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THE MACARTHUR  
NEW TESTAMENT  
COMMENTARY  
**MATTHEW 1-7**

*John MacArthur*

MOODY PUBLISHERS/CHICAGO

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# The Gracious King

(Matthew 1:1-17)

# 1

The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

To Abraham was born Isaac; and to Isaac, Jacob; and to Jacob, Judah and his brothers; and to Judah were born Perez and Zerah by Tamar; and to Perez was born Hezron; and to Hezron, Ram; and to Ram was born Amminadab; and to Amminadab, Nahshon; and to Nahshon, Salmon; and to Salmon was born Boaz by Rahab; and to Boaz was born Obed by Ruth; and to Obed, Jesse; and to Jesse was born David the king. And to David was born Solomon by her who had been the wife of Uriah; and to Solomon was born Rehoboam; and to Rehoboam, Abijah; and to Abijah, Asa; and to Asa was born Jehoshaphat; and to Jehoshaphat, Joram; and to Joram, Uzziah; and to Uzziah was born Jotham; and to Jotham, Ahaz; and to Ahaz, Hezekiah; and to Hezekiah was born Manasseh; and to Manasseh, Amon; and to Amon, Josiah; and to Josiah were born Jeconiah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon.

And after the deportation to Babylon, to Jeconiah was born Shealtiel; and to Shealtiel, Zerubbabel; and to Zerubbabel was born Abiud; and to Abiud, Eliakim; and to Eliakim, Azor; and to Azor was born Zadok; and to Zadok, Achim; and to Achim, Eliud; and to Eliud was born Eleazar; and to Eleazar, Matthan; and to Matthan, Jacob; and to Jacob was born Joseph the

**husband of Mary, by whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ.**

**Therefore all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the time of Christ fourteen generations. (1:1-17)**

As discussed in the introduction, one of Matthew's major purposes in his gospel, and the primary purpose of chapters 1 and 2, is to establish Jesus' right to Israel's kingship. To any honest observer, and certainly to Jews who knew and believed their own Scriptures, these two chapters vindicate Jesus' claim before Pilate: "You say correctly that I am a king. For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world" (John 18:37).

Consistent with that purpose of revealing Jesus to be the Christ (Messiah) and the King of the Jews, Matthew begins his gospel by showing Jesus' lineage from the royal line of Israel. If Jesus is to be heralded and proclaimed king there must be proof that He comes from the recognized royal family.

Messiah's royal line began with David. Through the prophet Nathan, God promised that it would be David's descendants through whom He would bring the great King who would ultimately reign over Israel and establish His eternal kingdom (2 Sam. 7:12-16). The promise was not fulfilled in Solomon, David's son who succeeded him, or in any other king who ruled in Israel or Judah; and the people waited for another one to be born of David's line to fulfill the prophecy. At the time Jesus was born the Jews were still anticipating the arrival of the promised monarch and the restored glory of the kingdom.

The Jews' concern for pedigrees, however, existed long before they had a king. After they entered Canaan under Joshua and conquered the region God had promised to them, the land was carefully and precisely divided into territories for each tribe—except the priestly tribe of Levi, for whom special cities were designated. In order to know where to live, each Israelite family had to determine accurately the tribe to which it belonged (see Num. 26; 34-35). And in order to qualify for priestly function, a Levite had to prove his descent from Levi. After the return from exile in Babylon, certain "sons of the priests" were not allowed to serve in the priesthood because "their ancestral registration . . . could not be located" (Ezra 2:61-62).

The transfer of property also required accurate knowledge of the family tree (see, e.g., Ruth 3-4). Even under Roman rule, the census of Jews in Palestine was based on tribe—as can be seen from the fact that Joseph and Mary were required to register in "Bethlehem, because he [Joseph] was of the house and family of David" (Luke 2:4). We learn from the Jewish historian Josephus that in New Testament times many Jewish families maintained detailed and highly valued ancestral files. Before his conversion, the apostle Paul had been greatly concerned about his lineage from "the tribe of Benjamin" (see Rom. 11:1; 2 Cor. 11:22; Phil. 3:5). For Jews, tribal identification and line of descent were all-important.

It is both interesting and significant that since the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70 no genealogies exist that can trace the ancestry of any Jew now living. The primary significance of that fact is that, for those Jews who still look for the Messiah, his lineage to David could never be established. Jesus Christ is the last verifiable claimant to the throne of David, and therefore to the messianic line.

Matthew's genealogy presents a descending line, from **Abraham** through **David**, through **Joseph**, to **Jesus, who is called Christ**. Luke's genealogy presents an ascending line, starting from Jesus and going back through David, Abraham, and even to "Adam, the son of God" (Luke 3:23-38). Luke's record is apparently traced from Mary's side, the Eli of Luke 3:23 probably being Joseph's father-in-law (often referred to as a father) and therefore Mary's natural father. Matthew's intent is to validate Jesus' royal claim by showing His legal descent from David through Joseph, who was Jesus' legal, though not natural, father. Luke's intent is to trace Jesus' actual royal blood ancestry through his mother, thereby establishing His racial lineage from David. Matthew follows the royal line through David and Solomon, David's son and successor to the throne. Luke follows the royal line through Nathan, another son of David. Jesus was therefore the blood descendant of David through Mary and the legal descendant of David through Joseph. Genealogically, Jesus was perfectly qualified to take the throne of David.

It is essential to note that in His virgin birth Jesus not only was divinely conceived but through that miracle was protected from regal disqualification because of Joseph's being a descendant of **Jeconiah** (v. 12). Because of that king's wickedness, God had declared of Jeconiah (also called Jehoiachin or Coniah) that, though he was in David's line, "no man of his descendants will prosper, sitting on the throne of David or ruling again in Judah" (Jer. 22:30). That curse would have precluded Jesus' right to kingship had He been the natural son of Joseph, who was in Jeconiah's line. Jesus' legal descent from David, which was always traced through the father, came through Jeconiah to Joseph. But His blood descent, *and His human right to rule*, came through Mary, who was not in Jeconiah's lineage. Thus the curse on Jeconiah's offspring was circumvented, while still maintaining the royal privilege.

### **The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. (1:1)**

*Biblos* (**book**) can also refer to a record or account, as is the case here. Matthew is giving a brief record of the **genealogy** (*genesis*, "beginning, origin") **of Jesus** Christ. **Jesus** is from the Greek equivalent of Jeshua, or Jehoshua, which means "Jehovah (Yahweh) saves." It was the name the angel told Joseph to give to the Son who had been miraculously conceived in his betrothed, Mary, because this One who would soon be born would indeed "save His people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21). Christos (Christ) is the Greek form of the Hebrew *māshîah* (Eng., messiah), which means "anointed one." Israel's prophets, priests, and kings were anointed,

and Jesus was anointed as all three. He was *the* Anointed One, *the* Messiah, whom the Jews had long expected to come as their great deliverer and monarch.

Yet because of their unbelief and misunderstanding of Scripture, many Jews refused to recognize Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah. Some rejected Him for the very reason that His parents *were* known to them. When He went back to His hometown of Nazareth He “began teaching them in their synagogue, so that they became astonished, and said, ‘Where did this man get this wisdom, and these miraculous powers? Is not this the carpenter’s son? Is not His mother called Mary, and His brothers, James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And His sisters, are they not all with us?’ ” (Matt. 13:54-56). On another occasion, others in Jerusalem said of Jesus, “The rulers do not really know that this is the Christ, do they? However, we know where this man is from; but whenever the Christ may come, no one knows where He is from” (John 7:26-27). A short while later, “Some of the multitude therefore, when they heard these words, were saying, ‘This certainly is the Prophet.’ Others were saying, ‘This is the Christ.’ Still others were saying, ‘Surely the Christ is not going to come from Galilee, is He?’ ” (John 7:40-41). Still others, better taught in the Scriptures but unaware of Jesus’ lineage and birthplace, said, “Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the offspring of David, and from Bethlehem, the village where David was?” (v. 42).

The genealogy establishes the Messiah’s royal lineage. Matthew’s intent is not to have the reader digress into a study of each person listed, but is to show that all of these persons point to the royalty of Christ.

#### THE GRACIOUS KING

Even so, from Matthew’s genealogy we learn more than Jesus’ lineage. We also see beautiful reflections of God’s grace. Jesus was sent by a God of grace to be a King of grace. He would not be a King of law and of iron force, but a King of grace. His royal credentials testify of royal grace. And the people He chose to be His ancestors reveal the wonder of grace, and give hope to all sinners.

The graciousness of this King and of the God who sent Him can be seen in the genealogy in four places and ways. We will look at these in logical, rather than chronological, order.

#### THE GRACE OF GOD SEEN IN THE CHOICE OF ONE WOMAN

**And to Jacob was born Joseph the husband of Mary, by whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ. (1:16)**

God showed His grace to Mary by choosing her to be the mother of Jesus. Although descended from the royal line of David, Mary was an ordinary, unknown young woman. Contrary to claims of her own immaculate conception (her being conceived miraculously in her own mother’s womb), Mary was just as much a sinner as all other human beings ever born. She was likely much better, morally and

spiritually, than most people of her time, but she was not sinless. She was deeply devout and faithful to the Lord, as she demonstrated by her humble and submissive response to the angel's announcement (Luke 1:38).

Mary needed a Savior, as she herself acknowledged at the very beginning of her song of praise, often called the Magnificat: "My soul exalts the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. For He has had regard for the humble state of His bondservant" (Luke 1:46-48). The notions of her being co-redemptrix and co-mediator with Christ are wholly unscriptural and were never a part of early church doctrine. Those heretical ideas came into the church several centuries later, through accommodations to pagan myths that originated in the Babylonian mystery religions.

Nimrod, a grandson of Ham, one of Noah's three sons, founded the great cities of Babel (Babylon), Erech, Accad, Calneh, and Nineveh (Gen. 10:10-11). It was at Babel that the first organized system of idolatry began with the tower built there. Nimrod's wife, Semiramis, became the first high priestess of idolatry, and Babylon became the fountainhead of all evil systems of religion. In the last days, "the great harlot" will have written on her forehead, "BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH" (Rev. 17:5). When Babylon was destroyed, the pagan high priest at that time fled to Pergamum (or Pergamos; called "where Satan's throne is" in Rev. 2:13) and then to Rome. By the fourth century A.D. much of the polytheistic paganism of Rome had found its way into the church. It was from that source that the ideas of Lent, of Mary's immaculate conception, and of her being the "queen of heaven" originated. In the pagan legends, Semiramis was miraculously conceived by a sunbeam, and her son, Tammuz, was killed and was raised from the dead after forty days of fasting by his mother (the origin of Lent). The same basic legends were found in counterpart religions throughout the ancient world. Semiramis was known variously as Ashtoreth, Isis, Aphrodite, Venus, and Ishtar. Tammuz was known as Baal, Osiris, Eros, and Cupid.

Those pagan systems had infected Israel centuries before the coming of Christ. It was to Ishtar, "the queen of heaven," that the wicked and rebellious Israelite exiles in Egypt insisted on turning (Jer. 44:17-19; cf. 7:18). While exiled in Babylon with his fellow Jews, Ezekiel had a vision from the Lord about the "abominations" some Israelites were committing even in the Temple at Jerusalem—practices that included "weeping for Tammuz" (Ezek. 8:13-14). Here we see some of the origins of the mother-child cult, which has drawn Mary into its grasp.

The Bible knows nothing of Mary's grace except that which she received from the Lord. She was the recipient, never the dispenser, of grace. The literal translation of "favored one" (Luke 1:28) is "one endowed with grace." Just as all the rest of fallen mankind, Mary needed God's grace and salvation. That is why she "rejoiced in God [her] Savior" (Luke 1:47). She received a special measure of the Lord's grace by being chosen to be the mother of Jesus; but she was never a source of grace. God's grace chose a sinful woman to have the unequalled privilege of giving birth to the Messiah.

THE GRACE OF GOD SEEN IN THE DESCENDANTS OF TWO MEN

**The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. (1:1)**

Both **David** and **Abraham** were sinners, yet by God's grace they were ancestors of the Messiah, the **Christ**.

David sinned terribly in committing adultery with Bathsheba and then compounded the sin by having her husband, Uria, killed so that he could marry her. As a warrior he had slaughtered countless men, and for that reason was not allowed to build the Temple (1 Chron. 22:8). David was a classic example of a poor father, who failed to discipline his children, one of whom (Absalom) even tried to usurp the throne from his own father by armed rebellion.

Abraham, though a man of great faith, twice lied about his wife, Sarah. Out of fear for his life and lack of trust in God, he told two different pagan kings that she was his sister (Gen. 12:11-19; 20:1-18). In so doing he brought shame on Sarah, on himself, and on the God in whom he believed and whom he claimed to serve.

Yet God made Abraham the father of His chosen people, Israel, from whom the Messiah would arise; and He made David father of the royal line from whom the Messiah would descend. Jesus was the Son of David by royal descent and Son of Abraham by racial descent.

God's grace also extended to the intervening descendants of those two men. Isaac was the son of promise, and a type of the sacrificial Savior, being himself willingly offered to God (Gen. 22:1-13). God gave the name of Isaac's son, Jacob (later renamed Israel), to His chosen people. Jacob's sons (**Judah** and his brothers) became heads of the tribes of Israel. All of those men were sinful and at times were weak and unfaithful. But God was continually faithful to them, and His grace was always with them, even in times of rebuke and discipline.

Solomon, David's son and successor to the throne, was peaceful and wise, but also in many ways foolish. He sowed seeds of both domestic and spiritual corruption by marrying hundreds of wives—most of them from pagan countries throughout the world of that time. They turned Solomon's heart, and the hearts of many other Israelites, away from the Lord (1 Kings 11:1-8). The unity of Israel was broken, and the kingdom soon became divided. But the royal line remained unbroken, and God's promise to David eventually was fulfilled. God's grace prevailed.

A careful look at the descendants both of Abraham and of David (vv. 2-16) reveals people who were often characterized by unfaithfulness, immorality, idolatry, and apostasy. But God's dealing with them was always characterized by grace. **Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham**, was sent to overcome the failures of both those men and of all their descendants, and to accomplish what they could never have accomplished. The King of grace came through the line of two sinful men.

## THE GRACE OF GOD SEEN IN THE HISTORY OF THREE ERAS

**Therefore all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the time of Christ fourteen generations. (1:17)**

From Matthew's summary of the genealogy we see God's grace at work in three periods, or eras, of Israel's history.

The first period, **from Abraham to David**, was that of the patriarchs, and of Moses, Joshua, and the judges. It was a period of wandering, of enslavement in a foreign land, of deliverance, of covenant-making and law-giving, and of conquest and victory.

The second period, **from David to the deportation to Babylon**, was that of the monarchy, when Israel, having insisted on having human kings like all the nations around them, discovered that those kings more often led them away from God and into trouble than to God and into peace and prosperity. That was a period of almost uninterrupted decline, degeneracy, apostasy, and tragedy. There was defeat, conquest, exile, and the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple. Only in David, Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah, and Josiah do we see much evidence of godliness.

The third period, **from the deportation to Babylon to the time of Christ**, was that of captivity, exile, frustration, and of marking time. Most of the men Matthew mentions in this period—from Shealtiel to Jacob the father of Joseph—are unknown to us apart from this list. It is a period shrouded largely in darkness and characterized largely by inconsequence. It was Israel's Dark Ages.

Nevertheless, God's grace was at work on behalf of His people through all three periods. The national genealogy of Jesus is one of mingled glory and pathos, heroism and disgrace, renown and obscurity. Israel rises, falls, stagnates, and finally rejects and crucifies the Messiah that God sent *to* them. But God, in His infinite grace, yet sent His Messiah *through* them.

## THE GRACE OF GOD SEEN IN THE INCLUSION OF FOUR OUTCASTS

**and to Judah were born Perez and Zerah by Tamar; and to Perez was born Hezron; and to Hezron, Ram; and to Ram was born Amminadab; and to Amminadab, Nahshon; and to Nahshon, Salmon; and to Salmon was born Boaz by Rahab; and to Boaz was born Obed by Ruth; and to Obed, Jesse; and to Jesse was born David the king. And to David was born Solomon by her who had been the wife of Uriah. (1:3-6)**

Matthew's genealogy also shows us the work of God's grace in His choosing four former outcasts, each of them women (the only women listed until the

mention of Mary), through whom the Messiah and great King would descend. These women are exceptional illustrations of God's grace and are included for that reason in the genealogy that otherwise is all men.

The first outcast was **Tamar**, the Canaanite daughter-in-law of **Judah**. God had taken the lives of her husband, Er, and of his next oldest brother, Onan, because of their wickedness. Judah then promised the young, childless widow that his third son, Shelah, would become her husband and raise up children in his brother's name when he grew up. After Judah failed to keep that promise, Tamar disguised herself as a prostitute and tricked him into having sexual relations with her. From that illicit union were born twin sons, **Perez and Zerah**. The sordid story is found in Genesis 38. As we learn from the genealogy, **Tamar** and **Perez** joined **Judah** in the messianic line. Despite prostitution and incest, God's grace fell on all three of those undeserving persons, including a desperate and deceptive Gentile harlot.

The second outcast also was a woman and a Gentile. She, too, was guilty of prostitution, but for her, unlike Tamar, it was a profession. **Rahab**, an inhabitant of Jericho, protected the two Israelite men Joshua sent to spy out the city. She lied to the messengers of the king of Jericho in order to save the spies; but because of her fear of Him and her kind act toward His people, God spared her life and the lives of her family when Jericho was besieged and destroyed (Josh. 2:1-21; 6:22-25). God's grace not only spared her life but brought her into the messianic line, as the wife of **Salmon** and the mother of the godly **Boaz**, who was David's great-grandfather.

The third outcast was **Ruth**, the wife of **Boaz**. Like Tamar and Rahab, **Ruth** was a Gentile. After her first husband, an Israelite, had died, she returned to Israel with her mother-in-law, Naomi. Ruth was a godly, loving, and sensitive woman who had accepted the Lord as her own God. Her people, the pagan Moabites, were the product of the incestuous relations of Lot with his two unmarried daughters. In order to preserve the family line, because they had no husbands or brothers, each of the daughters got their father drunk and caused him to unknowingly have sexual relations with them. The son produced by Lot's union with his oldest daughter was Moab, father of a people who became one of Israel's most implacable enemies. Mahlon, the Israelite man who married **Ruth**, did so in violation of the Mosaic law (Deut. 7:3; cf. 23:3; Ezra 9:2; Neh. 13:23) and many Jewish writers say his early death, and that of his brother, were a divine judgment on their disobedience. Though she was a Moabite and former pagan, with no right to marry an Israelite, God's grace not only brought **Ruth** into the family of Israel, but later, through Boaz, into the royal line. She became the grandmother of Israel's great King David.

The fourth outcast was Bathsheba. She is not identified in the genealogy by name, but is mentioned simply as the wife of **David** and the former **wife of Uriah**. As already mentioned, David committed adultery with her, had her husband sent to the battlefield to be killed, and then took her as his own wife. The son produced by the adultery died in infancy, but the next son born to them was **Solomon** (2 Sam. 11:1-27; 12:14, 24), successor to David's throne and continuer of the messianic line.



By God's grace, Bathsheba became the wife of David, the mother of Solomon, and an ancestor of the Messiah.

The genealogy of Jesus Christ is immeasurably more than a list of ancient names; it is even more than a list of Jesus' human forebears. It is a beautiful testimony to God's grace and to the ministry of His Son, Jesus Christ, the friend of sinners, who "did not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (Matt. 9:13). If He has called sinners by grace to be His forefathers, should we be surprised when He calls them by grace to be His descendants? The King presented here is truly the King of grace!

THE MACARTHUR  
NEW TESTAMENT  
COMMENTARY

**MATTHEW 8-15**

*John MacArthur*

MOODY PUBLISHERS/CHICAGO

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# Jesus' Power over Disease

(Matthew 8:1-15)

# 1

**And when He had come down from the mountain, great multitudes followed Him. And behold, a leper came to Him, and bowed down to Him, saying, "Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean." And He stretched out His hand and touched him, saying, "I am willing; be cleansed." And immediately his leprosy was cleansed. And Jesus said to him, "See that you tell no one; but go, show yourself to the priest, and present the offering that Moses commanded, for a testimony to them."**

**And when He had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to Him, entreating Him, and saying, "Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, suffering great pain." And He said to him, "I will come and heal him." But the centurion answered and said, "Lord, I am not worthy for You to come under my roof, but just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I, too, am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to this one, 'Go!' and he goes, and to another, 'Come!' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this!' and he does it." Now when Jesus heard this, He marveled, and said to those who were following, "Truly I say to you, I have not found such great faith with anyone in Israel. And I say to you, that many shall come from east and west, and recline at the table with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven; but the sons of the kingdom shall be cast out into the outer darkness; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth." And**

**Jesus said to the centurion, “Go your way; let it be done to you as you have believed.” And the servant was healed that very hour.**

**And when Jesus had come to Peter’s home, He saw his mother-in-law lying sick in bed with a fever. And He touched her hand, and the fever left her; and she arose, and waited on Him. (8:1-15)**

Matthew 8 begins where chapter 4 leaves off, with the Sermon on the Mount as a sort of parenthesis in between. At the end of chapter 4, Jesus was “going about in all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness among the people. And the news about Him went out into all Syria; and they brought to Him all who were ill, taken with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, paralytics; and He healed them. And great multitudes followed Him from Galilee and Decapolis and Jerusalem and Judea and from beyond the Jordan” (vv. 23-25). Jesus then “went up on the mountain” (5:1), where He preached His great sermon, and then came down from the mountain, still followed by “great multitudes” (8:1).

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus turned the religious beliefs and practices of popular Judaism, especially those of the scribes and Pharisees, topsy-turvy. He had told them, in effect, that their teaching was wrong, their living was wrong, and their attitude was wrong. Virtually everything they believed in, stood for, and hoped in was unbiblical and ungodly. The Lord overturned their entire religious system and exposed them as religious hypocrites and spiritual phonies.

Unlike other Jewish teachers of that day, Jesus did not quote the Talmud, the Midrash, the Mishnah, or other rabbis. He recognized no written authority but the Old Testament Scripture and even put His own words on a par with Scripture. “The result was,” Matthew explains, “that when Jesus had finished these words [the Sermon on the Mount], the multitudes were amazed at His teaching; for He was teaching them as one with authority, and not as their scribes” (Matt. 7:28-29).

In establishing Jesus’ messiahship, Matthew demonstrated His legal qualification through His genealogy, His prophetic qualification through the fulfillment of prophecy by His birth and infancy, His divine qualification by the Father’s own attestation at His baptism, His spiritual qualification by His perfect resistance to Satan’s temptations, and His theological qualification through the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount.

In chapters 8 and 9 Matthew dramatically sets forth still another qualification: Jesus’ divine power. Through the miracles of these two chapters, Matthew shows beyond doubt that Jesus is, in fact, the very Son of God, because only God could perform such supernatural feats. In an astounding display of power, Jesus cleansed a leper, healed two paralytics, cooled a fever, calmed a storm at sea, cast out demons, raised a girl from the dead, gave sight to two blind men, restored speech to a man made dumb by demons, and healed every other kind of disease and sickness.

These two chapters are particularly critical to understanding the life and ministry of Christ. In this section Matthew records a series of nine miracles performed

by the Lord, each one selected out of the thousands He performed during His three-year ministry. The nine miracles of Matthew 8-9 are presented in three groups of three miracles each. In each group Matthew recounts the miracles and then reports the Jews' response.

Jesus' miracles were the supreme proof of His divinity and the irrefutable credentials of His messiahship. Matthew's purpose in recording the miracles, like Jesus' purpose in performing them, was to confirm His deity and His claim to be the Messiah of Israel and the Savior of the world. In many ways this section is the heart of Matthew's message.

When Jesus first called His twelve disciples, He charged them not to go to Gentiles or Samaritans but "to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. 'And as you go, preach, saying "The kingdom of heaven is at hand." Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons; freely you received, freely give'" (10:5-8).

Tragically, however—and inexplicably from a human point of view—many of the Jews who saw Jesus' miracles concluded that He performed them by demonic rather than by divine power (Matt. 12:24). As more and more Jews rejected Him, Jesus turned His attention to the establishment of the Gentile church. He also began to speak more in parables, which the unbelieving Jews could not understand because of their spiritually hardened hearts (13:11-13).

It should be noted that the apostle John also recorded the miracles in his gospel as proof signs of Jesus' divinity and messiahship. When the Jewish leaders criticized Jesus for healing on the Sabbath, accused Him of blasphemy, and then sought to kill Him for claiming to be equal to God, "Jesus therefore answered and was saying to them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner. For the Father loves the Son, and shows Him all things that He Himself is doing; and greater works than these will He show Him, that you may marvel. For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son also gives life to whom He wishes'" (John 5:16-21). A short while later He further explained, "The works which the Father has given Me to accomplish, the very works that I do, bear witness of Me, that the Father has sent Me" (v. 36).

Still later Jesus said to His Jewish listeners, "I told you, and you do not believe; the works that I do in My Father's name, these bear witness of Me. . . . I and the Father are one" (John 10:25, 30). When "the Jews took up stones again to stone Him," Jesus said, "I showed you many good works from the Father; for which of them are you stoning Me? . . . If I do not do the works of My Father, do not believe Me; but if I do them, though you do not believe Me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in Me, and I in the Father" (vv. 31-32, 37-38).

To His troubled disciples, who even late in His ministry could not comprehend His relationship to the Father, Jesus had to explain again, "Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on My own initiative, but the Father abiding in Me does His works. Believe Me that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me; otherwise believe on account of the works themselves" (John 14:10-11; 15:24).

In his stated purpose for writing this gospel, John says, “Many other signs therefore Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name” (20:30-31).

The first three miracles reported in detail by Matthew (cf. 4:23-24) all involve the healing of physical affliction. In New Testament times disease was rampant and medical science as we know it did not exist. If a person survived a serious disease, it was usually because the malady had run its course. Whether or not it was fatal, most disease caused great pain and suffering, for which there was little remedy. Sufferers were often left scarred, deformed, lame, or otherwise debilitated for the rest of their lives. Plagues would sometimes wipe out entire villages, cities, or even regions. The list of diseases was long, and life expectancy was short.

Many diseases are mentioned in Scripture. We read of various forms of paralysis and atrophy, which would encompass such things as muscular dystrophy and poliomyelitis. The Bible frequently speaks of blindness, which was rampant because it could be caused by countless forms of disease, infection, and injury. Deafness was almost as common and had almost as many causes. We are told of boils, infected glands, various forms of edema, dysentery, mutism and other speech disorders, epilepsy, intestinal disorders, and many unidentified diseases.

When Jesus healed, He did so with a word or a touch, without gimmicks, formulas, or fanfare. He healed instantaneously, with no drawn out period of waiting or of gradual restoration. He healed totally, not partially, no matter how serious the disease or deformity. He healed everyone who came to Him and even some who never saw Him. He healed organic as well as functional afflictions. Most dramatically and powerfully of all, He even raised the dead.

It is small wonder, therefore, that Jesus' healing miracles brought such immediate and widespread attention. For people who seldom had means to alleviate even the symptoms of disease, the prospect of complete cure was almost too astounding to be believed. Even the rumor of such a thing would bring a multitude of the curious and hopeful. For those of us who live in a society where basic good health is accepted largely as a matter of course, it is difficult to appreciate the impact Jesus' healing ministry had in Palestine. Jesus instructed the disciples not to take any money, because people would have paid them all they had for health, and that could easily have corrupted the disciples' motives and objectives (see 10:8-9). For a brief period of time, disease and other physical afflictions were virtually eliminated as Jesus went through the land healing thousands upon thousands (see Matt. 4:23-24; 8:16-17; 9:35; 14:14; 15:30; 19:2; 21:14; etc.). As Jesus Himself said on several occasions, His miraculous works alone should have been more than enough reason to believe in Him (John 10:38; 14:11). Such things had never happened before in the history of the world and could only have a divine cause. That is what made the rejection of the scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, and others so self-condemnatory. No one could deny that Jesus performed the miracles, and only the most hard-hearted resistance to the truth could make a person reject His divinity in the face of such overpowering evidence. Those who would not believe in Jesus were indicted by every miracle He performed.



In the first three miracles of Matthew 8, the Lord healed a leper, a paralytic, and a woman with a fever. Beside the fact that each of them involved healing, these three miracles have four other common characteristics. First of all, in each of them Jesus dealt with the lowest level of human need, the physical. Although even earthly life involves much more than the physical, the physical part has its importance, and Jesus was lovingly sympathetic to those with physical needs. He thereby revealed the compassion of God toward those who suffer in this life.

Second, in each of the first three miracles, Jesus responded to direct appeals, either by the afflicted person himself or by a friend or relative. In the first case the leper himself asked Jesus to make him clean (8:2); in the second the centurion asked in behalf of his servant (v. 6); and in the third (v. 14), several unnamed friends or relatives asked on behalf of Peter's mother-in-law; as we learn from the parallel account in Luke 4:38.

Third, in each of the first three miracles, Jesus acted by His own will. Though He was sympathetic to the needs of those who were afflicted and was moved by the appeals for help, He nevertheless acted sovereignly by His own volition (vv. 3,13,15).

Fourth, in all three miracles Jesus ministered to the needs of someone who, especially in the eyes of the proud Jewish leaders, was on the lowest plane of human existence. The first person He helped was a leper, the second was a Gentile soldier and his slave, and the third was a woman. We learn from John that Jesus first revealed His messiahship to a despised Samaritan adulteress in Sychar (John 4:25-26), and we learn from Matthew that these three miracles of His early ministry served the humblest members of society. Our Lord showed special compassion toward those for whom society had special disdain.

#### THE WRETCHED MAN: A LEPER

**And when He had come down from the mountain, great multitudes followed Him. And behold, a leper came to Him, and bowed down to Him, saying, "Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean." And He stretched out His hand and touched him, saying, "I am willing; be cleansed." And immediately his leprosy was cleansed. And Jesus said to him, "See that you tell no one; but go, show yourself to the priest, and present the offering that Moses commanded, for a testimony to them." (8:1-4)**

The **great multitudes** that **followed** Jesus **when He had come down from the mountain** did not do so because they adored Him as their Messiah. Most of the crowd, no doubt, was simply curious, never before having seen anyone perform miracles or heard anyone speak with such authority (4:23-25; 7:28-29). They were uncommitted observers, amazed by what Jesus said and did but not convicted of their need of Him as Lord and Savior.

The root word behind *lepros* (**leper**) means "scaly," which describes one of the earliest and most obvious characteristics of leprosy. There continues to be much

debate among scholars as to whether or not the disease commonly called Hansen's disease today is the same as biblical leprosy. Many biblical terms for diseases simply describe observable symptoms that could apply to several different physical afflictions. In addition to that, some diseases change over the course of years, as immunities develop and new strains of infectious microorganisms are formed.

Most medical historians believe that leprosy originated in Egypt, and the leprosy bacillus called myobacterium leprae has been found in at least one mummy that also showed the typical scaly evidence of the disease on its skin. The Old Testament scholar R. K. Harrison maintains that the symptoms described in Leviticus 13 "could presage clinical leprosy" (Colin Brown, ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975], 2:465). It seems safe to assume, therefore, that ancient leprosy was virtually the same as contemporary Hansen's disease.

This severe form of leprosy was the most feared disease of the ancient world, and even today it cannot be totally cured, though it can be kept in check by proper medication. Although some 90 percent of people in modern times are immune to such contagion of leprosy, it was much more communicable in ancient times. Spongy, tumorlike swellings would eventually grow on the face and body, and the bacillus would become systemic and affect internal organs, while the bones would begin to deteriorate. Untreated in ancient times, it produced a weakness that made the victim vulnerable to tuberculosis or other diseases.

In order to protect His chosen people, God gave strict and specific regulations to Moses regarding leprosy, the details of which are found in Leviticus 13. A person suspected of having the disease was taken to a priest for examination. If he showed signs of having more than a superficial skin problem, he was isolated for seven days. If the symptoms became worse, the person was isolated for seven more days. If, at that time, the rash had not spread further, the person was pronounced clean. If, however, the rash had become worse, he was pronounced unclean. When leprosy was immediately evident from a person's hair turning white and his having raw, swollen flesh, he was pronounced unclean on the spot and no isolation period was involved. A less serious type of disease caused the entire skin to turn white, in which case the affected person could be considered clean. That disease was probably a form of psoriasis, eczema, vitiligo, tuberculoid leprosy, or perhaps a condition that Herodotus and the great Greek physician Hippocrates called leukodermia. When a person was found to have the serious form of leprosy, his clothes were to be torn, his head uncovered, his mouth covered (to prevent spread of the disease), and he was to cry, "Unclean! Unclean!" wherever he went to warn others to stay clear of him. Lepers were legally ostracized and forbidden to live in any community with their fellow Israelites (Num. 5:2). Among the sixty-one defilements of ancient Judaism, leprosy was second only to a dead body in seriousness. The Talmud forbade a Jew from coming closer than six feet to a leper, and if the wind was blowing, the limit was 150 feet.

Recent medical studies confirm that Hansen's disease can be passed on to others when it is inhaled through the air—a good reason for a leper to cover his mouth, as the Leviticus regulations required. People have also contracted the disease

from touching an object handled by a leper—again showing the value of the Leviticus standard, which required the burning of contaminated clothes.

In his book *Unclean! Unclean!* L. S. Huizenga describes some of the horrors of leprosy.

The disease which we today call leprosy generally begins with pain in certain areas of the body. Numbness follows. Soon the skin in such spots loses its original color. It gets to be thick, glossy, and scaly . . . . As the sickness progresses, the thickened spots become dirty sores and ulcers due to poor blood supply. The skin, especially around the eyes and ears, begins to bunch, with deep furrows between the swellings, so that the face of the afflicted individual begins to resemble that of a lion. Fingers drop off or are absorbed; toes are affected similarly. Eyebrows and eyelashes drop out. By this time one can see the person in this pitiable condition is a leper. By a touch of the finger one can also feel it. One can even smell it, for the leper emits a very unpleasant odor. Moreover, in view of the fact that the disease-producing agent frequently also attacks the larynx, the leper's voice acquires a grating quality. His throat becomes hoarse, and you can now not only see, feel, and smell the leper, but you can hear his rasping voice. And if you stay with him for some time, you can even imagine a peculiar taste in your mouth, probably due to the odor. ([Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1927], 149; cited in William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973], 388)

Although advanced leprosy is generally not painful, because of the nerve damage it is disfiguring, debilitating, and can be repulsive in the extreme, and has therefore for millennia been one of the most dreaded of diseases. One ancient rabbi said, "When I see lepers I throw stones at them lest they come near me." Another said, "I would not so much as eat an egg that was purchased on a street where a leper had walked."

An up-to-date look at modern leprosy reveals more of its character. Dr. Paul Brand, world-renowned expert on the treatment of Hansen's disease, has provided much help in understanding the unique nature of this affliction.

Hansen's disease (HD) is cruel, but not at all the way other diseases are. It primarily acts as an anesthetic, numbing the pain cells of hands, feet, nose, ears, and eyes. Not so bad, really, one might think. Most diseases are feared *because of their pain*—what makes a painless disease so horrible?

Hansen's disease's numbing quality is precisely the reason such fabled destruction and decay of tissue occurs. For thousands of years people thought HD caused the ulcers on hands and feet and face which eventually led to rotting flesh and loss of limbs. Mainly through Dr. Brand's research, it has been established that in 99 percent of the cases, HD only numbs the extremities. The destruction follows solely because the warning system of pain is gone.

How does the decay happen? In villages of Africa and Asia, a per-

son with HD has been known to reach directly into a charcoal fire to retrieve a dropped potato. Nothing in his body told him not to. Patients at Brand's hospital in India would work all day gripping a shovel with a protruding nail, or extinguish a burning wick with their bare hands, or walk on splintered glass. Watching them, Brand began formulating his radical theory that HD was chiefly anesthetic, and only indirectly a destroyer.

On one occasion, he tried to open the door of a little storeroom, but a rusty padlock would not yield. A patient—an undersized, malnourished ten-year-old—approached him smiling.

“Let me try, sahib, doctor,” he offered and reached for the key. With a quick jerk of his hand he turned the key in the lock.

Brand was dumbfounded. How could this weak youngster out-exert him? His eyes caught a telltale clue. Was that a drop of blood on the floor?

Upon examining the boy's fingers, Brand discovered the act of turning the key had gashed a finger open to the bone; skin, fat, and joint were all exposed. Yet the boy was completely unaware of it! To him, the sensation of cutting his finger to the bone was no different from picking up a stone or turning a coin in his pocket.

The daily routines of life ground away at the HD patient's hands and feet, but no warning system alerted him. If an ankle turned, tearing tendon and muscle, he would adjust and walk crooked. If a rat chewed off a finger in the night, he would not discover it missing until the next morning. . . .

. . . Stanley Stein (author of *Alone No Longer*) went blind because of another cruel quirk of HD. Each morning he would wash his face with a hot washcloth. But neither his hand nor his face was sensitive enough to temperature to warn him that he was using scalding water. Gradually he destroyed his eyes with his daily washing. (Philip Yancey, *Where Are You God When It Hurts?* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977], 32-34)

Leprosy is a graphic illustration of sin. Like leprosy, sin infects the whole person, and it is ugly, loathsome, corrupting, contaminating, alienating, and incurable by man. Lepers in ancient Israel were vivid object lessons of sin.

Yet a leper was the first to be healed by Jesus in this series of miracles in Matthew, and the fact that the **leper came to Him** was astounding in itself, because lepers were forbidden to come close to nonlepers.

Four things about this particular leper stand out. First of all he came to Jesus with confidence. He obviously sensed a love and tenderness in Jesus that allowed him to approach **Him** without fear of reprisal (such as being stoned) or even of reprimand. He somehow knew that Jesus was neither afraid of him nor ashamed to associate with him. He did not shout to Jesus from a distance, as he was supposed to do, but approached Him directly and without hesitation. Because he realized Jesus was not ashamed of him, he was less ashamed of himself. He thought of nothing but his great need and of Jesus' ability and willingness to meet that need.

Second, the man came to Jesus with reverence. His boldness did not come from presumption but from humble adoration. When he reached Jesus he **bowed down to Him**. *Proskuneō* (from which comes **bowed down**) literally means to

prostrate oneself and is most often translated “to worship” (see Matt. 2:2; 4:9,10; John 4:20-24; Acts 7:43; Rev 4:10; 19:10). From the reverential nature of his request, it seems that the leper addressed Jesus as **Lord** not simply in the sense of “Sir,” but as an acknowledgment of deity. He felt he was in the presence of God and that therefore Jesus could heal him of his terrible disease. It is both interesting and instructive to note that the scribes and Pharisees who were doubtlessly in the multitude that day were beautifully and richly attired, yet were inwardly corrupt, proud, and unbelieving. By contrast, the **leper** appeared loathsome and repulsive on the outside, but inwardly he was reverent and believing.

Third, the leper came to Jesus with humility. He came expectantly but not demandingly, saying, **Lord, if You are willing.** He asked to be healed only if it were the Lord's will. He did not claim to be worthy or deserving, but left himself in the Lord's hands to do as He would. The implication seems to be that the leper was quite willing to remain leprous if that were the Lord's will. Obviously he wanted to be healed, but he did not explicitly ask Jesus for healing, almost as if that were too much to presume. He simply acknowledged Jesus' ability to heal him. How far that humble spirit is from the demands of many Christians today who make claims on God's healing, blessing, and favor as if those were their inherent rights. This man claimed no rights, and his first concern was not his own welfare at all, but the Lord's will and glory.

Fourth, the leper came with faith, declaring, **You can make me clean.** He literally said, “You have the power to make me clean.” That is faith at its highest—the absolute conviction that God is able, coupled with humble submission to His sovereignty in the exercise of His power. The man knew that Jesus was not obligated to heal him, but he also knew that He was perfectly capable of doing it. He had the faith of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who declared to Nebuchadnezzar, “If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But even if He does not, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up” (Dan. 3:17-18).

The leper came with confidence because he believed Jesus was compassionate, with reverence because he believed Jesus was God, with humility because he believed Jesus was sovereign, and with faith because he believed Jesus had the power to heal him.

In response to that faith, Jesus **stretched out His hand and touched him, saying, “I am willing; be cleansed.”** Jews were forbidden by the Mosaic law to touch a leper, because he was unclean (Lev. 3:3). To do so was to expose themselves to both ceremonial and physical contamination. They could not help a leper by touching him, but only harm themselves. Yet it is certain that lepers yearned for the touch of another human being. In their isolation and social stigma, they no doubt would have given anything for even brief intimate contact with someone besides other lepers.

Jesus could have healed with only a word, as He did on numerous other occasions. But He made an obvious point of touching this man. That simple act in itself was amazing, not in the sense of being sensational and spectacular—as are the supposed miracles of many modern healers—but simply in the fact that the Son of

God lovingly condescended to touch the outcast of outcasts whom no other man would even come near.

The healing was instantaneous: **immediately his leprosy was cleansed.** Jesus did not need to heal in stages, although at times He chose to do so (Mark 8:22-26; John 9:6-7). When He touched defilement, it went away. The scene on this occasion must have been startling—to see a deformed, shriveled, scaly, sore-covered, derelict suddenly stand upright, with perfect arms and legs, with his face smooth and unscarred, his hair restored, his voice normal, and his eyes bright. The marvels of modern medical science pale beside such miraculous restoration.

The first requirement of faith is obedience, and as soon as the leper was cleansed, **Jesus said to him, “See that you tell no one; but go, show yourself to the priest, and present the offering that Moses commanded, for a testimony to them.”** Before he celebrated his new lease on life, and even before he testified to others about his miraculous cleansing, the man was to fulfill the requirements of the Mosaic law by having the temple priests attest to his cure.

This process, described in Leviticus 14, involved taking two birds and killing one of them over running water. The live bird, along with cedar wood, a scarlet string, and some hyssop, was then dipped in the blood of the slain bird. The former leper was then sprinkled seven times and pronounced clean by the priest, and the live bird was set free. The cleansed person was then to wash his clothes, shave off all his hair, and bathe himself. He could then rejoin Israelite society, although he had to remain outside his tent for seven days. The final act on the eighth day was to bring the required guilt, sin, and grain offerings—according to what could be afforded—and to be anointed by the priest on various parts of the body.

Jesus may have told the man not to say anything about his healing in order not to increase the crowd’s adulation of Him simply as a miracle worker, or perhaps He wanted to discourage their looking to Him as a political deliverer. It may have been that the Lord was still in His period of humiliation and that His exaltation by the crowd at this time would have been premature in the divine plan.

All of those reasons could have been involved, but Jesus’ instruction to **go, show yourself to the priest, and present the offering that Moses commanded,** was specifically given **for a testimony to them,** that is, to the multitude and especially to the Jewish leaders. Although Jesus devastated the hypocritical, superficial, and unbiblical standards and practices of the scribes and Pharisees, He did not want the people to think He was violating the requirements of God’s law—which He had just declared He came to fulfill, not destroy (5:17). In addition to that, when the priest declared the man clean—as he would have to do because of the obvious healing—Jesus’ miracle would be officially confirmed by the Jewish establishment. It is likely also for this reason that Jesus told the man not to tell anyone else before he presented himself to the priest for examination. If word that his healing was done by Jesus reached Jerusalem ahead of the man, the priests would no doubt have been reluctant to verify the cleansing.

Sadly, the man who had shown such confident and humble faith in his joyous exuberance did not also show immediate obedience. We learn from Mark that he

became so excited that “he went out and began to proclaim it freely and to spread the news about, to such an extent that Jesus could no longer publicly enter a city, but stayed out in unpopulated areas; and they were coming to Him from everywhere” (Mark 1:45).

As Jesus remarked several times in various words, “Which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise and walk?’” (Matt. 9:5; cf. Mark 2:9; Luke 5:23). The Lord’s greatest purpose was to cleanse sin, not sickness, and even His physical cleansings became illustrations of the spiritual cleansing He offered. The healing of leprosy was especially powerful in that regard, because its great physical destructiveness, pervasiveness, ugliness, and incurableness represent the even greater destructiveness, pervasiveness, ugliness, and incurableness of sin. Just as leprosy destroys physical health and makes a person an outcast with other men, so sin destroys spiritual health and makes a person an outcast with God. But just as Christ can cure leprosy, He can also cure sin; and just as His cleansing from leprosy restored men to human fellowship, His cleansing from sin restores them to God’s.

Much modern evangelism and personal witness is weakened by failure to confront men with the terribleness and danger of their sin. Coming to Christ is not getting on a popular bandwagon of religious sentimentality. It is facing and confessing one’s sin and bringing it to the Lord for cleansing. True conversion takes place when, like the leper, desperate people come to Christ humbly confessing their need and reverently seeking His restoration. The truly repentant person, like this leper, comes with no pride, no self-will, no rights, and no claim to worthiness. He sees himself as a repulsive sinner who has absolutely no claim to salvation apart from the abundant grace of God. He comes believing that God can and will save him only as he places his trust in Jesus Christ.

After a person is saved from sin, Jesus’ first requirement is that he henceforth obey the Word of God. Only a lifestyle of holy living can give proper testimony to what Jesus Christ has done in saving us. It is best to say nothing of our relationship to Jesus Christ unless our living reflects something of His holiness and will. When a Christian lives obediently, then both his actions and his words testify to Christ’s goodness and power.

