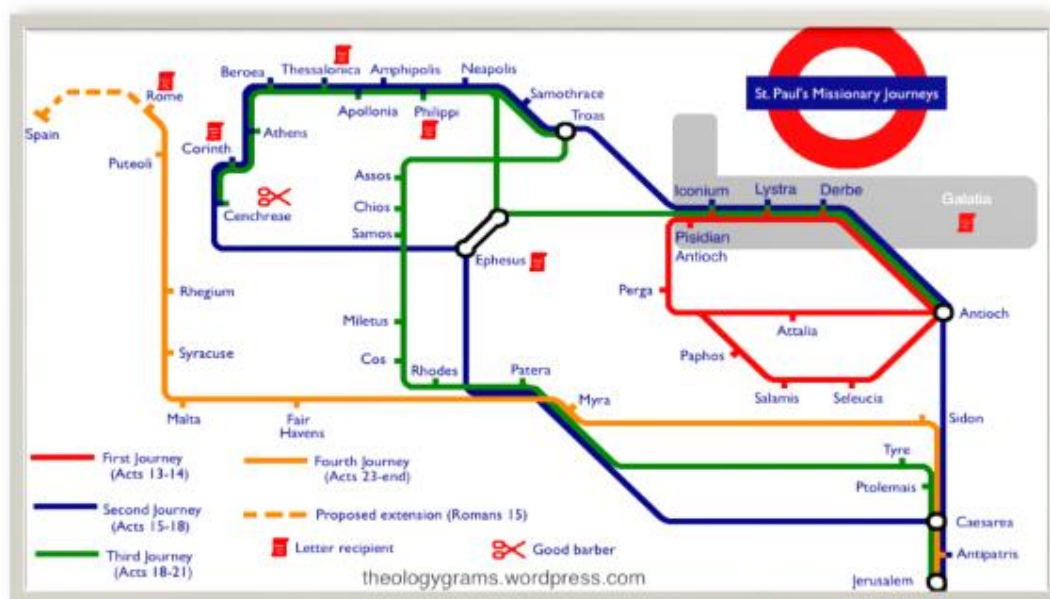
As instructed, they waited *with one accord in one place* when the Holy Spirit fell on them, enabled them to speak in other languages – understood by passers-by – and witness boldly. While the crowd attributed this phenomenon to their being drunk / inebriated Peter made it clear that "*this is what was promised by the prophet Joel*". This experience had transformed and empowered them. They were a close-knit fellowship sharing in the Apostles' doctrine, breaking of bread and prayers. Yet, in their active witness they carried on as normal, encountering the lame man on their way to the prayer meeting, responding bravely to the Council's threats. Soon they encountered two major challenges. First, Ananias and Saphira engaged in deception and were duly punished. Then, the disciples were charged with neglect of the Greek widows. Facing the implications of this latter situation squarely they re-established their priorities and appointed seven godly men to serve as deacons. One of these, Stephen, was later martyred but not without affecting the young zealot, Saul of Tarsus.

The persecution which followed led into the next phase of their expansion: an enforced scattering that saw Philip encounter the Ethiopian eunuch as well as some Samaritans, Saul of Tarsus dramatically converted and Cornelius rewarded through the ministrations of a corrected Peter. That same persecution had seen the gospel spread to other areas including the Syrian city of Antioch, which was to become the new centre of operations along with Jerusalem. In the cross-visiting which followed Barnabas and Saul emerge as leaders and Jerusalem approving what was happening in Antioch. We finish this first phase of Acts – the Experience, the Accidental dispersion, the ministry of Peter with the church at Antioch deliberately undertaking the next deliberate phase of being witnesses "*to the uttermost parts*".