#### THE RESPECTED MAN: A GENTILE

**And when He had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to Him, entreating Him, and saying, “Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, suffering great pain.” And He said to him, “I will come and heal him.” But the centurion answered and said, “Lord, I am not worthy for You to come under my roof, but just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I, too, am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to this one, ‘Go!’ and he goes, and to another, ‘Come!’ and he comes, and to my slave, ‘Do this!’ and he does it.” Now when Jesus heard this, He marveled, and said to those who were following, “Truly I say to you, I have not found such great faith with anyone in Israel. And I say to you, that many shall come from east and west,**



**and recline at the table with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven; but the sons of the kingdom shall be cast out into the outer darkness; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” And Jesus said to the centurion, “Go your way; let it be done to you as you have believed.” And the servant was healed that very hour. (8:5-13)**

Many commentators believe that the first three miracles of Matthew 8 occurred on the same day. If so, Jesus entered **Capernaum** only a short while after healing the leper. Because Jesus pronounced a curse on it (Matt. 11:23), the ancient city no longer exists, except in the form of the ruins of a synagogue and of a few houses, including, according to tradition, that of Peter. It was a lovely town in Jesus’ day and He spent considerable time there, much of it perhaps in Peter’s home (see 8:14).

The **centurion** who **came to Him** not only was a Gentile but an officer in the Roman occupation army, a man who ordinarily would have been greatly hated by the Jews. Such soldiers were often hated still more because the Romans usually chose alien residents of a region to make up its occupation force—making those soldiers not only oppressors but traitors in the eyes of the populace.

We learn from Luke that this **centurion** actually **came to** Jesus through some Jewish intermediaries, because he felt spiritually unworthy of approaching Jesus personally and perhaps also because he thought he would be rebuffed because of his military position. He was probably in the troops of the wicked Antipas and was possibly even a Samaritan, a half-breed Jew who was traditionally hated even more than Gentiles by “pure” Jews. Yet this man was held in great esteem by the Jews of Capernaum, because, as they told Jesus, “He is worthy for You to grant this to him; for he loves our nation, and it was he who built us our synagogue” (Luke 7:2-5). Like Cornelius (Acts 10:2), this **centurion** was undoubtedly a God-fearing Gentile. It is noteworthy that each of the Roman centurions mentioned in the New Testament are spoken of favorably. And from the biblical record it seems likely that each of them became a believer in Christ.

*Pais*, here translated **servant**, literally means a young child. Luke calls him a slave (*doulos*), indicating he was probably born into the slave household of the centurion. In any case, the boy “was highly regarded” by the centurion, who was now afraid that his servant would die (Luke 7:2). **Lord**, he said to Jesus through his emissaries, **my servant is lying paralyzed at home, suffering great pain**. Whatever the disease was, it was paralyzing, painful, and fatal. Like the leper, it seems the centurion was reluctant to ask Jesus specifically for a healing, since he simply states the young man’s terrible condition—although the request is clearly implied.

The fact that the **centurion** cared so much for his **servant** set him apart from the typical Roman soldier, who could be brutally heartless. The average slave owner of that day, whether military or civilian, had no more regard for his slave than for an animal. The great Greek philosopher Aristotle said there could be no friendship and no justice toward inanimate things, not even toward a horse, an ox, or a slave, because master and slave were considered to have nothing in common. “A slave,” he said, “is a



living tool, just as a tool is an inanimate slave” (*Ethics*, 1161b). The Roman law expert Gaius wrote that it was universally accepted that the master possessed the power of life and death over his slave (*Institutes*, 1:52). Still another Roman writer, Varro, maintained that the only difference between a slave, a beast, and a cart was that the slave talked (*On Landed Estates*, 1:17.1). Cato the Elder advised those in economic difficulty to look over their livestock and hold a sale. They should sell their worn-out oxen, their blemished cattle, sheep, wool, and hides, their old wagons and tools, their old and sickly slaves, and whatever else was superfluous (*On Agriculture*, 2.7).

But the **centurion** from **Capernaum** had no such inhumane ideas. He was a seasoned and capable fighting man or he would not have been a centurion—who, as the title indicates, was responsible for a hundred men. He was a man’s man, and a soldier’s soldier. Yet he had deep compassion for his dying slave boy and felt unworthy to approach Jesus personally. Jesus knew the man’s heart and did not need to hear a direct request, either from the centurion or from the Jews who came in his behalf. He simply responded in love, saying, **I will come and heal him.**

When Jesus came near to his house, **the centurion** saw Him and sent some friends out to meet Him (Luke 7:3). In his behalf they **answered and said, “Lord, I am not worthy for You to come under my roof.”** He felt genuinely unworthy for Jesus to go to that much trouble for him, and no doubt also did not want Him to break the Jewish tradition of not entering the house of a Gentile in order to avoid ceremonial contamination.

The centurion’s twice addressing Jesus as **Lord** indicates much more than courtesy. Jesus testified of the man that He had not seen such great faith in all of Israel (v. 10). The man here affirmed the divine lordship of Christ, believing that Jesus was indeed God and consequently had the power to heal his paralyzed servant. Because the servant was too ill to be carried out to Jesus and because he felt unworthy to have Jesus come into his house, the centurion said to Him, **Just say the word, and my servant will be healed.** From the many reports he had doubtlessly heard of Jesus’ healing power, and perhaps from having witnessed some of the healings himself, he knew that distance presented no barrier.

The centurion also understood delegation of power. **For I, too, am a man under authority, with soldiers under me,** he said. **And I say to this one, “Go!” and he goes, and to another, “Come!” and he comes, and to my slave, “Do this!” and he does it.** He recognized **authority** when he saw it, even in a realm in which he had no experience or understanding. He knew that if he had the power to make his soldiers and slaves do his bidding by simply giving them orders, Jesus’ supernatural powers could even more easily allow Him simply to **say the word** and cause the **servant [to] be healed.**

**Now when Jesus heard this, He marveled, and said to those who were following, “Truly I say to you, I have not found such great faith with anyone in Israel.”** Although, as God, Jesus knew all men’s hearts, in His humanness He was amazed that this Gentile soldier showed more genuine **faith** in Him than He had found **with anyone in Israel.** Many Jews had believed in Jesus, but none had shown the sincerity, sensitivity, humility, love, and depth of faith of this Gentile soldier. Even

to His disciples Jesus would say a short time later, “You men of little faith” (8:26). Still later in His ministry He would say to Philip, “Have I been so long with you, and yet you have not come to know Me?” (John 14:9).

This Gentile would not be alone in his belief. Jesus went on to say, **many shall come from east and west, and recline at the table with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven; but the sons of the kingdom shall be cast out into the outer darkness; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.** Those who had less spiritual advantage and less opportunity to know God’s truth—the Gentiles **from east and west**—would show greater response to the gospel than God’s own chosen people, who considered themselves to be **the sons of the kingdom** simply by virtue of racial descent.

The gospel came through Abraham’s seed, as Matthew has already attested through Jesus’ genealogy. But the benefit of the gospel, which is salvation, is appropriated by faith, not by genealogical descent. The Jews played an integral part in God’s bringing the Messiah and His gospel, and they are yet destined to play an important role in the end times. It was integral to God’s plan of salvation that His own Son be born, live, and die as a Jew. But the fact that **Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob**—or any other Jew—will be **in the kingdom of heaven** will not be because of their Jewishness but because of their saving faith.

Jesus’ words to those Capernaum Jews was startling in the extreme. What He said utterly contradicted everything taught by their rabbis. The twenty-ninth chapter of the apocryphal book of Second Baruch pictures what Jews believed would be the great heavenly feast at which all Jews were going to sit down and eat behemoth, the elephant, and leviathan, the giant sea monster, or whale—symbolic of an unlimited amount of food. In the eyes of many Jews, one of the most significant and appealing things about the feast was that it would be totally free of Gentiles.

But at that meal, Jesus said, many Gentiles would be present and many Jews absent. The presumed **sons of the kingdom shall be cast out into the outer darkness; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.** To the Jews, God had given the unique promises and privileges of His kingdom, but because they rejected the King when He came to them, they disqualified themselves from God’s blessing of light and destined themselves for **outer darkness**, where, instead of feasting throughout eternity, they would suffer forever in the horror of **weeping and gnashing of teeth.** Jewish tradition taught that sinners—a term synonymous with Gentiles in their thinking—would spend eternity in the outer darkness of gehenna. Jesus concurred with them about the destiny of condemned sinners (see also Matt. 22:13; 24:51), but He declared them totally wrong about the identity of those condemned sinners.

Hell is a place both of darkness and of fire, a combination not found in our present world. Part of the supernatural quality of hell is that it will be a place of fire, pain, and torment that will continue for all eternity in total darkness.

Being a physical descendant of Abraham was a great privilege and advantage (Rom. 3:1-2), but in spite of what most Jews believed, it did not guarantee salvation. It is the children of Abraham’s spiritual faith, not the children of his physical body,

whom God adopts as His own children (Rom. 8:14-17; Gal. 3:7-9, 26-29; cf. Rom. 4:11, 16). Those who reject Christ, even though they are physical descendants of Abraham, will have no place **at the table with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven.** By their rejection of the Son of God—especially in light of the irrefutable evidence of His miracles—they prove they are really sons of Satan (John 8:42-44). Because they are false **sons of the kingdom**, they annul the divine promise, forfeit the divine blessing, and are forever barred from the divine **kingdom.** That was the substance of Jesus' brief but sobering message to the unbelieving Jews just before He pronounced the healing of the centurion's slave.

Jesus again reaffirmed the greatness of the centurion's faith as He said to him, **“Go your way; let it be done to you as you have believed.” And the servant was healed that very hour.** That the **servant was healed** was Jesus' affirmation that **the centurion truly believed**, because otherwise his servant would have remained sick and probably soon died. The servant's healing was *according to* the centurion's faith (**as you have believed**), and because the healing was complete, so had to have been the faith. And if the centurion had such great faith before the miracle, how much greater must it have been when he saw his beloved young friend get up from his deathbed and go about his work in perfect health and without pain?

Jesus did not give the principle **as you have believed** as a universal promise to all believers. The principle of healing in proportion to faith was sovereignly applied as the Lord saw fit (see also, e.g., Matt. 9:29). Paul had absolute faith in God's ability to heal him, and he personally experienced, and was often used as the instrument of, God's miraculous healing. But when he prayed three times in great earnestness for his “thorn in the flesh” to be removed, the Lord's answer to him was, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:7-9).

#### THE RELATIVE: A WOMAN

**And when Jesus had come to Peter's home, He saw his mother-in-law lying sick in bed with a fever. And He touched her hand, and the fever left her; and she arose, and waited on Him.** (8:14-15)

The first thing many male Jews did every morning was to pray, “Lord, I thank Thee that I was not born a slave, a Gentile, or a woman.” In the first two miracles of Matthew 8, Jesus showed mercy and compassion not only to an outcast leper but to an outcast Gentile and his slave. Now He shows mercy and compassion to a woman. The proud, self-righteous Jewish men could not have missed Jesus' point: physical health, race, social status, or gender made no difference to Him. None of those things in itself was an advantage or disadvantage as far as His ministry and message were concerned. That the disadvantaged more often received His blessing was due to their more often being humble and aware of their need. Likewise, that the advantaged more often failed to receive His blessing was due to their more often being proud and self-satisfied.

Mark tells us that when Jesus, Peter, Andrew, James, and John arrived at

**Peter's home**, some of the group discovered that Peter's **mother-in-law** was ill, "and immediately they spoke to Him about her" (Mark 1:30). Luke adds the information that her fever was high and that the unidentified friends or relatives "made request of Him on her behalf" (Luke 4:38). In response to their request, Jesus then went to her room and **saw her lying sick in bed with a fever.**

We do not know the cause of the fever, but the facts that it was high and that the woman was too sick to get up suggest an extremely serious and probably life-threatening illness. The demands of everyday living did not allow most people in that day the luxury of going to bed whenever they felt bad. Physical pain and discomfort were a regular part of life, and, unless they were severe, did not normally interfere with a person's responsibilities.

Again Jesus' response and healing were immediate. **And He touched her hand, and the fever left her; and she arose, and waited on Him.** We know from both Mark and Luke that she also served the other people there (Mark 1:31; Luke 4:39), but Matthew emphasizes her special ministry to Jesus: **she waited on Him.** His healing touch had instantly removed her fever and pain, and most likely saved her life. We can be sure she served her gracious Lord with special attention and care.

Although Peter's mother-in-law obviously was a woman, she was also a Jew. It may therefore be that, after His strong words of verses 11-12, Jesus did not want to leave the impression that God had forsaken His chosen people, even though most of them had forsaken Him. That the kingdom was open to faithful Gentiles certainly did not mean it was closed to faithful Jews. As Paul makes clear in his letter to the Romans, "God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew ... There has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God's gracious choice. . . . For if you [Gentiles] were cut off from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more shall these who are the natural branches be grafted into their own olive tree?" (Rom. 11:2, 5, 24).

THE MACARTHUR  
NEW TESTAMENT  
COMMENTARY

**MATTHEW 16-23**

*John MacArthur*

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# The Blind Who Will Never See

(Matthew 16:1-4)

1

**And the Pharisees and Sadducees came up, and testing Him asked Him to show them a sign from heaven. But He answered and said to them, “When it is evening, you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.’ And in the morning, ‘There will be a storm today, for the sky is red and threatening.’ Do you know how to discern the appearance of the sky, but cannot discern the signs of the times? An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign; and a sign will not be given it, except the sign of Jonah.” And He left them, and went away. (16:1-4)**

Good eyesight is a marvelous blessing, and in order to see better, Americans spend some five billion dollars a year on eye care. About seven percent of the population is considered legally blind. In many parts of the world, of course, the percentage of blind people is much higher.

It is even more significant that, since the fall of Adam, every person on earth has been born spiritually blind. They fall into two categories: those who will never see and know God and those who, by the grace of God and the illumination of the Holy Spirit, are enabled to see and to have intimate fellowship with Him. The deciding factor is how a person is related to Jesus Christ. The person who rejects, the Savior remains forever blind; the person who confesses Him as Lord is given spiritual



sight as well as spiritual life. Unfortunately, men do not universally have the desire for spiritual sight that they do for physical. The vast majority do not know they are spiritually blind and do not care. Even when offered sight, many refuse it.

Jesus “was the true light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man. He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him” (John 1:9-11). Paul declares that, although “since the creation of the world [God’s] invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made,” rebellious mankind “did not honor Him as God, or give thanks; but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened” (Rom. 1:20-21). Even with evidence of God plainly before them, unregenerate men refuse to see Him. Their eyes reject the evidence because their hearts reject the One who gives it.

“A natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God,” Paul explains; “for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised” (1 Cor. 2:14). Unredeemed men are “darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart” (Eph. 4:18).

The Old Testament writers also testified to men’s natural spiritual blindness. The wicked “do not know nor do they understand,” wrote the psalmist; “they walk about in darkness” (Ps. 82:5). The same writer confessed that before he came to know God he “was senseless and ignorant, . . . like a beast before Thee” (Ps. 73:22). We learn from Proverbs that “the way of the wicked is like darkness; they do not know over what they stumble” (Prov. 4:19). Because of their sin and rebelliousness, Jeremiah described God’s chosen nation of Israel as “foolish and senseless people, who have eyes, but see not; who have ears, but hear not” (Jer. 5:21). Micah described Israel’s pagan enemies as those who “do not know the thoughts of the Lord, and they do not understand His purpose” (Mic. 4:12).

Three things contribute to man’s spiritual blindness. The first is sin. When God’s own Son came to earth as the light of the world, “men loved the darkness rather than the light; for their deeds were evil” (John 3:19). The second contributor to spiritual blindness is Satan. As “the god of this world [he] has blinded the minds of the unbelieving, that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Cor. 4:4). The third contributor is God’s sovereign judgment. When, because of their sin and their allegiance to Satan, men persistently reject God’s light, He judicially confirms them in their self-chosen darkness. Of those in Jerusalem who rejected Him, Jesus declared, “If you had known in this day, even you, the things which make for peace! But now they have been hidden from your eyes” (Luke 19:42).

Through the seven parables of Matthew 13 Jesus describes the characteristics of the age between His rejection and His coming again to establish His millennial kingdom. Those parables present “the mysteries of the kingdom,” truths not revealed in the Old Testament but given only to those who during this age trust in Jesus Christ for salvation (13:11). The singular purpose of those particular parables was

to teach that the mystery time, which has now lasted some 2,000 years, is a time of both belief and of unbelief, of receiving and of rejecting.

Following the seven parables, Jesus presented eight illustrations (Matt. 13:53—16:12), six of which focus on His rejection and two on His acceptance. History verifies that rejection of Jesus has been vastly greater than reception of Him, just as those parables and illustrations indicate.

The gospel accounts make clear that, beginning with the ministry of John the Baptist, the most vocal and determined rejection of Christ and His gospel was by the Jewish religious leaders, especially the influential and powerful **Pharisees and Sadducees**.

The events of Matthew 16 began just after the Lord crossed the Sea of Galilee from the Gentile area of Decapolis, where He had miraculously fed “four thousand men, besides women and children,” and came to the Jewish “region of Magadan,” on the western shore (Matt. 15:32-39). The exact location of Magadan, which Mark refers to as Dalmanutha (8:10), is unknown, but Jesus’ opponents came there as soon as they heard He had arrived.

In 16:1-4, Matthew records Jesus’ final invitation to those religious leaders; and by their persistent rejection of Him they confirmed themselves as among the spiritually blind who steadfastly refuse to see. In this brief passage we see four characteristics of those whose spiritual blindness will never end: they seek darkness, they curse the light, they regress still deeper into darkness, and finally they are abandoned by God.

#### THEY SEEK DARKNESS

The first characteristic is seen in the fact that **the Pharisees and Sadducees came up** to Jesus together. Although they ordinarily criticized and despised each other, the two religious groups found common cause in their opposition to Jesus. They were bound together by their love of spiritual darkness.

For the most part, the **Sadducees** were aristocratic, and they traditionally boasted the high priests and chief priests among their numbers. Many of them made fortunes operating the lucrative Temple concessions of money changing and selling of sacrificial animals. **The Pharisees**, on the other hand, were generally from the working class, and many of them, like Paul (Acts 18:3), made their living from a trade. Scribes and priests were found in both parties (see Matt. 3:7; 15:12; 21:15; 23:2-36; Mark 2:16; 3:6; Luke 7:30; 16:14; John 7:32; 8:3-6; 9:40-41).

**The Pharisees** were the more conservative and fundamental, but they held rabbinic tradition to be of equal authority with Scripture (see Matt. 15:2, 6). They were strongly separatistic, continuing the zealous protection of Judaism from Gentile influence that was begun several centuries earlier by the Hasidim in their resistance to the Hellenization campaigns of Antiochus Epiphanes.

The **Sadducees**, on the other hand, cared nothing for rabbinic tradition and had no compunction about making religious, cultural, or political compromises. Their cardinal principle was expediency. Although they claimed to believe Scripture,

their interpretations were so spiritualized that all significant meaning was lost. They were thoroughly liberal and materialistic, not believing in angels, immortality, resurrection of the dead, or anything else supernatural.

Once when Paul was brought before the Sanhedrin he capitalized on the great doctrinal differences between the two groups by identifying himself as a Pharisee and affirming his belief in the resurrection. When he did so, “there arose a dissension between the Pharisees and Sadducees; and the assembly was divided. For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor an angel, nor a spirit; but the Pharisees acknowledge them all. And there arose a great uproar; and some of the scribes of the Pharisaic party stood up and began to argue heatedly, saying, ‘We find nothing wrong with this man; suppose a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?’” (Acts 23:6-9).

Matthew’s use of a single article (**the**) suggests that **the Pharisees** were the main group, with **Sadducees** intermingled among them; and from Mark **8:11** we learn that the Pharisees took the lead in confronting Jesus. Those “blind guides of the blind” (Matt. **15:14**) enlisted the support of men who, if anything, were more spiritually blind than themselves. Instead of coming to Jesus for spiritual sight, they confirmed their love of blindness by making league with other ungodly men against Him. The ritualists and the rationalists joined forces on the basis of mutual contempt for Jesus. That is always the way of those who are willfully, sinfully blind. Their common trust is in themselves and in their own good works, and therefore their common enemy is God and His sovereign grace.

#### THEY CURSE THE LIGHT

A second characteristic of the willfully blind is the other side of the first: they curse the light. The person who is content in his spiritual blindness has no use for spiritual light, because it intrudes into his darkness and exposes his sin. “And this is the judgment,” Jesus said, “that the light is come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light; for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who practices the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God” (John 3:19-21). The Pharisees and Sadducees did not come to Jesus in hope of finding truth for themselves but in hope of finding falsehood in Him. Therefore, **testing Him**, they **asked Him to show them a sign from heaven**.

They did not expect Jesus to perform such **a sign**, and if He had given them one, their unbelief would have remained just as strong. They had already seen sign after sign, the miraculous nature of which was irrefutable. They did not deny His supernatural power but refused to recognize it as being from God, having even accused Him of working as an agent of Satan (Matt. 12:24).

Popular Jewish superstition held that demons could perform earthly miracles but that only God could perform heavenly ones. **From heaven** indicates the desire

to see a miraculous **sign** in the sky. The Pharisees and Sadducees demanded a miracle they thought was beyond Jesus, hoping to prove that His power, and therefore His message, were not divine. He would be publicly discredited, and they would be vindicated.

In their blindness they could not see that Jesus Himself was **a sign from heaven**. Nor could they see that they themselves were helping to fulfill that sign. As the godly Simeon held the infant Jesus in his arms he prophesied, “Behold, this Child is appointed for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and for a sign to be opposed” (Luke 2:34). Because the unbelieving religious leaders refused to recognize God’s supreme Sign, His only Son, they could not accept His lesser signs, despite the evidence they saw with their own eyes. Physical sight is of no help to spiritual blindness, and had those leaders seen a hundred more miracles a hundred times more dramatic, they would simply have been driven to deeper darkness—as their rejection of the miracle of Jesus’ resurrection proved. As Abraham said of the brothers in the story of the rich man and Lazarus, “If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead” (Luke 16:31). Like Pharaoh before Moses, the more they saw God’s power demonstrated, the more they hardened their hearts against Him (Ex. 7-11). Heavenly signs would come in the future (Matt. 24:29-30; Luke 21:11, 25; Acts 2:19; Rev. 15:1), but they would signal the very end.

If a person’s heart is set on darkness, when the light comes he curses it. Proudly confessing that very disposition, the French atheist Voltaire declared, “Even if a miracle should be wrought in the open marketplace before a thousand sober witnesses, I would rather mistrust my senses than admit a miracle.” Unbelief will always find a way to reject the truth, even to the point of denying the undeniable.

The liberal theologian does not prefer the speculations of philosophy or psychology because these are more provable or persuasive than the truths of Scripture but because he prefers man’s wisdom to God’s. And, contrary to his claim, the agnostic does not refuse to believe because he *cannot* know about God but because he *will not* know about Him. The person who turns to rationalism, evolution, skepticism, or simply to himself for meaning and purpose does not do so because of lack of evidence about God and Christ but in spite of it. The person who turns to man-made religion does not do so because no light about the true God is available but because he despises that light and that God.

Men turn to acts of penance, to self-affliction, to confessionals, and to every other human resource to try to expiate particular sins; but they refuse to deal with the root in their hearts, their basic sinful nature with which they do not want to part.

Knowing that the true intent of the Pharisees’ and Sadducees’ demand for a heavenly sign was to discredit Him, Jesus **answered and said to them, “When it is evening, you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.’ And in the morning, ‘There will be a storm today, for the sky is red and threatening.’”** Those sayings correspond to the age-old mariner’s ditty, “Red sky at night, sailor’s

delight. Red sky in the morning, sailor's warning." From many years of observation men learned that a red sky in the evening is usually followed by good weather, whereas a red sky in the morning is often followed by a storm. The religious leaders who confronted Jesus accepted the reliability of that folk meteorology without question.

**"Do you know how to discern the appearance of the sky"** Jesus asked them, **"but cannot discern the signs of the times?"** Both the Pharisees and Sadducees were proud of their religious heritage and considered themselves experts on the things of God. But despite their religious training and positions, their primitive and limited knowledge of weather was far superior to their knowledge of God. "Your sensitivity to weather," Jesus said in effect, "makes a mockery of your insensitivity to God's kingdom. You have no idea of what God is doing in the world. You are oblivious to **the times** in which you are privileged to live, the very times of redemption by God's own Son, before whom you now stand." It was the beginning of the messianic age that Jews had long hoped for, but those Jewish leaders did not recognize it. They were better weathermen than biblical scholars (cf. Luke 12:54-56). They were "blind guides of the blind" (Matt. 15:14). In Matthew 23, Jesus labeled them blind guides (vv. 16, 24) and blind fools (v. 17).

Modern society also has many people with great insight and discernment about the things of the world but who have no comprehension of the things of God. Experts are able to predict whether the stock market will go up or down, whether gold and silver will become more or less valuable, and whether the dollar will become stronger or weaker. Others can predict the direction of interest rates, fashions, the real estate market, and of import/export ratios. Others can predict trends in education, sociology, morality, and government. But our society is short of those who know what God's plan for the world is and that it is still the "last time," the time of the Messiah. What it means to be a citizen of His kingdom escapes them.

In answer to the disciples' question about "the sign of [His] coming, and of the end of the age," Jesus said, "You will be hearing of wars and rumors of wars; . . . nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and in various places there will be famines and earthquakes. . . . And many false prophets will arise, and will mislead many. And because lawlessness is increased, most people's love will grow cold" (Matt. 24:3, 6-7, 11-12).

Those signs that Jesus will return abound in our day. No period of history has experienced more wars or been so preoccupied with the prospect of war as our own. With unprecedented surpluses of food in some parts of the world, other parts still experience devastating famines. Cults and false religions of every sort are proliferating even in countries that have been nominally Christian for hundreds of years. The spirit of lawlessness and self-will is rampant.

Paul declared, "The mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains will do so until he is taken out of the way. And then that lawless one will be revealed whom the Lord will slay with the breath of His mouth and bring to an end by the appearance of His coming" (2 Thess. 2:7-8). The apostle explained to

Timothy that “the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons” (1 Tim. 4:1). Peter wrote of the great apostasy, false teaching, heresies, mockery, and denial of Christ’s return that would characterize the last days (2 Pet. 2:1-3; 3:3-4).

Ezekiel predicted that in the end times God would restore His chosen people to the land He had promised them (Ezek. 34:11-31); and in our present generation that promise has begun to be fulfilled with the reestablishment of the state of Israel. The same prophet wrote of a hostile power from the north that would attack Israel (Ezek. 38); and Russia’s great military might, geography, atheism, and anti-Semitism make that nation a prime prospect for being that hostile power.

Scripture also declares that the end times will be characterized by great concern for world unity, world government, world economics, and world religion (see Dan. 2; 7; Rev. 13; 17-18). The world is looking for stability and security and is ripe for the unifying role of a world leader who can stop wars and bring an end to political, economic, and social chaos—the role that one day will be filled by the antichrist.

All of those signs that mark the end times are characteristic of our day. There can be no doubt that we live near the end of the age, and the concern of believers should be for what the Bible says rather than for what men say and for what God is doing rather than for what men are doing.

#### THEY REGRESS DEEPER INTO SIN

A third characteristic of the spiritually blind who will never see is that they continue to regress deeper and deeper into darkness. They become more and more hardened and blinded, and the very things they suppose make them more pleasing to God drive them further from Him.

Jesus knew the true motive of the Pharisees and Sadducees was to entrap Him, not to be convinced of His messiahship. He also knew that another sign, no matter how astonishing, would not convince them about that which they were determined to reject. It was for this reason He spoke to them in parables, as indicated in Matthew 13:13-15. He would not capitulate to their hypocritical and wicked demand. **“An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign,”** He told them; **“and a sign will not be given it, except the sign of Jonah.”**

**The sign of Jonah** was the final sign Jesus gave to the world, the sign of His victory over sin, death, and Satan through His resurrection. As He had declared to a group of scribes and Pharisees on an earlier occasion, “Just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh shall stand up with this generation at the judgment, and shall condemn it because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and behold, something greater than Jonah is here” (Matt. 12:39-41; for further explanation, see the author’s commentary volume *Matthew 8-15*).

That **sign**, too, would be rejected by the Jewish religious leaders. When they heard of Jesus' resurrection, they bribed the soldiers who guarded His tomb to say that His body was stolen by His disciples (Matt. 28:11-15).

#### THEY ARE ABANDONED BY GOD

The fourth characteristic of those who persist in their love of darkness and rejection of the light is that they are finally abandoned by God, given over by Him to their lusts, impurities, degrading passions, and depraved minds (Rom. 1:24, 26, 28). That which is willful, sinful, and Satanic blindness becomes God's sovereign blindness.

Because the unbelieving Pharisees and Sadducees would not have Him as Lord and Savior, Jesus **left them and went away**. *Kataleipō* (**left**) means to leave behind, and it often carried the idea of forsaking or abandoning (see 2 Pet. 2:15).

That event marked an important transition in Jesus' ministry. Henceforth the Lord spent most of His time with His disciples and little time with the crowds or religious leaders. He turned **away** from those who rejected Him and focused His attention on His own. He gave no more arguments or signs for unbelievers, only additional truth for those who believed.

THE MACARTHUR  
NEW TESTAMENT  
COMMENTARY

**MATTHEW 24-28**

*John MacArthur*

MOODY PUBLISHERS/CHICAGO



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# The Signs of Christ's Coming—part 1

## The Background

(Matthew 24:1-3)

# 1

**And Jesus came out from the temple and was going away when His disciples came up to point out the temple buildings to Him. And He answered and said to them, “Do you not see all these things? Truly I say to you, not one stone here shall be left upon another, which will not be torn down.”**

**And as He was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, “Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?” (24:1-3)**

Jesus' message in Matthew 24–25 is commonly known as the Olivet discourse, so named because it was delivered to the disciples on the Mount of Olives. The theme of the discourse is Christ's second coming at the end of the present age to establish His millennial kingdom on earth.

The message was prompted by the disciples' question in 24:3, “Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?” The answer Jesus gave is the longest answer given to any question asked in the New Testament, and its truths are absolutely essential for understanding His return and the amazing

events associated with it. It is the revelation of our Lord, directly from His own lips, about His return to earth in glory and power.

The teaching of the Olivet discourse is much debated and frequently misunderstood, largely because it is viewed through the lens of a particular theological system or interpretive scheme that makes the message appear complex and enigmatic. But the disciples were not learned men, and Jesus' purpose was to give them clarity and encouragement, not complexity and anxiety. The intricate interpretations that are sometimes proposed for this passage would have left the disciples utterly dumbfounded. It is preferable to take Jesus' words as simply and as straightforwardly as possible.

### PROPHETIC EXPECTATIONS IN JUDAISM

In order to understand better the disciples' question on this occasion it is necessary to know something of the basic hopes and aspirations of the Judaism of that day. As always, the historical setting is an important key to the context. Throughout history people have had a strong desire to know the future, and few societies have been without their seers, mediums, fortune-tellers, and other prognosticators. By various means, all of them deceitful and many of them demonic, such futurists have offered gullible inquirers purported revelations of what lies ahead. Although the Mosaic law strictly forbade consulting mediums and soothsayers (Deut. 18:9-14), Israelites had frequently fallen prey to them, the most prominent instance being that of King Saul's consulting the medium of Endor (1 Sam. 28:3-25; see also 2 Kings 21:6).

There is no evidence that many Jews of Jesus' day were guilty of Saul's offense, but they did have an intense interest in the future. They were tired of being under the domination of pagan oppressors and were eager for the divinely promised deliverance of their Messiah. The Jews were a noble, highly intelligent, and highly gifted people who, humanly speaking, were entirely capable of competent self-rule. Yet for many centuries they had been subdued by one foreign tyrant after another. The northern ten tribes had been conquered by Assyria in 722 B.C., and the southern two tribes fell to Babylon in 586 B.C. Following that were conquests by the Medo-Persians, the Greeks, and finally the Romans.

In their own minds, however, the Jews had always been their own people and had never truly been subjugated to any foreign ruler. It was that abiding and sometimes arrogant spirit of independence even in the midst of oppression that induced some of the Jews to declare before Jesus in the Temple, "We are Abraham's offspring, and have never yet been enslaved to anyone" (John 8:33). They knew all too well, of course, that outwardly they were indeed enslaved, and freedom from that enslavement was the overriding passion of most Jews. Although the majority of them

were not associated with the militant Zealots, they all yearned for Rome to be overthrown and for Israel to become a free nation once again.

The Jews knew intimately the many Old Testament promises of future blessing, deliverance, and prosperity. They knew God had promised to vanquish all the enemies of His chosen people and to establish His eternal kingdom of righteousness and justice on earth. They knew that the Lord's Anointed One—His Messiah, or Christ—would come and establish the rule and reign of David again on earth, a reign of peace, prosperity, and safety that would never end. Their great longing was to see that day when God restored the kingdom as He had promised.

The Jews therefore had great hope for the future. They exulted as they read, "For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; and the government will rest on His shoulders; and His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness from then on and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will accomplish this" (Isa. 9:6-7). They thrilled at the promise that "a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse, and a branch from his roots will bear fruit. And the Spirit of the Lord will rest on Him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and strength, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord" (Isa. 11:1-2).

Israel took immense encouragement from the words of Jeremiah: "Behold, the days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I shall raise up for David a righteous Branch; and He will reign as king and act wisely and do justice and righteousness in the land. In His days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely; and this is His name by which He will be called, 'The Lord our righteousness'" (Jer. 23:5-6; cf. 30:9-10). They longed for the day when the spoil taken from them would be divided among them (Zech. 14:1), when "living waters [would] flow out of Jerusalem" (v. 8), and "there [would] be no more curse, for Jerusalem [would] dwell in security" (v. 11). They rejoiced that "the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which will never be destroyed, and that kingdom will not be left for another people . . . but it will itself endure forever" (Dan. 2:44).

By the time of Jesus, the Jews had formed in their minds a very clear scenario of how they believed those predicted events would unfold. To understand what the Jewish expectations were, it is helpful to read their literature from that time. In his *A History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ* ([Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1893], pp. 154-87), Emil Schuer gives excerpts from numerous extrabiblical Jewish writings of that era which reveal those expectations.

First, consistent with the teaching of Zechariah 14 and other Old Testament prophecies, they believed that the coming of the Messiah would

be preceded by a time of terrible tribulation. Just as a woman experiences intense pain shortly before the delivery of a child, so Israel would experience great torment shortly before the Messiah arrived.

2 Baruch 27 reported,

And honour shall be turned into shame,  
 And strength humiliated into contempt,  
 And probity destroyed,  
 And beauty shall become ugliness . . .  
 And envy shall rise in those who had not thought aught  
 of themselves,  
 And passion shall seize him that is peaceful,  
 And many shall be stirred up in anger to injure many,  
 And they shall rouse up armies in order to shed blood,  
 And in the end they shall perish together with them.

According to another source, there would be “quakings of places, tumult of peoples, schemings of nations, confusion of leaders, disquietude of princes” (2 Esdras [4 Ezra] 9:3).

The Jewish *Sibylline Oracles* declared,

From heaven shall fall fiery swords down to the earth. Lights shall come, bright and great, flashing into the midst of men; and earth, the universal mother, shall shake in these days at the hand of the Eternal. And the fishes of the sea and the beasts of the earth and the countless tribes of flying things and all the souls of men and every sea shall shudder at the presence of the Eternal and there shall be panic. And the towering mountain peaks and the hills of the giants he shall rend, and the murky abyss shall be visible to all. And the high ravines in the lofty mountains shall be full of dead bodies and rocks shall flow with blood and each torrent shall flood the plain. . . . And God shall judge all with war and sword, and there shall be brimstone from heaven, yea stones and rain and hail incessant and grievous. And death shall be upon the four-footed beasts. . . . Yea the land itself shall drink of the blood of the perishing and beasts shall eat their fill of flesh. (3:363ff.)

The Mishna anticipated that just before the coming of Messiah,

arrogance increases, ambition shoots up, . . . the vine yields fruit yet wine is dear. The government turns to heresy. There is no instruction. The synagogue is devoted to lewdness. Galilee is destroyed, Gablan laid waste. The inhabitants of a district go from city to city without finding compassion. The wisdom of the learned is hated, the godly despised, truth is absent.

Boys insult old men, old men stand in the presence of children. The son depreciates the father, the daughter rebels against the mother, the daughter-in-law against the mother-in-law. A man's enemies are his house-fellows.

Second, the popular eschatology of Jesus' day held that in the midst of that turmoil would appear an Elijah-like forerunner heralding the Messiah's coming. It was for that reason that so many Jews were drawn to John the Baptist. Jewish oral tradition maintained that the ownership of any disputed money or property would have to wait "till Elijah comes" before being finally settled.

The third event of that eschatology was the Messiah's appearance, at which time He would establish His kingdom age of glory and would vindicate His people.

The fourth event would be the alliance of the nations to fight against the Messiah. The *Sibylline Oracles* declared,

The kings of the nations shall throw themselves against this land bringing retribution on themselves. They shall seek to ravage the shrine of the mighty God and of the noblest men whensoever they come to the land. In a ring round the city the accursed kings shall place each one his throne with the infidel people by him. And then with a mighty voice God shall speak unto all the undisciplined, empty-minded people and judgment shall come upon them from the mighty God, and all shall perish at the hand of the Eternal. (3:363-72)

In 2 Esdras [4 Ezra] is the prediction, "It shall be that when all the nations hear his (the Messiah's) voice, every man shall leave his own land and the warfare they have one against the other, and the innumerable multitude shall be gathered together desiring to fight against him" (13:33-35). In other words, unbelieving mankind will interrupt all its other warfare in order to unite against the Messiah.

The fifth eschatological event would be the destruction of those opposing nations. Philo wrote that the Messiah would "take the field and make war and destroy great and populous nations." The writer of 2 Esdras declared that the Messiah "shall reprove them for their ungodliness, rebuke them for their unrighteousness, reproach them to their faces with their treacheries—and when he has rebuked them he shall destroy them" (12:32-33). The book of Enoch reported that "it shall come to pass in those days that none shall be saved, either by gold or by silver, and none shall be able to escape. And there shall be no iron for war, nor shall one clothe oneself with a breastplate. Bronze shall be of no service, and tin shall not be esteemed, and lead shall not be desired. And all things shall

be destroyed from the surface of the earth” (52:7-9). All the vast armaments and defenses of the nations will be useless against the Messiah.

Sixth would be the restoration of Jerusalem, either by renovation of the existing city or by the coming down of a completely new Jerusalem from heaven. In either case, the city of the great King would henceforth be pure, holy, and incorruptible. In the book of Enoch, Jerusalem was envisioned as having “all the pillars . . . new and the ornaments larger than those of the first” (Enoch 90:28-29).

Seventh, the Jews scattered throughout the world would be gathered back to Israel. Many Jews today still utter the ancient prayer “Lift up a banner to gather our dispersed and assemble us from the four ends of the earth.” The eleventh chapter of the Psalms of Solomon gives a graphic picture of that regathering:

Blow ye in Zion on the trumpet to summon the saints,  
 Cause ye to be heard in Jerusalem the voice of him  
 that bringeth good tidings;  
 For God hath had pity on Israel in visiting them.  
 Stand on the height, O Jerusalem, and behold thy children,  
 From the East and the West, gathered together by the Lord;  
 From the North they come in the gladness of their God,  
 From the isles afar off God hath gathered them.  
 High mountains hath he abased into a plain for them;  
 The hills fled at their entrance.  
 The woods gave them shelter as they passed by;  
 Every sweet-smelling tree God caused to spring up for them,  
 That Israel might pass by in the visitation of the glory of  
 their God.

Put on, O Jerusalem, thy glorious garments;  
 Make ready thy holy robe;  
 For God hath spoken good for Israel forever and ever,  
 Let the Lord do what he hath spoken concerning  
 Israel and Jerusalem;  
 Let the Lord raise up Israel by his glorious name.  
 The mercy of the Lord be upon Israel forever and ever.

In the eighth event of the Messiah’s coming Palestine would become the center of the world, and all nations would be subjugated to the Lord. “And all the isles and the cities shall say, How doth the Eternal love those men! For all things work in sympathy with them and help them. . . . Come let us all fall upon the earth and supplicate the eternal King, the mighty, everlasting God. Let us make procession to His Temple,



for He is the sole Potentate" (*Sibylline Oracles* 3:690ff.).

Ninth and finally, the Jews of Jesus' day believed that with the establishment of the Messiah's kingdom would come a new and eternal age of peace, righteousness, and divine glory.

Those ancient views of the coming of Christ were extrapolated largely from Old Testament teachings, and they closely correspond to New Testament premillennial doctrine about His second coming. The major difference is that those Jews had no knowledge of His coming twice, the first time to offer Himself as a sacrifice for the world's sin and the second to establish His millennial kingdom on earth. The Jewish people were not looking for inward deliverance from sin but for outward deliverance from political oppression.

In the minds of the Jews of Jesus' day, the time was ripe for the Messiah's coming. They had suffered persecution and subjugation for many centuries and were at that time under the relentless power of Rome. When John the Baptist appeared on the scene, reminiscent of the preaching and life-style of Elijah, the people's interest was intensely piqued. And when Jesus began His ministry of preaching, with unheard of authority and of healing every sort of disease, many Jews were convinced that He was indeed the Messiah. When He rode into Jerusalem on the colt, the crowds were beside themselves with anticipation, and they openly hailed Him as the Messiah, the long-awaited Son of David (Matt. 21:9).

At that point, however, Jesus' ministry rapidly and radically departed from their expectations. According to their thinking, the next steps would be the gathering of the nations against the Messiah and His dramatic and effortless victory over them.

That idea apparently was also still in the minds of the Twelve. Jesus' many predictions that He must suffer, die, and be resurrected had simply not registered with them. In some way or another they either had discounted those teachings or had rationalized and spiritualized them into being something other than literal, physical, and historical realities.

## PROPHETIC DISCUSSIONS WITH JESUS

In fairness to the disciples, the Old Testament prophets also saw the Messiah's coming and establishing His kingdom as a single event. The church age was a mystery to them, a mystery, as Paul explained, "which has been kept secret for long ages past, but now is manifested" (Rom. 16:25-26). Because Israel had obviously experienced tremendous tribulation, because Jesus declared Himself to be the Messiah and identified John the Baptist as His forerunner, and because He had accepted the Messianic acclaim of the people a few days earlier, the disciples understandably thought that the sequence of events would continue as

they expected. They were now certain that Jesus' next move would be to demonstrate His inexorable power over the nations that would soon rise up against Him.

It was doubtlessly such thoughts that had kept Judas superficially committed to stay with Jesus. He expected to be in the Messiah's inner circle when the kingdom was inaugurated and to be given power, wealth, and prestige commensurate with that position.

#### NEAR THE TEMPLE

**And Jesus came out from the temple and was going away when His disciples came up to point out the temple buildings to Him. And He answered and said to them, "Do you not see all these things? Truly I say to you, not one stone here shall be left upon another, which will not be torn down."** (24:1-2)

Jesus had spent all day Wednesday of Passover week in **the temple**, giving His last public teaching and pronouncing His final and most intense judgment on the false religious leaders and on the nation of Israel. Now He **was going away** to the Mount of Olives to be alone with **His disciples**.

As they were leaving Jerusalem, the **disciples came up to point out the temple buildings** to Jesus. The other two synoptic gospels report that they were pointing to **the temple** in admiration, saying, "Teacher, behold what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!" (Mark 13:1; cf. Luke 21:5).

**The temple** and its adjunct **buildings** stood on the top of a mount. A massive retaining wall on the south and west sides helped support the mount itself as well as the Temple. The Temple was awe-inspiring by any standards, but to a group of common men from rural Galilee it must have been a breathtaking marvel. They could not conceive how such an enormous structure could have been built or decorated so magnificently. The Roman historian Tacitus reported that it was a place of immense wealth, and the Babylonian Talmud said, "He that never saw the temple of Herod never saw a fine building." Some of the stones measured 40 feet by 12 by 12 and weighed up to a hundred tons, quarried as a single piece and transported many miles to the building site.

The disciples were perhaps wondering how such an amazing edifice, especially one dedicated to the glory of God, could be left desolate, as Jesus had just predicted. They should have remembered Ezekiel's vision of God's glory departing from the Temple and going "up from the midst of the city" (Ezek. 11:23). The holy sanctuary that had once been God's house was His no longer. It is now "your house" Jesus had said to

the unbelieving Jews before He left **the temple**, and it “is being left to you desolate” (Matt. 23:38), because the glory of the Lord would soon depart from it. The beautiful **buildings** that had been devoted to God’s glory and that should have honored Jesus would henceforth be devoted to desolation and destruction.

Jesus therefore responded to the disciples’ admiring comments by saying, **“Do you not see all these things? Truly I say to you, not one stone here shall be left upon another, which will not be torn down.”** The disciples’ jaws must have dropped when they heard those incredible words. They could not imagine how the Temple could be destroyed or why God would allow such a thing to happen.

Yet that is exactly what God allowed less than forty years later. When the Romans sacked Jerusalem in A.D. 70 and massacred most of its citizens, they also set fire to the Temple and razed it, just as Jesus predicted. The only stones left intact were the huge foundation stones, which were not part of the Temple edifice proper. Josephus commented that a person visiting the site after the destruction could not believe that anyone had ever inhabited the place, much less that one of the most magnificent structures of the ancient world had stood there only a short while before.