The second 'half' of Acts heralds a different set of activities yet with several similarities. As a result of their previous experience of communicating "*the reason for the hope that is within them*" there is now a strong fellowship based in Antioch as well as in the senior centre in the capital, Jerusalem. Here, while praying, they are exhorted by the Holy Spirit to commission two proven men – Saul and Barnabas – to go and deliberately take the message to the

known world. Commended by the church (sent ones, not volunteers looking for support) they go to Cyprus and then to Asia Minor preaching in the synagogues at first and, when rejected, in outside locations. They meet both persecution and adulation as some misunderstand and oppose while many repent and believe. Despite the harsh treatment, they revisit these cities and then return to Antioch to report on progress. While there another aspect of persecution catches up with them in the form of a pressure group insisting that Gentile converts should also adhere to the Jewish Law. The matter was taken to Jerusalem and considered there with the result that it was deemed unjust to add an unnecessary burden and a letter was drafted for distribution to the churches.

Paul and Barnabas were to take this but they differed over whether to take John Mark; so separating, Barnabas took the young man with him to Cyprus while Paul and Silas ventured back into Asia Minor and Galatia. After re-visiting the churches from the first journey they veered towards other parts of Asia Minor only to be constrained by the Holy Spirit until Paul had a vision in the night of a Macedonian call. Hence the gospel came westwards to Europe as opposed to spreading east. In Macedonia and Greece they visited several cities and encountered similar reception – many believers and a forceful opposition – having gone



from Philippi to Thessalonica, Athens and Corinth before calling in Ephesus on the mainland before returning to Jerusalem.

Such was their pastoral concern that they soon embarked on a third missionary journey largely taken up with visiting these same venues; as much to build up the churches as to spread the gospel; much of which was being effectively undertaken by the churches themselves (cf 1 Thessalonians 1 about the effect of their testimony in word and deed).

Not wanting to delay his attendance at the Jerusalem Festival Paul by-passed Ephesus on this journey but met with the elders at Miletus, wonderfully described by Luke, and which virtually drew his itinerant ministry to a close.

Back in Jerusalem, opposition from the Jewish leaders was fermenting and so to protect him, the local Christian leaders advised him to avoid any cause for offence at his actions and, when opposition became violent towards him, he was protected by the Roman authorities. That eventually led to a plea to be tried in Rome before Caesar which resulted in his being sent to that city by ship, encountering a stormy shipwreck on the way before arriving to a welcomed by the believers, house arrest by the authorities and a great opportunity to receive visitors and communicate with the churches. Most of his most powerful epistles come from this period.

One very significant by-product from this period of expansion – and enforced confinement in Rome – is the amount of letters – epistles – that circulated around the churches. This was the operational correspondence among the believers. Most – but not all - were written by Paul. We turn to look at these next.

The Epistles

Seven letters comprise the General Epistles and are attributed to James, Peter, John and Jude. However, the bulk belong to Paul although the authorship of Hebrews, because it lacks any direct reference to Paul and its style is different may be by an unknown author; yet its content and emphasis corresponds well with the other thirteen.

The table below shows that they were written at various points during his missionary journeys and especially during his enforced stay in Rome as a prisoner.

To	From	Where	Date
Galatians A, or Galatians B	Antioch Ephesus	Beginning of M2 end of M2	48 – 49 53 – 57
1 Thessalonians	Corinth	Late M2	51
2 Thessalonians	Corinth	Late M2	51 – 52
1 Corinthians	Ephesus	M3	55
2 Corinthians	Macedonia	M3	c55
Romans	Corinth	M3	57
Philemon	Rome	M4	60
Colossians	Rome	M4	60
Ephesians	Rome	M4	60
Philippians	Rome	M4	61
1 Timothy	Rome	M4+	63 – 65
Titus	Rome	M4+	63 - 65
2 Timothy	Rome	M4+	66 – 67
Hebrews	?		Before 70

They can be grouped and considered in different ways. For our purpose we will take Romans and Hebrews as basic principles, foundation epistles, because they set out the gospel message in a systematic way rather than jump from one topic to another.

Each is concerned with Christ, the gift of God and the embodiment of the gospel – the gospel they preached in Jerusalem and on their journey through Asia and Europe.