Shocked as they were to realize that the Temple would be destroyed, the disciples were no doubt heartened as well, thinking that that event would be related to the Messiah’s expected purification of Jerusalem, which would occur immediately after He destroyed the nations.

#### ON THE MOUNT

**And as He was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, “Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?”** (24:3)

Upon leaving the Temple, Jesus and the Twelve left Jerusalem through the eastern gate, crossed the Kidron Valley, and ascended the Mount of Olives. As they traveled that short distance, the disciples were probably discussing the question that Peter, James, John, and Andrew would ask Jesus on their behalf (Mark 13:3). As the sun was setting over Jerusalem and the Temple was silhouetted by the last rays of sunlight, they asked the Lord, **“Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?”**

For some time the disciples had been convinced “that the kingdom of God was going to appear immediately” (Luke 19:11). Therefore, in the context of the situation and of the disciples’ probable frame of mind, the word **when** seems to imply immediacy, suggesting the time might be

tomorrow; the day after, or no later than the end of Passover.

**These things** referred to what Jesus had just been talking about, namely, the former house of God that would soon be left desolate (23:38) and destroyed (24:2). The disciples were expecting the final stages of the Messiah's work to unfold in rather quick succession. The nations surely would rise up against Him, He would defeat them swiftly, purify Jerusalem, regather the Jews from around the world, and establish His glorious kingdom.

**"What will be the sign of Your coming?"** they now wanted to know. "What would the first indicator be? How will we know when those remaining events will transpire?" They still understood the Messiah's **coming** as a single continuum of events, having no comprehension of the church age that would intervene between His two comings. And they probably thought that **the sign of Christ's coming** would be something appropriately spectacular, such as a great darkness at midday, a brilliant light at night, the appearance of an angelic host, or a great blare of heavenly trumpets.

This was possibly the most exciting part of the disciples' experience with Christ, as they contemplated the imminence of His millennial kingdom. Based on what Jesus had just said, the disciples believed that the next time the unbelieving Jews whom Jesus had just confronted in the Temple would see Him would be when He came in His glory and they would be constrained to declare, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!" (23:39). More than ever, they were persuaded that that day could not be far off.

Even after the resurrection, the disciples still held to the same expectation. The last question they asked Jesus before His ascension was, "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). Jesus' death and resurrection had not lessened their anticipation but immensely heightened it. Surely now that He had proved death had no hold over Him it was time to proclaim Himself King, destroy His enemies, and inaugurate His kingdom.

The **coming** that the disciples had in mind was not a second coming. They saw His **coming** just as the Old Testament prophets had seen and predicted it, compressed into an unbroken series of events that would occur over a relatively short period of time.

**Coming** translates *parousia*, which has the basic meaning of presence and secondarily carries the idea of arrival. The disciples' question might therefore be paraphrased, "What will be the sign of Your manifesting Yourself in Your full, permanent presence as Messiah and King?" They did not use *parousia* in the specific and more technical sense that Jesus used it later in this chapter (vv. 27, 37, 39) and as it is often used elsewhere in the New Testament in referring to His second coming (see, e.g., 1 Thess. 3:13; 2 Thess. 2:8; 1 John 2:28). They were not thinking of Jesus'

returning, because they had no idea of His leaving, but were thinking rather of His perfected Messianic presence, which they expected Him to manifest presently.

**End** translates *sunteleia*, a compound word that refers to completion, as in the final culmination of a planned series of events. In the disciples' minds **the end of the age** would accompany Jesus' full manifestation of His messianic power and glory, bringing to a close the era of man's sin and rebellion against God and ushering in the divine kingdom of righteousness and justice.

Jesus used the phrase **the end of the age** in the parable of the wheat and tares and the parable of the dragnet, where in both cases it represented the gathering of the wicked by God's angels in preparation for judgment (Matt. 13:39, 49). He also used the phrase at the conclusion of the Great Commission, assuring the disciples, "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:20).

The disciples' question was about the ultimate **end of the age**, not simply the end of an era or epoch of history, but the final end to the present world system of darkness and sin—an end they expected soon. It was also, of course, a question about the beginning of a new and eternal age of light, righteousness, truth, and justice. The ungodly would be forever damned, and the godly would be forever blessed. When would that transpire, they wanted to know, and what sign would herald its arrival?

THE MACARTHUR  
NEW TESTAMENT  
COMMENTARY  
MARK 1-8

*John MacArthur*

MOODY PUBLISHERS/CHICAGO

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# The Herald of the New King (Mark 1:1–8)

# 1

**The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in Isaiah the prophet: “Behold, I send My messenger ahead of You, Who will prepare Your way; The voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make ready the way of the Lord, Make His paths straight.’” John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And all the country of Judea was going out to him, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins. John was clothed with camel’s hair and wore a leather belt around his waist, and his diet was locusts and wild honey. And he was preaching, and saying, “After me One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to stoop down and untie the thong of His sandals I baptized you with water; but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” (1:1–8)**

No narrative is more compelling, and no message more essential, than the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is the greatest story ever told because it

centers on the greatest person to ever walk this earth. The history of His earthly ministry is perfectly recorded in four complementary accounts—written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Their writings, known collectively as the four Gospels, provide a factual record of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. Matthew and John were apostolic eyewitnesses to the events of which they wrote; Luke thoroughly investigated the details of our Lord’s ministry in order to produce his testimony (cf. Luke 1:3–4); and, according to early church tradition, Mark wrote his gospel based on the preaching of the apostle Peter. Though penned by different men, these four accounts harmonize perfectly, providing their readers with a full-orbed understanding of the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. (For an integrated harmony of the Gospels, see John MacArthur, *One Perfect Life* [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012].) Of the four gospel writers, only Mark used the word **gospel** (*euangelion*) to introduce his history of the Lord Jesus. In keeping with his quick, staccato style, Mark opens his account with one brief introductory phrase: **“The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”**

The word **gospel** is a familiar one to us—frequently used to designate the first four books of the New Testament. But that is not how the biblical writers employed the term, nor is it how Mark uses it in the opening verse of his historical account. In the New Testament, the **gospel** is never a reference to a book; rather, it always refers to the message of salvation. That is Mark’s intended meaning here. His first-century audience would have understood the word “gospel” to mean “good news” or “glad tidings” of salvation. But it had an even more specific meaning that would have been familiar to both Jewish and Gentile people in ancient times.

First-century Jews would have been familiar with the word *euangelion* from its occurrence in the Septuagint—the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament. There it is used to speak of military victory, political triumph, or physical rescue (cf. 1 Sam. 31:9; 2 Sam. 4:10; 18:20–27; 2 Kings 7:9; Ps. 40:9). Significantly, the term is also found in a messianic context, where it points to the ultimate salvation of God’s people through the messianic King. Speaking of Israel’s future deliverance, the prophet Isaiah proclaimed:

Get yourself up on a high mountain,  
O Zion, bearer of good news,  
Lift up your voice mightily,  
O Jerusalem, bearer of good news;  
Lift it up, do not fear.  
Say to the cities of Judah,  
“Here is your God!”  
Behold, the Lord God will come with might,  
With His arm ruling for Him.  
Behold, His reward is with Him  
And His recompense before Him.  
(Isa. 40:9–10)

In those verses, the Septuagint translates the Hebrew word for “good news” (*basar*) with forms of the Greek word *euangelion*. In Isaiah 40, this “good news” consisted of more than mere tidings of military victory or physical rescue. It encompassed a message of ultimate victory, triumph, and eternal rescue, making it the best news possible. After thirty-nine chapters of judgment and rebuke, Isaiah concluded his prophetic masterpiece (in chapters 40–66) with promises of hope and deliverance. Those promises proclaimed the reality of God’s future reign and the restoration of His people.

In Isaiah 52:7, we find another familiar proclamation of hope:

How lovely on the mountains  
Are the feet of him who brings good news,  
Who announces peace  
And brings good news of happiness,  
Who announces salvation,  
And says to Zion, “Your God reigns!”

As in Isaiah 40:9, the prophet used the Hebrew term *basar* or “good news” (cf. Isa. 61:1–2), which is again translated by *euangelion* in the Septuagint. Significantly, this passage precedes Isaiah’s extended discussion of the Suffering Servant—the Messiah through whom this promised salvation would come (Isa. 52:13–53:12). When Mark stated that this was the **gospel of Jesus Christ**, his use of the word *Christos* (the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew “Messiah”) would have made this connection inescapable in the minds of those familiar with the Septuagint. The word **gospel**, which was associated with the Messiah, was a word of enthronement and royal exaltation; the glorious tidings of the

King of kings coming to take His rightful throne.

The term *euangelion* also had special significance to those outside of Judaism. Though largely ignorant of Jewish history, first-century Romans would have similarly understood the term to refer to the good tidings of a coming king. A Roman inscription dating back to 9 B.C. provides insight into how the word **gospel** was understood in an ancient Gentile context. Speaking of the birth of Caesar Augustus, a portion of the inscription reads:

Whereas the Providence . . . which has ordered the whole of our life, showing concern and zeal, has ordained the most perfect consummation for human life by giving to it Augustus, by filling him with virtue for doing the work of a benefactor among men, and by sending him, as it were, [as] a saviour for us and those who come after us, to make war to cease, to create order everywhere . . . and whereas the birthday of the God [Augustus] was the beginning of the world of the glad tidings that have come to men through him. . . . (*Inscrip. Priene*, cited from Gene L. Gree, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002] 94)

The inscription speaks of “glad tidings” (a form of *euangelion*) to describe the birth and reign of Caesar Augustus—a ruler whom the Romans regarded as their divine deliverer. The word **gospel** thus functioned as a technical term, even in secular society, to refer to the arrival, ascendancy, and triumph of an emperor.

As these examples from both Jewish and pagan sources illustrate, the first-century readers of Mark’s account would have understood the **gospel** to be a royal pronouncement, declaring that a powerful monarch had arrived—one who would usher in a new order of salvation, peace, and blessing. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Mark chose that word in order to effectively communicate—both to Jews and to Gentiles—that he was presenting the good news of the divine King.

Mark opens his account by noting that this is **the beginning** of his royal declaration. Such naturally stands at the head of his historical account. Yet, it also serves as a reminder that what follows is not the end of the story. The history of Jesus Christ is still being written. The King has not fully taken His throne. One day, He will return to establish His kingdom and He will reign as the eternal Sovereign. Mark’s account only

begins to tell the story of the arrival, ascendancy, establishment, and enthronement of the new King who is far more glorious than all other kings.

In this way, Mark's record of the life of the Lord Jesus opens with language that would signal to his readers that the most glorious King has come—and it is not Caesar. In fact, this divine Monarch sets Himself against all other earthly rivals including Caesar. He is the theme, not only of Mark's history but of all history. And what is His name? Mark wastes no time in declaring who He is: **Jesus Christ, the Son of God.**

The name **Jesus** (Greek, *Iesous*) is His human name. It is a Greek form of the name Joshua (Hebrew, *Yeshua*), which means "Yahweh is salvation." As the angel explained to Joseph, "You shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21). The term **Christ** is not a name but a title. It is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word translated "messiah," which means "anointed one." A royal title, it was used in the Old Testament to refer to the divinely appointed kings of Israel (cf. 1 Sam. 2:10; 2 Sam. 22:51) and ultimately to the great eschatological deliverer and ruler, the Messiah (Dan. 9:25–26; cf. Isa. 9:1–7; 11:1–5; 61:1). Any Jewish reader would have immediately understood the significance of the title—an explicit reference to the promised Savior of Israel.

The name **Son of God** speaks of Jesus' lineage and right to rule. He is one in nature with God—coeternal and coequal with the Father. For those Roman pagans who wrongly regarded Caesar as a god, Mark introduces them to the true divine King: the Lord Jesus Christ. As Nathaniel said to Jesus, "You are the Son of God, You are the King of Israel" (John 1:49). Throughout the course of His earthly ministry, Jesus repeatedly demonstrated Himself to be the divine King, and Mark is careful to present the overwhelming case to his readers (cf. 3:11; 5:7; 9:7; 13:32; 15:39). In the first half of his gospel record (chapters 1–8), Mark highlights the Lord's astonishing words and works. In the second half (chapters 9–16), he focuses on Jesus' death and resurrection. Both sections reach the same inevitable conclusion: through His words, works, death, and resurrection, Jesus proved Himself to be the promised messianic King, the Son of God and Savior of the world. Peter's confession articulates this theme in unmistakable language: "You are the Christ" (Mark 8:29; cf. Matt. 16:16). That this majestic confession stands in the

middle of the book is certainly no accident. It represents the very heart of Mark's message: the Lord Jesus is exactly who He claimed to be.

In his account **of the gospel of Jesus Christ**, Mark is consumed with the arrival of the greatest King ever: the messianic Monarch who will introduce His glorious kingdom of salvation and usher in a new era for the world. But Mark's gospel is only the beginning of the good news because the story of Christ's kingdom will continue through all of human history and into eternity. Mark introduces the sovereign Savior by looking at three facets of His royal arrival: the promise of the new King, the prophet of the new King, and the preeminence of the new King.

#### THE PROMISE OF THE NEW KING

**As it is written in Isaiah the prophet: “Behold, I send My messenger ahead of You, Who will prepare Your way; The voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make ready the way of the Lord, Make His paths straight.’”** (1:2–3)

Having introduced his account as a royal proclamation of the divine King, Mark continues his narrative by introducing the King's forerunner, John the Baptist. Mark's initial focus on John, rather than Jesus, might seem surprising to modern readers. But it is perfectly in keeping with Mark's purpose (to present Jesus Christ as the divine King) and would have been expected by his first-century audience. Earthly monarchs in the ancient world invariably sent official messengers before them to prepare the way, announce their coming, and make the people ready to receive them. So also, the arrival of the divine King was preceded by a royal herald who clearly announced His coming.

In order to introduce John the Baptist, Mark references two Old Testament prophecies—Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3—each of which foretold the ministry of the Messiah's forerunner. The phrase **it is written** was a normal way for New Testament writers to designate quotations from the Old Testament (cf. 7:6; 9:13; 14:21, 27; Matt. 4:4, 6, 7; Luke 2:23; 3:4; John 6:45; 12:14; Acts 1:20; 7:42; Rom. 3:4; 8:36; 1 Cor. 1:31; 9:9; 2 Cor. 8:15; 9:9; Gal. 3:10; 4:22; Heb. 10:7; 1 Peter 1:16). The fact that Mark does not

mention Malachi's name but introduces both with the phrase "**As it is written in Isaiah the prophet**" is not problematic. It was not uncommon at that time, when citing multiple Old Testament prophets, to refer only to the more prominent one and tuck in the others. Because these two prophecies fit together so perfectly and both refer to the same person, they may have been frequently used together by early Christians. The other gospel writers also applied these Old Testament passages to John (cf. Matt. 3:3; 11:10; Luke 3:4-6; 7:27; John 1:23).

Mark's appeal to the ancient Hebrew prophets is an important one, demonstrating that the King's arrival was not a secondary plan or an afterthought. This was the very plan that God had been working out from eternity past. In keeping with that plan, the ancient prophets had predicted the coming of the King's forerunner hundreds of years before he was born.

Mark begins by referencing Malachi 3:1, "**Behold, I send My messenger ahead of You, Who will prepare Your way.**" The Lord Jesus Himself declared this passage to refer to John the Baptist (Matt. 11:10; Luke 7:27). John was sent by God **ahead of** the Messiah as a royal herald to **prepare the way** for the divine King's arrival. Such preparation came through proclamation. John was called to be a preacher, who made a strong call for people to ready themselves for the new King's arrival. An expanded translation of Malachi 3:1 might read, "Behold, I, Jehovah, send My messenger John the Baptist to be the forerunner for You, the Messiah, and to prepare the people for Your coming."

Mark's use of Old Testament prophecy continues with a reference to Isaiah 40:3, "**The voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Make ready the way of the Lord, make His paths straight.'**" This passage expands on the mission of the Messiah's herald. In the ancient world, a royal forerunner was charged with making the road ready for the king's arrival. But how was John to do that for the coming Messiah? Rather than clearing literal roads of physical debris, John sought to remove obstacles of stubborn unbelief from the hearts and minds of sinners. The **way of the Lord** is the way of repentance, of turning from sin to righteousness, and of turning spiritual **paths** that are crooked into ones that are **straight** and holy.

In keeping with his calling, John preached to the multitudes who came to hear him **in the wilderness**, fervently pleading with them to

repent. With the fiery **voice** of an impassioned prophet, he was **crying** out with shouts, groans, and pleas for sinners to forsake their sin and seek the Savior. John was both a prophet and the fulfillment of prophecy. He was the last of the Old Testament prophets; yet he was also the forerunner whose ministry the Old Testament prophets had foretold. As the personal herald of the divine King, John was given unparalleled privilege. Because of his elevated role, being so closely associated with the Messiah's coming, he was the greatest prophet to ever live (Matt. 11:11).

As with many passages in the book of Isaiah, the prophecies of Isaiah 40 (including verse 3) anticipated both a short-term, partial fulfillment and a long-term, full fulfillment. In the short-term, the words of Isaiah 40 promised the Jews of the Babylonian captivity that they would one day return to Israel. God would lead them back to their homeland after seven decades of bondage, making a straight path of deliverance for them. When they arrived, the Lord would be with them (cf. Isa. 40:9-11). But Isaiah's prophecy went beyond the Babylonian captivity—since not everything Isaiah prophesied was fulfilled during the Jews' return to Israel in the sixth century B.C. In the long-term sense, Isaiah's prophecy pointed to the coming of the messianic King, and to the one who would precede Him as His forerunner.

All of this was promised in the Old Testament. Mark highlights these promises because he knows they will resonate with his readers, whether Jew or Gentile. The King's arrival—being properly preceded by a royal herald—was promised by God through the Hebrew prophets in centuries past. But there is an additional aspect to those Old Testament prophecies that must not be overlooked. They not only describe the Messiah's forerunner, they also reveal the divine character of the Messiah Himself.

The full text of Malachi 3:1 reads: "Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming," says the Lord of hosts." The implications of that prophecy are profound. In that verse, the Lord explained that the coming King, the one before whom the forerunner would be sent, is "Me"—namely, God Himself. The prophecy continues with a promise that the Lord would suddenly come to His temple. It is



no accident that Christ began His public ministry by going to the temple and cleansing it (John 2:13–22). Mark, of course, references only the first part of Malachi 3:1. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he paraphrases it slightly (changing the “Me” to “You”) in order to emphasize that the divine pronoun in Malachi 3:1 refers to the Lord Jesus. His use of this Old Testament passage underscores the divine nature of the Messiah. The new King is none other than God Himself.

The testimony to Christ’s deity is also seen in Isaiah 40:3, where Isaiah prophesied that Messiah’s forerunner would “clear the way for the Lord in the wilderness” and “make smooth in the desert a highway for our God.” The Hebrew word for “Lord” is *Yahweh*, the covenant name for God. The connection is unmistakable: the Messiah is one in nature with Yahweh. The testimony of that reality would be clearly articulated at Jesus’ baptism. Just a few verses later, in Mark 1:11, we find the words of the Father, “You are My beloved Son, in You I am well-pleased.”

The world had never seen a King like this. The God of the universe broke into history to provide salvation, blessing, and peace. His arrival had been promised from long ago. He was preceded by a royal herald who proclaimed His coming. The King’s name is Jesus, and He is the Christ, the Son of God.

#### THE PROPHET OF THE NEW KING

**John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And all the country of Judea was going out to him, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins. John was clothed with camel’s hair and wore a leather belt around his waist, and his diet was locusts and wild honey.**  
(1:4–6)

After referencing Old Testament prophecy about the Messiah’s forerunner, Mark continues by stating his name: **John the Baptist**. The name **John** was common in first-century Israel. It means “the Lord is gracious” and is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew name “Johanan” (cf.

2 Kings 25:23; 1 Chr. 3:15; Jer. 40:8). The title **the Baptist** is literally “the baptizer,” a name that distinguished **John** from others with that same name, and identified him with one of the most recognizable aspects of his ministry. John **appeared in the wilderness**, spending the duration of his ministry along the Jordan River, about twenty to thirty miles south of the Sea of Galilee (cf. John 3:23). He had, in fact, grown up **in the wilderness** (cf. Luke 1:80) and that is where he preached and ministered, away from the hubbub of the cities.

The **wilderness** had great significance in Jewish history; it was a constant reminder of the exodus from Egypt and entrance into the Promised Land. That significance would not have been easily missed by those who traveled to hear John’s **preaching** and witness his ministry of **baptism**. As William Lane explains:

The summons to be baptized in the Jordan meant that Israel must come once more to the wilderness. As Israel long ago had been separated from Egypt by a pilgrimage through the waters of the Red Sea, the nation is exhorted again to experience separation; the people are called to a second exodus in preparation for a new covenant with God. . . . As the people heed John’s call and go out to him in the desert far more is involved than contrition and confession. They return to a place of judgment, the wilderness, where the status of Israel as God’s beloved son must be re-established in the exchange of pride for humility. The willingness to return to the wilderness signifies the acknowledgment of Israel’s history as one of disobedience and rebellion, and a desire to begin once more. (*The Gospel according to Mark*, New International Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974], 50–51)

John’s ministry centered on the **preaching of a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins**. As noted earlier, in ancient times, the envoy of the arriving king would go before him, removing all the obstacles in the path and making sure the people were ready to receive the king. But how were the people to prepare for the arrival of the messianic King? They needed to forsake their sin and receive God’s forgiveness. In order to demonstrate their repentance, John called them to be baptized.

John’s **baptism** was a onetime act, distinguishing it from other ritual Jewish washings. In Jewish practice, the closest parallel to John’s

baptism was the onetime washing of Gentile proselytes, a rite that symbolized both their rejection of paganism and their acceptance of the true faith. The ceremony was the mark of an outsider's becoming a part of God's chosen people. For a Gentile proselyte to be baptized was nothing extraordinary. But John's call for Jews to be baptized was radical. In essence, it required them to see themselves as outsiders who must acknowledge that they were no more fit for the Messiah's kingdom than the Gentiles. John's baptism directly confronted the religious hypocrisy that permeated first-century Judaism. It challenged his listeners to consider the reality that neither being a physical descendant of Abraham nor a fastidious observer of Pharisaical laws were sufficient grounds by which to gain admittance into God's kingdom.

Instead, what was required was an internal change of the person's heart, mind, and will. The word **repentance** (*metanoia*) implies a genuine turning from sin and self to God (cf. 1 Thess. 1:9). True **repentance** involves a transformation of one's nature—making it a gracious work of God (Acts 11:18; 2 Tim. 2:25). The fruit (or subsequent evidence) of that internal transformation is seen in changed behavior. As John the Baptist told the crowds, "Therefore bear fruits in keeping with repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father,' for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham" (Luke 3:8; cf. Matt. 3:8–9).

An initial evidence of that genuine heart transformation was a willingness to be baptized. Those whose self-righteous pride remained would never undergo such a public, humbling act. But those whose minds had truly turned to forsake their sin and pride would eagerly declare themselves to be no better than Gentiles—sinners who recognized their unworthiness and their need to walk rightly before God. Thus, baptism marked the outward profession of inward repentance; it did not generate repentance but was its result (Matt. 3:7–8). Moreover, the act of **baptism** did not produce the **forgiveness of sins** but served as an external symbol of the fact that, through faith and repentance, sinners are graciously forgiven by God (cf. Luke 24:47; Acts 3:19; 5:31; 2 Cor. 7:10). Though John's ministry of baptism preceded Christian baptism (cf. Acts 19:3–4), it served a vital role in preparing the people for the arrival of the Messiah. As the apostle Paul explained many years later, "John baptized

with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in Him who was coming after him, that is, in Jesus” (Acts 19:4).

John proclaimed an urgent message of repentance in preparation for the coming of the messianic King. Consequently, his **preaching** focused on divine wrath and judgment. He confronted the Jewish religious leaders with vivid language: “You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” (Matt. 3:7). Speaking of the coming Messiah, he further warned the people, “His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire” (Matt. 3:12). John’s fiery sermons drove the people to address their sin, as they considered the possibility of being excluded from God’s kingdom. Before they could hear the good news of salvation, they needed to be confronted with the bad news regarding their own wickedness. Only through genuine faith and repentance could their sins be forgiven.

No first-century Jew wanted to be left out of the messianic kingdom. And so the people of Israel flocked from the cities into the wilderness in order to hear from this rugged, countercultural prophet. As Mark explains, **all the country of Judea was going out to him, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins.** In the words of one commentator:

By making the pilgrimage to the Jordan, those who believed John’s message showed that they wanted to be visibly separated from those under judgment when the Lord came. They wanted to be members of the future purified Israel. Undergoing John’s baptism helped them anticipate that they were not only God’s covenant people, but that they would remain in that covenant after God cast others out. In order to be assured that they would be included in the future forgiven Israel whose iniquity would be removed, they needed to repent and ask for personal forgiveness now. (Mark Horne, *The Victory According to Mark* [Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2003], 27)

Multitudes from **Jerusalem**, Jericho, and **all the country of Judea** came to hear John, to confess their sins, and to be baptized by him. By **confessing their sins**, the people agreed with God that they had broken His law and needed to be forgiven. But in the end, this revival proved

to be largely superficial. Sadly, the nation that flocked to John at the peak of his popularity would later reject the Messiah to whom his whole ministry pointed.

The territory of **Judea** was the southernmost division of first-century Israel, with Samaria and Galilee to the north. It included the city of **Jerusalem** and extended from the Mediterranean Sea in the west to the Jordan River in the east, and from Bethel in the north to Beersheba in the south. The **Jordan River** is still Israel's major river, flowing from the Sea of Galilee south to the Dead Sea. Tradition suggests that John began his ministry of baptism at the fords near Jericho.

Having described the nature of John's ministry (in vv. 4–5), Mark continues in verse 6 by describing John himself. The New Testament records many wonderful stories about John the Baptist—from his supernatural conception by aged parents, to his being filled with the Holy Spirit while in his mother's womb, to the fact that Jesus called him the greatest man who had lived up to that time. But Mark leaves out those details. In fact, his description of John is short and to the point: **John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist, and his diet was locusts and wild honey** (1:6). John's physical description fits a man who lived in the wilderness, where clothing fashions were ignored for rugged durability, and where **locusts and wild honey** provided viable sustenance.

But there is more here than a superficial statement about John's wardrobe and eating habits. A hairy garment made of **camel's hair**, girded **around** the **waist** by a rough **leather belt**, would have designated John as a prophet. In fact, the prophet Elijah wore similar attire. In 2 Kings 1:8, Elijah is described as “a hairy man with a leather girdle bound about his loins.” The reference to Elijah as a “hairy man” describes the hairy garments made of animal skin that he wore. Those garments were held in place by a leather belt around the waist.

The similarities between John and Elijah are hardly coincidental. As the angel Gabriel explained to Zacharias regarding John:

He will be great in the sight of the Lord; and he will drink no wine or liquor, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God. It is he who will go as a forerunner before Him *in the spirit and*

*power of Elijah*, to turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous, so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord. (Luke 1:15–17, emphasis added)

Jesus reiterated the connection between Elijah and John in Matthew 11:12–14. There He told the crowds who followed Him, “From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and violent men take it by force. For all the prophets and the Law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to accept it, John himself is Elijah who was to come” (cf. Mal. 4:5). The Lord’s point was that if the Jews had received John’s message as God’s message and received the Messiah he proclaimed, he would indeed have been the Elijah-like figure spoken of by Malachi. But because Israel ultimately rejected John’s gospel witness, another prophet like Elijah is still yet to come, perhaps as one of the two witnesses of Revelation 11:1–19.

John’s diet included **locusts**, which the Mosaic law permitted the Israelites to eat (Lev. 11:22). **Locusts** provided a good source of protein and could be prepared in a variety of ways. Once the wings and legs were removed, the body could be roasted, boiled, dried, and even ground up and baked into bread. **Wild honey** was also available (cf. Judg. 14:8–9; 1 Sam. 14:25–26), and provided a sweet counterpart to locusts. John’s simple diet was in keeping with his status as a lifelong Nazirite (cf. Luke 1:15).

Even Mark’s short description of John is enough to indicate that he must have been a shocking figure to those who saw him. He claimed to be a messenger from God, but his lifestyle was radically different than the other religious leaders of first-century Judaism. Those leaders (the Sadducees and Pharisees) were refined, well-dressed, and sophisticated. John clearly did not care about worldly comforts and even made a point of refusing them. His austere clothing, diet, and way of life were in themselves a rebuke of Israel’s religious elite, who indulged in the pomp and circumstance of their privileged positions. It confronted the common people also—since many of them admired the worldly advantages of their leaders. Significantly, John did not call the people to live or dress like he did. His goal was not to turn them into social recluses or ascetics. Nonetheless, his physical appearance served as a dramatic reminder that the pleasures and pursuits of this world can be stumbling blocks that

keep people from rejecting their sin and turning to God.

#### THE PREMINENCE OF THE NEW KING

**And he was preaching, and saying, “After me One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to stoop down and untie the thong of His sandals. I baptized you with water; but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”** (1:7–8)

The sum of John’s ministry is articulated in these two verses. The entire purpose behind his **preaching** (literally, proclaiming) was to point his listeners to the **One** who was **coming** after him. That is what it meant to be the forerunner, the herald who directed everyone’s attention away from himself and toward the coming King. As John later explained to his disciples, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30). He rightly understood and embraced his role as the Messiah’s messenger.

Thus he told the crowds, **“After me One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to stoop down and untie the thong of His sandals.”** The Greek includes a definite article, indicating that John was speaking about *the One* who was **coming**. John’s ministry did not precede just any king or monarch. Rather, he was pointing to *the* divine King whose coming was foretold by the Old Testament prophets. John readily acknowledged that this coming King was **mightier than** he. The Messiah would be greater in every respect, so much so that John did not regard himself as even being **fit to stoop down and untie the thong of His sandals**. Untying the master’s sandals and tending his dusty feet was a task performed by the lowest of slaves. John’s point, then, was that he did not consider himself worthy to be even the lowest slave of such an infinitely exalted King.

John continued to distance himself from Christ by noting the immeasurable difference between their two ministries: **“I baptized you with water; but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”** It is as if John is saying, “All I can do is wash you on the outside with water. But He can transform and cleanse you on the inside.” Being baptized **with the Holy Spirit** refers to the regenerative work of salvation (cf. Ezek. 36:24–

27; John 3:5–6). This is not a reference to an ecstatic postconversion experience, as some contemporary charismatics claim. Rather, it is the washing of regeneration and the renewing of the Holy Spirit that occurs at the moment of salvation (Acts 1:5; 8:16–17; 1 Cor. 12:13; Titus 3:5–7). This is the purification of the new covenant, and the transformation of the new birth.

In the upper room, the Lord Jesus promised to send the **Holy Spirit** to His disciples as “another Helper, that He may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not behold Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you, and will be in you” (John 14:16–17). That promise was initially fulfilled on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1–4). Since that time, every believer experiences the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit beginning at the moment of salvation (cf. 1 Cor. 6:19).

John’s statement regarding the Holy Spirit must have thrilled the hearts of the faithful Jews who heard him preach. In keeping with the promises of the Old Testament, they hoped for the day when God would “pour out [His] Spirit on all mankind” (Joel 2:28), when He would “sprinkle clean water on [them],” and “give [them] a new heart and put a new spirit within [them]” (Ezek. 36:25–26). In that day, their hearts would at last be baptized in the very power and person of God Himself (cf. Jer. 31:33). This supernatural power distinguishes the ministry of the new King from any other. John was not able to give the Holy Spirit. Only God can do that. And the coming King is God in human flesh, and He will baptize sinners with the saving power of the Spirit’s regenerative work.

John’s message summarizes the heart of the gospel, bringing us back to Mark’s use of the term in verse 1. The gospel is good news—the glad tidings of a new King who is bringing a new kingdom. The new King is the long-awaited Messiah. He is God Himself. His kingdom is a kingdom of forgiveness, blessing, and salvation. It comes to those who repent. And those who do will be baptized with the Holy Spirit. This gospel is the culmination of all past redemptive history and the door to all future glory. And John the Baptist, the faithful herald and forerunner, had come to announce His arrival.



THE MACARTHUR  
NEW TESTAMENT  
COMMENTARY  
**MARK 9-16**

*John MacArthur*

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# The Unveiled Son

## (Mark 9:1–8)

# 1

And Jesus was saying to them, “Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power.” Six days later, Jesus took with Him Peter and James and John, and brought them up on a high mountain by themselves. And He was transfigured before them; and His garments became radiant and exceedingly white, as no launderer on earth can whiten them. Elijah appeared to them along with Moses; and they were talking with Jesus. Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three tabernacles, one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” For he did not know what to answer; for they became terrified. Then a cloud formed, overshadowing them, and a voice came out of the cloud, “This is My beloved Son, listen to Him!” All at once they looked around and saw no one with them anymore, except Jesus alone. (9:1–8)

The high point of testimony in Mark's gospel came in the previous section when Peter, in response to Jesus' question, "But who do you say that I am?" declared, "You are the Christ (8:29)." Everything in Mark that came before Peter's declaration leads up to it; everything that followed afterward flows from it. To acknowledge that Jesus is "the Christ [the Messiah], the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:16), is to make the correct judgment concerning Him. In this section, Peter's confession is confirmed. What he affirmed by faith would be verified by the transfiguration of the Lord so that His divine glory became visible.

No sooner had Peter made his confession than Jesus "began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again" (v.31). Aghast and dismayed, Peter, in his impudent ignorance, dared to rebuke the Lord (v.32), and in turn was sharply rebuked by Him. Jesus forcefully told him, "Get behind Me, Satan; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's" (v.33).

Like the rest of the Jewish people, the notion of a murdered Messiah was incomprehensible and unacceptable to the Twelve. Later in the ninth chapter, Mark noted that again Jesus "was teaching His disciples and telling them, 'The Son of Man is to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill Him; and when He has been killed, He will rise three days later. But they did not understand this statement, and they were afraid to ask Him' (vv.31-32). In Luke 18:31-34 Jesus again

took the twelve aside and said to them, "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and all things which are written through the prophets about the Son of Man will be accomplished. For He will be handed over to the Gentiles, and will be mocked and mistreated and spit upon, and after they have scourged Him, they will kill Him; and the third day He will rise again." But the disciples understood none of these things, and the meaning of this statement was hidden from them, and they did not comprehend the things that were said.

Peter and the rest of the apostles eagerly anticipated the glory of the kingdom, but not the scandal of the cross, which Paul described as a stumbling block to the Jewish people (1 Cor. 1:23; cf. Gal. 5:11). After giving the apostles the crushing, disappointing news of His coming death, Jesus encouraged them by telling them that "the Son of Man" will one

day come “in the glory of His Father with the holy angels” (Mark 8:38). It was difficult for the disciples to accept that Jesus would die; it would be even more difficult for them when it happened. Thus, **Jesus was saying to them, “Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who will not taste death** (a Hebrew colloquial expression for dying) **until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power.”** In promising a preview glimpse of the **kingdom** (the Greek word can be translated as “royal splendor”), Jesus was speaking of His transfiguration (cf. Matt. 16:28–17:8; Luke 9:27–36), which would be witnessed by Peter, James, and John, and would move their faith to sight. The Lord’s visible manifestation of His divine glory in the transfiguration was the most transcendent miracle recorded in the New Testament prior to the Lord’s resurrection. It bolstered the apostles’ confidence in His coming revelation of glory.

When God appeared visibly in the Old Testament, He always did so in some form of light, as at the initiation of the priestly service (Lev. 9:23), to Israel (Ex. 16:7, 10), to Moses (Ex. 24:15–18; 33:18–23), at the completion of the tabernacle (Ex. 29:43; 40:34–35), at Israel’s rebellion at Kadesh-barnea (Num. 14:10), at the exposure of the sins of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram (Num. 16:19) and the people’s subsequent rebellion against Moses and Aaron (v. 42), at Meribah (Num. 20:6), at the dedication of the temple (1 Kings 8:11; 2 Chron. 7:1), and to Ezekiel (Ezek. 1:28; 3:23; 10:4, 18; 11:23). Habakkuk wrote of a future day when “the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea” (Hab. 2:14). In each of those instances, the purpose of God’s appearance was to strengthen the people’s faith.

But the Lord Jesus Christ, the God-Man, was the pure revelation of God’s glory. In 1 Corinthians 2:8 Paul referred to Him as the “Lord of glory,” while in 2 Corinthians 4:6 the apostle wrote “of the glory of God in the face of Christ.” The writer of Hebrews described Jesus as “the radiance of [God’s] glory” (1:3), and James referred to Him as “our glorious Lord Jesus Christ” (James 2:1). But with the exception of the transfiguration, that glory was veiled during His life and was revealed in His miraculous signs, not His visible appearance.

This experience, when they “saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father” (John 1:14), transformed these three men.

Nearing the end of his life, Peter recalled the manifestation of Christ's glory that they witnessed:

For we did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eye-witnesses of His majesty. For when He received honor and glory from God the Father, such an utterance as this was made to Him by the Majestic Glory, "This is My beloved Son with whom I am well-pleased"—and we ourselves heard this utterance made from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain. (2 Peter 1:16-18)

Mark's account of Jesus' transfiguration may be divided into four sections: the Son's transformation, the saints' association, the sleeper's suggestion, and the sovereign's correction.

#### THE SON'S TRANSFORMATION

**Six days later, Jesus took with Him Peter and James and John, and brought them up on a high mountain by themselves. And He was transfigured before them; and His garments became radiant and exceedingly white, as no launderer on earth can whiten them.** (9:2-3)

Mark, along with Matthew (17:1), indicates that the transfiguration took place **six days** after the promise Jesus gave, recorded in verse 1. Luke, however, placed it "some eight days" **later** (9:28). There is no contradiction; Luke included the day the Lord made the promise and the day of the transfiguration, while Matthew and Mark referred to the six days between those two events.

**Peter and James and John** made up the inner circle of the apostles and were the Lord's most intimate friends. They alone witnessed Jesus' raising of Jairus's daughter (Mark 5:37) and went with Him into Gethsemane (Mark 14:33). Jesus took them with Him in accord with the Law's requirement that truth be confirmed by two or three witnesses (Deut. 17:6; cf. Matt. 18:16; 2 Cor. 13:1; 1 Tim. 5:19; Heb. 10:28).

The Lord **brought them up on a high mountain by themselves** to pray (Luke 9:28). That **mountain** likely was Mt. Hermon (c. 9200

feet in elevation), the highest peak in the vicinity of Caesarea Philippi, where Peter's confession took place (Mark 8:27). Some have suggested Mt. Tabor, but it is too far south of the region of Caesarea Philippi and not a high mountain but rather a hill (it is less than 2000 feet in elevation). Mark, in an understated description of the most striking revelation of God up to that point, notes simply that Jesus **was transfigured before them**. It happened while the disciples were asleep (Luke 9:32), most likely from sorrow at the prospect of the Lord's death, as would later be the case again in Gethsemane (Luke 22:45).

**Transfigured** translates a form of the verb *metamorphoō*, from which the English word "metamorphosis" derives. It appears four times in the New Testament, always in reference to a radical transformation. Here and in Matthew 17:2 it describes the transfiguration, while in Romans 12:2 and 2 Corinthians 3:18, it refers to the transformation in the lives of believers brought about by salvation. Christ's nature, of course, could not change; only His appearance. The brilliant glory of His divine nature blazed forth through the veil of His humanity, and His face "became different" (Luke 9:29) and "shone like the sun" (Matt. 17:2; cf. Rev. 1:16). In addition to Jesus' face, **His garments became radiant and exceedingly white, as no launderer on earth can whiten them**. Matthew notes that "His garments became as white as light" (17:2), while Luke says that they "became white and gleaming [lit. 'to flash or gleam like lightning']" (9:29). It was that blazing glory that Peter, James, and John saw when they awakened (Luke 9:32).

Jesus had possessed essential glory from all eternity (John 17:5) but veiled it until this moment. His glory will be fully revealed to the whole world in the future when "the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and . . . all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory" (Matt. 24:30; cf. 25:31 and the description of that event in Rev. 19:11-16).

#### THE SAINTS' ASSOCIATION

**Elijah appeared to them along with Moses; and they were talking with Jesus.** (9:4-5)



**Elijah** and **Moses** existed as glorified spirits in heaven (Heb. 12:23), awaiting the resurrection of their bodies at the end of the future tribulation (Dan. 12:1-2), yet they appeared in visible, glorious (Luke 9:31) bodies. They evidently either received those bodies temporarily for this occasion, or God gave them their permanent resurrection bodies early. The apostles would not, of course, have recognized the two glorified men, so either they introduced themselves, or the Lord did.

As the disciples became fully awake (Luke 9:32), they realized that Elijah and Moses were **talking** with Jesus about His death (Luke 9:31). As noted earlier, Christ's death is the truth for which the transfiguration was intended to prepare the disciples. Jesus was to die, but that could not negate God's plan and the glory that was to come. The testimony of these two very important men confirmed the reality that the Lord Jesus would die.

Moses was the most honored leader in Israel's history, who led the exodus from Egypt when God rescued the nation from captivity. Although he had the authority of a king, he never had a throne. He functioned both as a prophet, proclaiming God's truth to the nation, and as a priest, interceding before God on behalf of His people. He was the human author of the Pentateuch, and the agent through whom God gave His holy Law.

While Moses gave the Law; Elijah was its foremost guardian and fought against every violation of it. He battled Israel's idolatry with courage and powerful warnings of judgment. His preaching was validated by miracles (1 Kings 17-19; 2 Kings 1-2), as Moses had done in Egypt and during Israel's forty years in the wilderness. There was no law-giver like Moses and no prophet comparable to Elijah. They are the most reliable possible witnesses to Christ's suffering and glory. Nothing could have brought the apostles more assurance and confidence that Jesus' death fulfilled God's purpose than hearing it from Moses and Elijah.

#### THE SLEEPER'S SUGGESTION

**Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three tabernacles, one for You, and one for Moses, and one**

**for Elijah.” For he did not know what to answer; for they became terrified.** (9:5–6)

Never at a loss for words despite his recent rebuke (Mark 8:32–33), Peter interrupted the conversation between Jesus, Moses, and Elijah and blurted out, **“Rabbi, it is good for us to be here.** Matthew records that Peter addressed Jesus as “Lord” (17:4); Luke that he addressed Him as “Master” (9:33). Peter’s use of all three titles reveals that he repeated his request and how overwhelmed and humbled he and the others were. Holy fear mingled with exhilarating wonder at this glorious and incomprehensible experience. His suggestion, **“let us make three tabernacles, one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah,”** reflects Peter’s tenacious desire that the suffering of the cross be avoided. He wanted the three to stay there permanently in their glorious state and establish the kingdom on the spot. According to Luke’s account, Peter spoke as Moses and Elijah began to leave. He saw his dream of seeing the kingdom established slipping away and made a last, desperate attempt to stop that from happening. But he **did not know what to answer; for they became terrified.** His fear caused him to express what was uppermost in his mind and, as Luke adds, not realizing what he was saying (Luke 9:33).

Several things prompted Peter’s suggestion. He had wanted all along to see the kingdom established, and Jesus’ promise in verse 1, “Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power,” had intensified his hope that it soon would be established. That hope reached its peak when he awoke to see Jesus in a transfigured state with Moses and Elijah present in glorified form. Those two prophets could certainly lead the people of Israel into the kingdom, and Elijah was associated with the coming of the kingdom (Mal. 3:1; 4:5–6; see the discussion of 9:9–13 in chapter 2 of this volume). The timing of this event fueled Peter’s hopes. The transfiguration took place in the month of Tishri, six months before the Passover. At that time the Feast of Tabernacles (or Booths), which commemorated the exodus from Egypt, was being celebrated. What better time, Peter may have reasoned, for the Messiah to lead His people out of bondage to sin and into His righteous kingdom than during the Feast of Tabernacles (Zech. 14:16–19)?

## THE SOVEREIGN'S CORRECTION

**Then a cloud formed, overshadowing them, and a voice came out of the cloud, "This is My beloved Son, listen to Him!" All at once they looked around and saw no one with them anymore, except Jesus alone. (9:7-8)**

Interrupting Peter's interruption of Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, God arrived. A bright **cloud**, signaling His glorious presence, **formed** and began **overshadowing them**. When **a voice came out of the cloud** and said, "**This is My beloved Son**, "My Chosen One" (Luke 9:35), "with whom I am well-pleased" (Matt. 17:5), **listen to Him!**", the disciples "fell face down to the ground and were terrified" (Matt. 17:6). The Father's command that they listen to the Son was a direct rebuke of Peter. He commanded Peter and the others to be silent and listen to what Jesus had to say about His death.

When the Father had finished speaking, "Jesus came to them and touched them and said, 'Get up, and do not be afraid'" (Matt. 17:7). **All at once they looked around and saw no one with them anymore, except Jesus alone**. The preview of the kingdom was over; it was not to be established at that time. What they had witnessed was not a vision in the mind but an experience of God's actual presence unprecedented since Adam and Eve experienced it in the garden before the fall. Though not without further misgivings and misunderstandings, the disciples would follow Jesus to the cross and then devote the rest of their lives to preaching "Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness" (1 Cor. 1:23; cf. 2:2; Gal. 3:1).