Romans sets out Christ as the ‘righteousness’ revealed by God for acceptance by faith among mankind. Christ is the answer to human need. His death atones for wrong actions – human sin – and his resurrection and life provides the force for living the born-again life. *If we were reconciled to God by the death of His son, much more, being reconciled we shall be saved by His life*”. Taken even deeper Christ transforms our very world view and mind set from being me-centred to being God-centred. And, with God at the centre we are exhorted to ‘fit-in’ to God’s purpose along with other believers. The question Romans asks is: Will you believe in the Christ? Will you have Him?

Hebrews, on the other hand presumes that Christ has been accepted and that the believers have had some time to assimilate him into their lives. But they are warned against negligence and the hazards of not listening and paying attention to this expression of God’s mind to humanity. In encouraging them to go forward and “*consider the apostle and high priest of our calling*’ the author proceeds to highlight the attributes and qualities of this high priest as someone faithful, sympathetic, representative, etc who can be fully trusted to lead us into the fulness of God’s intended blessedness.

But, they can't take it! They are dull of hearing! They are not in a state to be able to appreciate the glories being highlighted. Why? They are immature because they have not **used** the salvation given them. They are guilty of neglect.

Although it is a serious situation, and warnings are appropriate, the purpose is to encourage rectification and moving on. Rather than scupper the whole experience and make mockery of the work of grace they are to press on with faith and patience to be imitators of those who did in act inherit the promises. They have reason to hop.

That hope is described as an anchor which "*we have*" and enters "*within the veil*". The rest of the epistle goes on to examine these two areas to find if there is any weakness.

Not surprisingly an examination of the redemptive work of Jesus being our High Priest and mediating a better covenant entering into the veil to secure our forgiveness in one complete action is found to be absolute and flawless. It is a "*wonderful redemption*". There can be no reason whatsoever to doubt its efficacy or durability.

So, any risk must be in the realm of our holding on to the Hope: the "*we have*". Serious warnings are given of the danger of letting go and the consequences that follow. But, the purpose of this letter is not to condemn but to build, so they are encouraged to 'go on'.

Looking at others provides inspiration and motivation. A long list of OT worthies is cited giving examples of their exercise of faith. – acting as if the unseen was actually real. So Joseph gave command that his bones would be taken back to the Promised Land even though - to all intents and purposes - Egypt was where he was and would be. The actions cited can only be explained in the light of the long-term purpose of God. Patience is the diligent exercise of the immediate – often mundane - knowing its significance for long-term effectiveness.

Armed with this commitment – a commitment and discipline they had already practised before growing weary – they are encouraged to "*run the race*" with patience "*looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith*". Misunderstood though they might be, following the sound of a different drum, they would be rewarded with: "*May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever.*"

Whether they actually succeeded in that is something we will see in our next set of letters: Galatians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, and 1 & 2 Corinthians.

Ministry Period Letters

Paul's missionary activity falls into two phases. During the first he embarked on three missionary journeys, first to Cyprus and Asia Minor and then over to Macedonia and Greece as well. During that time he wrote to the Galatians (the group of churches he saw come into

being from his first journey) and then to Thessalonica and later to the Corinthians. The second phase saw him facing 'lockdown' in Rome from where he wrote to churches: Philippi, Ephesus and neighbouring Colosse; and to individuals such as Philemon, Timothy and Titus.

The church in Galatia had been developing well until some Judaisers had come in to divert them from Paul's teaching and insist on adherence to the Mosaic Law. Sadly, the Galatians succumbed to this prompting Paul's alarmed response: *"I am astounded that you are so soon departed from the gospel"*. Having become Christians by grace they were now reverting to justification by works and Law observance. Paul's answer to them was to reiterate the gospel that had ensured his conversion from being a devout Law-keeper to a new person who, without any human intervention, now could confess *"I live, yet not I but Christ lives in me. And the life I now live I live by faith in the son of God who loved me and gave himself for me"*. In outlining that gospel he explains that the law only served for a short period but now, through Abraham, salvation was open to all by faith. However, that new freedom was not to be abused but they were to commit themselves to sowing good so that the fruit of the spirit might be manifest in them. And, he said this, not as censure, but out of heartfelt concern and anguish for them.