Like their Lord, Christians will suffer for the sake of the gospel before experiencing the glory of heaven; it is "through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). "We suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him" (Rom. 8:17), because "all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Tim. 3:12). Yet, we understand that "to the degree that [we] share the sufferings of Christ, [we] keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory [we] may rejoice with exultation" (1 Peter 4:13), knowing that "our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus

Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself” (Phil. 3:20-21).

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# Luke's Prologue (Luke 1:1–4)

# 1

**Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught.**  
(1:1–4)

The world is full of stories. Some are compelling, others are moving, many are impactful, and a few are even capable of profoundly changing how people think and live. Many such stories have come and gone throughout history, from the legends of the ancient world, the myths of past civilizations, the fanciful stories surrounding the pantheon of Greek gods, to the classics of literature from Aesop's fables to Beowulf to Shakespeare to modern writers. But there is one enduring and true story that stands above all the rest: the life of Jesus Christ. It is, as the title of a mid-twentieth-century Hollywood retelling of His life proclaimed, "The Greatest Story Ever Told."

This is the compelling and glorious story of how God purposed



in eternity past to save lost sinners from eternal hell. His gracious, loving plan was to send His Son to be the atoning sacrifice for the sins of all who put their faith in Him. Jesus, as Paul wrote to the Romans, was “delivered over because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification” (Rom. 4:25). John wrote concerning Him, “He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world” (1 John 2:2). It was only because “God displayed [Jesus] publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith” that He could “demonstrate His righteousness” (Rom. 3:25) and both “be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (v.26). Because “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23), the gospel message of salvation from sin and judgment in Christ alone completely transcends the limitations of culture and time and definitively determines every person’s eternal destiny (cf. John 3:36; 8:24; 14:6; Acts 4:12).

Accordingly, the central theme of both the Old and New Testaments is the Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Rev. 19:10). Just before His ascension He told the disciples, “These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled” (Luke 24:44). It is the “Scriptures” (the Old Testament), Jesus declared to the hostile Jewish leaders, “that testify about Me” (John 5:39). The New Testament Epistles unpack all the theological riches of salvation in Christ, while the book of Revelation chronicles Christ’s second coming in glory (cf. Matt. 24:30).

But of all the books of the Old and New Testaments, the Gospels most clearly focus on the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. The gospel of Luke is the longest, and most thorough and complete of the four (Luke covers approximately forty pages, Matthew thirty-seven, Mark twenty-three, and John twenty-nine). Including the book of Acts, Luke’s accurate, inerrant, comprehensive narrative of the life of Jesus and its impact spans more than sixty years. It begins with the birth of His forerunner, John the Baptist, and concludes with the apostle Paul’s first imprisonment and ministry of the gospel in Rome. Altogether, Luke’s writings make up more than one fourth of the New Testament. (For a further discussion of Luke’s writings, see the Introduction to Acts in *Acts 1–12*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary [Chicago: Moody, 1994], 1–6.)

But despite his major role in chronicling the history and spread of the good news of salvation, Luke remains virtually unknown. Nowhere in his inspired writings does he refer to himself by name—not even in Acts, where he was one of Paul’s traveling companions. In keeping with Luke’s humble anonymity, the rest of the New Testament mentions his name only three times (Col. 4:14; 2 Tim. 4:11; Philem. 24). He was content to remain in the background and allow the majesty of Christ, who pervades his writ-

ing, to be the focus. Luke's accurately recorded history and theology establish his readers' understanding of the Lord's life and ministry.

The four verses that constitute the prologue to Luke's gospel are one long sentence, crafted in the polished style of a Greek literary classic. (The remainder of the gospel was written in the *koinē* Greek used in common, everyday speech, as were the other New Testament books.) Such prologues, explaining the writer's sources, purpose, and approach, were common in the scholarly writings of the Greco-Roman world (including those by such noted historians as Herodotus, Thucydides, Polybius, and Josephus). Luke's prologue thus marks his gospel as a serious literary and historical work, commanding the respect of even the most sophisticated, well-educated Gentile readers.

Despite his anonymity four elements of the evangelist's identity appear implicitly and explicitly in the prologue. Luke is revealed as a physician and historian, and as a theologian and pastor.

#### LUKE THE PHYSICIAN AND HISTORIAN

**Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, (1:1–3a)**

The phrase **it seemed fitting for me as well** contains this gospel's only reference to its author. As noted in the introduction to this volume, the early church unanimously identified Luke as the author of the gospel that bears his name; there was never any other suggestion concerning its authorship.

All that is known about Luke's life before he became one of Paul's partners in spreading the gospel is that he was a physician. In Colossians 4:14 Paul referred to his dear friend as "Luke, the beloved physician." Since verses 10 and 11 of that chapter identify Aristarchus, Mark, and Jesus Justus as the only ones among this list of Paul's fellow workers who were "from the circumcision" (i.e., Jewish), it is reasonable to conclude that the people Paul refers to in verses 12–17, including Luke (v. 14), were Gentiles. (For further evidence that Luke was a Gentile, see the introduction to Luke in this volume.)

Being a physician in the ancient world did not carry the dignity that such a profession does today. Howard C. Kee gives a helpful historical perspective:

An obvious question is: did most of the Roman populace share the exalted view of the medical art propounded by its chief practitioners, and particularly by Galen [a second-century A.D. Roman doctor]? Galen is caustic in his denunciation of the money-seeking, routine-bound quacks who “enter the sickroom, bleed the patient, lay on a plaster, and give an enema.” Both from the epigrams and from non-medical writers of the second century [A.D.] it is evident that the medical profession was regarded as being characteristically greedy and fond of public display. Plutarch, in *The Flatters*, mocks the smooth bedside manner of the day. Dio Chrysostom describes the efforts of physicians to drum up trade by public lecture-presentations, intended to dazzle hearers and attract patients:

This sort of recitation . . . is kind of a spectacle or parade . . . like the exhibition of the so-called physicians, who seat themselves conspicuously before us and give us a detailed account of the union of joints, the combination and juxtaposition of bones, and other topics of that sort, such as pores and respirations, and excretions. And the crowd is all agape with admiration and more enchanted than a swarm of children.

In his fine survey, *Roman Medicine*, John Scarborough notes that there were two different classes of physicians serving two different groups of patients. The aristocrats had physicians as servants or as private employees in their own establishments, or had access to them despite their high fees and lofty reputations. There were also many illiterate doctors, quacks, charlatans; exploiters of a gullible and needy public. He remarks that, “The intellectuality of Galen fails to pierce the growing gloom of an age gradually turning from rational answers posed by the Greek heritage of questioning to the mystical, all-encompassing solutions of religion.” By the second half of the second century, there were many wonder-workers and rhetoricians, of whom Lucian draws satirical sketches in *Alexander the False Prophet and The Passing of Peregrinus*. . . . Although we cannot generalize from Lucian’s satirical remarks about the healing profession—in both its medical and its mystical aspects—we can safely conclude that [it] was [not] beyond criticism or universally esteemed in the later second century.

In the New Testament there are only seven occurrences of the word *hiatros*, and in only one of these is there a positive estimate of the physician. In Mt. 9:12 (=Mk. 2:17; Lk. 5:31) there is a proverbial expression about the physician’s role being to care for the ailing, rather than the well. This is offered in the synoptics as justification for Jesus’ attention to the sick, the unclean and the outcasts. In Mk. 5:26 (=Lk. 8:43), . . . the physicians have taken money from the woman with the menstrual flow but have not cured her ailment. Another proverbial expression in Lk. 4:23, “Physician, heal yourself!”, is a challenge to the one who points out problems that he must cure them. In Col. 4:14, Luke is identified as

“the beloved physician,” with no indication of the nature of the medical role he may have performed. (*Medicine, Miracle and Magic in New Testament Times* [London: Cambridge, 1986], 63–65)

At the very outset of his gospel Luke acknowledged that **many** others had already **undertaken to compile an account of** the life of Jesus. He did not specifically identify any of these early sources, which have all been lost. The only ones still extant that Luke may have consulted are the inspired gospels of Matthew and Mark, which probably were written before he penned his gospel (although Luke's omission of the material in an important section of Mark [6:45–8:26] suggests that he may not have seen Mark's gospel before he wrote). Whether or not Luke saw their gospels, he had personal contact with both Mark and Matthew, since Mark and Luke both traveled with Paul (cf. Philem. 24), and Luke could have visited Matthew in Jerusalem during Paul's two-year imprisonment at Caesarea (Acts 24:27). During that same period, Luke could have interviewed those in the Jerusalem church who had known the Lord, including the apostles and His mother, Mary. In addition, Luke had access to many others who had followed Jesus during His lifetime (such as the seventy [Luke 10:1–12], the women who ministered to Him [cf. Matt. 27:55; Mark 15:40–41; Luke 8:1–3; 23:49, 55], the 120 believers who gathered in Jerusalem following Christ's ascension [Acts 1:15], and the 500 who gathered in Galilee [1 Cor. 15:6]). They would have vividly remembered the things that Jesus did and said, and Luke could have interviewed them, or possibly read their writings.

Luke's goal was not to produce just another biography of Jesus, though that would have been a noble end in itself. Far more than that, he understood that the gospel is the story of what God accomplishes through Jesus Christ in the lives of sinners. The verb translated **accomplished** (*peplērophorēmenōn*) is an intensive compound word that indicates the complete fulfillment of something, in this case the redemptive plan of God. Luke's gospel, like the other three canonical gospels, emphasizes the theme of divine accomplishment. It chronicles how God accomplished salvation for His people (cf. Matt. 1:21; Luke 19:10) through the redemptive work of His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. The gospels do not relate the story of a misunderstood ethical teacher, a failed social revolutionary, a model of selfless humility, or even a heroic martyr; they reveal the Savior who is God incarnate, the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29).

It is important to note that Luke was not critical of those who had **undertaken** (a term often used in connection with literary endeavors) **to compile an account** (a phrase often used to refer to historical writing) of Jesus' life and ministry. He did not pen his gospel as a corrective

to those accounts, but because God prompted him to write a comprehensive narrative of the life of Christ and the spread of His salvation gospel.

Luke's reason for referring to his sources was twofold. First, it establishes his history as a legitimate, reliable account. He was a careful historian who used credible methods of research and writing, and based his content on the firsthand accounts of eyewitnesses. Second, Luke's use of those sources places his gospel squarely in the orthodox tradition. His volume was not a bizarre, different, heretical gospel. Luke's account was consistent with the teaching of the apostles (cf. Acts 2:42) and with those of eyewitnesses and especially the other Spirit-inspired gospel writers (cf. John 20:30-31; 21:24-25).

In writing his gospel Luke utilized the source material **handed down to him by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses**. These same men (one definite article in the Greek text modifies both groups) later became **servants** (cf. 1 Cor. 3:5-9; 4:1; 2 Cor. 3:6) **of the word** (a synonym for the gospel [cf. 5:1; 8:11-13, 15; Acts 6:4; 8:4, 14, 25; 10:36; 11:1, 19; 13:5, 7, 44; 14:25; 15:7; 16:6, 32; 17:11; 18:5; 19:10]). They observed Jesus' ministry firsthand and used that knowledge to faithfully preach the gospel. God preserved and transmitted the truth through them until He inspired four specific writers to record it in the New Testament. **Eyewitnesses** were the most significant sources who **handed down** (a technical term denoting the passing on of authoritative truth) the true information upon which Luke's account was based. That Luke was not an eyewitness himself makes it evident that he was not an apostle, since one qualification of apostleship was to have witnessed the resurrected Christ (Acts 1:21-22; cf. Luke 24:45-48; John 20:19-29; 1 Cor. 9:1; 1 John 1:1-3). Like Mark, he was not himself one of their number, but was a companion of some of the apostles (most notably Paul).

Since Luke had access to this wealth of firsthand, eyewitness testimony, it was **fitting** ("good," "proper") for him to write his account. The phrase **having investigated everything carefully from the beginning** ("having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first" [NKJV]) further marks Luke as an accomplished and accurate historian. His careful and thorough research gave him a precise understanding of Jesus Christ's life and ministry. As a result, he was uniquely qualified to write this gospel narrative under the Spirit's inspiration.

Luke's acknowledgement of his use of source material must not be misconstrued as a disclaimer of divine inspiration for his gospel. The process of inspiration never bypassed or overrode the personalities, life experiences, vocabularies, or writing styles of the Bible's human authors; their unique traits are indelibly stamped on all the books of Scripture. The Spirit used Luke's knowledge, gave him additional information, guided

his selection of material, and controlled every word so that he wrote exactly what God wanted written (cf. 1 Cor. 2:12-13; 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Peter 1:20-21). Therefore, his original account is infallibly and inerrantly true.

#### LUKE THE THEOLOGIAN AND PASTOR

**to write it out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught. (1:3b-4)**

A good theologian is analytical, logical, and systematic. His goal is to persuade people to understand and accept doctrinal truth by means of a thoughtful, logical, progressive, consistent, persuasive explanation. Luke revealed himself to be a master theologian by writing his account **in consecutive order**. The New American Standard's rendering implies that Luke's gospel will be strictly chronological from beginning to end. Certainly it is generally chronological, starting with the birth of Christ, His circumcision and boyhood, moving on to His baptism and public ministry, and culminating with the cross and resurrection. (See the outline of Luke in the introduction in this volume.) There were instances, however, in which Luke arranged his material thematically to illustrate or expound a particular theological point (e.g., Luke's record of John the Baptist's arrest, 3:15-20). So Luke's narrative exhibits a basic chronological flow, but not to the exclusion of thematic, doctrinal discussion, in which he uses material out of chronological sequence.

So the phrase **in consecutive order** is better understood as a reference to the logical, systematic nature of Luke's writing. The New King James Version's translation of this phrase, "an orderly account," captures the essence of Luke's purpose in writing. His goal was to persuade; to lead his readers to believe the gospel by means of his carefully researched, logical, systematic presentation of the truth concerning God's saving purpose in Christ.

The first vital theological truth Luke wanted his readers to understand is God's sovereignty in history. He viewed God's sovereign plan of redemption, which unfolded through the life and work of Jesus Christ (cf. Acts 2:22-24), as of supreme importance. It was to die as a substitute for the sins of His people that He came into the world (19:10; cf. 9:22-23; 17:25; 18:31-34; 24:25, 26, 44). Second, Luke saw the significance of the universal sweep of redemption. He understood that salvation was available to everyone, not just the Jews (cf. Acts 10:34-48; 14:24-27; 15:12-19). Luke wanted to make it clear that the wonderful reality of God's saving purpose included Gentiles (e.g., Luke 7:1-10; 14:15-23). He himself was a

Gentile and he wrote to Theophilus, also a Gentile (Acts 1:1). In fact, Luke viewed the gospel not only as being for all ethnic groups, including Jews, Samaritans, and Gentiles, but also for all categories of individuals within those groups, including women (even prostitutes), outcasts (including lepers), those possessed by demons, even tax collectors (cf. 7:36–50; 10:25–37; 15:11–32; 16:19–31; 17:11–19; 19:1–10). Luke’s emphasis on the gospel’s universal appeal can be seen in his genealogy of Jesus. Unlike Matthew, who began his genealogy with Abraham, the father of the Jewish people, Luke traces Christ’s genealogy all the way back to Adam, the father of the entire human race.

Though the main doctrinal emphasis in his gospel is the person and work of Jesus Christ, Luke did not neglect other important realities. Luke not only revealed God’s sovereign control over history, but also described His tender, compassionate concern for lost sinners (cf. the parables in chapter 15). The doctrine of salvation is critical in Luke’s gospel (his is the gospel that refers most specifically to the doctrine of justification, 18:14; cf. 7:36–50; 15:11–32; 19:1–10). In fact, the cross is the focus of more than half of his gospel, from 9:53 to the end of chapter 23. Luke also focused more on the ministry of the Holy Spirit than the other gospel writers, and recorded the Lord’s teaching on His second coming. In addition, Luke the theologian addressed several areas of practical theology, such as worship, forgiveness, mercy, thanksgiving, and prayer. Profiles of discipleship are presented.

Finally, Luke’s prologue reveals his pastor’s heart. He addressed this massive work to a single individual, a man whom he called **most excellent Theophilus**. No personal details are known about him, but the title **most excellent** suggests that he was likely from the upper level of society. (Luke uses the same phrase in the book of Acts to designate the governors Felix and Festus [23:26; 24:3; 26:25].)

**Theophilus** had already **been taught** certain **things** about Jesus. But some of that teaching had been unclear or incomplete and Luke wanted him to **know the exact truth**. The word translated **exact** means “reliable,” “certain,” or “accurate.” Luke presented to Theophilus and all others who would read his account a precise, accurate, and complete understanding of the gospel and the life of Christ. Whether Theophilus was an interested unbeliever or a new believer is not known. In either case, Luke’s intensive research and detailed writing reveals the immensity of his pastor’s heart. He cared enough about Theophilus’s soul that he made this Spirit-empowered effort to bring that one man to a more precise, accurate knowledge of the truth concerning the Lord Jesus Christ. (For other New Testament examples of that kind of concern, see Acts 18:26; 19:1–5.)

In the remarkable providence of God, the Holy Spirit ensured

that the book Luke wrote initially to one man would be disseminated around the world. The beloved physician, historian, theologian, and pastor had the privilege of becoming the instrument God used for the salvation and edification of millions throughout history (cf. 24:44–53).



THE MACARTHUR  
NEW TESTAMENT  
COMMENTARY

**LUKE 6-10**

*John MacArthur*

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# Lord of the Sabbath (Luke 6:1–11)

# 1

Now it happened that He was passing through some grainfields on a Sabbath; and His disciples were picking the heads of grain, rubbing them in their hands, and eating the grain. But some of the Pharisees said, “Why do you do what is not lawful on the Sabbath?” And Jesus answering them said, “Have you not even read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him, how he entered the house of God, and took and ate the consecrated bread which is not lawful for any to eat except the priests alone, and gave it to his companions?” And He was saying to them, “The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.” On another Sabbath He entered the synagogue and was teaching; and there was a man there whose right hand was withered. The scribes and the Pharisees were watching Him closely to see if He healed on the Sabbath, so that they might find reason to accuse Him. But He knew what they were thinking, and He said to the man with the withered hand, “Get up and come forward!” And he got up and came forward. And Jesus said to them, “I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save a life or to destroy it?” After looking around at them all, He said to him, “Stretch out your hand!” And he did so; and his hand was restored. But they

**themselves were filled with rage, and discussed together what they might do to Jesus. (6:1-11)**

The initial reaction to the Lord Jesus Christ was generally positive. Speaking of His early ministry in Galilee, Luke noted that when “He began teaching in their synagogues [He] was praised by all” (4:15). The Lord was so popular that when He “left [Capernaum] and went to a secluded place ... the crowds were searching for Him, and came to Him and tried to keep Him from going away from them” (4:42). After Jesus healed a leper, “the news about Him was spreading even farther, and large crowds were gathering to hear Him and to be healed of their sicknesses” (5:15). In the aftermath of His healing of a paralytic, the people “were all struck with astonishment and began glorifying God; and they were filled with fear, saying, ‘We have seen remarkable things today’” (5:26). Even the religious leaders were unable to restrain their curiosity at first (5:17).

But curiosity eventually turned to hostility, which by the time the events in the sixth chapter of Luke’s gospel occurred was escalating severely. The religious leaders had come to view Jesus as the most dangerous man in Israel, the biggest threat to their religious power and prestige. Their fears were well-founded. Jesus was the most powerful teacher the world had ever seen or ever will see, and He was assaulting their ritualism, legalism, and prideful hypocrisy. Even worse, while attacking them, the Lord was associating with the tax collectors, prostitutes, and other riffraff of society. When Jesus showed concern about their sins, since He came “to call ... sinners to repentance” (5:32), some of them responded with repentance and faith. But when He confronted the Pharisees and scribes, because they were the leaders of the religious establishment and the proud, unrepentant purveyors of the damning lie that God was pleased by self-righteousness, legalism, and ritualism, they found the Lord’s discrediting of them to be intolerable and infuriating. They also found His choosing of common men instead of members of the religious elite as His apostles insulting.

The Lord did not escalate the conflict by being insensitive or ungracious, but by His uncompromising proclamation of the truth. The truth of God is the most important thing in the world (cf. Prov. 23:23). It is the message of sin, forgiveness, salvation, and the hope of eternal life. All the truth must be proclaimed no matter what the effects are, whether people embrace it, or are offended by it; whether they accept it and are saved, or reject it, and are eternally lost. There is no common ground between the truth and error.

Jesus spoke the truth in every situation, not under compulsion or against His will, but by His deliberate choice. By doing so, He exposed

error both to those who taught it, and to anyone else who might have been attracted to it. The Lord never minced words when dealing with either false religion, or the wicked false teachers who purvey it (cf. Matt. 7:15–20; 23:1–36). His bold preaching of the gospel, which was incompatible with the Jewish religion of His day (Luke 5:36–39), forced people to choose between the gospel of grace and the works-righteousness system of contemporary Judaism.

At the heart of Jesus' conflict with the Pharisees and scribes was the Sabbath. Much of their self-righteous attempt to earn salvation by good works focused on keeping the Sabbath regulations. Because its observance was the mainstay or anchor of first-century Judaism, the Sabbath inevitably became a major point of contention between Jesus and the Jewish leaders. In this section of his gospel, Luke records two incidents in which Jesus boldly confronted their false view of the Sabbath, and established Himself as Lord over the Sabbath. The first incident took place in the grainfields; the second in a synagogue.

#### IN THE GRAINFIELDS

**Now it happened that He was passing through some grainfields on a Sabbath; and His disciples were picking the heads of grain, rubbing them in their hands, and eating the grain. But some of the Pharisees said, "Why do you do what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" And Jesus answering them said, "Have you not even read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him, how he entered the house of God, and took and ate the consecrated bread which is not lawful for any to eat except the priests alone, and gave it to his companions?" And He was saying to them, "The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath." (6:1–5)**

The **Sabbath** was originally given by God in the Mosaic law (not before) to be a day of rest (the Hebrew word translated "Sabbath" comes from a verb that means, "to cease," "to desist," or, "to rest" [cf. Gen. 2:2]), refreshment, and worship for His people (Ex. 20:8–11). But by the first century, it had accumulated an enormous number of extrabiblical restrictions and regulations, so much so that it had become the most oppressive and burdensome day of the week.

The Talmud devotes twenty-four chapters to Sabbath regulations, describing in painfully exhaustive detail what was and was not permitted to be done. The result was a ridiculously complex system of external behavior restraints—so much so that one rabbi spent two and a half years studying just one of the twenty-four chapters.

For example, traveling more than 3,000 feet from home was forbidden. But if one had placed food at the 3,000 foot point before the Sabbath, that point would then be considered a home, since there was food there, and allow another 3,000 feet of travel. Similarly, a piece of wood or a rope placed across the end of a narrow street or alley constituted a doorway. That could then be considered the front door of one's house, and permit the 3,000 feet of travel to begin there.

There were also regulations about carrying items. Something lifted up in a public place could only be set down in a private place, and vice versa. An object tossed into the air could be caught with the same hand, but if it was caught with the other hand, it would be a Sabbath violation. If a person had reached out to pick up food when the Sabbath began, the food had to be dropped; to bring the arm back while holding the food would be to carry a burden on the Sabbath. It was forbidden to carry anything heavier than a dried fig (though something weighing half as much could be carried two times). A tailor could not carry his needle, a scribe his pen, or a student his books. Only enough ink to write two letters (of the alphabet) could be carried. A letter could not be sent, not even with a non-Jew. Clothes could not be examined or shaken out before being put on because an insect might be killed in the process, which would be work. No fire could be lit, or put out. Cold water could be poured into warm water, but not warm into cold. An egg could not be cooked, not even by placing it in hot sand during the summer. Nothing could be sold or bought. Bathing was forbidden, lest water be spilled on the floor and wash it. Moving a chair was not allowed, since it might make a rut in a dirt floor, which was too much like plowing. Women were forbidden to look in a mirror, since if they saw a white hair, they might be tempted to pull it out.

Other forbidden things included sowing, plowing, reaping, binding sheaves, threshing, winnowing, grinding, kneading, baking, shearing, washing, beating, dyeing, or spinning wool, tying or untying a knot, catching, killing, or skinning a deer, salting its meat, or preparing its skin. (For a detailed discussion of the rabbinic Sabbath restrictions, see Alfred Ederheim, "The Ordinances and Law of the Sabbath as Laid Down in the Mishnah and the Jerusalem Talmud," Appendix XVII in, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974], 2:777-87.)

It was to people crushed by the unbearable burden (Matt. 23:4; Luke 11:46; Acts 15:10) of manmade, legalistic regulations that the Lord Jesus Christ said, "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light" (Matt. 11:28-30).

This particular Sabbath found the Lord and His disciples **passing**

**through some grainfields.** *Sporimos* (**grainfields**) literally means, “sown fields”; the crop being grown in these particular fields was probably either wheat or barley. Since the grain was ripe enough to eat, it was probably spring or summer. As they walked along the paths between the rows of grain, the **disciples were picking the heads of grain, rubbing them in their hands, and eating the grain.** To do so was not wrong in itself; travelers were permitted by the Mosaic law to pick grain from their neighbors’ fields to satisfy their hunger (though not, of course, to harvest it): “When you enter your neighbor’s standing grain, then you may pluck the heads with your hand, but you shall not wield a sickle in your neighbor’s standing grain” (Deut. 23:25).

But to do so on the Sabbath was a violation, not of the Mosaic law, but of the rabbinic restrictions described above. Specifically, the disciples were guilty in the eyes of the **Pharisees** of reaping (picking the grain), threshing (rubbing the husks together to separate them from the grain), and winnowing (throwing the husks away), and thus preparing food. The self-appointed guardians of the Sabbath were quick to pounce on the blatant violation of their silly regulations. **“Why do you do what is not lawful on the Sabbath?”** they demanded. Although they addressed their question to the entire group, the Pharisees’ rebuke was directed primarily at Jesus, since His disciples were surely following His teaching and example. They viewed the incident as a direct attack on their whole religious system to which, as noted earlier, the Sabbath was central. Obviously, their presence in the grainfields indicates the constant scrutiny to which the religious leaders subjected Jesus, as they dogged His steps looking for an excuse to condemn Him.

Assuming responsibility for His disciples’ actions, Jesus responded with a mildly sarcastic rebuke of the Pharisees’ ignorance. They, of course, knew the history He was about to relate, but had ignored its true significance. As He frequently did (cf. 5:23; 10:26; 20:3-4, 24) **Jesus** answered their question with one of His own: **“Have you not even read (cf. Matt. 19:4; 21:42; 22:31; Mark 12:10) what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him, how he entered the house of God, and took and ate the consecrated bread which is not lawful for any to eat except the priests alone, and gave it to his companions?”**

The incident the Lord referred to is recorded in 1 Samuel 21:1-6. Fleeing Saul’s relentless pursuit of him, David came to Nob, about a mile north of Jerusalem. David **was hungry**, as were **those who were with him**. Seeking food, they **entered the house of God** (the tabernacle), and asked Ahimelech the priest for five loaves of bread. The tabernacle, of course, was not a bakery, and the only bread available there was the **consecrated bread**. Also called the “bread of the Presence” (Ex. 25:30),



it consisted of twelve loaves, placed each Sabbath on the golden table in the Holy Place. After the bread was replaced with fresh loaves, it could be eaten, but only by the priests (Lev. 24:9). Ahimelech was willing to give some of the consecrated bread to David and his men, on the condition that “the young men [had] kept themselves from women” (1 Sam. 21:4) (i.e., were ceremonially clean). After David assured him that they had done so, Ahimelech gave them the bread and they ate it.

The point of the account, which was lost on the Pharisees, was that mercy, compassion, and human need were more important than rigid adherence to even biblical ritual and ceremony. Mark 2:27 records that Jesus also said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath,” while Matthew records His rebuke, “But if you had known what this means, ‘I desire compassion, and not a sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the innocent” (12:7). If a human priest could permit David to violate part of God’s ceremonial law (perhaps even on a Sabbath, since the old bread being replaced had not yet been eaten by the priests), how much more could the Son of God allow His disciples to violate unbiblical human traditions?

Then Jesus stunned and outraged the Pharisees by declaring, **“The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.”** As such, He alone had the right to decide what behavior was appropriate on the Sabbath; He is the interpreter of God’s will, law, and word. Since the Sabbath was established by God (Ex. 20:8-11), He, the Son of God, had authority over it. Thus, by claiming authority over a divinely instituted ordinance, Jesus was claiming full equality with God. Compare John 5:9-17, where our Lord was again confronted over His Sabbath activity and replied, “My Father is working ... and I Myself am working” (v. 17). Here again He clearly declared His equality with God, as evidenced by His sovereignty over the Sabbath.

#### IN A SYNAGOGUE

**On another Sabbath He entered the synagogue and was teaching; and there was a man there whose right hand was withered. The scribes and the Pharisees were watching Him closely to see if He healed on the Sabbath, so that they might find reason to accuse Him. But He knew what they were thinking, and He said to the man with the withered hand, “Get up and come forward!” And he got up and came forward. And Jesus said to them, “I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save a life or to destroy it?” After looking around at them all, He said to him, “Stretch out your hand!” And he did so; and his hand was**

**restored. But they themselves were filled with rage, and discussed together what they might do to Jesus.** (6:6–11)

**On another Sabbath**, Jesus again confronted the Pharisees over the issue of the Sabbath. Luke does not specify when this incident took place, or the location of the **synagogue** (possibly Capernaum). However Matthew, Mark, and Luke all place it immediately after the incident in the grainfields, which suggests it happened soon afterward, perhaps on the next Sabbath. In keeping with the priority of His ministry, Jesus **was teaching** (cf. 4:14–15, 31, 44; 5:15, 17). The content of His message was not recorded, but He would have been preaching the gospel (3:18; 4:18; 7:22; 20:1; Mark 1:14)—the good news that the poor, prisoners, blind, and oppressed could be freed from their sin and the heavy burden of a false, damning, legalistic religion (4:18–21).

In the synagogue on that particular Sabbath **was a man . . . whose right hand** (only Luke, with his careful attention to medical detail, notes that it was his right hand) **was withered**; that is, atrophied due to paralysis. This man was the main object of Jesus' attention, and his healing was another assault on the Pharisees' restrictions for the Sabbath.

As always, the **scribes and the Pharisees** were there, hoping to find something for which they could condemn the Lord. As always, these zealous legalists **were watching** Jesus **closely**. **Watching closely** translates a form of the Greek verb *paratēreō*, which means, "to observe carefully," "to be on the lookout," or "to pay heed to." Often, as it does here, the word takes on a sinister tone, and could be translated, "to lurk," "to watch for an opportunity," or "to lie in wait" (cf. 14:1; 20:20; Mark 3:2). The scribes and Pharisees were by no means neutral observers, but rather spies.

Specifically, they were watching Jesus **to see if He healed on the Sabbath, so that they might find reason to accuse Him**. Ironically, these self-appointed guardians of the Sabbath system did not want to stop Jesus from breaking their Sabbath rules; they actually wanted Him to perform a healing, so they would have cause to indict Him. Christ's performing a healing would thus best suit their heinous hatred. Interestingly, never throughout His entire ministry did they doubt His ability to heal (cf. 5:17–26), which proved His ability to forgive sin (5:24). Yet the convoluted reasoning in their sinful, prideful, obstinate hearts was that if Jesus did heal, the consequence would be that they could charge Him with breaking the Sabbath.

Needless to say, ministering to a sick person was by no means a violation of the Old Testament regulations concerning the Sabbath (cf. Matt. 12:7). The rabbis, however, had decreed that no one, whether a physician, friend, or family member, could treat a sick person on the Sabbath.

To do so, they taught, would be work and hence a violation of the Sabbath. The only two exceptions they allowed were cases when a person might otherwise die before the Sabbath ended, or a pregnant woman who gave birth on the Sabbath. Other than those two situations, showing compassion and mercy to a suffering person made one a blaspheming lawbreaker.

As He had earlier done (5:22) and would later do (11:17), Jesus in His omniscience **knew what they were thinking**. The Lord was fully aware of their vicious, hateful thoughts toward Him; that they were waiting for Him to heal so they could accuse Him of breaking the Sabbath. Ignoring their legalistic, merciless regulations and intentions, Jesus **said to the man with the withered hand, “Get up and come forward!”** He was the perfect candidate to help the Lord stage His assault on their twisted view of the Sabbath. His condition was clearly not life threatening, so there was no possible justification under the death exception for helping him.

The crippled man **got up and came forward** and stood before the synagogue audience. It was a dramatic moment, as the people waited to see what Jesus was going to do. Addressing the scribes and Pharisees, who no doubt had front-row seats (11:43; 20:46; Matt. 23:6; Mark 12:39), Jesus asked the self-proclaimed experts on the law a pointed question. **“I ask you,”** He demanded, **“is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save a life or to destroy it?”** As was often the case, the Lord’s question impaled His opponents on the horns of a dilemma. On the one hand, answering that it was lawful to do good on the Sabbath would officially authorize Jesus to heal the man. They could not then indict Him for breaking the Sabbath. On the other hand, answering that it was not lawful to do good would reveal their wicked, merciless hearts. That would tear down their veneer of self-righteousness and piety and expose them as the hypocrites they were.

The scribes and Pharisees knew the correct answer to Jesus’ question, which the book of Isaiah records. In two passages in Isaiah God indicted Israel for their superficial, shallow, false religion—the very issue Jesus was addressing:

“What are your multiplied sacrifices to Me?” says the Lord. “I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed cattle; and I take no pleasure in the blood of bulls, lambs or goats. When you come to appear before Me, who requires of you this trampling of My courts? Bring your worthless offerings no longer, incense is an abomination to Me. New moon and sabbath, the calling of assemblies—I cannot endure iniquity and the solemn assembly. I hate your new moon festivals and your appointed feasts, they have become a burden to Me; I am weary of bearing them. So when you spread out your hands in prayer, I

will hide My eyes from you; yes, even though you multiply prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are covered with blood. Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from My sight. Cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, reprove the ruthless, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.” (1:11–17)

Is this not the fast which I choose, to loosen the bonds of wickedness, to undo the bands of the yoke, and to let the oppressed go free and break every yoke? Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into the house; when you see the naked, to cover him; and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? Then your light will break out like the dawn, and your recovery will speedily spring forth; and your righteousness will go before you; the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry, and He will say, “Here I am.” If you remove the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger and speaking wickedness, and if you give yourself to the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then your light will rise in darkness and your gloom will become like midday. And the Lord will continually guide you, and satisfy your desire in scorched places, and give strength to your bones; and you will be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water whose waters do not fail. Those from among you will rebuild the ancient ruins; you will raise up the age-old foundations; And you will be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of the streets in which to dwell. If because of the sabbath, you turn your foot from doing your own pleasure on My holy day, and call the sabbath a delight, the holy day of the Lord honorable, and honor it, desisting from your own ways, from seeking your own pleasure and speaking your own word, then you will take delight in the Lord, and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth; and I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken. (58:6–14)

As those two passages indicate, God rejected religious ritual divorced from compassion, mercy, and doing good. The Sabbath above all days was a day to express goodness; to show mercy and kindness to the needy. But the rabbinic restrictions had so strangled the Sabbath as to render such kindness forbidden.

The real issue was not the healing of the crippled man; Jesus was not concerned primarily with their attitude toward him, or whether it was right to do good to him. The deeper question was who was honoring God: Jesus, who wanted to show mercy to a needy individual, or the scribes and Pharisees, who wanted only to destroy Jesus? Sabbath observance was as they defined it—a litmus test of faithfulness to God. Paradoxically, these religious errorists scrupulously observed the minutiae of their Sabbath laws while at the same time plotting to murder the Lord of the Sabbath. As David Gooding observes,

The religious mind is a curious thing. It is not necessarily interested in common morality; still less in relieving human misery and affliction. It is interested in keeping rules; particularly the rules which spring from its own cherished interpretations of Scripture or tradition; and to these interpretations it will attribute the inflexible authority of God himself. Let God incarnate, contrary to its interpretations, interpose with a miracle of divine goodness to relieve human misery, then instead of revising its interpretations it will plan to stop such miracles happening again. (*According to Luke* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987], 116)

There was a long pause while the Lord waited for a reply. But the scribes and Pharisees, shocked into silence, said nothing. Finally, **after looking around at them all** “with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart” (Mark 3:5), Jesus **said to** the crippled man, **“Stretch out your hand!” And he did so; and his hand was restored.** Jesus deliberately broke their Sabbath restrictions.

After witnessing this astonishing creative miracle, one would expect the next verse to read, “And the scribes and Pharisees believed.” Such was not the case, however. Instead, **they themselves were filled with rage, and discussed together what they might do to Jesus** to destroy Him (Matt. 12:14). *Anoia* (**rage**) literally means, “folly,” or “foolishness.” It denotes in this context an irrational rage; they were out of their minds with fury at Jesus’ direct assault on their hypocritical religion. Their reaction reflects the blindness and obstinacy of heart of those deeply involved in false religion. Amazingly, the Pharisees even enlisted the help of their bitter enemies the Herodians (Jews loyal to the Herodians) in their search for a way to eliminate Jesus (Mark 3:6). Such an alliance was highly unusual, since about the only thing the two parties had in common was their hatred of Jesus.

The Pharisees’ irrational hatred of and fury toward Jesus was motivated by self-preserving fear. The Lord was striking monumental blows at the very heart of their religious system. Here, long before Passion Week, the religious leaders were already plotting Jesus’ death. Their hatred would drive their continued opposition to Christ until they finally succeeded in having Him arrested and executed.

These two incidents bring out the stark contrast between Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders. It is the contrast between the representative of God’s truth, and the representatives of false religion; between divine truth and human tradition; between profound knowledge and madness; between goodness and wickedness; between compassion and cruelty; between open honesty and hidden deception; between divine power and human impotence; between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan.

Yet God’s grace can penetrate even the most hardened heart. Not

all of the Pharisees permanently rejected the Lord Jesus Christ. Acts 15:5 notes that there were “some of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed.” One of those believing Pharisees, Saul of Tarsus, became the great apostle Paul. The self-proclaimed foremost of sinners (1 Tim. 1:15), he was called by the risen Lord to preach the gospel throughout the Roman world.

THE MACARTHUR  
NEW TESTAMENT  
COMMENTARY  
**LUKE 11-17**

*John MacArthur*

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# Jesus' Pattern for Every Prayer—Part 1: Teach Us to Pray (Luke 11:1–2a)

# 1

**It happened that while Jesus was praying in a certain place, after He had finished, one of His disciples said to Him, “Lord, teach us to pray just as John also taught his disciples.” And He said to them, “When you pray, say:” (11:1–2a)**

On the importance of prayer in the Christian life, the notable Puritan pastor Thomas Brooks wrote,

The power of religion and godliness lives, thrives, or dies, as closet [private] prayer lives, thrives, or dies. Godliness never rises to a higher pitch than when men keep closest to their closets.

Private prayer is that privy [secret] key of heaven that unlocks all the treasures of glory to the soul. The best riches and the sweetest mercies God usually gives to his people when they are in their closets upon their knees ... the graces of the saints are enlivened, and cherished, and strengthened by the sweet secret influences which their souls fall under when they are in their closet-communion with God. (*The Secret Key to Heaven* [Reprint; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2006], xiv, 44)

Prayer is more than merely an occasional duty; it is a way of life. The New Testament commands believers to “keep watching and praying” (Matt. 26:41); “that at all times they ought to pray” (Luke 18:1); to be “devoted to prayer” (Rom. 12:12); to “pray at all times” (Eph. 6:18); to “devote [themselves] to prayer” (Col. 4:2); to “in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let [their] requests be made known to God” (Phil. 4:6); and to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5:17).

Old Testament saints believed that God heard their prayers. In Psalm 65:2 David addressed God as “You who hear prayer,” while Solomon wrote that God “hears the prayer of the righteous” (Prov. 15:29). Not only does He hear the prayers of His people, He also delights in hearing them (Prov. 15:8). But those prayers must be from a pure heart (Job 16:17; Ps. 17:1; Prov. 28:9), because God will not hear the prayers of those who harbor sin in their heart (Ps. 66:18; Isa. 1:15), and must also reflect trust in Him (1 Chron. 5:20).

The Old Testament records, for example, the prayers of Abraham for Abimelech (Gen. 20:7, 17), Isaac for Rebekah (Gen. 25:21), Moses for Israel after the people rebelled against God in the wilderness (Num. 14:13–19), Hannah for a son (1 Sam. 1:10–12), David in response to the promise of the Davidic covenant (2 Sam. 7:18–29), Solomon at the dedication of the temple (1 Kings 8:22–53), Elijah for the resurrection of a widow’s son (1 Kings 17:21), Elisha for the resurrection of a Shunnamite woman’s son (2 Kings 4:33), Hezekiah in response to an Assyrian invasion (2 Kings 19:15–19), and for healing (2 Kings 20:2–3), David and Manasseh for personal forgiveness (Ps. 51; 2 Chron. 33:11–13), Jonah for personal deliverance (Jon. 2:1–9), and Ezra (Ezra 9:5–15), Nehemiah (Neh. 1:4–11), and Daniel (Dan. 9:1–19) for forgiveness and deliverance for the nation of Israel.

The New Testament records the prayers of Anna (Luke 2:37), the apostles (Acts 1:14; 6:6 [cf. 6:4]), the early church (Acts 1:24; 2:42; 4:23–31; 12:5, 12; 13:3), Peter and John (Acts 8:14–15), Peter (Acts 9:40; 11:5), Paul (Acts 9:11; 16:25 [with Silas]; 20:36; 21:5; 28:8; Rom. 1:10; 10:1; 2 Cor. 13:7, 9; Eph. 1:16–23; 3:14–21; Phil. 1:4, 9–11; Col. 1:3, 9–12; 1 Thess. 1:2; 3:10; 2 Thess. 1:11; 2 Tim. 1:3; Philem. 4), and John (3 John 2).

But the supreme example of prayer in all of Scripture is drawn from the Lord Jesus Christ. Prayer permeated our Lord’s earthly ministry from beginning to end. He prayed at His baptism (Luke 3:21), during His

first preaching tour (Mark 1:35; Luke 5:16), before choosing the Twelve (Luke 6:12–13), before feeding the five thousand (Matt. 14:19), after feeding the five thousand (Matt. 14:23), before feeding the four thousand (Matt. 15:36), before Peter's confession of Him as the Christ (Luke 9:18), at the transfiguration (Luke 9:28–29), for some children who had been brought to Him (Matt. 19:13), after the return of the seventy (Luke 10:21), before raising Lazarus from the dead (John 11:41–42), as He faced the reality of the cross (John 12:28), at the Last Supper (Matt. 26:26–27), for Peter (Luke 22:31–32), in Gethsemane (Matt. 26:36–44), from the cross (Matt. 27:46; Luke 23:34, 46), with the disciples He encountered on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:30), at the ascension (Luke 24:50–51) and, supremely, in His high priestly prayer in John 17. It comes as no surprise, then, that this passage finds **Jesus . . . praying in a certain unnamed place** somewhere in Judea.

Luke's account of this model prayer is an abbreviated version of the one recorded by Matthew (6:9–13), though the two prayers were given on different occasions. The one in Matthew's gospel was in Galilee; the one recorded by Luke occurred several months later in Judea. Undoubtedly both prayers reflect teaching repeated frequently by Jesus to His followers throughout His earthly ministry. For the sake of completeness, the elements noted by Matthew but omitted by Luke will be included in the exposition of this prayer in the chapters that follow.

This prayer is Jesus' vehicle for teaching the disciples (and all believers) the essential structure and required features of prayer. The elements in His prayer emphasize the overarching reason for prayer, as will be seen. This overview may be divided into two sections: the disciples' request that Jesus teach them to pray, and the Lord's response.

#### THE DISCIPLES' REQUEST

**after He had finished, one of His disciples said to Him, “Lord, teach us to pray just as John also taught his disciples.”** (11:1b)

While Jesus frequently sought solitude when He prayed (cf. 5:16; Matt. 14:23; Mark 1:35), on this occasion some of His disciples were

present. When the Lord had **finished** praying **one of His disciples**, no doubt speaking for the rest, **said to Him, “Lord, teach us to pray.”** Given both the Old Testament’s emphasis on prayer and their familiarity with it, this request seems somewhat surprising. But it reflects the sad reality that at that time in their history, tradition and ceremony had replaced the knowledge of Scripture so that true prayer had largely been lost to the Jewish people. The disciples’ request for instruction in prayer also reveals that what they had come to be familiar with regarding prayer was not what God wanted. The prayer they heard Jesus pray was radically different from the traditional, customary prayers they were used to in their synagogues from the scribes, Pharisees, and rabbis.

Jesus noted that contrast in Matthew 6, where He indicted the phony, hypocritical religion of the scribes and Pharisees. “When you pray,” He warned His hearers, “you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full” (v.5). Those prayers were focused on putting on a show of piety for the people who were watching, not on honoring and glorifying God. Instead of showy, ostentatious, public prayers, Jesus instructed His followers, “When you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you” (v.6). Many Jewish prayers were marked by the ritualistic, meaningless, empty, vain repetition that characterized pagan prayers. But Jesus declared, “When you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words” (v.7).

That **John** the Baptist had **also taught his disciples** to pray (cf. Luke 5:33) also prompted the Lord’s disciples to ask Him to teach them. They were acquainted with John’s disciples (cf. 7:18–24), and wanted the same kind of instruction from Jesus that John had given his followers. It is reasonable to assume that since John was not a part of the religious establishment, he had maintained a pure, uncorrupted approach to prayer in keeping with that of Old Testament saints.