Where the Thessalonians were concerned they were doing well despite the difficult circumstances of their coming into being. Anxious to see how they were doing he sent Timothy who brought an encouraging report. Once again in praising them he highlights the truth of the gospel and what had happened and what was happening to them. However, they were being distracted by part of that truth so he reassures them about the detail of the return of Jesus and encourages them to act diligently in practising their commitment and devotion, thus continuing to be a model church.

Far from being a model church Corinth was a mixture accommodated as it was in such a cosmopolitan city. There were so many differences and variety of practices and influences that the church was divided and confused with all these variants. They had genuine ethical problems that they were aware of but actually they were infested with issues which were far more serious.

Paul had visited them several times and written other letters but all we now have are these two. So, what does he say?

After his failure in Athens he came to Corinth deciding to *"know nothing among you but Jesus Christ and him crucified"*. He repeats that simple gospel and shows them that the answer to all their problems are addressed in it and the truth it conveys. He reminds them that they have access to the whole of God's wisdom and resources. They were a building built on the foundation of Jesus Christ, but they were to be careful how they built on it. In surveying the church as it is Paul discerns that there were elements being used (pride, lust, greed, intolerance, etc) that were *"wood, hay, stubble"* (materials that cannot withstand the

fire). Alongside that, any 'good' materials (worship, ministry, mutual support, etc) were grossly misused. They should be a living epistle communicating all God's goodness. That meant effort on their part to choose the right way.

In encouraging them Paul provides an insight into his own experiences of God and thus reinforce his credentials as someone who communicated to them the saving principles of the gospel and sound doctrine.

This set of letters contain some key features of Paul's ministry among them. He acknowledged their growth and Christian testimony, despite adverse circumstances and conditions. He focuses on the gospel and its teaching as to what it means to be a Christian. That teaching and its application in clear Christian living that is the secret of any healthy growth. Lest they think that it is Paul he goes to great lengths to reveal the Source of all that he shares with them. It comes from God through varied experiences: it is the word of God. Paul's ministry is summed up in the familiar words: *"For I delivered to you that which I received..."*

If that is the case then they, like the Hebrews, would need to pay attention to the things they had heard and so practically carry out the things that belong to salvation.

All this was an expression of his pastoral concern for them. Indeed he expresses this graphically to them by saying *"My little children of whom I travail in birth until Christ be formed in you"* (Galatians 4: 19)

Would this still be the burden of his ministry when he was a captive in Rome? We'll see next time.

The 'Prison' Epistles

Following his appeal to be tried before Caesar Paul found himself in Rome under a kind of house arrest where he was confined but free to receive visitors and keep in touch with other believers. Not being able to travel he wrote to them: to three churches (Ephesus, Colossae and Philippi) and to three individuals (Timothy, Titus and Philemon). By now he is older, at the end of his active itinerant ministry but no less concerned for the welfare of the churches and individuals and for their realisation of all that God wanted for them and for his kingdom. As such, they contain real gems of insight into Paul's understanding of God's purposes and of his encouragement for them. They are less concerned with solving immediate problems or addressing urgent issues than with realisation and motivation.

Ephesians and Colossians have a very similar, almost identical, pattern. Initially there is an expression of appreciation for their spiritual life and testimony, tracing their conversion through responding by faith to the verbal gospel they heard and the clear evidence of the growth that followed. They have been redeemed; or in Colossian terms, *"translated from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of his dear son"* due to the saving work of Jesus

on the cross; and *“blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ Jesus”*. Yet, it is more than being rescued: it means being regenerated and made new and thus be admitted to a new realm. Initiated into the church, the *“body of him who rules over all”*, into the mystery hidden until now, and became dynamic members of the church through which God will make his wisdom known. Salvation, for Paul, is more than rescue from sin and its consequences. It is an entry into the positive, the prospective new life, the experience of being *“citizens of heaven”*. Sadly, the overriding concept for most evangelicals tends to be the former rather than the latter, with an appreciation of being saved but less enthusiasm for manifesting the new life corporately.