THE LORD'S RESPONSE

**And He said to them, “When you pray, say:” (2b)**

The disciples had not requested that Jesus teach them a prayer to recite, but how to pray. He responded by giving them a prayer that, while it is recited and even sung, is not intended for merely that. Having warned against meaningless repetition in prayer (Matt. 6:7), Jesus would hardly have given His followers a prayer to recite mechanically. Nor is there any record in the New Testament of anyone subsequently reciting this prayer. Far from being merely another ritual prayer, it is a skeleton or framework for all prayer. As such, it is of great practical value, as the Puritan pastor and theologian Thomas Watson noted:

There is a double benefit arising from framing our petitions suitably to this prayer. 1. Hereby error in prayer is prevented. It is not easy to write wrong after this copy; we cannot easily err when we have our pattern before us. 2. Hereby mercies requested are obtained; for the apostle assures us that God will hear us when we pray “according to his will.” 1 John v. 14. And sure we pray according to his will when we pray according to the pattern he has set us. (*Body of Divinity* [Reprint; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979], 400–401)

This prayer reflects the elements of prayer found in the Old Testament. There was a sense in which God was unapproachable, symbolized by the veil separating the Holy of Holies from the rest of the temple, and the prohibition against touching Mt. Sinai when God appeared (Ex. 19:12). Yet while the people could not enter directly into God's presence, they were invited to approach Him in prayer. “In my distress” David said, “I called upon the Lord, and cried to my God for help; He heard my voice out of His temple, and my cry for help before Him came into His ears” (Ps. 18:6). In Psalm 145:18 he added, “The Lord is near to all who call upon Him, to all who call upon Him in truth.” In Psalm 50:15 God invited His people to “Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I shall rescue you, and you will honor Me,” and in 91:15 He promised, “He will call upon Me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble; I will rescue him and honor him.”

Prayers in the Old Testament were characterized by several elements. First, they were marked by adoration, love, and praise, as the passion of the heart flowed out from the lips (Pss. 7:17; 22:23, 26; 34:1).

Second, they reflected an attitude of gratefulness and thanksgiving for God's blessings and provision (Pss. 9:1; 30:4; 33:2; 50:14, 23; Isa. 12:1; Dan. 2:23; Jon. 2:9), Third, they recognized God's holiness (Ps. 22:3), acknowledging His transcendent glory. Fourth, they manifested a heartfelt desire to obey God (Ps. 119:5, 8, 17, 34, 88, 134), which resulted in confession of sin (Ps. 51) when there was disobedience. Fifth, instead of focusing exclusively on the needs of individuals, Old Testament prayers also expressed the needs of the nation as a whole (Ex. 33:13, 16; Deut. 26:15). Sixth, prayer in the Old Testament also involved perseverance, such as that exemplified by Moses, who interceded on behalf of the people for forty days after the incident of the golden calf (Deut. 9:18, 25). Finally, prayers were offered in humility (2 Chron. 7:14; Ezra 8:21; Ps. 10:17). Those same elements are in view in Jesus' prayer, as He reestablished the divine pattern that had largely been lost in Israel.

This rich, multifaceted template may be approached in several ways. It unfolds the various relationships between the believer and God: Father and child ("Our Father"), Holy One and worshiper ("hallowed be Your name"), Ruler and subject ("Your kingdom come"), Master and servant ("Your will be done"), Savior and sinner ("forgive us our debts"), and Guide and pilgrim ("do not lead us into temptation"). It also defines the proper attitudes for prayer: unselfishness ("our"), intimacy ("Father"), reverence ("hallowed be Your name"), loyalty ("Your kingdom come"), submissiveness ("Your will be done"), dependence ("give us this day our daily bread"), penitence ("forgive us our debts"), humility ("do not lead us into temptation"), and confident, triumphant joy ("Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever").

Focusing on God's glory, Jesus ignored non-essential elements such as the posture of prayer. Scripture records people praying in every conceivable position: standing (Gen. 24:12–14; 1 Sam. 1:26), sitting (Judg. 21:2–3; 2 Sam. 7:18; 1 Kings 19:4), kneeling (1 Kings 8:54; Ezra 9:5; Dan. 6:10), bowing (Ex. 34:8–9), lying face down (Ezek. 9:8; Matt. 26:39), with uplifted hands (Ps. 28:2; 1 Tim. 2:8), looking up (John 11:41; 17:1), and looking down (Luke 18:13).

Nor is there any particular location that prayers must be offered, though Jesus did suggest a private place (Matt. 6:6) rather than a pretentious public display. Still, the men of Judah prayed in the midst of battle

(2 Chron. 13:14); Elijah prayed in a cave (1 Kings 19:9–10); Jesus prayed in the garden of Gethsemane (Matt. 26:36–44), in the wilderness (Mark 1:35; Luke 5:16), on a mountain, (Luke 6:12), and on the cross (Luke 23:33–34); the early church prayed in a house (Acts 1:14,24; 12:12); Peter prayed on a housetop (Acts 10:9); Paul and Silas prayed in jail (Acts 16:25); Paul prayed on a beach (Acts 21:5) and in the temple (Acts 22:17); Hezekiah prayed in bed (Isa. 38:2); and Jonah prayed in the stomach of a fish (Jon. 2:1–9).

Nor did Jesus specify any particular time to pray. Scripture records people praying in the early morning before dawn (Mark 1:35), in the morning after sunrise (Pss. 5:3; 88:13), three times a day (Dan. 6:10 [morning, noon, and evening; Ps. 55:17]), at noon (Acts 10:9), in the afternoon (Acts 3:1), in the evening (1 Kings 18:36), during the night (Pss. 4:4; Luke 6:12), at midnight (Acts 16:25), all day long (Ps. 86:3), and day and night (Neh. 1:6; Luke 2:37; 1 Thess. 3:10; 1 Tim. 5:5); in short, believers are to pray at all times (Luke 18:1; Eph. 6:18), continually (Acts 1:14), and unceasingly (1 Thess. 5:17).

The Lord also did not mandate one particular attitude for prayer. On the one hand, some approached God with an attitude of sadness, grief, even despair. Daniel prayed wearing sackcloth, a manifestation of sorrow (Dan. 9:3); a repentant tax collector beat his breast, a sign of remorse, while praying (Luke 18:13); Hannah “wept bitterly” as she prayed (1 Sam. 1:9–11), as did David (Ps. 39:12); appalled by Israel’s defeat at Ai following Achan’s sin, Joshua and the elders of Israel put dust on their heads and tore their clothes when they sought the Lord in prayer (Josh. 7:6–7); after the devastating catastrophes that hit him “Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head, and he fell to the ground and worshiped” (Job 1:20); Moses (Deut. 9:18–19), Nehemiah (Neh. 1:4), Anna (Luke 2:37), the leaders of the church at Antioch (Acts 13:1–3), and Paul and Barnabas (Acts 14:23) fasted and prayed; Jesus, “in the days of His flesh, . . . offered up both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears to the One able to save Him from death, and He was heard because of His piety” (Heb. 5:7; cf. Luke 22:44); David exhorted the people, “Pour out your heart before Him; God is a refuge for us” (Ps. 62:8).

On the other hand, prayer can be offered with an attitude of joy. Paul wrote to the Philippians that he was “always offering prayer with joy



in my every prayer for you all” (Phil. 1:4); 1 Samuel 2:1 records that “Hannah prayed and said, ‘My heart exults in the Lord; my horn is exalted in the Lord, my mouth speaks boldly against my enemies, because I rejoice in Your salvation’”; David declared, “My mouth offers praises with joyful lips” (Ps. 63:5; cf. 71:23; 84:2; 92:4); Psalm 66:1 exhorts, “Shout joyfully to God, all the earth”; in Psalm 95:1–2 the psalmist exhorted, “O come, let us sing for joy to the Lord, let us shout joyfully to the rock of our salvation. Let us come before His presence with thanksgiving, let us shout joyfully to Him with psalms” (cf. 98:4–6; 100:1–2).

The petitions in the first half of this model for prayer focus on God’s glory, those in the second half on man’s need. Yet in reality the entire prayer is God-centered, since He glorifies Himself by providing for man’s needs. Prayer arises from the Word of God (cf. Dan. 9:2–3) and has as its ultimate goal the glory of God. It is not an attempt to change the will of God, still less does it attempt to manipulate Him to gain one’s greedy, selfish desires, as the “Health and Wealth” movement falsely teaches. True prayer puts God in His rightful place of sovereign authority and willingly, joyfully subordinates itself to His purposes. As Thomas Brooks noted, “Such prayers never reach the ear of God, nor delight the heart of God, nor shall ever be lodged in the bosom of God, that are not directed to the glory of God” (*Secret Key*, 235). Everything in Christ’s model prayer is in reality a rehearsal of what God has affirmed to be true, concerning both His person and His promises. Prayer seeks God’s glory and aligns itself with the promises He has made in Scripture.

All of the petitions affirm the supremacy of God. “Father” acknowledges Him as the source of all blessing; “hallowed be Your name” as sacred; “Your kingdom come” as sovereign; “Your will be done” as superior; “give us each day our daily bread” as supporter; “forgive us our sins” as savior, and “lead us not into temptation” as shelter.

This opening section of chapter 11 focuses on the importance of prayer. Verses 1–4 contain the Lord’s instruction on prayer, verses 5–8 reveal God’s eagerness to hear prayer, verses 9–10 teach the certainty that God will answer prayer, and verses 11–13 express God’s desire to give the best to those who pray. All of those rich truths will be the subject of the next several chapters of this volume.

THE MACARTHUR  
NEW TESTAMENT  
COMMENTARY  
LUKE 18-24

*John MacArthur*

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# Persistent Prayer for the Lord's Return (Luke 18:1–8)

# 1

Now He was telling them a parable to show that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart, saying, “In a certain city there was a judge who did not fear God and did not respect man. There was a widow in that city, and she kept coming to him, saying, ‘Give me legal protection from my opponent.’ For a while he was unwilling; but afterward he said to himself, ‘Even though I do not fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow bothers me, I will give her legal protection, otherwise by continually coming she will wear me out.’” And the Lord said, “Hear what the unrighteous judge said; now, will not God bring about justice for His elect who cry to Him day and night, and will He delay long over them? I tell you that He will bring about justice for them quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?”(18:1–8)

The Bible teaches both by precept and example that prayer encompasses many different matters. For example, the Old Testament

records numerous prayers for people and their needs. Abraham prayed that God would make Ishmael his heir (Gen. 17:18), for God to spare Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 18:23-32), and for Him to heal Abimelech and his household (Gen. 20:7, 17). David prayed for the recovery of his infant son (2 Sam. 12:16), and for Solomon as he assumed the throne (1 Chron. 29:19). Elijah prayed that the Lord would raise a widow's son from the dead (1 Kings 17:20-21), and Elisha did the same for the Shunammite woman's son (2 Kings 4:33). Job prayed for God to forgive his friends (Job 42:8-10). Moses prayed that God would spare Aaron (Deut. 9:20), heal Miriam (Num. 12:13), and lift the plagues from the Egyptians (Ex. 8:12-13, 30-31; 9:33; 10:18-19).

The Old Testament also records prayer offered for the nation of Israel as a whole, by David (2 Sam. 24:17; Ps. 25:22), Daniel (Dan. 9:3-19), Ezekiel (Ezek. 9:8), Ezra (Ezra 9:5-15), Hezekiah (2 Kings 19:14-19), Joshua (Josh. 7:6-9), Moses (Ex. 32:11-13, 31-32; 34:9; Num. 11:1-2; 14:13-19; 21:7; Deut. 9:26-29), Nehemiah (Neh. 1:4-11), Samuel (1 Sam. 7:5-9; 12:23), Solomon (1 Kings 8:22-54), and the people of Israel (Ex. 2:23; 14:10; Judg. 3:9; 1 Sam. 12:10; Neh. 9:27).

People in the Old Testament also brought their personal requests to God. Abraham prayed for God to give him a son as his heir (Gen. 15:2-3); his servant prayed that God would make his mission to find a wife for Isaac a success (Gen. 24:12); Jacob prayed that God would deliver him from Esau (Gen. 32:9-12); Moses prayed that he would find favor in God's sight (Ex. 33:12-13) and that God would reveal His glory to him (v. 18); Hannah prayed for a son (1 Sam. 1:10-11, 27); David prayed for help and deliverance from affliction (Pss. 18:6; 22:19; 69:1, 13, 29), as did the sons of Korah (Ps. 88:1-2); Hezekiah prayed that God would spare his life (2 Kings 20:2-3); and Jonah prayed that God would deliver him from drowning (Jonah 2:2-10). David (Pss. 25:18; 32:5; 51), Daniel (Dan. 9:20), and Manasseh (2 Chron. 33:11-13) prayed for God to forgive their sins.

The New Testament also records prayers for the needs of individuals. Jesus prayed for His disciples (John 17), for Peter's faith (Luke 22:32), for God to forgive those who crucified Him for what they had done (Luke 23:34), and for children who were brought to Him (Matt. 19:13); Paul prayed for Philemon (Philem. 4-6), Timothy (2 Tim. 1:3), Publius's father (Acts 28:8), and the salvation of Israel (Rom. 10:1); Philemon

prayed for Paul's release from imprisonment (Philem. 22); the early church prayed for Peter's release from prison (Acts 12:5); Peter prayed that God would raise Dorcas from the dead (Acts 9:40); John prayed for Gaius's health (3 John 1-2); the various churches that Paul ministered to prayed for him (Acts 13:3; Rom. 15:30-32; 2 Cor. 1:11; Eph. 6:19; Phil. 1:19; Col. 4:3; 1 Thess. 5:25; 2 Thess. 3:1), and he prayed for them (Rom. 1:9-10; 2 Cor. 13:7, 9; Eph. 1:16-21; 3:14-21; Phil. 1:3-4, 9; Col. 1:3, 9; 1 Thess. 1:2; 3:10; 2 Thess. 1:11-12). Epaphras prayed for the Colossian church; Peter and John prayed that the Samaritans would be filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:14-15).

In addition, Scripture commands prayer for civil rulers (1 Tim. 2:2), all believers (Eph. 6:18), and lost sinners in general (1 Tim. 2:1)—even those who persecute believers (Matt. 5:44).

But an often overlooked element of prayer is prayer for the return of the Lord Jesus Christ, which the apostle John pled for in Revelation 22:20 and a prayer all believers should pray (v. 17). It is such prayer that is the theme of our Lord's parable, which may be examined under four headings: the illustration, the intention, the interpretation, and the inquisition.

### THE ILLUSTRATION

**“In a certain city there was a judge who did not fear God and did not respect man. There was a widow in that city, and she kept coming to him, saying, ‘Give me legal protection from my opponent.’ For a while he was unwilling; but afterward he said to himself, ‘Even though I do not fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow bothers me, I will give her legal protection, otherwise by continually coming she will wear me out.’”** (18:2-5)

The setting for the Lord's illustration is a **certain** fictitious **city**. Though the story is invented, the situation Jesus described was an all too familiar one to those listening, who had much experience with needy widows (Luke took a particular interest in widows [Luke 2:37; 4:25-26; 7:12; 20:47; 21:2-4; Acts 6:1; 9:39, 41]) and with unjust judges.

The Lord characterized this **judge** as one **who did not fear**

**God and did not respect man.** That description was used in ancient literature to describe the most wicked and rebellious people, who had no regard for what God commanded or people expected. This man was ultimately and consummately immoral. He was not moved by reverence or worship, or by compassion or sympathy. He had no interest in the first commandment, to love God, or the second commandment, to love his neighbor. Not only was he wicked, but he was also comfortable with his corruption, as his boast in verse 4, **“I do not fear God nor respect man,”** reveals. His confession is consistent with his reputation. Here was the most immoral kind of man in the most important position of moral responsibility; a judge whose disregard for God and man had far-reaching implications for all who came before his bench.

The court over which he presided was not a religious court, but a civil one. He did not rule on the significant matters of the Old Testament law and the religious traditions, but on the application of the law to the affairs of everyday life (cf. Matt. 5:25; Luke 12:14). Nonetheless, he had a very serious duty before God to uphold the law with justice and demonstrate sympathy and compassion with wisdom. After appointing judges in the cities of Judah, King Jehoshaphat charged them,

“Consider what you are doing, for you do not judge for man but for the Lord who is with you when you render judgment. Now then let the fear of the Lord be upon you; be very careful what you do, for the Lord our God will have no part in unrighteousness or partiality or the taking of a bribe.” (2 Chron. 19:6-7)

But despite their sobering responsibility before God, judges were often corrupt. Through the prophet Amos, God indicted Israel’s judges:

They hate him who reproves in the gate, and they abhor him who speaks with integrity. Therefore because you impose heavy rent on the poor and exact a tribute of grain from them, though you have built houses of well-hewn stone, yet you will not live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, yet you will not drink their wine. For I know your transgressions are many and your sins are great, you who distress the righteous and accept bribes and turn aside the poor in the gate. Therefore at such a time the prudent person keeps silent, for it is an evil time. Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and thus may the Lord God of hosts be with you, just as you have said! Hate evil, love good, and establish



justice in the gate! Perhaps the Lord God of hosts may be gracious to the remnant of Joseph. (Amos 5:10-15)

Alfred Edersheim wrote concerning Israel's corrupt judges, "Jewish wit designated them, by a play on words, as *Dayyaney Gezeloth*—Robber Judges, instead of their real title of *Dayyaney Gezeroth* (Judges of Prohibitions, or else of Punishments). . . . The Talmud . . . accuses them of ignorance, arbitrariness, and covetousness, so that for a dish of meat they would pervert justice" (*The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974], 2:287).

*Entrepō* (**respect**) means "to be put to shame." Middle Eastern culture then as now was a shame and honor based culture. People sought to do what would bring them public honor, and avoid at all costs doing anything that would bring them public shame. Good social behavior was encouraged by appealing to a person's shame, much as the contemporary expression, "Shame on you!" does. Thus, the point of the expression **did not respect man** is that this judge was not ashamed before people. He had no shame; he could not be put to shame. Because he had no reverence for God and could never do anything that would cause him to feel shame in his behavior toward people, he was impervious to any appeal to justice or righteousness. No one could move him to do what was right.

Into his court came a **widow** from **that city**. She had been seriously defrauded by someone and as a result she was destitute. Because of that **she kept coming to him, saying, "Give me legal protection from my opponent."** Her persistence indicates that her financial situation was desperate and she needed what was rightfully hers. Further, her destitution extended beyond financial matters. She was not only bereft of material resources, but evidently there was no man in her life to look after her in the absence of her husband. Courts were the province of men, and women came there only when there was no man available to plead their case. This widow represents those who are alone, destitute, powerless, helpless, unloved, uncared for, and desperate.

The Old Testament taught that widows were to be treated with justice and mercy. Exodus 22:22 prohibited afflicting a widow (cf. Isa. 1:23; Jer. 7:6; 22:3), while Deuteronomy 24:17 commanded that they be

treated fairly. In Isaiah 1:17 God instructed His people to “plead for [lit., “contend for,” or “fight for”] the widow,” while Deuteronomy 10:18 says that God “executes justice for . . . the widow” (cf. Pss. 68:5; 146:9; Prov. 15:25) and Deuteronomy 27:19 warns, “Cursed is he who distorts the justice due an alien, orphan, and widow.” Eliphaz, one of Job’s would-be counselors, insulted Job by falsely accusing him of having “sent widows away empty” (Job 22:9), while Job denounced the wicked as those who “take the widow’s ox for a pledge” (Job 24:3; cf. 24:21). Based on the teaching of the Old Testament, the fictitious judge was obligated to do something to help this widow, if not on a legal basis (though she apparently had the law on her side, since she requested **legal protection from her opponent**), then purely on the basis of mercy. He, however, was utterly indifferent, unsympathetic, and without compassion toward her.

Her desperate need made the widow relentless and determined in her pursuit of the justice due her, so **she kept coming to** the judge, probably on an almost daily basis, demanding that he **give her legal protection from her opponent**. She insisted that he recognize the validity of her complaint and render a just verdict in her favor. Initially, **he was unwilling** to help her, but eventually her persistence wore down his resistance. Exasperated by her constant requests **he said to himself, “Even though I do not fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow bothers me, I will give her legal protection, otherwise by continually coming she will wear me out.”** He affirmed, as noted above, his utter disdain for both God and men, thus disclaiming any noble motive for what he was about to do. He decided to give **this widow the legal protection** that she requested solely because she bothered him. Her **continually coming** to him was more than he could handle and threatened to **wear him out**. *Hupopiazō* (**wear out**) literally means “to strike in the face,” “to treat roughly,” or “to beat black and blue.” Paul used it in 1 Corinthians 9:27 to speak of the severe self-discipline he imposed on himself. The widow was figuratively beating up the judge. Though women were powerless in that male-dominated culture, they were respected and honored. Because of that, they could get away with behavior that would not be tolerated in a man. The trouble and annoyance she caused him was relentless, and it was not going to stop until he acquiesced. In the end, the powerful and seemingly impervious judge

was worn down by the persistence of the weak, helpless widow. He decided to give her the **legal protection** (from the verb *ekdikeō*; “to vindicate,” or “execute justice”) that she asked for.

### THE INTENTION

**Now He was telling them a parable to show that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart, (18:1)**

Before He related this **parable**, Luke gave its point. The Lord **was telling** His followers (17:22) **that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart**. This fictional story continues His discourse on the second coming that began in 17:22. Jesus' point is that believers are to continually **pray and not to lose heart** as they wait for His return.

The Lord knew that there would be a long (by human reckoning, not God's; cf. 2 Peter 3:8) interval between His first and second comings, so far lasting for two millennia. During that time Christ has been continually dishonored and denied His rightful place. The Word of God has been unappreciated, assaulted, and denied. Christians have faced rejection, hostility, persecution, and martyrdom at the hands of Satan and the evil world system. It is only natural that they should long for the Lord Jesus Christ to return and judge the ungodly, destroy sin, end the reign of Satan, and set up His earthly kingdom. But until the second coming, Christians must not **lose heart** (give up, become weary, or lose courage) and stop praying (cf. 21:36). This verse is not a call to unceasing prayer in general (cf. Eph. 6:18; 1 Thess. 5:17). As noted above, the context (see also v. 8) indicates that the prayer in view is specifically for Christ's return (cf. 11:2; Matt. 6:10; Rev. 6:9–10). In fact, such prayer is part of the means of bringing about the second coming, since prayer is a means God uses to accomplish His work.

The doctrine of the second coming brings comfort, promotes holy living, and spurs evangelism. It has implications on how believers view everything they own, how they live their lives, and how they pray. Prevailing, persistent prayer for the Lord's return drives the heart to leave the things of this passing world and to love Christ's appearing (2 Tim. 4:8; cf.

Titus 2:13). That should be a defining characteristic of every Christian's life.

### THE INTERPRETATION

**the Lord said, “Hear what the unrighteous judge said; now, will not God bring about justice for His elect who cry to Him day and night, and will He delay long over them? I tell you that He will bring about justice for them quickly. (18:6–8a)**

The phrase **the Lord said** introduces Christ's explanation of this story in the context of His return. He began by contrasting the **unrighteous** (dishonest, corrupt, unjust) fictional **judge** with the true God, who is holy, just, and righteous. The judge was cruelly indifferent to the widow's plight. Yet in the end, worn down by her persistent determination to force the justice due her, he finally gave in and did the right thing, albeit for purely selfish motives.

In an argument contrasting the lesser with the greater, Jesus asked, **“Will not God bring about justice for His elect who cry to Him day and night, and will He delay long over them?”** The elect, like the widow, are helpless, and at the mercy of God as their judge. But the corrupt, wicked judge was not at all like God. Yet even though he was indifferent to the demands of justice and mercy he finally, reluctantly, and for his own selfish interest, did what was right for a person for whom he had no feelings. How much more will God, who loves His own perfectly, do what is right for them, whom He chose from “before the foundation of the world” (Eph. 1:4), when they **cry to Him day and night** because they “long to see one of the days of the Son of Man” (17:22; cf. 1 Thess. 1:10; Rev. 6:10)? He is the one, in contrast to the unrighteous judge, “who judges righteously” (1 Peter 2:23); who has said, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay” (Rom. 12:19); and whose “judgments are true and righteous” (Rev. 19:2). Unlike the uncaring, merciless judge, God is “compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness” toward His people (Ps. 103:8).

The phrase **delay long over them** might better be translated “be patient over them.” The long interval between the first and second

comings of Christ is a period in which God is exercising patience on behalf of His own. **Delay long** translates a form of the verb *makrothumeō* from *makros*, which in terms of time means “far distant,” or “remote,” and *thumos*, which refers to anger or wrath. *Makrothumeō* here indicates that God has delayed for a long time His eschatological wrath in order to extend His mercy in gathering the elect. “The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness,” wrote Peter, “but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9; cf. Rom. 2:4; 9:22; 1 Tim. 1:16; 1 Peter 3:20). God is bringing salvation to His elect; His patience is for their redemption (2 Peter 3:15). Once all the elect have been gathered, He will both satisfy His justice and glorify them. When God does vindicate His elect He will do so suddenly and quickly, as the Lord’s rhetorical question, **Will He delay long over them?** indicates.

#### THE INQUISITION

**However, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?** (18:8b)

Jesus concluded this section by asking this pensive question. When He returns, will He find anyone faithfully praying in eagerness for the second coming? Any who have loved His appearing? Who cry out, “Maranatha” (“come Lord”) (1 Cor. 16:22)?

Some think that eschatology, the doctrine of the last things, is mere sensationalistic speculation with little practical value. But as the Lord’s teaching in this passage indicates, nothing could be further from the truth. Paul’s dealings with the infant church at Thessalonica further emphasizes the importance and practical value of teaching on the end times. The apostle’s two epistles to them reveal that in the brief time he spent with them (cf. Acts 17:1–2), he taught them an amazingly comprehensive eschatology (2 Thess. 2:5).

In the salutation to his first epistle Paul praised the Thessalonians for their “steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ” (1:3), which is “to wait for His Son from heaven” (v. 10). In 2:12 he exhorted them to “walk in

a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory,” while in verse 19 he referred to “the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming.” Paul prayed that God would “establish [their] hearts without blame in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints” (3:13). In chapter 4 Paul gave them a detailed description of the rapture (vv. 13–18), while in chapter 5 the apostle reminded them of what he had taught them regarding the Day of the Lord and the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ (vv. 1–11, 23).

In his second epistle to that Thessalonian congregation, Paul continued his detailed instruction regarding eschatology. In chapter 1 he described God’s judgment and the coming of the kingdom (vv. 5–10), and the eternal punishment of the wicked (v. 9). In the second chapter he gave them detailed teaching on the rise of Antichrist, the return of Christ, and the coming of the Day of the Lord.

The extensive eschatological teaching Paul gave this young church reveals that such doctrine is critical, foundational, and highly useful to living a godly life (2 Peter 3:11, 14; 1 John 3:1–3). Knowing the end of the story encourages Christians to “be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that [their] toil is not in vain in the Lord” (1 Cor. 15:58).

True Christians live in hope, waiting expectantly for the promise of Christ’s return to be fulfilled. To that end they pray for His glory and honor to be revealed. Such prayer is life changing.

THE MACARTHUR  
NEW TESTAMENT  
COMMENTARY  
**JOHN 1-11**

*John MacArthur Jr.*

MOODY PUBLISHERS/CHICAGO

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# The Divine Word

# 1

(John 1:1–5)

**In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being. In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men. The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it. (1:1–5)**

The opening section of John's gospel expresses the most profound truth in the universe in the clearest terms. Though easily understood by a child, John's Spirit-inspired words convey a truth beyond the ability of the greatest minds in human history to fathom: the eternal, infinite God became a man in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. The glorious, incontrovertible truth that in Jesus the divine "Word became flesh" (1:14) is the theme of John's gospel.

The deity of the Lord Jesus Christ is an essential, nonnegotiable tenet of the Christian faith. Several lines of biblical evidence flow together to prove conclusively that He is God.

First, the direct statements of Scripture affirm that Jesus is God. In keeping with his emphasis on Christ's deity, John records several of those statements. The opening verse of his gospel declares, "the Word [Jesus]

was God” (see the discussion of this verse later in this chapter). In John’s gospel Jesus repeatedly assumed for Himself the divine name “I am” (cf. 4:26; 8:24, 28, 58; 13:19: 18:5, 6, 8). In 10:30, He claimed to be one in nature and essence with the Father (that the unbelieving Jews recognized this as a claim to deity is clear from their reaction in v. 33; cf. 5:18). Nor did Jesus correct Thomas when he addressed Him as “My Lord and my God!” (20:28); in fact, He praised him for his faith (v. 29). Jesus’ reaction is inexplicable if He were not God.

To the Philippians Paul wrote, “[Jesus] existed in the form of God,” possessing absolute “equality with God” (Phil. 2:6). In Colossians 2:9 he declared, “For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form.” Romans 9:5 refers to Christ as “God blessed forever”; Titus 2:13 and 2 Peter 1:1 call Him “our God and Savior.” God the Father addressed the Son as God in Hebrews 1:8: “Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, and the righteous scepter is the scepter of His kingdom.” In his first epistle John referred to Jesus Christ as “the true God” (1 John 5:20).

Second, Jesus Christ receives titles elsewhere in Scripture given to God. As noted above, Jesus took for Himself the divine name “I am.” In John 12:40 John quoted Isaiah 6:10, a passage which in Isaiah’s vision refers to God (cf. Isa. 6:5). Yet in verse 41 John declared, “These things Isaiah said because he saw His [Christ’s; cf. vv. 36, 37, 42] glory, and he spoke of Him.” Jeremiah prophesied that the Messiah would be called “The Lord [YHWH] our righteousness” (Jer. 23:6).

God and Jesus are both called Shepherd (Ps. 23:1—John 10:14); Judge (Gen. 18:25—2 Tim. 4:1, 8); Holy One (Isa. 10:20—Ps. 16:10; Acts 2:27; 3:14); First and Last (Isa. 44:6; 48:12—Rev. 1:17; 22:13); Light (Ps. 27:1—John 8:12); Lord of the Sabbath (Ex. 16:23, 29; Lev. 19:3—Matt. 12:8); Savior (Isa. 43:11—Acts 4:12; Titus 2:13); Pierced One (Zech. 12:10—John 19:37); Mighty God (Isa. 10:21—Isa. 9:6); Lord of lords (Deut. 10:17—Rev. 17:14); Alpha and Omega (Rev. 1:8—Rev. 22:13); Lord of Glory (Ps. 24:10—1 Cor. 2:8); and Redeemer (Isa. 41:14; 48:17; 63:16—Eph. 1:7; Heb. 9:12).

Third, Jesus Christ possesses the incommunicable attributes of God, those unique to Him. Scripture reveals Christ to be eternal (Mic. 5:2; Isa. 9:6), omnipresent (Matt. 18:20; 28:20), omniscient (Matt. 11:27; John 16:30; 21:17), omnipotent (Phil. 3:21), immutable (Heb. 13:8), sovereign (Matt. 28:18), and glorious (John 17:5; 1 Cor. 2:8; cf. Isa. 42:8; 48:11, where God states that He will not give His glory to another).

Fourth, Jesus Christ does the works that only God can do. He created all things (John 1:3; Col. 1:16), sustains the creation (Col. 1:17; Heb. 1:3), raises the dead (John 5:21; 11:25-44), forgives sin (Mark 2:10; cf. v. 7), and His word stands forever (Matt. 24:35; cf. Isa. 40:8).

Fifth, Jesus Christ received worship (Matt. 14:33; 28:9; John 9:38;

Phil. 2:10; Heb. 1:6)—even though He taught that only God is to be worshiped (Matt. 4:10). Scripture also records that both holy men (Acts 10:25–26) and holy angels (Rev. 22:8–9) refused worship.

Finally, Jesus Christ received prayer, which is only to be addressed to God (John 14:13–14; Acts 7:59–60; 1 John 5:13–15).

Verses 1–18, the prologue to John’s presentation of the deity of Christ, are a synopsis or overview of the entire book. John clearly defined his purpose in writing his gospel in 20:31—that his readers “may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing [they] may have life in His name.” John revealed Jesus Christ as “the Son of God,” the eternal second person of the Trinity. He became a man, the “Christ” (Messiah), and offered Himself as a sacrifice for sins. Those who put their faith in Him will “have life in His name,” while those who reject Him will be judged and sentenced to eternal punishment.

The reality that Jesus is God, introduced in the prologue, is expounded throughout the book by John’s careful selection of claims and miracles that seal the case. Verses 1–3 of the prologue teach that Jesus is co-equal and co-eternal with the Father; verses 4–5 relate the salvation He brought, which was announced by His herald, John the Baptist (vv. 6–8); verses 9–13 describe the reaction of the human race to Him, either rejection (vv. 10–11) or acceptance (vv. 12–13); verses 14–18 summarize the entire prologue.

The prologue also introduces several key terms that appear throughout the book, including light (3:19–21; 8:12; 9:5; 12:35–36, 46), darkness (3:19; 8:12; 12:35, 46), life (3:15–16, 36; 4:14, 36; 5:21, 24, 26, 39–40; 6:27, 33, 35, 40, 47–48, 51, 53–54, 63, 68; 8:12; 10:10, 28; 11:25; 12:25, 50; 14:6; 17:2, 3; 20:31), witness (or testify; 2:25; 3:11; 5:31, 36, 39; 7:7; 8:14; 10:25; 12:17; 15:26–27; 18:37), glory (2:11; 5:41, 44; 7:18; 8:50, 54; 11:4, 40; 12:41; 17:5, 22, 24), and world (3:16–17, 19; 4:42; 6:14, 33, 51; 7:7; 8:12, 23, 26; 9:5, 39; 10:36; 11:27; 12:19, 31, 46–47; 13:1; 14:17, 19, 22, 27, 30–31; 15:18–19; 16:8, 11, 20, 28, 33; 17:5–6, 9, 11, 13–16, 18, 21, 23–25; 18:36–37).

From the first five verses of John’s gospel prologue flow three evidences of the deity of the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ: His preexistence, His creative power, and His self-existence.

## THE PREEXISTENCE OF THE WORD

**In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. (1:1–2)**

*Archē* (**beginning**) can mean “source,” or “origin” (cf. Col. 1:18; Rev. 3:14); or “rule,” “authority,” “ruler,” or “one in authority” (cf. Luke 12:11;

20:20; Rom. 8:38; 1 Cor. 15:24; Eph. 1:21; 3:10; 6:12; Col. 1:16; 2:10, 15; Titus 3:1). Both of those connotations are true of Christ, who is both the Creator of the universe (v. 3; Col. 1:16; Heb. 1:2) and its ruler (Col. 2:10; Eph. 1:20–22; Phil. 2:9–11). But *archē* refers here to the **beginning** of the universe depicted in Genesis 1:1.

Jesus Christ **was** already in existence when the heavens and the earth were created; thus, He is not a created being, but existed from all eternity. (Since time began with the creation of the physical universe, whatever existed before that creation is eternal.) “The Logos [Word] did not then begin to be, but at that point at which all else began to be, He already *was*. In the beginning, place it where you may, the Word already existed. In other words, the Logos is before time, eternal.” (Marcus Dods, “John” in W. Robertson Nicoll, ed. *The Expositors’ Bible Commentary* [Reprint; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2002], 1:683. Emphasis in original.). That truth provides definitive proof of Christ’s deity, for only God is eternal.

The imperfect tense of the verb *eimi* (**was**), describing continuing action in the past, further reinforces the eternal preexistence of the Word. It indicates that He was continuously in existence before the beginning. But even more significant is the use of *eimi* instead of *ginomai* (“became”). The latter term refers to things that come into existence (cf. 1:3, 10, 12, 14). Had John used *ginomai*, he would have implied that the Word came into existence at the beginning along with the rest of creation. But *eimi* stresses that the Word always existed; there was never a point when He came into being.

The concept of the **Word** (*logos*) is one imbued with meaning for both Jews and Greeks. To the Greek philosophers, the *logos* was the impersonal, abstract principle of reason and order in the universe. It was in some sense a creative force, and also the source of wisdom. The average Greek may not have fully understood all the nuances of meaning with which the philosophers invested the term *logos*. Yet even to laymen the term would have signified one of the most important principles in the universe.

To the Greeks, then, John presented Jesus as the personification and embodiment of the *logos*. Unlike the Greek concept, however, Jesus was not an impersonal source, force, principle, or emanation. In Him, the true *logos* who was God became a man—a concept foreign to Greek thought.

But *logos* was not just a Greek concept. The word of the Lord was also a significant Old Testament theme, well-known to the Jews. The word of the Lord was the expression of divine power and wisdom. By His word God introduced the Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 15:1), gave Israel the Ten Commandments (Ex. 24:3–4; Deut. 5:5; cf. Ex. 34:28; Deut. 9:10),

attended the building of Solomon's temple (1 Kings 6:11-13), revealed God to Samuel (1 Sam. 3:21), pronounced judgment on the house of Eli (1 Kings 2:27), counseled Elijah (1 Kings 19:9ff.), directed Israel through God's spokesmen (cf. 1 Sam. 15:10ff.; 2 Sam. 7:4ff.; 24:11ff.; 1 Kings 16:1-4; 17:2-4., 8ff.; 18:1; 21:17-19; 2 Chron. 11:2-4), was the agent of creation (Ps. 33:6), and revealed Scripture to the prophets (Jer. 1:2; Ezek. 1:3; Dan. 9:2; Hos. 1:1; Joel 1:1; Jonah 1:1; Mic. 1:1; Zeph. 1:1; Hag. 1:1; Zech. 1:1; Mal. 1:1).

John presented Jesus to his Jewish readers as the incarnation of divine power and revelation. He initiated the new covenant (Luke 22:20; Heb. 9:15; 12:24), instructs believers (John 10:27), unites them into a spiritual temple (1 Cor. 3:16-17; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:21), revealed God to man (John 1:18; 14:7-9), judges those who reject Him (John 3:18; 5:22), directs the church through those whom He has raised up to lead it (Eph. 4:11-12; 1 Tim. 5:17; Titus 1:5; 1 Peter 5:1-3), was the agent of creation (John 1:3; Col. 1:16; Heb. 1:2), and inspired the Scripture penned by the New Testament writers (John 14:26) through the Holy Spirit whom He sent (John 15:26). As the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ is God's final word to mankind: "God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son" (Heb. 1:1-2).

Then John took his argument a step further. In His eternal pre-existence **the Word was with God**. The English translation does not bring out the full richness of the Greek expression (*pros ton theon*). That phrase means far more than merely that the Word existed with God; it "[gives] the picture of two personal beings facing one another and engaging in intelligent discourse" (W. Robert Cook, *The Theology of John* [Chicago: Moody, 1979], 49). From all eternity Jesus, as the second person of the trinity, was "with the Father [*pros ton patera*]" (1 John 1:2) in deep, intimate fellowship. Perhaps *pros ton theon* could best be rendered "face-to-face." The Word is a person, not an attribute of God or an emanation from Him. And He is of the same essence as the Father.

Yet in an act of infinite condescension, Jesus left the glory of heaven and the privilege of face-to-face communion with His Father (cf. John 17:5). He willingly "emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. . . . He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:7-8). Charles Wesley captured some of the wonder of that marvelous truth in the familiar hymn "And Can It Be That I Should Gain?":

He left His Father's throne above,  
So free, so infinite His grace!  
Emptied Himself of all but love,  
And bled for Adam's helpless race.

Amazing love! How can it be  
That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?  
Amazing love! How can it be  
That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

John's description of the Word reached its pinnacle in the third clause of this opening verse. Not only did the Word exist from all eternity, and have face-to-face fellowship with God the Father, but also **the Word was God**. That simple statement, only four words in both English and Greek (*theos ēn ho logos*), is perhaps the clearest and most direct declaration of the deity of the Lord Jesus Christ to be found anywhere in Scripture.

But despite their clarity, heretical groups almost from the moment John penned these words have twisted their meaning to support their false doctrines concerning the nature of the Lord Jesus Christ. Noting that *theos* (**God**) is anarthrous (not preceded by the definite article), some argue that it is an indefinite noun and mistranslate the phrase, "the Word was divine" (i.e., merely possessing some of the qualities of God) or, even more appalling, "the Word was a god."

The absence of the article before *theos*, however, does not make it indefinite. *Logos* (**Word**) has the definite article to show that it is the subject of the sentence (since it is in the same case as *theos*). Thus the rendering "God was the Word" is invalid, because "the Word," not "God," is the subject. It would also be theologically incorrect, because it would equate the Father ("God" whom the Word was with in the preceding clause) with the Word, thus denying that the two are separate persons. The predicate nominative (**God**) describes the nature of the Word, showing that He is of the same essence as the Father (cf. H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* [Toronto: MacMillan, 1957], 139-40; A. T. Robertson, *The Minister and His Greek New Testament* [Reprint: Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978], 67-68).

According to the rules of Greek grammar, when the predicate nominative (**God** in this clause) precedes the verb, it cannot be considered indefinite (and thus translated "a god" instead of **God**) merely because it does not have the article. That the term **God** is definite and refers to the true God is obvious for several reasons. First, *theos* appears without the definite article four other times in the immediate context (vv. 6, 12, 13, 18; cf. 3:2, 21; 9:16; Matt. 5:9). Not even the Jehovah's Witnesses' distorted translation of the Bible renders the anarthrous *theos* "a god" in those verses. Second, if John's meaning was that the Word was divine, or a god, there were ways he could have phrased it to make that unmistakably clear. For example, if he meant to say that the Word was merely in some sense divine, he could have used the adjective *theios* (cf. 2 Peter

1:4). It must be remembered that, as Robert L. Reymond notes, “No standard Greek lexicon offers ‘divine’ as one of the meanings of *theos*, nor does the noun become an adjective when it ‘sheds’ its article” (*Jesus, Divine Messiah* [Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presb. & Ref., 1990], 303). Or if he had wanted to say that the Word was a god, he could have written *ho logos ēn theos*. If John had written *ho theos ēn ho logos*, the two nouns (*theos* and *logos*) would be interchangeable, and God and the Word would be identical. That would have meant that the Father was the Word, which, as noted above, would deny the Trinity. But as Leon Morris asks rhetorically, “How else [other than *theos ēn ho logos*] in Greek would one say, ‘the Word was God’?” (*The Gospel According to John*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979], 77 n. 15).

Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, John chose the precise wording that accurately conveys the true nature of the Word, Jesus Christ. “By *theos* without the article, John neither indicates, on the one hand, identity of Person with the Father; nor yet, on the other, any lower nature than that of God Himself” (H. A. W. Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Gospel of John* [Reprint; Winona Lake, Ind.: Alpha, 1979], 48).

Underscoring their significance, John restated the profound truths of verse 1 in verse 2. He emphasized again the eternity of the Word; **He** already **was** in existence **in the beginning** when everything else was created. As it did in verse 1, the imperfect tense of the verb *eimi* (**was**) describes the Word’s continuous existence before **the beginning**. And as John also noted in verse 1, that existence was one of intimate fellowship **with God** the Father.

The truth of Jesus Christ’s deity and full equality with the Father is a nonnegotiable element of the Christian faith. In 2 John 10 John warned, “If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching [the biblical teaching concerning Christ; cf. vv. 7, 9], do not receive him into your house, and do not give him a greeting.” Believers are not to aid heretical false teachers in any way, including giving those who have blasphemed Christ food and lodging, since the one who does so “participates in [their] evil deeds” (v. 11). Such seemingly uncharitable behavior is perfectly justified toward false teachers who deny the deity of our Lord and the gospel, since they are under God’s curse:

There are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed! As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed! (Gal. 1:7-9)



Emphasizing their deadly danger, both Paul (Acts 20:29) and Jesus (Matt. 7:15) described false teachers as wolves in disguise. They are not to be welcomed into the sheepfold, but guarded against and avoided.

Confusion about the deity of Christ is inexcusable, because the biblical teaching regarding it is clear and unmistakable. Jesus Christ is the eternally preexistent Word, who enjoys full face-to-face communion and divine life with the Father, and is Himself God.

### THE CREATIVE POWER OF THE WORD

**All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being. (1:3)**

Once again John expressed a profound truth in clear language. Jesus Christ, the eternal Word, created everything that **came into being**. John underscored that truth by repeating it negatively; **apart from Him nothing** (lit., “not even one thing”) **came into being that has come into being**.

That Jesus Christ created everything (cf. Col. 1:16; Heb. 1:2) offers two further proofs of His deity. First, the Creator of all things must Himself be uncreated, and only the eternal God is uncreated. The Greek text emphasizes the distinction between the uncreated Word and His creation, since a different verb is used here than the one used in verses 1 and 2. As noted in the previous point, John used a form of the verb *eimi* (“to be”), which denotes a state of being, to describe the Word in verses 1 and 2; here, speaking of the creation of the universe, he used a form of the verb *ginomai* (**came into being**). That Jesus is the Creator also verifies His deity, because God is portrayed throughout the Bible as the Creator (Gen. 1:1; Ps. 102:25; Isa. 40:28; 42:5; 45:18; Mark 13:19; Rom. 1:25; Eph. 3:9; Rev. 4:11).

By stressing the role of the Word in creating the universe, John countered the false teaching that later developed into the dangerous heresy known as Gnosticism. The Gnostics embraced the philosophical dualism common to Greek philosophy that held that spirit was good and matter was evil. They argued that since matter was evil, the good God could not have created the physical universe. Instead, a series of spirit beings emanated from Him until finally one of those descending emanations was evil and foolish enough to create the physical universe. But John rejected that heretical view, strongly affirming that Jesus Christ was the Father’s agent in creating everything.

The present world, however, is radically different from God’s original good creation (Gen. 1:31). The catastrophic results of the fall not only

affected the human race, but also the entire creation. Jesus therefore will one day redeem not only believers, but also the material world as well, as Paul noted in Romans 8:19–21:

For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

When the curse is lifted during Christ's millennial reign,

The wolf will dwell with the lamb,  
 And the leopard will lie down with the young goat,  
 And the calf and the young lion and the fatling together;  
 And a little boy will lead them.  
 Also the cow and the bear will graze,  
 Their young will lie down together,  
 And the lion will eat straw like the ox.  
 The nursing child will play by the hole of the cobra,  
 And the weaned child will put his hand on the viper's den.  
 They will not hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain,  
 For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord  
 As the waters cover the sea. (Isa. 11:6–9)

The wolf and the lamb will graze together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox; and dust will be the serpent's food. They will do no evil or harm in all My holy mountain, says the Lord. (Isa. 65:25)

#### THE SELF-EXISTENCE OF THE WORD

**In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men. The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.** (1:4–5)

Displaying yet again his Spirit-inspired economy of words, John in these two brief verses summarized the incarnation. Christ, the embodiment of **life** and the glorious, eternal **Light** of heaven, entered the sin-darkened world of **men**, and that world reacted in various ways to Him.

As noted earlier in this chapter, the themes **life** and **Light** are common in John's gospel. *Zōē* (**life**) refers to spiritual life as opposed to *bios*, which describes physical life (cf. 1 John 2:16). Here, as in 5:26, it refers primarily to Christ having life in Himself. Theologians refer to that as aseity, or self-existence. It is clear evidence of Christ's deity, since only God is self-existent.

This truth of God's and Christ's self-existence—having life in themselves—is foundational to our faith. All that is created can be said to be “becoming,” because nothing created is unchanging. It is essential to understand that permanent, eternal, non-changing being or life is distinct from all that is becoming. “Being” is eternal and the source of life for what is “becoming.” That is what distinguishes creatures from the Creator, us from God.

Genesis 1:1 establishes this fundamental reality with the statement, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” Because it is the most important truth in the Bible, it is the one most assaulted. Unbelievers know that to be rid of creation is to be rid of a Creator. And to be rid of God leaves men free to live in whatever way they want, with no judgment.

The whole universe falls into the category of “becoming” because there was a point when it did not exist. Before existence it was the self-existent eternal being—the source of life—God, who is pure, self-existent being, pure life, and never becoming anything. All creation receives its life from outside, from Him, but He derives His life from within Himself, depending on nothing for His life. There was a point when the universe did not exist. There was never a point when God did not exist. He is self-existence, life, “I am who I am” (Ex. 3:14). He is from everlasting to everlasting. Acts 17:28 rightly says: “In Him we live and move and exist.” We cannot live or move or be without His life. But He has always lived and moved and been.

This is the purest ontological description of God—and to say Jesus is the **life** is to say the most pure truth about the nature of God that He possesses. And, as in verse 3, He then is the Creator.

While as the Creator Jesus is the source of everything and everyone who lives, the word **life** in John's gospel always translates *zōē*, which John uses for spiritual or eternal life. It is imparted by God's sovereign grace (6:37, 39, 44, 65; cf. Eph. 2:8) to all those who believe savingly in Jesus Christ (1:12; 3:15–16, 36; 6:40, 47; 20:31; cf. Acts 16:31; Rom. 10:9–10; 1 John 5:1, 11–13). It was to impart spiritual life to sinners who “were dead in [their] trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2:1) that Jesus came into the world (10:10; cf. 6:33).

While it is appropriate to make some distinction between life and light, the statement **the life was the Light** halts any disconnect between the two. In reality, John is writing that **life** and **light** cannot be separated. They are essentially the same, with the idea of light emphasizing the manifestation of the divine life. **The life was the Light** is the same construction as “the Word was God” (v. 1). As God is not separate from the Word, but the same in essence, so life and light share the same essential properties.

The light combines with life in a metaphor for the purpose of clarity and contrast. God's life is true and holy. **Light** is that truth and holiness manifest against the darkness of lies and sin. Light and life are linked in this same way in John 8:12, in which Jesus says: "I am the Light of the world; he who follows Me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the Light of life." The connection between light and life is also clearly made in the Old Testament. Psalm 36:9 says: "For with You is the fountain of life; in Your light we see light."

"The light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Cor. 4:4) is nothing more than the radiating, manifest life of God shining in His Son. Paul specifically says: "God . . . is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (v. 6). So light is God's life manifest in Christ.

In addition to its connection to life, light carries its own significance, as seen in the contrast between light and darkness, which is a common theme in Scripture. Intellectually, light refers to truth (Ps. 119:105; Prov. 6:23; 2 Cor. 4:4) and darkness to falsehood (Rom. 2:19); morally, light refers to holiness (Rom. 13:12; 2 Cor. 6:14; Eph. 5:8; 1 Thess. 5:5) and darkness to sin (Prov. 4:19; Isa. 5:20; Acts 26:18). Satan's kingdom is the "domain of darkness" (Col. 1:13; cf. Luke 22:53; Eph. 6:12), but Jesus is the source of **life** (11:25; 14:6; cf. Acts 3:15; 1 John 1:1) and the **Light that shines in the darkness** of the lost world (8:12; 9:5; 12:35-36, 46).

Despite Satan's frantic, furious assaults on the **Light, the darkness did not comprehend it**. *Katalambanō* (**comprehend**) is better translated "overcome." Even a small candle can drive the darkness from a room; the brilliant, glorious **Light** of the Lord Jesus Christ will utterly destroy Satan's realm of darkness. Since He came into the world, "the darkness is passing away and the true Light is already shining" (1 John 2:8).

The thrust of this verse, then, is not that the **darkness** failed to understand the truth about Jesus; on the contrary, the forces of darkness know Him all too well. In Matthew 8:29 some demons "cried out [to Jesus], saying, 'What business do we have with each other, Son of God? Have You come here to torment us before the time?'" In Peter's house in Capernaum, Jesus "cast out many demons; and He was not permitting the demons to speak, because they knew who He was" (Mark 1:34). Luke 4:41 records that "demons also were coming out of many, shouting, 'You are the Son of God!' But rebuking them, He would not allow them to speak, because they knew Him to be the Christ." In Luke 4:34 a terrified demon pleaded, "Let us alone! What business do we have with each other, Jesus of Nazareth? Have You come to destroy us? I know who You are—the Holy One of God!" The demons not only know the truth about Christ, but they also believe it. "You believe that God is one," wrote James, "You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder" (James 2:19).

It is because they understand with total clarity the judgment that awaits them that Satan and the demons have tried desperately throughout history to kill the **life** and extinguish the **Light**. In the Old Testament, Satan tried to destroy Israel, the nation from which the Messiah would come. He also tried to destroy the kingly line from which the Messiah would descend (2 Kings 11:1-2). In the New Testament, he prompted Herod's futile attempt to kill the infant Jesus (Matt. 2:16). At the beginning of His earthly ministry, Satan vainly tried to tempt Jesus to turn aside from the cross (Matt. 4:1-11). Later, he repeated the temptation again through one of His closest followers (Matt. 16:21-23). Even Satan's seeming triumph at the cross in reality marked his ultimate defeat (Col. 2:15; Heb. 2:14; cf. 1 John 3:8).

Similarly, unbelievers are eternally lost not because they do not know the truth, but because they reject it:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. (Rom. 1:18-21)

(For a further discussion of this point, see the exposition of 1:9-11 in chapter 2 of this volume.)

No one who rejects Christ's deity can be saved, for He Himself said in John 8:24, "Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins; for unless you believe that I am He, you will die in your sins." It is fitting, then, that John opens his gospel, which so strongly emphasizes Christ's deity (cf. 8:58; 10:28-30; 20:28), with a powerful affirmation of that essential truth.

THE MACARTHUR  
NEW TESTAMENT  
COMMENTARY  
**JOHN 12-21**

*John MacArthur*

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# The Climax of Love and Hate (John 12:1–11)

# 1

Jesus, therefore, six days before the Passover, came to Bethany where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. So they made Him a supper there, and Martha was serving; but Lazarus was one of those reclining at the table with Him. Mary then took a pound of very costly perfume of pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped His feet with her hair; and the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of His disciples, who was intending to betray Him, said, “Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and given to poor people?” Now he said this, not because he was concerned about the poor, but because he was a thief, and as he had the money box, he used to pilfer what was put into it. Therefore Jesus said, “Let her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of My burial. For you always have the poor with you, but you do not always have Me.” The large crowd of the Jews then learned that He was there; and they came, not for Jesus’ sake only, but that they might also see Lazarus, whom He raised from the dead. But the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death also; because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and were believing in Jesus. (12:1–11)

The incarnation of the Lord Jesus Christ marks the zenith of history. His life not only divides the calendar (B.C. means “before Christ”; A.D. [“anno Domini”] means “in the year of the Lord”), but also human destiny. As Jesus Himself warned those who rejected Him, “Unless you believe that I am He, you will die in your sins” (John 8:24), and on another occasion, “Do you suppose that I came to grant peace on earth? I tell you, no, but rather division” (Luke 12:51; cf. Luke 2:34). Like no one else, Jesus Christ evokes the antithetical extremes of love and hate, devotion and rejection, worship and blasphemy, and faith and unbelief. How people respond to Him divides the sheep from the goats; the wheat from the tares; believers from unbelievers; the saved from the lost.

John wrote his gospel to present Jesus as the Son of God and the Messiah (20:31). In so doing, he also recorded how people reacted to Jesus’ messianic claims and miraculous signs. The apostle accordingly cites numerous examples of those who believed in Jesus (1:35–51; 2:11; 4:28–29, 41–42, 53; 6:69; 9:35–38; 10:42; 11:27, 45; 12:11; 16:27, 30; 17:8; 19:38–39; 20:28–29), and those who rejected Him (1:10–11; 2:20; 3:32; 5:16–18, 38–47; 6:36, 41–43, 64, 66; 7:1, 5, 20, 26–27, 30–52; 8:13–59; 9:16, 29, 40–41; 10:20, 25–26; 11:46–57; 12:37–40).

In this passage, which relates the story of Mary’s anointing of Jesus, the themes of belief and unbelief are particularly clear. The worshipful act of Mary epitomizes faith and love; the cold, calculated, cynical response of Judas epitomizes unbelief and hatred. The section also records other reactions to Jesus, including the devoted service of Martha, the indifference of the crowd, and the hostility of the religious leaders.

The Lord’s raising of Lazarus had stirred up murderous opposition from the hostile Jewish leaders (11:46–53). They decided that they had to kill both Jesus and Lazarus. Since His hour to die had not yet come (7:30; 8:20; 12:23; 13:1), Jesus left the vicinity of Jerusalem and stayed in the village of Ephraim (11:54), about a dozen miles to the north on the edge of the wilderness. From there He made a brief visit to Samaria and Galilee (Luke 17:11–19:28) and then, **six days before the Passover, came once more to Bethany.** His arrival would have been on the Saturday before the Passover. (Because the distance people were permitted to travel on the Sabbath was limited [cf. Acts 1:12], the Lord may have arrived after sundown on Friday. That, according to Jewish reckoning, would have been after the Sabbath had begun.) John described **Bethany** as the village **where Lazarus** lived, and Lazarus as its now most famous resident, since **Jesus had raised him from the dead.**

From the account of the supper given there in His honor, five varied reactions to Jesus emerge: Martha responded with heartfelt service,

Mary with humble sacrifice, Judas with hypocritical self-interest, the people with hollow superficiality, and the religious leaders with hostile scheming.

#### THE HEARTFELT SERVICE OF MARTHA

**So they made Him a supper there, and Martha was serving; but Lazarus was one of those reclining at the table with Him. (12:2)**

The Sanhedrin had decreed that anyone who knew where Jesus was should report that information to them (11:57). But rather than turning Him in like some criminal, the Lord's friends in Bethany gave **a supper** in His honor. The purpose of the event was to express their love for Him, and especially their gratitude for His raising of Lazarus. Since *deipnon* (**supper**) refers to the main meal of the day, it would have been a lengthy one, designed with much time for leisurely conversation. The guests were surely **reclining**, leaning on one elbow with their heads toward a low, U-shaped table. How many people were there is not known, but at least Jesus, the Twelve, Mary, Martha, Lazarus, and probably Simon the leper were present.

Luke records a visit by Jesus to the home of Mary and Martha several months earlier, which provides insight into Martha's attachment to serving, even when it was not the priority:

Now as they were traveling along, He entered a village; and a woman named Martha welcomed Him into her home. She had a sister called Mary, who was seated at the Lord's feet, listening to His word. But Martha was distracted with all her preparations; and she came up to Him and said, "Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to do all the serving alone? Then tell her to help me." But the Lord answered and said to her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things; but only one thing is necessary, for Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her." (Luke 10:38-42)

Even after such a rebuke, here again being true to her interest, **Martha was** involved in **serving** the meal. (That John describes **Lazarus** as **one of the guests reclining at the table with** Jesus suggests that the feast was not in his and his sisters' home.) Matthew 26:6 and Mark 14:3 make more than a suggestion, stating specifically that the meal was held in the house of Simon the leper. Though the descriptive name stuck to him, he obviously had been healed from his disease, for people would never have gathered in the home of someone with an active case of leprosy. Not only would they have feared contagion, but also to socialize would

have ceremonially defiled them, since lepers were unclean (Lev. 13:45). Nor is it likely that Simon would have owned a house and hosted a meal in it if he had still been sick, since lepers were social outcasts (Num. 5:2). Because cures for leprosy were beyond the limited medical knowledge of that time, it is reasonable to believe that Jesus had earlier healed him.

Though others were served also, Martha's service on this occasion was primarily directed at Jesus, and was commendable for two related reasons: it was motivated by loving gratitude to Him, and by a desire to generously honor Him in the way she best knew how. There was no rebuke as in the earlier incident. Like her, all Christians are to be engaged in selfless service (Rom. 12:11; cf. Gal. 5:13; Col. 3:24; Heb. 9:14). Jesus said, "The greatest among you shall be your servant" (Matt. 23:11) and declared of Himself, "I am among you as the one who serves" (Luke 22:27), and, "the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve" (Matt. 20:28). Paul repeatedly described himself as a bond servant of Jesus Christ (Rom. 1:1; 2 Cor. 4:5; Gal. 1:10; Phil. 1:1; Titus 1:1; cf. 1 Cor. 3:5; 4:1; 2 Cor. 3:6; 6:4; 11:23), as did James (James 1:1), Peter (2 Peter 1:1), Jude (Jude 1), and John (Rev. 1:1). In John 12:26 the Lord promised those who faithfully serve Him, "If anyone serves Me, he must follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also; if anyone serves Me, the Father will honor him." Although it tends to be overshadowed by Mary's dramatic act of worship, Martha's humble service on this occasion was no less commendable and pleasing to the Lord.

#### THE HUMBLE SACRIFICE OF MARY

**Mary then took a pound of very costly perfume of pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped His feet with her hair; and the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. (12:3)**

In keeping with her portrayal elsewhere in the Gospels (cf. 11:32–33; Luke 10:39), Mary once again appears as the more pensive, reflective, and emotional of the two sisters. In a startling, spontaneous outpouring of her love for Him, she **took a pound of very costly perfume of pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus**. A **pound** (a Roman measure, equivalent to about twelve ounces by today's standards) was a large amount of **perfume**. **Nard** was a fragrant oil extracted from the root and spike (hence the translation "spikenard" in some English versions) of a plant native to the mountains of northern India. Perfume made from **nard** was **very costly** because of the great distance from which it had to be imported. Mary's **nard** was **pure** in quality, making it even more valuable. Some were thinking it was worth "over three

hundred denarii” (Mark 14:5), and Judas agreed with that valuation (John 12:5). As noted in the discussion of verse 5 below, such an amount would be equal to a year’s wages. The expensive alabaster vial in which it was stored also added to its value (Matt. 26:7). She broke the vial (Mark 14:3), thus giving up the whole thing—both contents and container. The perfume likely made up a sizeable portion of Mary’s net worth. But like David (2 Sam. 24:24), she refused to offer the Lord something that cost her nothing. She acted in unrestrained love.

Matthew’s (26:7) and Mark’s (14:3) parallel accounts note that Mary poured the perfume on Jesus’ head, while John says that she **anointed His feet**. All three accounts are in perfect harmony. Since the Lord was reclining at a low table, with His feet extended away from it, Mary could have easily poured the perfume first on His head, then His body (Matt. 26:12), and finally on His feet. Then, in an act that shocked the onlookers even more than the pouring out of expensive perfume, she **wiped His feet with her hair**. The Jews considered washing the feet of another person to be degrading, a necessary task to be done only by the most menial slaves (cf. John 1:27). None of the Twelve at the coming Passover meal in the upper room were willing to serve the others by washing their feet, so in a supreme act and example of lowliness, Jesus did it (cf. 13:1–15). But even more shocking than her costly and lowly washing of Jesus’ feet was the fact that Mary let down her hair. For a respectable Jewish woman to do that in public would have been considered indecent, perhaps even immoral. But Mary was not concerned with the shame she might face as a result. Instead, she was solely focused on pouring out her love and in honoring Christ, with no thought of any perceived shame that it might bring to her.

John’s note that **the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume** is the kind of vivid detail an eyewitness would recall. It also testifies to the extravagance of Mary’s act of humble devotion. She was heedless of its cost, both financially and to her reputation. The measure of her love was her total abandonment to Jesus Christ. Consequently, Mary’s noble act would, as the Lord declared, be spoken of as a memorial of her love wherever the gospel is preached (Mark 14:9).

It must be noted here that Luke records a very similar incident:

Now one of the Pharisees was requesting Him to dine with him, and He entered the Pharisee’s house and reclined at the table. And there was a woman in the city who was a sinner; and when she learned that He was reclining at the table in the Pharisee’s house, she brought an alabaster vial of perfume, and standing behind Him at His feet, weeping, she began to wet His feet with her tears, and kept wiping them with the hair of her head, and kissing His feet and anointing them with the perfume. Now when the Pharisee who had invited Him saw this, he said to himself, “If

this man were a prophet He would know who and what sort of person this woman is who is touching Him, that she is a sinner.” (Luke 7:36–39)

That this is a completely different event is clear because it took place in Galilee, not Bethany; it featured a woman who was a sinner (likely a prostitute), not Mary; and occurred much earlier in our Lord’s life, not during Passion Week. It also was an event at the house of a Pharisee, not Simon the leper.

#### THE HYPOCRITICAL SELF-INTEREST OF JUDAS

**But Judas Iscariot, one of His disciples, who was intending to betray Him, said, “Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and given to poor people?” Now he said this, not because he was concerned about the poor, but because he was a thief, and as he had the money box, he used to pilfer what was put into it. Therefore Jesus said, “Let her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of My burial. For you always have the poor with you, but you do not always have Me.”** (12:4–8)

The stunned silence that must have followed Mary’s startling and unexpected act was suddenly broken by a voice raised in protest. The conjunction *de* (**but**) introduces the stark contrast between Mary’s selflessness and Judas’s selfishness. As is always the case in the Gospels, John’s description of **Judas Iscariot** emphasizes two facts. First, he was **one of** the Lord’s **disciples** (Matt. 10:4; 26:14, 47; Mark 14:43; Luke 22:3, 47; John 6:71); second, he **was intending to betray Him** (Matt. 26:25; 27:3; Mark 3:19; 14:10; Luke 6:16; 22:4, 48; John 6:71; 13:2, 26–29; 18:2, 5; cf. Acts 1:16). So shocking and singularly defining was Judas’s betrayal that the gospel writers could not think of him or refer to him apart from it. That he was not merely a follower of Christ, but one of the Lord’s inner circle, makes his betrayal all the more heinous. It was the most despicable act in all of human history—and the one that merited the most severe punishment. In the chilling words of the Lord Jesus Christ, “Woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been good for that man if he had not been born” (Matt. 26:24).

Wanting to appear philanthropic, Judas acted outraged over such a profligate waste of money, exclaiming, **“Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and given to poor people?”** Chronologically, these are Judas’s first recorded words in the New Testament. They expose the avarice, ambition, and selfishness that ruled his heart. He had cast his lot with Jesus, expecting Him to usher in the politi-

cal, earthly messianic kingdom most Jewish people were looking for. As one of the inner circle, Judas had eagerly anticipated an exalted position in that kingdom. But now, for him, that dream had turned to ashes. Jesus had so antagonized the Jewish leaders that they intended to kill Him (John 7:1; 11:53). Not only that, the Lord Himself warned the disciples that His death was inevitable (e.g., Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33). And when the Galilean crowds sought to crown Jesus as the earthly king Judas thought He would be, the Lord refused to cooperate with them (John 6:14-15).

Disillusioned, Judas—facing the end of his ambitions—decided to at least get some financial compensation for the three years he had wasted on Jesus. John, not seeing it at that moment, but writing in retrospect many years later, makes the appropriate inspired comment on Judas's real motive: he **said this, not because he was concerned about the poor, but because he was a thief, and as he had the money box, he used to pilfer what was put into it.** As noted above, Mary's perfume was worth a lot of money; since a denarius was a day's wages for a common laborer (Matt. 20:2), **three hundred denarii** equaled a year's wages (allowing for Sabbaths and other holy days on which no work was done). Seeing that much money elude his grasp infuriated Judas, and he lashed out at Mary. "Judas' disapproval of Mary's action related not to loss of opportunity to do more for the poor but to his own loss of opportunity to steal from the common purse" (Colin Kruse, *The Gospel According to John*, The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003], 263). So persuasive was his seemingly righteous indignation that others joined in his protest (Matt. 26:8-9; Mark 14:4-5).

Though some have tried to attribute noble motives to Judas (i.e., by arguing that he was a misguided patriot, trying to prod Christ into ushering in His kingdom), the New Testament portrays him as nothing but a greedy thief and a murderous traitor—even a Devil (John 6:70-71; cf. 13:2, 27). Judas is the greatest example of missed opportunity in history. He lived day in and day out with Jesus Christ, God incarnate, for three years. Yet in the end Judas rejected Him, betrayed Him, was overcome by guilt (but not genuine repentance), committed suicide, and went "to his own place" (Acts 1:25)—that is, hell (John 17:12) in its most potent form.

The Lord immediately defended Mary, sternly rebuking Judas (the verb translated **let alone** is in the second person singular, meaning "you") by commanding him, "**Let her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of My burial.**" Jesus obviously did not mean that Mary would keep the perfume (or at least part of it) until His burial, since she had just poured it all out (cf. Mark 14:3). While commentators disagree on how to understand these words, the most satisfactory solution is to understand an ellipsis in the Lord's statement. Supplying the missing words, the sense would be, "Let her alone; she did not sell the perfume

[as you wish she had], so that she could keep it for the day of my burial” (cf. D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 429–30; cf. Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004], 363–64).

Mary’s act was a spontaneous outpouring of her love and devotion to Christ. Yet, like Caiaphas’s unwitting prophecy (11:49–52), it had a deeper significance. In Matthew 26:12 Jesus said, “When she poured this perfume on My body, she did it to prepare Me for burial” (cf. Mark 14:8). The **burial** of which Jesus prophetically spoke was not the actual placing of His dead body in the tomb, but the anointing she had just done, which He saw as a symbol of His soon coming death and burial. Part of the lavish expenditures associated with many first-century funerals was the cost of perfumes to mask the odor of decay (cf. John 11:39). This act by Mary, as in the case of Caiaphas (11:49–52) revealed a far greater reality than she realized at the time. Her anointing prefigured the one Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus would later perform on His body after Jesus’ death (John 19:38–40).

If Judas had really wanted to help the poor, he would not have lacked opportunity since, as Jesus reminded them all (the verb and pronoun in this phrase are plurals), **“You always have the poor with you”** (cf. Mark 14:7). The Lord was not disparaging the giving of charity to the poor (cf. Deut. 15:11), but rather was challenging the disciples to keep their priorities straight. The opportunity to do good to Him, as Mary had done, would not last long, because they would **not always have** Him physically present with them. Here again the Lord’s words were a prediction of His coming death, now less than a week away.

Judas now stood at the crossroads. Unmasked as a hypocrite, pretending to care for the poor while in reality embezzling from the common purse, he faced the ultimate decision. He could fall at Jesus’ feet in humble, penitent repentance, confess his sin, and seek forgiveness. Or he could pridefully harden his heart, refuse to repent, surrender to Satan’s influence, and betray the Lord. Tragically and sinfully, he chose the latter course, with full and sole culpability for its consequences, though it fulfilled the purpose of God for the sacrifice of His Son (cf. 13:18–19). Immediately after this incident, “Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went off to the chief priests in order to betray Him to them. They were glad when they heard this, and promised to give him money. And he began seeking how to betray Him at an opportune time” (Mark 14:10–11).



## THE HOLLOW SUPERFICIALITY OF THE PEOPLE

**The large crowd of the Jews then learned that He was there; and they came, not for Jesus' sake only, but that they might also see Lazarus, whom He raised from the dead. (12:9)**

After the Sabbath, a **large crowd of the Jews** who were in Jerusalem for Passover **learned that Jesus was** in Bethany. (The term **Jews** here does not refer to the religious leaders, but to the common people [cf. 11:55–56].) They **came** to Bethany **not for Jesus' sake only, but that they might also see Lazarus, whom He raised from the dead.** News of that sensational miracle had spread, and the curious crowd wanted to see both the miracle worker, and the one whom He had raised.

These people were not yet openly hostile to Jesus, like Judas and the religious leaders, but neither were they committed to Him, like Martha and Mary. They were the thrill seekers, following the latest sensation, superficially interested in Jesus, but spiritually indifferent and ultimately antagonistic to Him. Like the members of the Laodicean church, they were “lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold” (Rev. 3:16). At the triumphal entry they would hail Him, shouting “Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel” (John 12:13). But only a few days later they would scream, “Away with Him, away with Him, crucify Him!” (John 19:15), and some would come to mock Him as He was hanging on the cross (Matt. 27:39–40).

## THE HOSTILE SCHEMING OF THE LEADERS

**But the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death also; because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and were believing in Jesus. (12:10–11)**

By no means did the crowds that flocked to Bethany to see Jesus and Lazarus escape the notice of the Jewish authorities. The ruthless **chief priests** had already plotted to kill Jesus (11:53); now they expanded the plot and **planned to put Lazarus to death also.** As living proof of Jesus' miraculous power, the resurrected Lazarus presented a great threat to the Sadducees, because **on account of him many of the Jews were going away and were believing in Jesus** (cf. 11:48). He was an undeniable testimony to the Lord's messianic claims. Not only that, a resurrected man was also an embarrassment to the Sadducees in another way: they denied the resurrection of the dead (Matt. 22:23), and he was

an undeniable refutation of that error. Unable to counter the incontrovertible testimony Lazarus provided by being alive, they sought to destroy the evidence by killing him. Their tangled web of deception was expanding, as Leon Morris notes: "It is interesting to reflect that Caiaphas had said, 'it is expedient for you that one man die for the people' (11:50). But one was not enough. Now it had to be two. Thus does evil grow" (*The Gospel According to John*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979], 582).

No one is neutral regarding Jesus Christ; as He Himself warned, "He who is not with Me is against Me; and he who does not gather with Me, scatters" (Luke 11:23). Whether loving and serving Him, like Mary and Martha, being indifferent and vacillating toward Him, like the crowd, or hating and opposing Him, like Judas and the chief priests, everyone takes a stand somewhere. What that stand is determines each person's eternal destiny, since "there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

THE MACARTHUR  
NEW TESTAMENT  
COMMENTARY

**ACTS 1-12**

*John MacArthur*

MOODY PUBLISHERS/CHICAGO

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# Resources for Finishing Our Lord's Unfinished Work

# 1

**The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when He was taken up, after He had by the Holy Spirit given orders to the apostles whom He had chosen. To these He also presented Himself alive, after His suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days, and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God. And gathering them together, He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, "Which," He said, "you heard of from Me; for John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." And so when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; but you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth." And after He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. And as they were gazing intently into the sky**

**while He was departing, behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them; and they also said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven.” (1:1-11)**

The work of Jesus Christ is both finished and unfinished. His great work of providing redemption is finished, and nothing may be added to it (cf. John 17:4). His work of ministry and proclamation, however, is not finished. That work He only started. Along with the other gospels, **the first account composed** by Luke for **Theophilus** (the gospel of Luke), records **all that Jesus began to do and teach** during His life on earth. The rest of the New Testament describes the continuation of His work by the early church. We are still finishing it until He comes.

Christ's work of redemption is completed, and the church's work of evangelism begins. Acts chronicles the initial stages and features of that unfinished work, and sets the path the church is to follow until the end.

As the book of Acts begins, an important transition takes place. During His ministry on earth, the work of preaching and teaching was done primarily by our Lord Himself as He trained His disciples. Now it is time to pass that responsibility on to the apostles, before He ascends to the Father. The burden of proclaiming repentance and the good news of forgiveness to a lost world will rest squarely on their shoulders. The apostles will also be responsible for teaching the truths of the faith to the church.

From a purely human standpoint the apostles were in no way ready for such a task. There were things they still did not understand. Their faith was weak, as evidenced by our Lord's frequent reprimands of them (cf. Matt. 8:26; 14:31; 16:8; Luke 12:28). Nor had they acquitted themselves well during the traumatic events surrounding Christ's arrest and crucifixion. They had not only failed in public witness but also in private loyalty and in personal faith. Peter, their acknowledged leader, had vehemently and profanely denied even knowing Jesus. His faith and spiritual character were not strong enough to withstand the challenge of a lowly servant girl (Matt. 26:69-70). With the exception of John, all the disciples had fled in fear of their own lives and were nowhere to be found at the crucifixion site. Although Jesus had explicitly predicted His resurrection, the disciples scoffed at the initial reports that His tomb was empty (Luke 24:11). When Jesus appeared to them, He found them cowering behind locked doors for fear of the Jewish authorities (John 20:19). Thomas, not present at that first appearance, refused to believe even the testimony of the other ten apostles (John 20:24-28). Only a

second appearance, and the Lord's invitation to touch His crucifixion wounds, cured Thomas of his skepticism.

The apostles themselves obviously lacked the understanding and spiritual power to complete Jesus' unfinished ministry of evangelism and edification. However, in these His last words to them before His ascension, the Lord Jesus Christ reiterates (cf. John 20:22) the promise of the Spirit. He will empower the apostles (and all subsequent believers) with those resources necessary to finish the Savior's unfinished work. They needed the correct message, manifestation, might, mystery, mission, and motive.

### THE MESSAGE

**The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when He was taken up, after He had by the Holy Spirit given orders to the apostles whom He had chosen. (1:1-2)**

As already noted, **the first account** refers to Luke's gospel, which he **composed** for **Theophilus** (see the Introduction for further details). That **account** was largely concerned with the earthly life and ministry of our Lord, revealing **all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when He was taken up**. From the inception of His earthly ministry until His ascension, Jesus had instructed His disciples by both deed and word. His miracles were to strengthen their faith; His parables were to clarify spiritual truth for them; His teaching was to formulate their theology. He revealed to them the truth they would need to carry on His work.

It is axiomatic that those who would carry the message of Christ to the world must know what that message is. There must be an accurate understanding of the content of Christian truth before any ministry can be effective. Such knowledge is foundational to spiritual power and to fulfilling the church's mission. The lack of it is insurmountable and devastating to the evangelistic purpose of God.

The apostle Paul was so concerned about this that it was central to his desire for all believers. In Ephesians 1:18-19a he wrote, "I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe."

To the Philippians he wrote, "This I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, so



that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ" (Phil. 1:9-10).

Paul's prayer for the Colossians eloquently expresses his longing that all believers be mature in knowledge:

For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience. (Col. 1:9-11)

In 2 Timothy 2:15, Paul charged Timothy, "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth." Then he challenged his son in the faith to teach sound truth to others (cf. 1 Tim. 4:6, 11, 16; 6:2b, 3, 20, 21; 2 Tim. 1:13, 14; 2:2; 3:16, 17; 4:1-4).

The writer of Hebrews rebuked some of his readers' ignorance of the truth: "For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food" (Heb. 5:12).

Mere factual knowledge, of course, was powerless to save those Hebrews, or anyone else, unless it was believed and appropriated. In Matthew 23:2-3, Jesus warned against imitating the hypocritical Pharisees: "The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses; therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things, and do not do them." Jesus set the pattern of consistency in behaving and proclaiming because, as Luke observed, He **began** both to **do** as well as to **teach**. He perfectly lived the truth He taught.

Paul admonished believers to "adorn the doctrine" they had been taught by how they lived their lives. He wrote, "Show yourself to be an example of good deeds . . . sound in speech . . . showing all good faith that [you] may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in every respect" (Titus 2:7, 8, 10). Evangelism is telling people that God saves from sin. What adorns that message, or makes it believable, is a holy life that clearly demonstrates God can save from sin. It is self-defeating to proclaim the message of salvation from sin while living a sinful life. The messenger must manifest the power of the message he is proclaiming. Jesus preached righteousness and lived it perfectly. We have to preach the same message and strive to live it as perfectly as we can.

Two major factors contribute to the church's powerlessness today. First, many are ignorant of biblical truth. Second, those who may know biblical truth all too often fail to live by it. Proclaiming an erroneous message is tragic, yet so is proclaiming the truth but giving scant evidence that one's life has been transformed by it. Such people cannot expect others to be moved by their proclamation. The exemplary nineteenth-century Scottish preacher Robert Murray McCheyne gave the following words of advice to an aspiring young minister:

Do not forget the culture of the inner man—I mean of the heart. How diligently the cavalry officer keeps his sabre clean and sharp; every stain he rubs off with the greatest care. Remember you are God's sword, His instrument—I trust a chosen vessel unto Him to bear His name. In great measure, according to the purity and perfections of the instrument, will be the success. It is not great talents God blesses so much as great likeness to Jesus. A holy minister is an awful weapon in the hand of God. (Andrew A. Bonar, *Memoirs of McCheyne* [Chicago: Moody, 1978], 95)

Those who would be effective in preaching, teaching, and evangelism must give heed to those words. Sound doctrine supported by holiness of life is essential for all who would minister the Word.

Even after His resurrection, Jesus continued to teach the essential realities of His kingdom **until the day when He was taken up**, a reference to His ascension. (Luke uses this term four times in this chapter, vv. 2, 9, 11, 22.) That day, marking the end of our Lord's earthly ministry, had arrived. As He had predicted, Jesus was about to ascend to the Father (cf. John 6:62; 13:1, 3; 16:28; 17:13; 20:17). During His ministry, He had **given orders** to the apostles **by the Holy Spirit**, who was both the source and the power of His ministry (cf. Matt. 4:1; 12:18, 28; Mark 1:12; Luke 3:22; 4:1, 14, 18). Jesus' ministry in the Spirit's power demonstrated the pattern for believers. They, like the apostles, also are to obey Him (cf. Matt. 28:19-20). The Holy Spirit is the source of power for believers' ministry and enables them to obey their Lord's teaching.

The verb *entellō* (**given orders**) signals a command (cf. Matt. 17:9), emphasizing the force of the truth. It encompasses a series of commands to obey God, as well as threats in light of the consequences of disobedience.

While Jesus instructed thousands of people in His days on earth, His primary and constant learners were **the apostles whom He had chosen**. Equipping them for their foundational ministry was a critical goal of His teaching. Their qualification was simply that the Lord had chosen them for salvation and unique service (cf. John 15:16). He

saved, commissioned, equipped, gifted and taught them so that they could be eyewitnesses to the truth and recipients of the revelation of God. They established the message believers are to proclaim.

The importance of this instruction in preparing these men for finishing the Lord's work cannot be overemphasized. Our Lord was building into them the teaching that is later called "the apostles' doctrine" (Acts 2:42)—the organized body of truth that established the church.

The effectiveness of every believer's ministry in large measure depends on a clear and deep knowledge of the Word. No wonder Spurgeon said,

We might preach 'til our tongue rotted, 'til we exhaust our lungs and die—but never a soul would be converted unless the Holy Spirit uses the Word to convert that soul. So it is blessed to eat into the very heart of the Bible until, at last, you come to talk in scriptural language and your spirit is flavoured with the words of the Lord, so that your blood is Bibline and the very essence of the Bible flows from you. (Partly cited in Richard Ellsworth Day, *The Shadow of the Broad Brim* [Philadelphia: Judson, 1943], 131)

#### THE MANIFESTATION

**To these He also presented Himself alive, after His suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days, and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God. (1:3)**

The apostles needed not only the proper message but also the confidence to proclaim that message even if it cost their lives. They could hardly have been enthusiastic about proclaiming and facing martyrdom for a dead Christ. They needed to know that He was alive and would fulfill His promise of the kingdom. To secure that necessary confidence, Jesus **presented Himself alive, after His suffering**, to them. He offered them **many convincing proofs** (cf. John 20:30), such as entering a room where the doors were locked (John 20:19), showing them His crucifixion wounds (Luke 24:39), and eating and drinking with them (Luke 24:41–43). Most convincing, though, was His **appearing to them over a period of forty days**, beginning with the day of His resurrection. The Greek text actually reads "through forty days." That affirms that though He was not with them continuously, He did appear in their presence at intervals. Although it is by no means exhaustive, the most extensive summary of those appearances is found in 1 Corinthians 15:5–8.

The end result of these appearances was that the apostles became absolutely convinced of the reality of their Lord's physical resurrection. That assurance gave them the boldness to preach the gospel to the very people who crucified Christ. The transformation of the apostles from fearful, cowering skeptics to bold, powerful witnesses is a potent proof of the resurrection.

There have been many suggestions as to the content of the Lord's teaching during the forty days. The mystical religionists held that He imparted to the apostles the secret knowledge that characterized gnosticism. Many in the early church believed He taught them concerning church order (F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971], 33–34). Luke, however, shuts down all such speculations when he reveals that during this time the Lord was **speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God**. He taught them more truth related to the domain of divine rule over the hearts of believers. That theme, a frequent one during the Lord Jesus Christ's earthly ministry (cf. Matt. 4:23; 9:35; 10:7; 13:1ff.; Mark 1:15; Luke 4:43; 9:2; 17:20ff.; John 3:3ff.), offered further proof to the disciples that it was really He.

The Lord wanted them to know that the crucifixion did not nullify the promised millennial kingdom (cf. Isa. 2:2; 11:6–12; Dan. 2:44; Zech. 14:9). The apostles no doubt had difficulty believing in that kingdom after the death of the King. The resurrection changed all that, and from that time on they proclaimed Jesus Christ as the King over an invisible, spiritual kingdom (cf. Acts 17:7; Col. 1:13; 1 Tim. 1:17; 6:15; 2 Tim. 4:1; 2 Peter 1:11; Rev. 11:15; 12:10; 17:14; 19:16). The kingdom will be manifested in its fullness at the second coming. At that point our Lord will personally reign on earth for a thousand years.

The **kingdom of God** (the realm where God rules, or the sphere of salvation) encompasses much more than the millennial kingdom, however. It has two basic aspects: the universal kingdom, and the mediatorial kingdom (for a detailed discussion of those two aspects see Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959]; for a more detailed discussion of the kingdom, see *Matthew 8–15*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary [Chicago: Moody, 1987], 348–51).

The universal kingdom refers to God's sovereign rule over all of His creation. Psalm 103:19 reads, "The Lord has established His throne in the heavens; and His sovereignty rules over all." Other passages that describe the universal kingdom include 1 Chronicles 29:11–12; Psalm 10:16; 29:10; 45:6; 59:13; 145:13; Daniel 4:34; 6:26 (cf. Rom. 13:1–7).

The mediatorial kingdom refers to God's spiritual rule and authority over His people on earth through divinely chosen mediators. Through Adam, then the patriarchs, Moses, Joshua, the judges, prophets, and the kings of Israel and Judah, God revealed His will and mediat-

ed His authority to His people. With the end of Israel's monarchy began the times of the Gentiles. During that period, which will last until the second coming of Christ, God mediates His spiritual rule over the hearts of believers through the church (Acts 20:25; Rom. 14:17; Col. 1:13). He does so by means of the Word and the living Christ (Gal. 2:20). The final phase of the mediatorial, spiritual kingdom will dominate the earth in the form of the millennial kingdom, to be set up following Christ's return. During that thousand year period, the Lord Jesus Christ will personally reign on earth, exercising sovereign control over the creation and all men. At the end of the Millennium, with the destruction of all rebels, the spiritual kingdom will be merged with the universal kingdom (1 Cor. 15:24), and they will become the same.

During the church age, then, God mediates His kingdom rule through believers indwelt by the Holy Spirit and obedient to the Word. That is why Peter calls believers "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation" (1 Peter 2:9).

Today, Jesus Christ does not manifest Himself physically and visibly to believers. Jesus said to Thomas, "Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed" (John 20:29), while Peter wrote, "Though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory" (1 Peter 1:8). His manifestation to us is no less real, however (cf. Col. 1:29). Such personal communion with the resurrected and exalted Savior is essential for finishing His unfinished work of ministry.

### THE MIGHT

**And gathering them together, He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, "Which," He said, "you heard of from Me; for John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now . . ." but you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; (1:4-5, 8a)**

Having received the message, and witnessed the manifestation of the risen Christ, the apostles may have been tempted to assume they were ready to minister in their own strength. To prevent that error Jesus, after **gathering them together, commanded them not to leave Jerusalem** (cf. Luke 24:49). To the apostles, who were no doubt fired with enthusiasm and eager to begin, that must have seemed a strange command. Yet, it illustrates an important point: All the preparation and

training that knowledge and experience can bring are useless without the proper might. Power had to accompany truth.

To make certain the apostles were not only motivated but also supernaturally empowered for their mission, Jesus commanded them **to wait for what the Father had promised**. That promise, made repeatedly during the Lord's earthly ministry (cf. Luke 11:13; 24:49; John 7:39; 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7; 20:22), was that the Holy Spirit would be sent (cf. Acts 2:33). God's pledge was to be fulfilled just ten days later on the Day of Pentecost.

The apostles, like all believers of all dispensations, knew of and had tasted the working of the Holy Spirit. When Jesus sent them out on a preaching tour, He told them, "It is not you who speak, but it is the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you" (Matt. 10:20; cf. Luke 12:12). In John 14:17, Jesus told the apostles the Holy Spirit "abides with you, and will be in you." Like the other believers in the old economy, they experienced the Spirit's power for salvation and life, as well as for special occasions of ministry. In the new economy, inaugurated at Pentecost, the Spirit would permanently indwell and empower them in a way that was unique.

While this promise of power was primarily for the apostles (as was the promise of revelation and inspiration in John 14:26), it also secondarily forecast the enabling power the Spirit would give to all believers (cf. Acts 8:14-16; 10:44-48; 19:1-7). The general promise was at the heart of the Old Testament prophecies concerning the New Covenant. Ezekiel 36:25-27 records God's promise for all who come into the New Covenant: "Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put My Spirit within you." There was to come a fullness of the Spirit in some way unique to the New Covenant and for all believers. But there was also a special anointing for the apostles.

A magnificent comparison to this sense of the promise is the baptism of Jesus Christ. Our Lord was obviously in perfect accord and fellowship with the Holy Spirit, yet at the moment of His baptism, Scripture says, "heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon Him in bodily form like a dove" (Luke 3:21-22). This was emblematic of the fullness of power He would receive from the Spirit to do His earthly work. One chapter later, Luke records that Jesus was "full of the Holy Spirit" (4:1). When He spoke in the Nazareth synagogue He began by giving testimony to the unusual enabling of the Spirit by saying, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives,

and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are downtrodden, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord” (Luke 4:18–19). Luke 5:17 suggests the same source for His healing power.

Others received such anointing for unusual service, such as Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist, who by that power prophesied (Luke 1:67–79). In all of those cases, the Holy Spirit came in special fullness to enable unusually powerful ministry to take place.

Jesus further defines the promise of the Father for them as what **you heard of from Me** (cf. John 14:16–21; 15:26; 20:22). Our Lord’s next words, **for John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now**, are reminiscent of John the Baptist’s statement in John 1:33: “He who sent me to baptize in water said to me, ‘He upon whom you see the Spirit descending and remaining upon Him, this is the one who baptizes in the Holy Spirit.’” The promise was to be fulfilled, and the disciples would be **baptized with the Holy Spirit, not many days from now**—ten to be exact. Jesus promised that after He departed, He would send the Spirit (John 16:7).

Despite the claims of many, the apostles’ and early disciples’ experience is not the norm for believers today. They were given unique enabling of the Holy Spirit for their special duties. They also received the general and common baptism with the Holy Spirit in an uncommon way, subsequent to conversion. All believers since the church began are commanded to be filled with the Spirit (Eph. 5:18) and to walk in the Spirit (Gal. 5:25). Yet these early apostles and believers were told to wait, showing the change that came in the church age. They were in the transitional period associated with the birth of the church. In the present age, baptism by Christ through the agency of the Holy Spirit takes place for all believers at conversion. At that moment, every believer is placed into the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13). At that point the Spirit also takes up His permanent residency in the converted person’s soul, so there is no such thing as a Christian who does not yet have the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:9; cf. 1 Cor. 6:19–20).