With such a privilege there is an obligation, so these two letters both exhort their hearers to *“walk worthy of the vocation”* and demonstrate this new life spiritually, seeking *“those things which are above”* in practical actions often in domesticated contexts with encouragement to *“let the peace of God rue your hearts”*, or *“speaking to each other in psalms and spiritual songs”*, in mutual encouragement and testimony. Where Ephesians is concerned that is something so precious that it needs to be safeguarded with *“the whole armour of God”* against all the attempts of the devil to thwart it.

Philippians has the same message but expressed more in terms of partnership and mutual help through modelling. Again, thanking God for their new found life and professing confidence that *“he which has begun a good work in you will continue to perform it until the day of Jesus Christ”* he encourages them to learn from his experience of rejoicing in adversity and seeing it as an opportunity to see God turn opposition to an advantage. That means adopting a different mind-set exemplified by the Lord Jesus in his redemptive humiliation and determining to shun worldly demands, counting all things but loss to press on and reach the prize for such a high calling. There is both reward and consolation. They are to *“be anxious for nothing but, by prayer and supplication they are to make their requests known to God. And, the peace of God will rule their hearts in Christ Jesus”*.

A significant feature of all three letters is the mention of the fact that Paul is always praying for them and an indication of what those prayers contain. Essentially he is praying that they might ‘see’ and be given an insight into what they have entered and given a taste of the prospects. In Philippians he talks about tasting that which is excellent; to ‘go for gold’ and more and more participate in and understand what God’s purpose are – an answer to the prayer: *“Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth”* and echoing the Romans 12 charge of not conforming to this world but, through a renewed mind, *“tasting what is that good and perfect and acceptable will of God”*.

In practical terms much of that growth and spiritual development will be stimulated by the ministry and encouragement of leaders such as Paul. So, three letters are addressed to two such successors to Paul – Timothy and Titus. Each man is charged with fulfilling their ministry, not letting their youth be a reason for handicapping them but, fully utilising the gift endowed on them and following Paul’s example should teach others *“how to conduct*

themselves in the household of God". Instructions are given about appropriate behaviours, establishing proper structures and equipping others, not as single operators but as key members of a corporate body with each one contributing to the benefit of the whole. Not an easy task and one where weariness – even lethargic discouragement - may set in, yet one where self-discipline, single mindedness, commitment and attention to being totally prepared and developed, using the Scriptures and the example of others as helps. And, underpinning it all is a reminder of the gospel and God's purpose, as expressed in Titus 2: 11 – 14 where God is making it possible to bring into being a "*people of his own zealous for good works*".

This set of letters is completed with a personal plea to Philemon to reinstate Onesimus, a runaway slave, now transformed by grace. Surely a reminder that the outworking of God's work is done in the lives of individuals. Paul tells the Corinthians: "*such were some of you*" and the Lord Jesus' words to Peter: "*What is that to the (what John would be doing) follow thou me*".

That following would be anything but easy so we have a set of complementary epistles with much to say about 'enduring hardship'. We will look at them next time.

General Epistles

The General epistles by James, Peter, John and Jude were apparently written to believers scattered after the Jerusalem persecutions and now in isolation and under threat of further trials in remoter areas. The letters were written in order to encourage them not only to survive but to thrive. After Paul's glorious visionary letters from Rome they are very appropriate as helps to struggling believers.

James, writing to the twelve tribes, in telling them what to do in such circumstances tells them to adopt the right attitude. Saying "*Count it all joy when you fall into such trials*" sounds strange but, understanding that this is a way in which God works out his purposes helps them to endure it with patience – and confidence. But, knowledge of itself is inadequate: they must put it into action.