The baptism with the Holy Spirit is not a special privilege for some believers, nor are believers challenged and exhorted in Scripture to seek it. It is not even their responsibility to prepare for it by praying, pleading, tarrying, or any other means. The passive voice of the verb translated **be baptized** indicates the baptism by Jesus Christ with the Spirit is entirely a divine activity. It comes, like salvation itself, through grace, not human effort. Titus 3:5–6 says, “He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior.” God sovereignly pours out the Holy Spirit on those He saves.

The Spirit's presence, leading, and might were absolutely essential if the apostles were to be effective in continuing the Lord's unfinished work. They had already experienced His saving, guiding, teaching, and miracle-working power. Soon they would **receive** the **power** they needed for ministry after **the Holy Spirit** fell on them.

**Power** translates *dunamis*, from which the English word "dynamite" derives. All believers have in them spiritual dynamite for use of gifts, service, fellowship, and witness. They need to experience the release of that power in their lives through not grieving the Spirit by sin (Eph. 4:30), and being continually filled and controlled by the Spirit (Eph. 5:18). The latter takes place as believers yield moment by moment control of their lives to Him, and is the same as yielding their minds to the Word (Col. 3:16). The result of being filled with the Spirit is expressed by Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3:16, 20 "that [God] would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man. . . . Now to Him who is able to do exceeding abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us . . ." (For a complete discussion of the filling of the Spirit, see *Ephesians*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary [Chicago: Moody, 1986].)

#### THE MYSTERY

**And so when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority;"** (1:6-7)

A paradoxical component of the resources for continuing the Lord's ministry was something believers don't know and can't find out. The apostles shared the fervent hope of their nation that Messiah would come and take up His earthly kingdom. Often Jesus had taught them prophetically about the future (Matt. 13:40-50; 24, 25; Luke 12:36-40; 17:20-37; 21:5-36). The enthusiastic question **they were asking Him, "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?"** is thus perfectly understandable. After all, here was the resurrected Messiah speaking with them about His kingdom. They knew of no reason the earthly form of the kingdom could not be set up immediately, since the messianic work signaling the end of the age had arrived. It must be remembered that the interval between the two comings of Messiah was not explicitly taught in the Old Testament. The disciples on the road to Emmaus were greatly disappointed that Jesus had not redeemed Israel and set up the kingdom (Luke 24:21). Further, the apostles knew that



Ezekiel 36 and Joel 2 connected the coming of the kingdom with the outpouring of the Spirit Jesus had just promised. It is understandable that they hoped the arrival of the kingdom was imminent. Surely it was for this kingdom they had hoped since they first joined Jesus. They had experienced a roller coaster ride of hope and doubt which they now felt might be over.

Jesus, however, quickly brings them back to reality. It was not for them **to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority**. The Scriptures teach many things about the earthly and glorious reign of Jesus Christ in His kingdom, but not the precise time of its establishment. **Times** (*kairos*) refers to features, characteristics of eras, and events. God, **by His own authority**, has determined all the aspects of the future and the kingdom. But as far as men are concerned, that remains one of “the secret things” that “belong to the Lord our God” (Deut. 29:29). All that believers can know is that the kingdom will be established at the second coming (Matt. 25:21–34). The time of the second coming, however, remains unrevealed (Mark 13:32).

That Jesus does not deny their expectation of a literal, earthly kingdom involving Israel is highly significant. It shows that their understanding of the promised kingdom was correct, except for the time of its coming. If they were mistaken about such a crucial point in His kingdom teaching, His failure to correct them is mystifying and deceptive. A far more likely explanation is that the apostles’ expectation of a literal, earthly kingdom mirrored the Lord’s own teaching and the plan of God clearly revealed in the Old Testament.

Since the season of His coming cannot be known, and the Lord could return at any moment in the rapture of the church (cf. 1 Thess. 5:2), believers must be continually ready. All must remember the Lord’s solemn warning in Mark 13:33–37:

Take heed, keep on the alert; for you do not know when the appointed time is. It is like a man, away on a journey, who upon leaving his house and putting his slaves in charge, assigning to each one his task, also commanded the doorkeeper to stay on the alert. Therefore, be on the alert—for you do not know when the master of the house is coming, whether in the evening, at midnight, at cockcrow, or in the morning—lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all, “Be on the alert!”

Such continual vigilance and anticipation, through all generations of believers who were looking for Jesus to return, has served as true incentive to live with urgency and minister with passion.

## THE MISSION

**“you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.” (1:8b)**

Rather than engage in useless speculation over the time for the coming of the kingdom, the apostles were to focus on the work at hand. **Witnesses** are those who see something and tell others about it. I once witnessed an attempted murder. When I testified in court, they wanted to know three things: what I saw, heard, and felt. I was reminded of 1 John 1:1–2, where John writes, “What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we beheld and our hands handled, concerning the Word of Life . . . we have seen and bear witness and proclaim to you.” A witness for Jesus Christ is simply someone who tells the truth about Him. The apostles, as Peter points out, “were eyewitnesses of His majesty” (2 Peter 1:16).

This was the foremost purpose for which the empowering of the Holy Spirit came. And the early church was so effective that they “upset the world” (Acts 17:6). Jesus commands all believers to be His witness in the Great Commission: “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:19–20).

So many Christians sealed their witness to Christ with their blood that *marturēs* (**witnesses**) came to mean “martyrs.” Their blood, as the second-century theologian Tertullian stated, became the seed of the church. Many were drawn to faith in Christ by observing how calmly and joyously Christians met their deaths.

There is a sense in which believers do not even choose whether or not to be **witnesses**. They *are* witnesses, and the only question is how effective their witness is. If the church is to reach the lost world with the good news of the gospel, believers must “sanctify Christ as Lord in [their] hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks [them] to give an account for the hope that is in [them]” (1 Peter 3:15). Titus 2 indicates that how Christians live their lives lays the platform of integrity and believability on which effective personal witness is built. In that text, Paul writes that we are to so live “that the word of God may not be dishonored” (v. 5), “that the opponent [of the Christian faith] may be put to shame, having nothing bad to say about us” (v. 8), and “that they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in every respect” (v. 10), so that we may make it possible that the saving gospel comes winsomely to all.

Beginning in **Jerusalem**, the apostles carried out the Lord's mandate. Their witness spread beyond there to **all Judea and Samaria** (the neighboring area), and finally **even to the remotest part of the earth**. Verse 8 provides the general outline for the book of Acts. Following that outline, Luke chronicles the irresistible march of Christianity from Jerusalem, into Samaria and then through the Roman world. As the book unfolds, we will move through those three sections of the expansion of the church.

This beginning was to dramatically alter the course of history, and the spread of the gospel message has continued past Acts to reach all the earth. Today, believers continue to have the responsibility for being Christ's witnesses throughout this world. The sphere for witnessing is as extensive as the kingdom—all the world. That was and is the mission for the church until Jesus comes.

### THE MOTIVE

**And after He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. And as they were gazing intently into the sky while He was departing, behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them; and they also said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven."** (1:9–11)

The Lord Jesus Christ was about to depart for heaven to return to His former glory (cf. John 17:1–6). Before doing that, He left the apostles with a final, dramatic moment which provided powerful motivation for carrying on His work. To their amazement, **He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight** (cf. vv. 2, 11, 22). Jesus, in His glorious resurrection body, left this world for the realm of heaven to take His place on the throne at God's right hand. Back on the Mount of Olives (Luke 24:50), the shocked apostles **were gazing intently into the sky while He was departing**. To their further consternation, angels, described as **two men in white clothing**, suddenly appeared and **stood beside them**. Such angelic appearances were not unusual (Gen. 18:2; Josh. 5:13–15; Mark 16:5). Two of them confirm the promise of Christ's return as true (cf. John 8:17). These angels asked the bewildered apostles, **"Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky?"** They are called **men of Galilee** since all the apostles (with the exception of the dead traitor Judas) were from that region. The angels' question, **"why do you stand looking**

**into the sky?"** indicates more than curiosity at the miracle. The word translated **looking** indicates a long gaze, in this case a transfixed look as if losing someone. The question, then, is a mild rebuke to the apostles. They were not losing Jesus, as they feared. Maybe some of them remembered the vision of Ezekiel, who saw the glory of God depart to heaven from Israel (Ezek. 10:18-19) and feared it was happening again.

The angels went on to say, **"This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven."** The promise of Zechariah 14:4 will come to pass, namely that the Messiah will return to the Mount of Olives. The angels stressed that **this** same **Jesus** whom they had watched ascend would one day return **in just the same way as** they had **watched Him go into heaven**. He will return in His glorified body, accompanied with clouds (cf. Dan. 7:13; Matt. 24:30; 26:64; Rev. 1:7; 14:14), just as at His ascension.

This becomes a compelling motive. No one knows when He will come, but everyone must live in anticipation that it could be in their lifetime (cf. Rom. 13:12-14; 2 Peter 3:14-18). The truth that Christ will return provides a powerful motive to serve Him. Paul writes, "We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad" (2 Cor. 5:10). In Revelation 22:12 the Lord Jesus Christ said, "Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to render to every man according to what he has done." Believers must serve Christ faithfully in light of His imminent return. In Revelation 16:15 Jesus warned, "Behold, I am coming like a thief. Blessed is the one who stays awake and keeps his garments, lest he walk about naked and men see his shame" (cf. 1 John 2:28).

The task of finishing the work that Jesus began, the duty of evangelizing the lost world, is a daunting one. But the Lord in His mercy from the start has provided all the spiritual resources necessary to accomplish that task. It is up to each believer to appropriate those resources and put them to use. "We must work the works of Him who sent [Jesus Christ], as long as it is day; night is coming, when no man can work" (John 9:4).

THE MACARTHUR  
NEW TESTAMENT  
COMMENTARY  
**ACTS 13-28**

*John MacArthur*

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# The Character of an Effective Church (Acts 13:1–13)

# 1

Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was there, prophets and teachers: Barnabas, and Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. And while they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away. So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia and from there they sailed to Cyprus. And when they reached Salamis, they began to proclaim the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews; and they also had John as their helper. And when they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they found a certain magician, a Jewish false prophet whose name was Bar-Jesus, who was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence. This man summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God. But Elymas the magician (for thus his name is translated) was opposing them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith. But Saul, who was also known as Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, fixed his gaze upon him, and said, “You who are full of all deceit and fraud, you son of the



**devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease to make crooked the straight ways of the Lord? And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and not see the sun for a time.” And immediately a mist and a darkness fell upon him, and he went about seeking those who would lead him by the hand. Then the proconsul believed when he saw what had happened, being amazed at the teaching of the Lord. Now Paul and his companions put out to sea from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia; and John left them and returned to Jerusalem. (13:1–13)**

There is much truth in the humorous adage that some people make things happen, others watch things happen, while still others are left wondering what happened. What is true of individuals is also true of churches. Some churches are dynamic, aggressively reaching out with the gospel to make an impact on the world. Some know God is moving in other churches and wonder why they aren't experiencing that power. Still others just barely exist, languishing while the spiritual (and maybe even physical) weeds grow. They make an impact only on their members' social lives.

Acts 11 introduced a leadership and a congregation that God used to make things happen—the Antioch church, the first beachhead of Christianity in the pagan world. That church had an impressive beginning. Acts 11:21 records that “a large number who believed turned to the Lord” under the ministry of Hellenistic Jews who fled Jerusalem following Stephen's martyrdom (11:19–20). The Antioch church grew dramatically under the capable leadership of Barnabas and Saul (11:26). It was in Antioch that the name *Christians* was first given to the followers of Jesus Christ (11:26). Although it was intended as a derisive term, the believers wore it as a badge of honor. Members of this largely Gentile church showed their love for their Jewish brethren by sending them famine relief (11:27–30).

But of all the factors that made the Antioch church strong, the most significant was its submission to the Holy Spirit. Both the leaders (cf. 11:24; 13:9) and the congregation (cf. 13:2, 4) of the Antioch church were Spirit-filled. They were utterly dependent on the Spirit, who energized every phase of their ministry.

What marks a Spirit-filled church? A Spirit-filled church may be defined simply as one whose members walk in obedience to the will of God. Since God reveals His will in Scripture, a Spirit-filled church must be deeply committed to the Word of God. Indeed, a comparison of Ephesians 5 and Colossians 3 reveals that being filled with the Spirit and letting the Word richly dwell in one's life produce the same effects. Therefore they are the two sides of the same spiritual reality.

Chapter 13 marks a turning point in Acts. The first twelve chapters have focused on the ministry of Peter; the remaining chapters focus on Paul. Until now the emphasis has been on the Jewish church in Jerusalem and Judea; chapters 13–28 describe the spread of the Gentile church throughout the Roman world. And it was from the dynamic, doctrinally sound, growing, Spirit-controlled church at Antioch that the flag of Gentile missions was unfurled. It had spiritual leaders, with a spiritual ministry, who went on a spiritual mission, faced spiritual opposition, and experienced spiritual victory.

### SPIRITUAL LEADERS

**Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was there, prophets and teachers: Barnabas, and Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. (13:1)**

Effective, strong churches inevitably have godly leaders, and the church **at Antioch** was no exception. God has always put a premium on spiritual leadership (Acts 6:3; 1 Tim. 3:1–13; Titus 1:5–9; cf. Hos. 4:9; Matt. 9:36). These five men were the heart of the ministry at Antioch.

Luke describes them as **prophets and teachers**, two important New Testament terms. **Prophets** played a significant role in the apostolic church (cf. 1 Cor. 12:28; Eph. 2:20; 3:5; 4:11). Like the apostles, they were preachers of God's Word and were responsible in the early years of the church to instruct the local congregations. Sometimes they received new revelation from God, as in Acts 11:28 and 21:10–11. Both of those incidents record that the prophets, in contrast to the apostles, received practical, not doctrinal revelation. The prophets' function as receivers of divine revelation ended with the cessation of the temporary sign gifts. Even their office, like that of the apostles, was replaced by pastor-teachers and evangelists (cf. Eph. 4:11–12), who were the elders and overseers (1 Tim. 3:1ff.; Titus 1:5–9). (For a discussion of the cessation of the sign gifts, see John MacArthur, *Charismatic Chaos* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992] and *1 Corinthians*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary [Chicago: Moody, 1984].)

The prophets edified the saints by preaching expositions of existing revelation (cf. 1 Thess. 5:20). Although prophets of that unique kind no longer exist, the similar gift for preaching the Word of God remains. It is given to pastors and evangelists, who proclaim what Peter called "the prophetic word" (2 Pet. 1:19) and is still vital to the spiritual health of the church (cf. Rom. 10:14–18). All the way to the return of the Lord, the "spirit of prophecy" continues to be "the testimony of Jesus" (Rev. 19:10).

**Teachers** are critical in today's church (cf. 1 Cor. 12:28; Eph. 4:11; James 3:1). Theirs is the ministry of giving others a clear understanding of biblical truth. The distinctive of the ministry of teachers is its emphasis on pedagogy rather than on proclamation. That they are somewhat different from preachers seems apparent in texts that discuss both, though the same gifted man can sometimes perform both functions, as Acts 15:35 indicates.

Antioch had five men who were both preachers and teachers of God's Word. It was through their ministry that the church was built up in the faith.

**Barnabas** has already appeared several times in Acts. From 4:36 we learn he was a Levite from the island of Cyprus. His birth name was Joseph, but the apostles named him **Barnabas**, which means "Son of Encouragement"—an apt description of this gentle, loving man. It was Barnabas who convinced the skeptical and suspicious believers at Jerusalem that Saul's conversion was genuine (9:27). The Jerusalem fellowship sent him to investigate the rumors that Gentiles had been saved in Antioch (11:22)—a sign of the high esteem in which the Jerusalem church held him. He brought Saul from Tarsus and got him involved in the ministry in Antioch (11:25–26). Barnabas, along with Saul, carried the Antioch church's contributions for the relief of the Judean church to Jerusalem (11:30).

Little is known about **Simeon, Lucius, and Manaen**. Luke's note that **Simeon was called Niger** (which means "black") may suggest that he was a dark-skinned man, an African, or both. While some identify him with Simon of Cyrene, who carried Jesus' cross (Mark 15:21), there is no direct evidence for that identification. **Lucius**, but not Simeon, is identified with the city of **Cyrene** in North Africa. There is nothing to link him with the Lucius whom Paul greets in Romans 16:21 and certainly no evidence to identify him (as some have argued) as Luke the physician. **Manaen** was notable, Luke records, because he **had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch** (Herod Antipas, the Herod of the gospels). *Suntrophos* (**had been brought up with**) can be translated "foster-brother." He had been reared in Herod the Great's household along with Herod Antipas. **Saul**, or Paul, needs no introduction. Through his tireless efforts the gospel spread throughout the Gentile world. These were the shepherds who led the flock to effectiveness and impact.

#### SPIRITUAL MINISTRY

**And while they were ministering to the Lord and fasting,** (13:2a)

The responsibility of spiritual shepherds is spiritual ministry.

Unlike many in the ministry today who are busy with shallow activities and programs, the leaders at Antioch understood their spiritual mandate clearly. They patterned themselves after the apostles, who, according to Acts 6:4, devoted themselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word. Those are ever the priorities for the man of God.

**Ministering** is from *leitourgeō*, a word that originally meant “to discharge a public office.” It was “used of the Attic orators who served the state at their own cost” (A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Baker’s reprint of the 1930 edition], 3:177). The leaders of the Antioch church faithfully discharged the office God called them to and fulfilled their ministry (cf. 2 Tim. 4:5).

In Scripture, however, *leitourgeō* means more than public service; it describes priestly service. In the Septuagint it described the priests who ministered in the tabernacle (Ex. 28:41). Serving in a leadership role in the church must be viewed as an act of worship to God. Such service consists of offering spiritual sacrifices to Him (cf. Heb. 13:15–16), including prayer, oversight of the flock, studying, and preaching and teaching the Word.

Their **ministering** was not to the congregation but to **the Lord**. It is crucial to understand that God is the audience for all spiritual ministry (cf. Acts 20:19–20). Those whose goal is ministering to people will be tempted to compromise to achieve that end. Making the Lord the object of ministry obviates the need for compromise.

Like the Macedonian believers, those in ministry must give themselves first to the Lord and only then to other believers (cf. 2 Cor. 8:5). They are to “be diligent to present [themselves] approved to God,” not to men (2 Tim. 2:15). The man of God, like every believer, does his “work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men,” because “it is the Lord Christ whom [he serves]” (Col. 3:23–24).

The Bible frequently connects **fasting** with times of vigilant, passionate prayer (cf. Neh. 1:4; Ps. 35:13; Dan. 9:3; Matt. 17:21; Luke 2:37; 5:33; Acts 14:23). Believers may become so concerned with spiritual issues that they lose the desire to eat, or they set aside food to concentrate on intense intercession. Those who know little of fasting perhaps know little about such concern. Scripture nowhere commands believers to fast, but Jesus assumed His followers would do so (Matt. 6:17; Luke 5:33–35). In sharp contrast to the showy, hypocritical fasting of the Pharisees, believers’ fasting is for God’s eyes only (Matt. 6:16–18). (For a further discussion of fasting, see *Matthew 1–7*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary [Chicago: Moody, 1985], 399ff.)

## SPIRITUAL MISSION

**the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away. So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia and from there they sailed to Cyprus. And when they reached Salamis, they began to proclaim the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews; and they also had John as their helper. (13:2b-5)**

Spiritual men with effective spiritual ministry will see God extend their spiritual mission. God chooses for further ministry those already actively serving Him. He is not likely to take idle Christians down from the shelf, dust them off, and entrust them with important work. Saul and Barnabas were deeply involved in ministering to the Lord when their call to further service came. God chose experienced, proven men for the vitally important mission to the Gentiles.

The truth that all ministry is to be done for the Lord is here reinforced by the Spirit’s command to **set apart** Barnabas and Saul **for** Himself. They were His men, to use as He would and send wherever He desired.

Another principle that flows out of this text is that God sovereignly calls men to the ministry. The church did not choose Saul and Barnabas. Indeed, they would probably have been the last two chosen, since they were the best the church had. Nor did Saul and Barnabas volunteer. Instead, the Spirit sovereignly **called them** to full-time missionary service.

A final principle to be gleaned from this text is the importance of waiting for God’s timing. The Antioch church did not concoct schemes or map out strategies to reach the Gentile world. Instead, it concentrated on carrying out the ministries God had already entrusted to it. An important feature in discerning God’s will for the future is to do His will in the present.

How **the Holy Spirit** communicated to the church is not revealed. Presumably He spoke through one of the prophets. However the message was communicated, the church’s response was instant obedience. There was no grumbling or resentment; the Holy Spirit demanded the church’s best, and Antioch joyously provided Saul and Barnabas.

After **they had fasted and prayed**, no doubt for the success of Saul and Barnabas’s ministry, the leaders **laid their hands on them**. The laying on of hands neither granted Saul and Barnabas the Holy Spirit nor ordained them to ministry. Both had already received the Spirit

(Acts 9:17; 11:24) and had been serving in the ministry for many years. The laying on of hands simply signified identification, confirmation, and unity in their upcoming mission (cf. Num. 8:10; 27:18–23).

Having prayed for Saul and Barnabas and having publicly identified with them, the Antioch church **sent them away**. A better translation of *apoluō* (**sent them away**) might be “they let them go,” or “they released them.” It is clear from verse 1 that the Spirit, not the church, sent out the two missionaries. Since He had already sent them, all the church could do was cut the cord and let them go. That truth is repeated in verse 4, where Luke relates that the missionaries were **sent out by the Holy Spirit**.

Leaving Antioch to begin the mission, **they went down to Seleucia**. Located some sixteen miles away, near the mouth of the Orontes River, **Seleucia** served as the port of Antioch. Whether the missionaries took the road to Seleucia or traveled by boat down the Orontes is not stated. Once in Seleucia, they took passage on a ship and **sailed to Cyprus**.

**Cyprus** is the third largest island in the Mediterranean, after Sicily and Sardinia. It is about 60 miles off the Syrian coast and would have been visible from Seleucia on a clear day. The main part of the island is 90 to 100 miles long and up to 60 miles wide. In New Testament times its two major cities were Salamis, the chief port and commercial center, and Paphos, the capital.

Saul and Barnabas no doubt chose to begin their missionary outreach on Cyprus for several reasons. According to Acts 4:36, it was Barnabas’s home and thus familiar territory. Also, it was close to Antioch, probably two days’ journey at most. Further, Cyprus had a large Jewish population. All those reasons made it an ideal starting point for outreach to the Gentile world.

Arriving at the main port city, **Salamis, they began to proclaim the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews**. To preach the gospel first to the Jews was Paul’s custom throughout his missionary journeys. Cyprus had a Jewish settlement large enough to support several synagogues in Salamis. As they traveled from synagogue to synagogue, Saul and Barnabas **had John Mark as their helper**. He was a native of Jerusalem (Acts 12:12) and was Barnabas’s cousin (Col. 4:10). When Saul and Barnabas returned to Antioch from Jerusalem after delivering relief aid, John Mark came with them (Acts 12:25). He had undoubtedly left Antioch along with Saul and Barnabas. Although he was soon to desert them and return to Jerusalem, for now he was a member of the team, helping Saul and Barnabas carry out their spiritual mission.

## SPIRITUAL OPPOSITION

**And when they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they found a certain magician, a Jewish false prophet whose name was Bar-Jesus, who was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence. This man summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God. But Elymas the magician (for thus his name is translated) was opposing them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith. . . . Now Paul and his companions put out to sea from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia; and John left them and returned to Jerusalem.** (13:6–8, 13)

When God's people seek to advance His purposes, satanic opposition is unavoidable. The missionary team had by now traversed **the whole island** from Salamis in the northeast corner **as far as Paphos** on the southwest coast. Besides being the seat of the Roman government, **Paphos** was

a great center for the worship of Aphrodite [Venus]. . . . The greatest festival in Cyprus in honor of Aphrodite was the Aphrodisia, held for three days each spring. It was attended by great crowds not only from all parts of Cyprus but also from surrounding countries. (Charles F. Pfeiffer and Howard F. Vos, *The Wycliffe Historical Geography of Bible Lands* [Chicago: Moody, 1967], 305–6)

It was a city rife with immorality: "Extensive religious prostitution accompanied [Aphrodite's] rites at Paphos" (Pfeiffer and Vos, 306).

Here, in the capital, **they found a certain magician**. As happened when Peter and John brought the gospel to Samaria, Saul and Barnabas were confronted by a **magician**. *Magos* (**magician**) does not necessarily have an evil connotation. It is used, for example, in Matthew 2:1 to describe the wise men who visited the infant Jesus and His family. The term originally referred to the hereditary priestly tribe within the Median nation. They were well-versed in astronomy and astrology, agriculture, mathematics, and history. They were involved in various occult practices and were famous for their ability to interpret dreams (cf. Dan. 2:1ff.). Such was their political power and influence that no Persian ruler came to power without their approval. (For further information, see *Matthew 1–7*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary [Chicago: Moody, 1985], 26–28.) Later, however, the term **magician** was used to describe all sorts of practitioners of magic and dabblers in the occult. **Bar-Jesus**, being **Jewish**, obviously was not one of the Medo-Persian magi. Like

Simon (Acts 8:9–11), he was a deceiver who put his knowledge to evil use.

Bar-Jesus was not only a magician; Luke further describes him as a **false prophet**. His name, ironically, means “son of salvation”—a strange name indeed for a deceiving false prophet. It was no accident that this man had attached himself to the Roman **proconsul**. The kingdom of darkness is eager to influence those who rule. Much of the evil in this world can be traced ultimately to such baleful influence by “the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Eph. 6:12; cf. Dan. 10:13–11:1).

The Roman governor of Cyprus was **Sergius Paulus**, whom Luke describes as a **man of intelligence**. The accuracy of Luke’s account is verified by an inscription found at Soloi, on the north coast of Cyprus. That inscription dates itself “in the proconsulship of Paulus” (Sir William M. Ramsay, *St. Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen* [reprint; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1975], 74).

As an intelligent Roman, the governor no doubt had a keen interest in new philosophies and religious beliefs. That he had in his entourage a Jewish teacher (albeit a renegade one) showed he had some interest in Judaism. Saul and Barnabas appeared to him to be two more Jewish teachers from whom he could learn more about the Jewish faith. Further, his duties as governor prompted him to investigate this new teaching that was sweeping Cyprus. Accordingly, he **summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God**.

Alarmed at the prospect of Sergius Paulus’s conversion, and his own subsequent loss of status, **Elymas the magician (for thus his name is translated) was opposing them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith**. He was doing the bidding of his evil master, Satan. Like many Jewish people at this time, Bar-Jesus also had a Greek name, **Elymas**, by which he was known at the court of Sergius Paulus. Luke’s parenthetical note that **thus his name is translated** does not mean **Elymas** translates Bar-Jesus. Instead, **Elymas** was apparently the Greek transliteration of an Arabic word for “magician” (Simon J. Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary: Acts* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990], 462).

It is well to remember the lesson of these verses. Leading someone to Christ is not merely an academic exercise, nor is it a matter of making a successful sales pitch. Rather, it involves all-out war against the forces of hell. Saul and Barnabas battled Bar-Jesus for the soul of Sergius Paulus.

But such external attacks are not Satan’s only strategy. Even more deadly over the centuries have been his attacks on the church from within. It is hardly surprising, then, that he sought to derail the mission to the Gentiles with internal pressure as well. That pressure came in John



Mark's desertion. Having completed their work on Cyprus, **Paul and his companions put out to sea from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia; and John left them and returned to Jerusalem.** Perga was a major city in the Roman province of **Pamphylia**, in Asia Minor.

What specifically was the reason **John left them and returned to Jerusalem** is not clear. Some have suggested that he was afraid to travel in the dangerous mountains of Pamphylia, a region infested with bands of robbers (cf. 2 Cor. 11:26). Others think he resented Paul's taking the ascendancy over his cousin, Barnabas; others that he disapproved of Paul's emphasis on preaching the gospel to the Gentiles; and still others that he feared persecution. Whatever the reason, Paul did not consider it valid (Acts 15:38). And, tragically, although John Mark's desertion did not stop the mission to the Gentiles, it did split the successful team of Paul and Barnabas (Acts 15:36–40). Internal dissension, division, and disunity continue to disrupt works of God that have stood fast against the storms of external opposition.

#### SPIRITUAL VICTORY

**But Saul, who was also known as Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, fixed his gaze upon him, and said, "You who are full of all deceit and fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease to make crooked the straight ways of the Lord? And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and not see the sun for a time." And immediately a mist and a darkness fell upon him, and he went about seeking those who would lead him by the hand. Then the proconsul believed when he saw what had happened, being amazed at the teaching of the Lord.** (13:9–12)

The battle for the soul of Sergius Paulus now reached its climax. **Saul**, who, Luke notes, **was also known** by his Roman name **Paul**, had had enough of the magician's interference. Being **filled with the Holy Spirit**, Paul **fixed his gaze upon** that false prophet. As with all those who dabble in the occult and demonic doctrine, Bar-Jesus was **full of all deceit and fraud**. *Dolos* (**deceit**) is the Greek word for "a snare." Like a cleverly disguised snare, Bar-Jesus was not what he appeared to be to his unsuspecting victims. *Radiourgias* (**fraud**) appears only here in the New Testament. It meant originally, "ease or facility in doing; hence readiness in turning the hand to anything, bad or good; and so recklessness, unscrupulousness, wickedness" (Marvin R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946], 1:516). Far from being a "son of salvation," Bar-Jesus was accused by Paul as being

in reality a **son of the devil**. Bar-Jesus fancied himself a righteous prophet, but Paul denounced him as the **enemy of all righteousness**. He constantly twisted and perverted God's truth, leading to Paul's withering question, "**will you not cease to make crooked the straight ways of the Lord?**"

Bar-Jesus was not to escape with a mere tongue lashing, however. As he had made others spiritually blind, he was now to suffer physical blindness. Paul informed him, "**the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and not see the sun for a time.**" That Bar-Jesus' blindness was to be temporary was an indication of God's mercy. One can only hope that he recovered from his spiritual blindness as well.

The missionaries' spiritual victory was not only negative, as seen in the defeat of Bar-Jesus, but also positive. Satan's emissary had been defeated and silenced; and now Paul and Barnabas were about to win the battle for Sergius Paulus's soul: **Then the proconsul believed when he saw what had happened, being amazed at the teaching of the Lord**. As so often is related in Acts, God used a miracle to confirm the authenticity of His messengers and the truth of His Word. Significantly, it was **the teaching of the Lord**, not the stunning miracle he had just witnessed, that prompted **the proconsul** to believe. He was **amazed at the teaching of the Lord**, not at the miracle.

There is no reason to doubt the genuineness of Sergius Paulus's belief. That he became a true Christian is suggested by some extrabiblical sources. The great nineteenth-century archaeologist Sir William Ramsay "argued from other literary sources that Sergia Paulla, the proconsul's daughter, was a Christian, as was her son Gaius Caristianus Fronto, the first citizen of Pisidian Antioch to enter the Roman senate" (Richard N. Longenecker, "The Acts of the Apostles," in Frank E. Gaebelin, ed. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981], 9:421; cf. E. M. Blaiklock, *The Archaeology of the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977], 107; J. A. Thompson, *The Bible and Archaeology* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987], 392). But apart from such external evidence, Luke's account is clear. The conversion of Sergius Paulus "has been the main point of the whole Cyprus narrative" (John B. Polhill, *The New American Commentary: Acts* [Nashville: Broadman, 1992], 295). As his erstwhile counselor was plunged into physical darkness, the proconsul emerged from spiritual darkness into the gospel's glorious light.

The church at Antioch stands for all time as an example of an effective church. The successful mission to evangelize the Gentile world that it initiated was a turning point in history. The true church of Jesus Christ on earth today is the spiritual legacy of that outreach.

four practices: **things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood**. Those were violations of the law of **Moses**, who **from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath**. To needlessly violate the Mosaic sanctions would destroy the church's credibility with unbelieving Jews and also offend believing ones. It would be an abuse of the freedom in Christ believers enjoy (cf. 1 Pet. 2:16).

**Things contaminated by idols** refers to food offered to pagan gods and then sold in temple butcher shops. Idolatry was a repulsive, blasphemous matter to the Jews. The Old Testament is replete with warnings against it (cf. Ex. 20:3; 34:17; Deut. 5:7). Further, their ancestors' practice of idolatry led to the destruction of the nation (cf. 2 Kings 17:7–18; 2 Chron. 36:14–16). They would naturally seek to avoid any manifestation of it, including eating meat offered to idols. That was a serious issue in the early church, one later dealt with at length by Paul (1 Cor. 8:1–13; 10:14–33).

**Fornication** describes sexual sin in general, and the orgies associated with the worship of pagan gods in particular. Illicit sex was an integral part of the pagan Gentile worship. Temple priestesses were often little more than prostitutes. Although **fornication** is obviously a moral issue (cf. 1 Cor. 6:15–20), in a broader sense it is also an issue of consideration to Jews. In all their marriage relations and conduct with the opposite sex, the Gentiles were to do nothing offensive to God's law or Jewish sensibilities.

Abstaining from **what is strangled and from blood** involved the dietary laws (Gen. 9:4; Lev. 3:17; 7:26; 17:12–14; 19:26; Deut. 12:16, 23; 15:23; 1 Sam. 14:34; Ezek. 33:25). While certainly not imposing those laws on the Gentile believers (cf. Acts 10:9–16), James set forth these as minimum requirements for fellowship. As noted above, freedom in Christ does not grant the right to sin, or to offend another believer.

Having decided both the doctrinal and practical issues, **it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas—Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren**. The Council's decision needed to be communicated to the church at **Antioch**, the center of Gentile Christianity. That **the apostles and the elders, with the whole church** agreed was yet another manifestation of the unity that marked the early church (cf. Acts 6:5).

It was necessary **to choose men from among them to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas**, or else the Judaizers would surely have accused the two missionaries of giving a biased account of the proceedings. Accordingly, they selected **Judas called Barsabbas, and**

**Silas**, whom Luke describes as **leading men among the brethren**. Nothing more is known of **Judas called Barsabbas**, nor whether he was related to the Joseph Barsabbas mentioned in Acts 1:23. **Silas**, however, played a prominent role in New Testament history. Also known as Silvanus (2 Cor. 1:19; 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1; 1 Pet. 5:12), he accompanied Paul on his second missionary journey (15:40; 16:19, 25, 29; 17:4, 10, 14, 15; 18:5). He later served as Peter’s amanuensis for his first epistle (1 Pet. 5:12). Luke describes both Judas and Silas as **leading men** in the Jerusalem church. Recognizing the vital importance of the mission, the Jerusalem church sent two of its best. Another indication of how seriously the church leaders viewed the situation is that they sent a **letter** along with the delegation. That letter, **from the apostles and the brethren who are elders** was addressed **to the brethren in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia who are from the Gentiles**. That the Jerusalem church addressed the Gentiles as **brethren** was significant. It affirmed the church’s acceptance of them as fellow believers and undermined the Judaizers’ position. The salutation *chairein* (**greetings**) appears only here, in Acts 23:26 (where it is used by a Roman, Claudius Lysias), and in James 1:1. That may imply that James wrote the letter on behalf of the others. **Syria and Cilicia** were administered at this time as a single Roman district, of which Antioch was the capital. Many of the churches in **Cilicia** had no doubt been founded by Paul during his stay there after his flight from Jerusalem (Acts 9:30). The Gentile churches on Cyprus and in Galatia were not mentioned. They may have been viewed as extensions of the Antioch church, or the letter may have been addressed only to Antioch because that church had sent the delegation to Jerusalem (Homer A. Kent, Jr., *Jerusalem to Rome* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992], 128). In any case, the letter was delivered to the Galatian churches by Paul and Silas (Acts 16:4).

The occasion for the letter is stated. The Jerusalem church had **heard that some of its number to whom it gave no instruction had disturbed** the Antioch believers **with their words, unsettling their souls**. The Judaizers who were troubling the Antioch church had no authorization from Jerusalem. *Tarassō* (**disturbed**) is not the same word used in verse 19. It is a strong word, meaning “to deeply upset,” “to deeply disturb,” “to perplex,” or “to create fear.” It is used in John 14:1 to describe the disciples’ agitated state after Jesus told them of His impending death. It also appears in reference to false teaching in Galatians 1:7 and 5:10. *Anaskeuazō* (**unsettling**) appears only here in the New Testament. In extrabiblical Greek it was used to speak of going bankrupt or of a military force plundering a town (W. E. Vine, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* [Old Tappan, N. J.: Revell, 1966], 4:88). Taken together, these two words aptly describe the havoc wrought by false teaching.

Having decided to send the letter, **it seemed good to** the leaders of the Jerusalem fellowship, **having become of one mind, to select men to send to Antioch with their beloved Barnabas and Paul.** That they were **of one mind** about this matter shows again their unity (cf. v. 22). The description of **Barnabas and Paul** as **beloved** shows the affection they felt for these men. The church's commendation of them as **men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ** is the noblest anyone could receive. On their first missionary tour, the two had faced persecution (Acts 13:50), and Paul had nearly been killed (Acts 14:19–20). Willingness to suffer for the cause of Christ was the consistent pattern of their lives.

What made them willing to risk their lives? First, they were concerned for others. To the Philippians Paul wrote, "Even if I am being poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I rejoice and share my joy with you all" (Phil. 2:17). Second, they knew the path of suffering led to a richer provision of God's grace (2 Cor. 12:9–10). Third, they understood the continuity of eternal life. In Romans 14:7–9 Paul wrote:

For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself; for if we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord; therefore whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.

Knowing that in life or in death they were the Lord's made them fearless. Fourth, they knew that death merely gained them heaven, which they longed for. Paul expressed that hope in Philippians 1:21–23:

For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain. But if I am to live on in the flesh, this will mean fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which to choose. But I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better.

Fifth, they sought to obey Christ at all costs, even when that obedience involved suffering. Peter wrote that believers "have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps" (1 Pet. 2:21; cf. 1 Pet. 3:17; 5:10). Finally, and most significant, they were willing to suffer **for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ** (cf. Phil. 3:10). The **name** of Jesus Christ included all He was and purposed, and it motivated Paul's service (Rom. 1:5), as well as the service of others in the early church (3 John 7). When the apostles suffered persecution, they rejoiced "that they had been considered wor-

thy to suffer shame for His name” (Acts 5:41). No cost was too high to pay to protect the honor of the Lord Jesus Christ.

As had been decided earlier (v. 22), **Judas and Silas** would accompany Paul and Barnabas back to Antioch. They could **report the same things by word of mouth**, thus confirming the letter’s contents by their firsthand report of the proceedings. Then, reflecting the Council’s decision regarding matters of fellowship (vv. 19–21), the letter concluded:

**For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well. Farewell.** (15:28–29)

The letter thus answered the doctrinal question raised by the Antioch church and gave wise instruction on how to avoid rifts in the fellowship.

#### THE DEVELOPMENT

**So, when they were sent away, they went down to Antioch; and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement. And Judas and Silas, also being prophets themselves, encouraged and strengthened the brethren with a lengthy message. And after they had spent time there, they were sent away from the brethren in peace to those who had sent them out. [But it seemed good to Silas to remain there.] But Paul and Barnabas stayed in Antioch, teaching and preaching, with many others also, the word of the Lord.** (15:30–35)

Having been **sent away** with the blessings of the Jerusalem fellowship, the messengers **went down to Antioch**. There, **having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter**. The entire **congregation**, which had been anxiously awaiting the news of whether their salvation was genuine, gathered **together** to hear the apostles’ decision.

The reading of the **letter** and the report of the delegation evoked four responses from the assembled believers. The first was celebration: **they rejoiced**. The confirmation that salvation was indeed by grace alone lifted a tremendous burden of worry from their shoulders. The second response was consolation, **because of** the letter’s **encour-**

**agement.** They no longer needed to fear that their salvation was not genuine. Legalism produces fear, guilt, and pride, while grace alone brings comfort and hope (2 Thess. 2:16). A third response was confirmation, as **Judas and Silas, also being prophets themselves, encouraged and strengthened the brethren with a lengthy message.** The two leaders from Jerusalem added their own heartening words to those of the letter. Then, **after they had spent time there, they were sent away from the brethren in peace to those who had sent them out** and returned to Jerusalem. Legalism produces neither confirmation nor edification; it is “the word of His grace” that is “able to build” up believers (Acts 20:32). The final response was continuation. Verse 34 is not in the best manuscripts, but verse 35 notes that **Paul and Barnabas stayed in Antioch, teaching and preaching, with many others also, the word of the Lord.** Paul and Barnabas picked up where they had left off and continued their ministry of **teaching and preaching . . . the word of the Lord.** Their teaching made clear that salvation is by grace alone. Luke adds that **many others** joined them in proclaiming the liberating truth of salvation by grace.

The apostolic church thus survived the greatest challenge it had yet faced and established the doctrine of salvation by grace. Satan’s attempt to inject heretical teaching was thwarted. So also was his attempt to split the church along racial and cultural lines. With the vitally important truth about salvation safeguarded, the church experienced greater days of ministry than ever before.

There has always been, and always will be, only one way to be saved. No one expressed that truth any clearer than the apostle Paul when he penned the familiar words, “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast” (Eph. 2:8–9).

THE MACARTHUR  
NEW TESTAMENT  
COMMENTARY  
**ROMANS 1-8**

*John MacArthur*

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# The Good News of God—part 1



**Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, (1:1)**

A quick look at any newspaper or passing glance at a weekly news magazine reminds us that in our world most news is bad and seems to be getting worse. What is happening on a national and worldwide scale is simply the magnification of what is happening on an individual level. As personal problems, animosities, and fears increase, so do their counterparts in society at large.

Human beings are in the hold of a terrifying power that grips them at the very core of their being. Left unchecked, it pushes them to self-destruction in one form or another. That power is sin, which is always bad news.

Sin is bad news in every dimension. Among its consequences are four inevitable byproducts that guarantee misery and sorrow for a world taken captive. First, sin has selfishness at its heart. The basic element of fallen human nature is exaltation of self, the ego. When Satan fell, he was asserting his own will above God's, five times declaring, "I will . . ." (Isa. 14:13-14). Man fell by the same self-will, when Adam and Eve asserted

their own understanding about right and wrong above God's clear instruction (Gen. 2:16-17; 3:1-7).

By nature man is self-centered and inclined to have his own way. He will push his selfishness as far as circumstances and the tolerance of society will allow. When self-will is unbridled, man consumes everything and everyone around him in an insatiable quest to please himself. When friends, fellow workers, or a spouse cease to provide what is wanted, they are discarded like an old pair of shoes. Much of modern western society has been so imbued with the propriety of self-esteem and self-will that virtually every desire has come to be considered a right.

The ultimate goal in many lives today is little more than perpetual self-satisfaction. Every object, every idea, every circumstance, and every person is viewed in light of what it can contribute to one's own purposes and welfare. Lust for wealth, possessions, fame, dominance, popularity, and physical fulfillment drives people to pervert everything they possess and everyone they know. Employment has become nothing more than a necessary evil to finance one's indulgences. As is often noted, there is constant danger of loving things and using people rather than loving people and using things. When that temptation is succumbed to, stable and faithful personal relationships become impossible. A person engulfed in self-will and self-fulfillment becomes less and less capable of loving, because as his desire to possess grows, his desire to give withers. And when he forfeits selflessness for selfishness, he forfeits the source of true joy.

Selfish greed progressively alienates a person from everyone else, including those who are closest and dearest. The end result is loneliness and despair. Everything that is craved soon yields to the law of diminishing returns, and the more one has of it the less it satisfies.

Second, sin produces guilt, another form of bad news. No matter how convincingly one tries to justify selfishness, its inevitable abuse of things and other people cannot escape generating guilt.

Like physical pain, guilt is a God-given warning that something is wrong and needs correcting. When guilt is ignored or suppressed, it continues to grow and intensify, and with it come anxiety, fear, sleeplessness, and countless other spiritual and physical afflictions. Many people try to overcome those afflictions by masking them with possessions, money, alcohol, drugs, sex, travel, and psychoanalysis. They try to assuage their guilt by blaming society, parents, a deprived childhood, environment, restrictive moral codes, and even God Himself. But the irresponsible notion of blaming other persons and things only aggravates the guilt and escalates the accompanying afflictions.

Third, sin produces meaninglessness, still another form of bad news and one that is endemic to modern times. Trapped in his own selfishness, the self-indulgent person has no sense of purpose or meaning.

Life becomes an endless cycle of trying to fill a void that cannot be filled. The result is futility and despair. To questions such as, “Why am I here? What is the meaning of life? What is truth?” he finds no answers in the world but the lies of Satan, who is the author of lies and prince of the present world system (cf. John 8:44; 2 Cor. 4:4). In the words of Edna St. Vincent Millay in her poem “Lament,” he can only say, “Life must go on; I forget just why.” Or, like the central character in one of Jean-Paul Sartre’s novels, he may say nihilistically, “I decided to kill myself to remove at least one superfluous life.”

A fourth element in sin’s chain of bad news is hopelessness, which is the companion of meaninglessness. The consumptively selfish person forfeits hope, both for this life and for the next. Although he may deny it, he senses that even death is not the end, and for the hopeless sinner death becomes therefore the ultimate bad news.