What doesn't help is to carry on acting in the old ways of the world, for friendship with the world is enmity against God. If they judge by appearances, talk too freely and carelessly of their own wisdom and not availing themselves of the true wisdom that comes from God then they are not helping themselves. However, God is redemptive and longs to empower them. So, they are told to submit to God, resist the devil and, more importantly, "*draw near to God*" because he would then draw near to them – and help them be victorious. The confidence that ensues from that act of faith is reflected in patience – a quality that was amply displayed by the OT prophets. Should they need more help then they should pray, with complete confidence, inspired by the example of Elijah.

Peter follows, again with encouragement for those scattered across Asia Minor (and largely bereft of the missionary activities of Paul after the first journey). They are reminded of the wonderful privilege that is theirs that, through the redemptive work of Jesus, they have been *“begotten to a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead”*. What is more, that redemption, costly as it was for Christ, gains them access into a wonderful state of being a *“chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession”*.

As such, they are to be holy and work out the practical expression of this new, better, life in ordinary civic and domestic contexts, just as Jesus did when he was on earth.

Not surprisingly, they can anticipate some antagonism as their ‘good’ life stands out in contrast to the godless living around them. Buoyed by their confidence they are to be prepared to give a reason for the hope that motivates them.

Yet, more severe testings’ lie ahead but they are to accept the humiliation such trials bring, again just as Jesus did, and be confident that God will give them the strength as they resist Satan and respond to the pastoral discipline of the elders who watch over them.

2 Peter takes it further. While chapter 2 warns against false teachers and chapter 3 assures them that the day of the Lord will surely come with its relief and overcoming the onus is on them in chapter 1 to make their calling and election sure by taking deliberate incremental steps adding one virtue on to another until they gain maturity. It is the resurfacing again of the paradoxical thrust of God’s sovereign power and human collaboration that remains a mystery but, at the same time, an essential feature of triumphant Christian testimony, reminiscent of the Philippians exhortation to *“work out your own salvation with fear and trembling”* knowing that it is *“God who works within you both to will and to do of his good pleasure”*.

John has three epistles each again encouraging the believers while at the same time warning them against negative tendencies.

In 1 John he ‘writes’ to them with three aims in mind. The first is *“so that their joy may be full”*. He reminds them that he has shared with them the truth he has encountered and experienced. With their reception of that gift they then share fellowship – common possession – of the essence of that gift which is *“God is light and in him is no darkness at all”*. However, they need to use it and not walk in darkness. To suggest that they couldn’t walk in darkness is not being honest. Everyone has a tendency to sin but there is both understanding and provision for such failure when, after confession the *“blood of Jesus cleanses us”*.

The second purpose in writing is so that they would not sin. The fight to be and remain holy is a hard one but one made up of a range of simple actions – some of which are helpful and others not. This section oscillates between these two categories and highlights good activities, such as abiding in God, drawing near to him, loving him and loving other brothers

and sisters, purifying themselves, etc; while negative activities are those which are characterised by deliberate and consistent giving in to sin, hating the brothers, etc. again echoing the effective dichotomy of human effort and divine enabling working together for good.

When such actions are positive then that fulfils his third purpose which is to give them the assurance that they are the children of God because their life and testimony exemplifies that.

The two short letters appear to be more situation specific and contain some cryptic references. However each provides encouragement and warning against infiltrating adverse influences.

That infiltration is a major feature of **Jude**. While Jude's original purpose was to commend them it runs out that he has to appeal to them to "*contend for the faith once delivered to the saints*". False teachers – and very unsavoury characters – appear to have wormed their way into the church and threaten the very health of the church. They have little to commend them; they are to be resisted at all costs. Reminding them again that they had been warned about these charlatans and their evil, divisive, influence the believers are to continue with perseverance and to "*build yourselves up in the most holy faith, pray in the Holy Spirit and keep yourselves in the love of God*". That will bring its reward as expressed in the concluding doxology: "*To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy – to the only God our saviour be glory, majesty, power and authority through Christ Jesus our Lord*".

That reaches reality in the last book in the New Testament – Revelation – which we will look at next.

Revelation

These final books in the New Testament, and indeed of the Bible, are clearly written by way of encouragement to scattered believers going through, and likely to experience more, persecution. This one in particular starts with the present and projects into the future. It is also apocalyptic in that it uses graphic illustrations and dramatic representations to convey its message in coded form. Consequently, it is a difficult book to read. As someone once said: reading Revelation leaves your head confused with the happenings but warms your heart with the outcomes: it is reassurance that the "Lord reigns"!

However, taking the Book as a whole there is a structure and a sequence,

It is, first and foremost, a revelation of Jesus, and of a resurrected, risen Jesus, Conqueror of death and Victor over 'principalities and powers'. It is He who speaks to the churches.

And that is a distinct feature of this end time. Whereas in the beginning God spoke to individuals, like Noah, Abraham or Moses, now the message is to (local) churches. The

survey of the present state of these churches highlights good things (for which they are commended), negative aspects (for which they are seriously rebuked) and motivating aspects in the form of encouragement to overcome any difficulties; and to "hold on"

That discouraging scene on earth is answered by the grandstand scenario in heaven seen through the 'open door'. There, the scroll, held by the One on the throne, surrounded by worshippers, is opened by the "Lamb slain from the foundation of the earth".

So, in this motivating insight, the first level of the detailed revelation is a set of scenarios made apparent when seals are opened in succession revealing natural disasters and then the marvel of the souls of the martyred, those who came through great tribulation, and the presentation of the prayers of the saints: phenomena disdained on earth but preserved in heaven.

That heralds the next phase signified by the blowing of 7 Trumpets. Having seen into the heavens there is now an insight into events, probably current and future events, in heaven and earth. Once again the first four trumpets herald 'natural catastrophe' happenings with the environment, the sea and the sky affected adversely. Then follow three trumpet calls that are designated as woes: and indeed that is what they are. The first depicts destroying locusts; the second shows the opposition to the "two witnesses" with the debacle of celebration at their death until they are eventually resurrected. The third is a vivid drama of real conflict among cosmic powers with Satan as the dragon and his associated 'beasts' from sea and land waging war, but being frustrated and overcome, ending up with the sight of the multitude praising the Lamb and announcing that "the kingdoms of this world have become the kingdom of our God". Earth, controlled by these evil powers is rendered relatively impotent. Its apparent supremacy - persecuting the saints - is only transient,

Thirdly, in terms of phases represented by seals, trumpets and bowls (vials) comes the outpouring of punishment with the fall of Babylon and all she represents, as well as of those who were conformed to her corrupt systems and who now mourn her demise.

That gives rise to a loud Hallelujah and praise for the Divine victory played out in these last chapters with the acknowledging of the King of Kings, the binding of Satan for a thousand years and the judgement at the Great White Throne, followed by the appearance of the Bride, the new Jerusalem and the City with the healing river flowing out from it; whose inhabitants are those "whose names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life" – and none other.

So, against the background of current persecution – and any increase likely to be encountered – where the 'saints' suffer at the hands of this 'present evil age' and 'the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience' here is ground for "holding on". It is a cosmic battle won by the "Lamb slain from the foundation of the world" at the Resurrection and exaltation after the humiliation of the Cross; and shown

to be a victory of epic proportions. The suffering saints who have 'been faithful unto death' are not forgotten; the prayers of the saints do avail; the Evil One will be cast down and into the lake of fire; those who hold sway in its wake will be brought to judgement and punished eternally: and the saints will be vindicated and rewarded, with a wonderful new prospect ahead of them. This is a revelation of what 'is to come'

It is also ground for perseverance; and looking to that same Jesus who wrought the victory at His first coming and who will come again in triumph having accomplished all.

While holding on, the confident cry and assurance of overcoming is: "Even so, Come, Lord Jesus". And, like the original message of the saving gospel, this comes by God conveying it through His word entrusted to John. And, just as John's Gospel was "written that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ and that, believing, you might have life in His name" Revelation is written that "through the comfort of the Scriptures, you might have hope."

04.12.2020