Millions of babies are born every day into a world filled with bad news. And because of the boundless selfishness that permeates modern society, millions of other babies are not allowed to enter the world at all. That tragedy alone has made the bad news of the modern world immeasurably worse.

The tidbits of seemingly good news are often merely a brief respite from the bad, and sometimes even what appears to be good news merely masks an evil. Someone once commented cynically that peace treaties merely provide time for everyone to reload!

But the essence of Paul’s letter to the Romans is that there is good news that is truly good. The apostle was, in fact, “a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles, ministering as a priest of the gospel of God” (Rom. 15:16). He brought the good news that in Christ sin can be forgiven, selfishness can be overcome, guilt can be removed, anxiety can be alleviated, and life can indeed have hope and eternal glory.

In his Romans letter Paul speaks of the good news in many ways, each way emphasizing a uniquely beautiful facet of one spiritual gem. He calls it the blessed good news, the good news of salvation, the good news of Jesus Christ, the good news of God’s Son, and the good news of the grace of God. The letter begins (1:1) and ends (16:25-26) with the good news.

The entire thrust of the sixteen chapters of Romans is distilled into the first seven verses. The apostle apparently was so overjoyed by his message of good news that he could not wait to introduce his readers to the gist of what he had to say. He burst into it immediately.

In Romans 1:1-7 Paul unfolds seven aspects of the good news of Jesus Christ. He first identifies himself as the preacher of the good news (v. 1), which will be discussed in this present chapter. He then tells of the promise (v. 2), the Person (vv. 3-4), the provision (v. 5a), the proclamation (v. 5b), the purpose (v. 5c), and the privileges of the good news (vv. 6-7).

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 THE PREACHER OF THE GOOD NEWS

**Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, (1:1)**

God called a unique man to be the major spokesman for His glorious good news. **Paul** was God's keynote speaker, as it were, for heralding the gospel. A singularly gifted man, he was given divine "insight into the mystery of Christ" (Eph. 3:4), "the mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations; but has now been manifested to His saints" (Col. 1:26). That remarkable Jew with Greek education and Roman citizenship, with incredible leadership ability, high motivation, and articulate expression, was specially and directly called, converted, and gifted by God.

**Paul** crisscrossed much of the Roman Empire as God's ambassador of the good news of Christ. He performed many healing miracles, yet was not relieved of his own thorn in the flesh. He raised Eutychus from the dead but was at least once left for dead himself. He preached freedom in Christ but was imprisoned by men during many years of his ministry.

In the first verse Paul discloses three important things about himself in regard to his ministry: his position as a servant of Christ, his authority as an apostle of Christ, and his power in being set apart for the gospel of Christ.

## PAUL'S POSITION AS A SERVANT OF CHRIST

**a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, (1:1a)**

*Doulos* (**bond-servant**) carries the basic idea of subservience and has a wide range of connotations. It was sometimes used of a person who voluntarily served others, but most commonly it referred to those who were in unwilling and permanent bondage, from which often there was no release but death.

The Hebrew equivalent (*'ebed*) is used hundreds of times in the Old Testament and carries the same wide range of connotations. The Mosaic law provided for an indentured servant to voluntarily become a permanent bond-slave of a master he loved and respected. "If a slave plainly says, 'I love my master, my wife and my children; I will not go out as a free man,' then his master shall bring him to God, then he shall bring him to the door or the doorpost. And his master shall pierce his ear

with an awl; and he shall serve him permanently” (Ex. 21:5-6).

That practice reflects the essence of Paul’s use of the term *doulos* in Romans 1:1. The apostle had given himself wholeheartedly in love to the divine Master who saved him from sin and death.

In New Testament times there were millions of slaves in the Roman Empire, the vast majority of whom were forced into slavery and kept there by law. Some of the more educated and skilled slaves held significant positions in a household or business and were treated with considerable respect. But most slaves were treated much like any other personal property of the owner and were considered little better than work animals. They had virtually no rights under the law and could even be killed with impunity by their masters.

Some commentators argue that because of the great difference between Jewish slavery as practiced in Old Testament times and the slavery of first-century Rome, Paul had only the Jewish concept in mind when speaking of his relationship to Christ. Many of the great figures in the Old Testament were referred to as servants. God spoke of Abraham as His servant (Gen. 26:24; Num. 12:7). Joshua is called “the servant of the Lord” (Josh. 24:29), as are David (2 Sam. 7:5) and Isaiah (Isa. 20:3). Even the Messiah is called God’s Servant (Isa. 53:11). In all of those instances, and in many more in the Old Testament, the term *servant* carries the idea of humble nobility and honor. But as already noted, the Hebrew word (*‘ebed*) behind *servant* was also used of bond-slaves.

In light of Paul’s genuine humility and his considering himself the foremost of sinners (1 Tim. 1:15), it is certain that he was not arrogating to himself the revered and noble title of servant of the Lord as used in the citations above. He considered Himself Christ’s **bond-servant** in the most unassuming sense.

There is, of course, an honor and dignity attached to all of God’s true servants, even the most seemingly insignificant, and Paul was very much aware of the undeserved but real dignity God bestows on those who belong to Him. Yet he was constantly aware also that the dignity and honor God gives His children are purely from grace, that *in themselves* Christians are still sinful, depraved, and undeserving. He wrote to the Corinthian church, “What then is Apollos? And what is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, even as the Lord gave opportunity to each one” (1 Cor. 3:5). Here Paul uses the term *diakonos* to describe his position as servant, a term commonly used of table waiters. But as in his use of *doulos*, the emphasis here is on subservience and insignificance, not honor. Later in the same letter he asks his readers to regard him as a galley slave (4:1). The term used here is *hupēretēs* (“servants”) which literally means “underrowers,” referring to the lowest level of rowers in the large galley of a Roman ship. This was perhaps the hardest, most dangerous, and

most demeaning work a slave could do. Such slaves were considered the lowest of the low.

Because he was called and appointed by Christ Himself, Paul would never belittle his position as an apostle or even as a child of God. He plainly taught that godly leaders in the church, especially those who are diligent in preaching and teaching, are “worthy of double honor” by fellow believers (1 Tim. 5:17). But he continually emphasized that such positions of honor are provisions of God’s grace.

#### PAUL’S AUTHORITY AS AN APOSTLE

##### **called as an apostle, (1:b)**

Paul next establishes the authority of his ministry, based on his being **called as an apostle**. Perhaps a better rendering would be “a called apostle,” which more clearly points up the fact that his position **as an apostle** was not of his own doing. He did not volunteer for that office, nor was he elected by fellow believers. He was divinely **called** by the Lord Jesus Christ Himself.

While Paul, then called Saul, was still blinded from his miraculous encounter with Jesus on the Damascus Road, the Lord said to Ananias about Paul: “He is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel” (Acts 9:15). In relaying the message to Paul, Ananias said, “The God of our fathers has appointed you to know His will, and to see the Righteous One, and to hear an utterance from His mouth. For you will be a witness for Him to all men of what you have seen and heard” (Acts 22:14-15). Paul later gave the additional revelation that Christ already had given that message directly to him, saying,

Arise, and stand on your feet; for this purpose I have appeared to you, to appoint you a minister and a witness not only to the things which you have seen, but also to the things in which I will appear to you; delivering you from the Jewish people and from the Gentiles, to whom I am sending you, to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God in order that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me. (Acts 26:16-18)

Paul told the Corinthian believers, “I am under compulsion; for woe is me if I do not preach the gospel” (1 Cor. 9:16). God had given him a task he had never dreamed of and had never asked for, and he



knew he would be in serious trouble if he was not obedient to his divine commission.

Paul was “an apostle (not sent from men, nor through the agency of man, but through Jesus Christ, and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead)” (Gal. 1:1). He went on to declare, “Am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ” (v. 10).

**Apostle** translates *apostolos*, which has the basic meaning of a person who is sent. It referred to someone who was officially commissioned to a position or task, such as an envoy or ambassador. Cargo ships were sometimes called apostolic, because they were dispatched with a specific shipment for a specific destination.

The term **apostle** appears some seventy-nine times in the New Testament and is used in a few instances in a general, nontechnical sense (see Rom. 16:7; Acts 14:14). In its broadest sense, *apostle* can refer to all believers, because every believer is sent into the world as a witness for Christ. But the term is primarily used as a specific and unique title for the thirteen men (the Twelve, with Matthias replacing Judas, and Paul) whom Christ personally chose and commissioned to authoritatively proclaim the gospel and lead the early church.

The thirteen apostles not only were all called directly by Jesus but all were witnesses of His resurrection, Paul having encountered Him on the Damascus Road after His ascension. Those thirteen apostles were given direct revelation of God’s Word to proclaim authoritatively, the gift of healing, and the power to cast out demons (Matt. 10:1). By these signs their teaching authority was verified (cf. 2 Cor. 12:12). Their teachings became the foundation of the church (Eph. 2:20), and their authority extended beyond local bodies of believers to the entire believing world.

Although the apostles were “the sent-ones” in a unique way, every person who speaks for God must be called and sent by Him. There are many people preaching, teaching, and presuming to prophesy in Christ’s name whom Christ has clearly not sent. They obviously have no anointing of God because their teachings and living do not square with God’s Word.

False prophets have always plagued God’s people. They corrupted ancient Israel, they have corrupted the church through all the centuries of its existence, and they continue to corrupt the church today. Through Jeremiah the Lord said of such impostors, “I did not send these prophets, but they ran. I did not speak to them, but they prophesied” (Jer. 23:21).

Some religious leaders not only give no evidence of being called by God to preach and teach in His name but even give little evidence of salvation. In his book *The Reformed Pastor*, seventeenth-century Puritan pastor Richard Baxter devotes a hundred pages to warning preachers of the gospel to be sure first of all that they are truly redeemed and second that they have been called by God to His ministry.

## PAUL'S POWER IN BEING SET APART FOR THE GOSPEL

**set apart for the gospel of God, (1c)**

Because Paul was called and sent by God as an apostle, his whole life was **set apart** in the Lord's service. Even a person who has been called by God to a special type or place of service cannot be effective if he is not also separated unto God for **the gospel of God**.

Throughout the Old Testament, God provided for the setting apart of His chosen people. To the entire nation He declared, "You are to be holy to Me, for I the Lord am holy; and I have set you apart from the peoples to be Mine" (Lev. 20:26). Just before He delivered His people from Pharaoh's Army the Lord commanded: "You shall devote to the Lord the first offspring of every womb, and the first offspring of every beast that you own; the males belong to the Lord" (Ex. 13:12). God also demanded the firstfruits of their crops (Num. 15:20). The Levites were set apart as the priestly tribe (Num. 8:11-14).

In the Septuagint (Greek) version of the above passages from Exodus, Numbers, and Leviticus, the words translated "present," "lift up," and "set apart" are all forms of *aphorizō*, the term Paul used for his being **set apart**. It is used of setting apart to God the firstborn, of offering to God first fruits, of consecrating to God the Levites, and of separating Israel to God from other peoples. There was to be no intermingling of the chosen people with the Gentile nations or of the sacred with the profane and ordinary.

The Aramaic term *Pharisee* may share a common root with *aphorizō* and carries the same idea of separation. The Pharisees, however, were not set apart by God or according to God's standards but had rather set themselves apart according to the standards of their own traditions (cf. Matt. 23:1, 2).

Although Paul himself had once been the most ardent of the self-appointed Pharisees, he was now set apart divinely, not humanly. God revealed to him that he had been set apart by God's grace even from his mother's womb (Gal. 1:15). When he and Barnabas were set apart and commissioned for missionary work by the church in Antioch, it was on the direct instruction of the Holy Spirit (Acts 13:2).

Paul's clear understanding of this separateness comes through in his writing to Timothy. Timothy was a genuine servant of God, and he had been personally discipled by Paul and succeeded him as pastor of the church at Ephesus. But at some point in his ministry he may have come dangerously close to being ineffective, perhaps because of fear of opposition or because of temporary weakness. Paul therefore exhorted his beloved friend, "I remind you to kindle afresh the gift of God which is in

you through the laying on of my hands. For God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and discipline” (2 Tim. 1:6-7). He may also have been tempted to be ashamed of the gospel and of Paul, as suggested in Paul’s saying to him, “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15).

Perhaps because Timothy became distracted from his primary work of preaching and teaching the Word and had become involved in fruitless disputes with unbelievers or immature believers, Paul admonished him further, saying, “Avoid worldly and empty chatter, for it will lead to further ungodliness” (2:16). It is even possible that Timothy was in danger of falling into some form of immoral behavior, prompting Paul to warn: “Flee from youthful lusts, and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart” (2:22).

Despite Timothy’s high calling and remarkable training, Paul feared that his young disciple was capable of slipping back into some worldly ways. Like many Christians, he discovered that life can appear to be easier and less troublesome when compromises are made. Paul had to remind him that he was set apart by God for God’s work and for no one else and for nothing else.

The term *euangelion* (**gospel**) is used some sixty times in this epistle. William Tyndale defined it as “glad tidings” (*Doctrinal Treatises and Introductions to Different Portions of the Holy Scriptures by William Tyndale*, Henry Walter, ed. [Cambridge: University Press, 1848], p. 484). It is the good news that God will deliver us from our selfish sin, free us from our burden of guilt, and give meaning to life and make it abundant.

The most important thing about **the gospel** is that it is **of God**. Paul makes that clear in the first sentence of his epistle in order that his readers have no confusion regarding the specific good news about which he was speaking. *Euangelion* was a common term used in the cult of emperor worship that was common in Paul’s day. Many of the caesars claimed deity for themselves and demanded worship from every person in the empire, free or slave, rich or poor, renowned or unknown. Favorable events relating to the emperor were proclaimed to the citizens as “good news.” The town herald would stand in the village square and shout, “Good news! The emperor’s wife has given birth to a son,” or, “Good news! The emperor’s heir has come of age,” or, “Good news! The new emperor has acceded to the throne.”

Especially because he was writing to believers in the Roman capital, Paul wanted to be certain that his readers understood that the good news he proclaimed was of an entirely different order than the trivial and vain proclamations concerning the emperors. The fact that it was **of God** meant that God was the source of it. It was not man’s good news, but God’s good news for man.

One cannot help wondering why God would condescend to bring good news to a world that rejects and scorns Him. No one deserves to hear it, much less to be saved by it.

The noted expository preacher Donald Grey Barnhouse told the fascinating legend of a young Frenchman who was dearly loved by his mother but in early manhood fell into immorality. He was greatly enamored of an unprincipled woman who managed to gain his total devotion. When the mother tried to draw her son away from the wicked and debased association, the other woman became enraged. She railed at the young man, accusing him of not truly loving her and insisting that he demonstrate his commitment to her by getting rid of his mother. The man resisted until a night when, in a drunken stupor, he was persuaded to carry out the heinous demand. According to the story, the man rushed from the room to his mother's house nearby, brutally killed her, and even cut out her heart to take to his vile companion as proof of his wickedness. But as he rushed on in his insane folly, he stumbled and fell, upon which the bleeding heart is said to have cried out, "My son, are you hurt?" Dr. Barnhouse commented, "That is the way God loves" (*Man's Ruin: Romans 1:1-32* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952], pp. 21-22).

Paul himself was living proof of God's great love and mercy. Though he had opposed Christ and persecuted the church, God had made him the Church's chief spokesman. He could imagine no greater role than being set apart to God for the proclamation of His gospel, the good news of salvation in Christ. Perhaps that is one reason he was so effective. Who knew better than Paul just how good the good news really was?

THE MACARTHUR  
NEW TESTAMENT  
COMMENTARY  
**ROMANS 9-16**

*John MacArthur*

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# The Tragic Unbelief of Israel

# 1

**I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh, who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises, whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen. (9:1–5)**

Romans 9–11 is one of the most fascinating passages in the New Testament, filled with essential and very practical doctrine and focused on Israel, God's chosen people.

Throughout church history, however, this passage has often been greatly misunderstood. Some commentators and expositors all but ignore it. Others treat it as a parenthesis that has little, if any, connection to the rest of the letter. They take it as an aside in which Paul expresses personal concerns and insights about his fellow Jews. According to those interpreters, the central message of justification by



faith is interrupted at the beginning of chapter 9 and resumes at the beginning of chapter 12. They argue that Paul's beautiful and climactic paean of praise, hope, and assurance in 8:38–39 flows naturally into 12:1.

It is true that if Paul had left out chapters 9–11, the argument and the flow of the letter would still seem unbroken. But, as we will see, it is also true that these three chapters are integrally related to the rest of the letter. Paul did not want to continue his teaching on justification by faith until he clarified some related truths regarding Israel and Israelites. As part of that clarification, the apostle needed to contradict some prevailing falsehoods over which many Christians, especially those who were Jewish, were stumbling.

Paul no doubt had taught the basic truths of Romans 9–11 many times, and, although he had yet to visit Rome in person (1:13), numerous believers there had known Paul personally and had heard those truths spoken from his own lips. It is possible that some of his letters to other churches had been read by Christians in Rome. And because Paul had received previous opposition to these truths, he anticipated the questions and arguments that some of the Roman church members were sure to raise and answers them in the inspired words of these chapters. An initial look at these questions and a brief suggestion of their answers may provide a helpful start to this section.

First, he anticipated the argument that, if the gospel of Jesus Christ offered salvation to all Gentiles, then God must have forsaken His ancient people Israel. Jews who heard the gospel concluded that the doctrine of justification by faith was a new idea that was valid only for Gentiles and that Christians believed the ceremonies and works righteousness of Judaism had no merit before God. They were sure the gospel implied that Jews no longer had a unique place or purpose in God's plan of redemption.

These Jews were quite right, of course, that the gospel discounts Jewish ritual and works righteousness as a means of salvation. But ritualism and legalism, even the keeping of God's divinely-revealed law, had *never* been a means of salvation, only a means of expressing or symbolizing obedience to God. As Paul makes clear earlier in this letter (see especially chaps. 3–5), God has never justified any person, Jew or Gentile—not even Abraham—on any other basis than His grace made effective by personal faith. It was also true that the New Covenant in the blood of Christ had replaced the Old Covenant and that God was calling out a new people for His name from among all nations and peoples.

In his introduction to this letter, Paul states unambiguously that Christ had given him a unique apostleship to the Gentiles (1:1–5; cf. Gal. 1:16). But the book of Acts clearly indicates that he also was called to bring the gospel to “the sons of Israel” (9:15). It is therefore not

strange that, whenever possible, this apostle to the Gentiles began a new ministry by first preaching the gospel to Jews, in a synagogue or other meeting place (see, e.g., Acts 9:20; 13:5, 14; 14:1; 16:13; 17:1–2; 19:8). He was genuinely, passionately concerned for Israel's spiritual condition and so was eager to answer the questions he knew they were asking.

Near the end of Romans 11 Paul asserts with divine authority that the Savior of the world came from Zion (that is, was a Jew) and that ultimately "all Israel will be saved," just as the prophet Isaiah had declared (Rom. 11:26; cf. Isa. 59:20–21; 27:9). Early in His earthly ministry, Jesus told the Samaritan woman that "salvation is from the Jews" and that He was the promised Jewish Messiah who would offer salvation not only to Jews but to all mankind (John 4:22–26). Paul was doubtless familiar with that declaration by His Lord, and he assures the Romans that it is inconceivable that God could reject and forget His people Israel. True Christianity and anti-Semitism are therefore contradictory terms in the most absolute sense.

Paul anticipated and answered a second question he knew would arise in the minds of many of His readers, namely, "If salvation is *from* the Jews and is first of all *to* the Jews, why did Israel, including her highest religious leaders, reject Jesus as their Messiah, Savior, and King?" If, as Paul said, "the gospel . . . is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Rom. 1:16), and if God grants "glory and honor and peace to every man who does good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (2:10), why are most Jews still in unbelief? Why is the uniquely chosen and blessed nation of Israel, who knows the law and the prophets so well, not only rejecting the gospel of Jesus Christ but zealously persecuting fellow Jews who believe it?"

As we will study in detail in a later chapter, Paul's response to such thinking was: "What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, attained righteousness, even the righteousness which is by faith; but Israel, pursuing a law of righteousness, did not arrive at that law. Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as though it were by works. They stumbled over the stumbling stone" of salvation by faith (9:30–32). Continuing his explanation, the apostle says, "Brethren, my heart's desire and my prayer to God for them [fellow Jews] is for their salvation. For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge. For not knowing about God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes" (10:1–4).

Because Paul well understood that most of his fellow Jews trusted in their descent from Abraham and in their good works, he asserts in

unmistakable terms that “he is not a Jew who is one outwardly; neither is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God” (Rom. 2:28–29). In other words, the true Jew is a spiritual Jew, a Jew whose heart and mind have been cleansed and purified (“circumcised”) by the Spirit and who therefore belongs to God by faith. Neither physical circumcision nor physical lineage from Abraham can save a person. They can, in fact, easily become barriers to salvation by giving a false sense of spiritual security. Trusting in such human things kept Jews from receiving Jesus Christ.

Because the gospel is clear that both Jews and Gentiles are saved by faith, the Jews must turn from their trust in their own religious achievement, humbling themselves, rejecting the intimidating pressure of the tradition they lived by. They rejected that gospel and thus rejected their Messiah.

This salvation was not new. “Apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested,” Paul says, “being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction” (Rom. 3:21–22). The individual Jew has never been saved on any other basis than personal faith in God, no matter how pure and well documented his physical descent from Abraham. “We maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law. Or is God the God of Jews only? Is He not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since indeed God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith is one” (3:28–30). God creates Jews and Gentiles alike, and He saves them alike, in faith, apart from works and rituals. The Jews were not saved because the barriers of ceremonies, traditions, and legalism in general blocked their way.

The apostle later asks rhetorically, “I say then, they [Israel] did not stumble so as to fall, did they? May it never be! But by their transgression salvation has come to the Gentiles, to make them jealous” (11:11). In other words, Israel’s failure to come to Jesus Christ in faith, tragic as it has been, is not permanent or irreversible. In fact, because Israel’s failure opened the door of the gospel to the Gentiles, jealousy of the Gentiles eventually will have a part in leading Israel to turn to the Savior God through faith in Christ, to receive at last the Messiah they rejected at His first coming.

Not only that, the apostle says, but, “if their transgression be riches for the world and their failure be riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their fulfillment be!” (v. 12). If Israel’s unbelief brought so many Gentiles to the Lord, how many more will be brought to Him when Israel finally believes. John reveals that the number will be incal-

culable. "After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands" (Rev. 7:9).

This question could be stated another way: "If Abraham is the father of those who are truly saved by faith, how can his descendants largely reject God's way of salvation as set forth in the gospel of Jesus Christ?" The apostle had answered that question in chapter 4, saying,

What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about; but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? "And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." Now to the one who works, his wage is not reckoned as a favor, but as what is due. But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness. . . . And he [Abraham] received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised, that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be reckoned to them. (Rom. 4:1-5, 11)

In other words, large numbers of Jews reject the gospel of Christ because they trust in the outward rite of circumcision and, as already mentioned, in their physical descent from Abraham, rather than in the unqualified faith in God that brought salvation to Abraham and made him "the father of *all* who believe without being circumcised," Gentile as well as Jew (v. 11, emphasis added).

Paul knew that a third and closely related question would also arise in the minds of Jews: "Granted that individual Jews must be saved by personal faith, what about the *nation* of Israel? Has God discarded His ancient chosen nation?" Paul's response to that question is given in chapter 9. It is the "Israelites," he explains, "to whom belongs the adoption as sons and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises, whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen" (9:4-5). It has always been a unique blessing and privilege to be a Jew, and the nation of Israel has always held "favored status" before God among the nations of the world.

But that favored position has not prevented God from disciplining that nation or from temporarily putting it aside "until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in" (Rom. 11:25). Once that has occurred, the Lord "will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and of supplication, so that they will look on

Me whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son, and they will weep bitterly over Him, like the bitter weeping over a first-born" (Zech. 12:10). Then "the sovereignty, the dominion, and the greatness of all the kingdoms under the whole heaven will be given to the people of the saints of the Highest One; His kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom, and all the dominions will serve and obey Him" (Dan. 7:27).

In this section Paul shows that the nation of Israel was temporarily set aside by God because of her continued impenitence and unbelief, most especially for her rejection of the Messiah. In His gracious sovereignty, however, and with divine certainty, God will preserve for Himself a remnant of Israel. That nation, in the form of an ordained remnant of its people, will be brought by faith not only into the purified and restored kingdom of "David's greater Son" but into the eternal kingdom of God.

Paul also reminds his readers that, just as Isaiah prophesied, "Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, it is the remnant that will be saved" (Rom. 9:27; Isa. 10:22). Through His prophets God had made clear that only a remnant of the nation would ultimately come to Him in genuine faith. Through Isaiah He had promised that "in the last days, then it will happen on that day that the Lord will again recover the second time with His hand the remnant of His people, who will remain, from Assyria, Egypt, Pathros, Cush, Elam, Shinar, Hamath, and from the islands of the sea. And He will lift up a standard for the nations, and will assemble the banished ones of Israel, and will gather the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth" (Isa. 11:11–12; cf. v. 16). Through Jeremiah He promised: "Then I Myself shall gather the remnant of My flock out of all the countries where I have driven them and shall bring them back to their pasture; and they will be fruitful and multiply" (Jer. 23:3; cf. Mic. 2:12; Zech. 8:11–12). And because "the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (Rom. 11:29), Israel has the divine guarantee that this remnant, representing the nation, *will* be saved. God's plan from eternity past has always been that Israel's rejection of Him would be both partial and temporary.

In those answers to fellow Jews, Paul also answered a question he knew would arise in the minds of many Gentile believers. "If God did not keep His promises to His chosen people Israel," they would wonder, "how can we expect Him to keep His promises to us as Gentile believers?" The problem, of course, is in the question. God *did not fail* in His promises to Israel or to individual Jews. His promises were given to *faithful* Israel and to *faithful*, believing Jews, to those who were spiritual, not simply physical, descendants of Abraham. Because he was such a model of faithfulness, Abraham not only was the father of the faithful who lived after him but, in a prevenient sense, the father even of the

faithful who lived before him. Abraham's faith reached forward, as the Lord Jesus Christ Himself tells us that, "Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad" (John 8:56).

As we shall learn, these questions and many more are answered with profound wisdom and holy reason.

So overwhelmed is he with what the Lord has given him to write, Paul ends this three-chapter section on Israel (Romans 9–11) with a majestic, triumphant doxology of praise and thanksgiving to God: "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor? Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to him again? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen" (Rom. 11:33–36).

In the first of these three chapters, Paul focuses first on the tragedy of Israel's unbelief (Rom. 9:1–5). He then declares that this unbelief is part of God's eternal plan of redemption (vv. 6–13) and demonstrates that this divine plan for Israel's unbelief is not capricious or unfair but is perfectly just (vv. 14–29).

In expressing his deep sorrow over Israel's spiritual condition, the apostle first declares his love for her people as fellow Jews.

#### PAUL'S PERSONAL CONNECTION WITH UNBELIEVING ISRAEL

**I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh, (9:1–3)**

As just noted, Paul begins this section on Israel by declaring his personal grief over the unbelief of his beloved kinsmen. He has just presented eight chapters of divine truths that are thrilling to those who believe but devastating to all unbelievers, particularly so to unbelieving Jews, who felt totally secure in their racial heritage from Abraham, in their legalistic performance of ceremony, and in their adherence to rabbinical traditions. An unbelieving Jew who took seriously Paul's words in chapters 1–8 would likely feel that the gospel rendered him an utter outcast, written off by God.

Paul had once been the most zealous persecutor of Jews who named the name of Christ, relentlessly "breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord" (Acts 9:1). Now he had been completely transformed, gladly counting himself among the disciples of Christ

and strongly condemning the legalism and false security of traditional Judaism. To unbelieving religious Jews, Christianity would be viewed as an anti-Jewish conspiracy. In their eyes, Paul utterly contradicted the teaching of Moses, preaching such things as, "Let it be known to you, brethren, that through Him [Christ] forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and through Him everyone who believes is freed from all things, from which you could not be freed through the Law of Moses" (Acts 13:38–39). Paul, a former Pharisee (Acts 23:6; Phil. 3:5) and zealous defender of traditional Judaism (Acts 8:1, 3; 9:1–2), was now considered the traitor of traitors to his people, more despised than a pagan Gentile. He was the great betrayer, the Judas of Judaism and the archenemy of Israel (see, e.g., Acts 9:23; 13:50; 20:3; 2 Cor. 11:24).

Still today, Jews look upon Christianity as inherently anti-Semitic. When they hear Jesus proclaimed as their long-awaited Messiah, the great Savior and Deliverer of Israel, they become highly incensed. Instead of seeing the gospel as the perfect fulfillment and completion of Judaism, they see it as a destructive threat. Unfortunately, their many persecutions throughout history at the hands of professed Christians exacerbates that resentment.

Paul had great concern not just for Israel as a nation but an incredibly profound love for Israelites as individuals. And he knew that before unbelieving Jews would listen to anything else he had to say, they first would have to be convinced that he truly cared for them and was far from leading an anti-Jewish conspiracy. In his preaching and writing the apostle irrefutably undermined the two basic pillars of popular Judaism, physical descent from Abraham and works righteousness under the law. Like Jesus during His earthly ministry, Paul stripped bare the hypocritical and legalistic sham of rabbinical Judaism. Also like Jesus, he knew he had to assure unbelieving Jews of his genuine love for them. He had to convince them that he proclaimed the gospel as a friend who wanted to protect and rescue them, not as an enemy who sought to condemn and destroy them. He had to show them his heart before he could give them his theology.

He begins by assuring them of his personal honesty and integrity, saying, **I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying**. Paul certified his genuineness by declaring that this **truth** was told **in Christ**. He called his Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, as an indisputable witness. He was saying that everything he thought or did or felt was done for and through His Lord. Paul's union with Christ was the orbit within which his emotions moved and the fountain from which they flowed. In other words, Christ, who was the apostle's very life and breath, would attest to the truth of what he was about to teach. His omniscient, righteous, sovereign, and gracious Lord, who perfectly knew Paul's heart and motives, would affirm the truthfulness of the apostle's limitless love for his fellow

Jews. In the words of the nineteenth-century Swiss commentator and theologian Frederic Godet, "In the eyes of Paul there is something so holy in Christ, that in the pure and luminous atmosphere of His felt presence no lie, and not even any exaggeration, is possible" (*Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans* [New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1883], p. 338).

Paul frequently called God as his witness. In the opening of this letter he assured the Roman church that "God, whom I serve in my spirit in the preaching of the gospel of His Son, is my witness as to how unceasingly I make mention of you, always in my prayers" (1:9-10). For Paul, a promise made was a promise kept. In his second letter to Corinth, he wrote, "I call God as witness to my soul, that to spare you I came no more to Corinth" (2 Cor. 1:23). Later in that same letter he again assured his readers of his truthfulness by declaring, "The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, He who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying" (11:31).

Giving the same assurance in 9:1, Paul insisted **I am not lying**. The apostle would not say or do anything simply for the sake of expediency or to make a favorable impression. He was not trying to entice his Jewish readers to accept what he said by flattering them or by making insincere and exaggerated claims for himself. He would not say anything that was untruthful or hypocritical in order to gain their attention or their agreement. His words exactly expressed his mind and heart.

Next he calls his own **conscience** as a **witness**. While defending himself before the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, "Paul, looking intently at the Council, said, 'Brethren, I have lived my life with a perfectly good conscience before God up to this day'" (Acts 23:1). It was not Paul's conscience in itself that was reliable. His conscience was consistently clear and uncondemning because he lived in consistent obedience to the Lord. "For our proud confidence is this," he said, "the testimony of our conscience, that in holiness and godly sincerity, not in fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God, we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you" (2 Cor. 1:12).

Contrary to the common advice, "Let your conscience be your guide," the natural human conscience is far from being a reliable guide. It can be "seared" (1 Tim. 4:2), covered with insensitive scar tissue. Like every other aspect of man's fallen nature, it is tainted and corrupted by sin. "To the pure, all things are pure," Paul explained to Titus; "but to those who are defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure, but both their mind and their conscience are defiled" (Titus 1:15). Through neglect of fellowship with God and disobedience to His Word, even a believer's conscience can become insensitive and unreliable. That is why Paul does not allow for believers to violate conscience, even in regard to nonmoral things. To do so is to train yourself to reject conscience (cf.



Rom. 14:20–23). All believers should be able to say with Martin Luther, “My conscience is captive to the Word of God.”

A conscience surrendered to God’s Word is a conscience that is subject to **the Holy Spirit**, whom Paul next invokes as a witness to his truthfulness and to the reliability of his conscience.

The human conscience by itself is neutral. It is activated by and according to the nature of the person to whom it belongs. The conscience of an evil, unregenerate man is no guard against sinful thoughts and actions. The conscience of a faithful believer, on the other hand, is reliable, because it is activated by the truths and standards of God’s Word and is energized by the power of God’s indwelling **Holy Spirit**. When we live in the Spirit, walk in the Spirit, and obey the Spirit, we can trust our conscience because it is under divine control. The Spirit’s perfect prompting will either commend or condemn what we are doing or are planning to do.

Because what he is about to say seems so unbelievable—at best, highly exaggerated—Paul has an important reason for summoning such an array of witnesses.

His introductory statement is believable enough. Few Christians who knew Paul would doubt that he had **great sorrow and unceasing grief** in his **heart** for his unbelieving fellow Jews. As noted above, although he was a specially appointed apostle to the Gentiles, he also was commissioned to proclaim the gospel to “the sons of Israel” (Acts 9:15). As he makes clear in this present passage, it would have torn his heart out were he not to have opportunity to proclaim the way of salvation to his fellow sons and daughters of Israel. Even *with* the opportunity for witness, he could not assuage the **great sorrow and unceasing grief** he felt for those Jews who refused to believe.

It was that same kind of grief that the prophet Samuel had for Saul. We read that “Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death; for Samuel grieved over Saul. And the Lord regretted that He had made Saul king over Israel” (1 Sam. 15:35). By his own arrogance and disobedience, Saul had made himself an outcast before God and his people. But out of deep love for the Lord’s anointed, Samuel never stopped grieving on the king’s behalf. In the massive psalm that so highly exalts God’s Word, the writer confesses: “My eyes shed streams of water, because they [Israel] do not keep Thy law” (Ps. 119:136).

Jeremiah is called the weeping prophet because of his deep grief over the unbelief and wickedness of his people. “Oh, that my head were waters,” he mourned, “and my eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people!” (Jer. 9:1). Later he implores: “Listen and give heed, do not be haughty, for the Lord has spoken. Give glory to the Lord your God, before He brings darkness and before your feet stumble on the dusky mountains, and

while you are hoping for light He makes it into deep darkness, and turns it into gloom. But if you will not listen to it, my soul will sob in secret for such pride; and my eyes will bitterly weep and flow down with tears, because the flock of the Lord has been taken captive” (Jer. 13:15–17).

Israel’s rejection of her Messiah weighed so heavily on Paul’s heart that he called on two members of the Trinity to attest to his unrelenting anguish. And he knew that, but for God’s gracious intervention on the Damascus road, he not only would still be among those unbelieving Jews but would still be leading them in persecuting those who had acknowledged their Messiah.

The full depth and genuineness of Paul’s grief is expressed in his almost unbelievable declaration that **I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh**. As indicated by his opening qualifier, **I could wish**, Paul knew he could not reject his salvation and again become **accursed** (devoted to destruction in eternal hell) and thus forever **separated from Christ**.

It was for the salvation of his fellow Jews that Paul expresses himself in hyperbole, saying he was willing even to forfeit his salvation, if, somehow, that could save them from God’s condemnation. No one, of course, knew better than Paul that salvation is a believer’s most precious treasure and that only Christ’s sacrificial death has the power to save. But here he was speaking emotionally, not theologically, and there is no reason to doubt that his awesome statement of self-sacrifice was the expression of a completely honest heart. Paul felt such love that he was willing to relinquish his own salvation and spend eternity in hell if somehow that could bring His fellow Jews to faith in Christ! He knew, of course, that, even if such a thing were possible, his being separated from Christ would have no power in itself to bring a single person to Christ. The apostle also knew that the obvious impossibility and worthlessness of such a sacrifice would cause some of his critics to accuse him of safely offering to sacrifice that which he knew was impossible to lose. It was doubtless to counter such accusations that he had called Christ and the Holy Spirit to witness his sincerity.

Paul’s passion to offer such an ultimate sacrifice reflected the gracious heart of God, who so loved the unloving and evil world that He sent His only begotten Son to provide for its redemption (John 3:16). It also reflected the equally gracious heart of the Son, who, in obedience to the Father, gave His life that others might live. Paul had just finished rejoicing in the believer’s absolute security in Christ, from which “neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing” can “separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:38–39). Yet his love for the lost in Israel gave

him the willingness to surrender those intimate, inestimable, and eternal blessings, if doing so would bring his Jewish brethren to Christ.

It was exactly Paul's great love for the lost that made him such a powerful instrument in the hands of God. Evangelism has little effect if the evangelist has little love for the lost. John Knox reflected Paul's great love when he prayed, "Give me Scotland or I die," Henry Martyn when he said, "O that I were a flame of fire in the hand of God," and David Brainerd, who prayed that he might burn out for God, which he did before he was thirty years old.

Moses loved the fickle, ungrateful, and disobedient Israelites in much the same way that Paul loved them centuries later. Interceding for them after they built and worshiped the golden calf during the very time he was on Mount Sinai receiving the tablets of the law from God, Moses pleaded with the Lord on their behalf, "Now, if Thou wilt, forgive their sin—and if not, please blot me out from Thy book which Thou hast written!" (Ex. 32:32).

Some years ago, a young woman in our area was stabbed and killed while jogging near her apartment. Both the woman and her husband were Christians, but the woman's parents were not, and she had a great burden for their salvation. Shortly before she was killed she had confided to her husband that she would be willing to die if her death could be used by God to win her parents to Himself. After the memorial service, in which the gospel was proclaimed, her mother did indeed receive Christ as Lord and Savior.

Only Christ's own gracious love in the hearts of those who belong to Him can produce such self-sacrificing devotion. The more we obey His Word and surrender to His will, the more we will love as He loves.

#### GOD'S PERSONAL CONNECTION WITH UNBELIEVING ISRAEL

**who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises, whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen. (9:4–5)**

Paul next expresses his deep sorrow over Israel's unbelief because of their personal connection with God. He not only loved Jews because they were his physical kinsmen but even more because they are God's chosen people. He loved whomever God loves, and because God loves Israel uniquely, Paul loved Israel uniquely.

In these two verses the apostle sets forth nine marvelous privileges that belong to Israel, graciously bestowed on them by a loving God.

First, they are privileged simply to be **Israelites**, descendants of Abraham through Isaac and then through Jacob, whose name was changed to Israel (Gen. 32:28).

Throughout history, Israelites (or Jews, as they came to be called after the Exile in Babylon) have distinguished themselves in virtually every field of human endeavor—in science, the arts, music, business, education, political leadership, and countless other areas. They have always been a noble people and have produced a disproportionate share of the world's geniuses. When God prepared His special earthly vineyard, "He planted it with the choicest vine," namely, Israel (Isa. 5:2).

Second, it is Israelites **to whom belongs the adoption as sons**. Beyond their patriarchal ancestry, Jews are privileged to have **adoption as God's sons**. God commanded Moses to "say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the Lord, 'Israel is My son, My first-born'''" (Ex. 4:22). Through Hosea, the Lord declared that "when Israel was a youth I loved him, and out of Egypt I called My son" (Hos. 11:1). At the covenant at Sinai, when the law was given through Moses, God declared to Israel, "You shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex. 19:6). Israel was separated out to be His unique and righteous witness to the rest of the world.

It is clear from the context of those verses, as well as from countless other parts of Scripture, that the *nation* of Israel was, in some respect, God's child. Salvation has always been on an individual basis. One person cannot be saved by another's faith. As Paul makes clear a few verses later, "They are not all Israel who are descended from Israel" (Rom. 9:6). Yet, while not in the sense of salvation, it was as a nation that God sovereignly bestowed on Israel His special calling, covenant, blessing, and protection.

The Old Testament does not refer to God as the Father of individual Jews—in the way the New Testament does of God as Father of individual Christians—but as the Father of Israel. It was for that reason, among others, that the Jewish leaders were so incensed when Jesus referred to God in a personal relationship as His Father.

But Israel poorly fulfilled that calling, wasting its privilege. Through Isaiah the Lord lamented, "Listen to Me, O house of Jacob, and all the remnant of the house of Israel, you who have been borne by Me from birth, and have been carried from the womb; even to your old age, I shall be the same, and even to your graying years I shall bear you! I have done it, and I shall carry you; and I shall bear you, and I shall deliver you" (Isa. 46:3–4).

Third, God blessed Israel by revealing to her His own presence in the Shekinah glory. In that unique and inexplicable way, God dwelt in the midst of His people. In the wilderness, "the glory of the Lord ap-

peared [to Israel] in the cloud” (Ex. 16:10). It was in His glory that He appeared to Israel at Sinai (Ex. 24:16–17), and His glory was present in the tent of meeting, where He spoke “with the sons of Israel” (Ex. 29:42–43; Lev. 9:23). His glory was supremely present in the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle and then the Temple, manifested in light between the wings of the cherubim on the ark of the covenant (see Ex. 25:22; 40:34; 1 Kings 8:11).

Fourth, Israel was privileged to have been given **the covenants**. The first covenant was with Abraham, the physical father of all Jews (Gen. 12:15–17) and the spiritual father of all who believe (Rom. 4:11). Through Moses, Israel was given the covenant of law at Mount Sinai (Ex. 19–31; cf. Deut. 29–30). Through David Israel was given the covenant of an eternal kingdom (2 Sam. 7:8–16). It would even be through Israel that God’s supreme covenant of redemption through His Son would come (Jer. 31:31–34; Ezek. 37:26). No other nation has or ever will be blessed with such covenants. As one commentator has observed, no aspect of Israel’s history pointed out their uniqueness as the recipients of redemptive revelation more than these covenants.

Fifth, Israel was privileged by **the giving of the Law** of God to them through Moses. In that **Law** Israel not only was taught the Ten Commandments but countless other principles and standards, the obeying of which would honor God and bring blessing on the people. They were shown the way of blessing and prosperity, not only morally and spiritually but also materially. To disobey was to be cursed (cf. Deut. 27–28).

As Israel was encamped on the plains of Moab, shortly before entering the Promised Land, Moses reminded the people:

See, I have taught you statutes and judgments just as the Lord my God commanded me, that you should do thus in the land where you are entering to possess it. So keep and do them, for that is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes and say, “Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.” For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as is the Lord our God whenever we call on Him? Or what great nation is there that has statutes and judgments as righteous as this whole law which I am setting before you today? (Deut. 4:5–8)

As Paul had already told his readers, Israel had the incomparable privilege of being custodian of the “oracles of God” (Rom. 3:2), which not only included the books of Moses but all of what we now call the Old Testament.

Sixth, Israel was uniquely blessed by being entrusted with **the temple service**, through which she worshiped and dealt with sin be-

fore the Lord. **The temple service** refers to the entire ceremonial system that God revealed through Moses—the sacrifices, offerings, cleansings, and other means of worship and repentance administered by the priests and Levites. When Israel obediently and sincerely worshiped the Lord, He promised: “I will meet there [at the tent of meeting] with the sons of Israel, and it shall be consecrated by My glory. And I will consecrate the tent of meeting and the altar; I will also consecrate Aaron and his sons to minister as priests to Me. And I will dwell among the sons of Israel and will be their God. And they shall know that I am the Lord their God who brought them out of the land of Egypt, that I might dwell among them; I am the Lord their God” (Ex. 29:43–46).

Seventh, Israel was given **the promises** of God in a distinct and unique way. Although Paul does not explain the nature of **the promises**, it seems likely that he was referring to the promised Messiah, who would come out of Israel, and to His promised kingdom, as well as to eternal life. That is the promise of which Peter reminded his audience in Jerusalem at Pentecost, saying, “For the promise is for you and your children, and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God shall call to Himself” (Acts 2:39). Later in the book of Acts, Luke reports Paul’s message to Jews in Galatia: “We preach to you the good news of the promise made to the fathers, that God has fulfilled this promise to our children in that He raised up Jesus, as it is also written in the second Psalm, ‘Thou art My Son; today I have begotten Thee.’ And as for the fact that He raised Him up from the dead, no more to return to decay, He has spoken in this way: ‘I will give you the holy and sure blessings of David’” (Acts 13:32–34; cf. 2 Sam. 7:8–17).

Eighth, Paul reminds his readers that it was from Israel that God raised up **the fathers**, beginning with the first great patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob/Israel. It was through those men that the foundations of all the blessings were laid.

Ninth, and finally, Israel was privileged to provide the lineage of **Christ according to the flesh**. Christ was not incidentally born a Jew but was preordained to be a human descendant of Abraham and of David. It is for that reason that Matthew gives the genealogy of Jesus’ adoptive father, Joseph (1:1–17) and that Luke gives the genealogy of His natural mother, Mary (Luke 3:23–38). As noted above, Jesus Himself told the Samaritan woman that “salvation is from the Jews” and that He was the promised Jewish Messiah who would offer salvation to all mankind (John 4:22–26).

In closing this abbreviated but comprehensive account of Israel’s special blessings, Paul declares that Jesus Christ—by far their greatest blessing, the blessing in whom all the others find their full meaning—**is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.**

Those words are not so much a benediction as an affirmation of Christ's divine majesty and lordship. Without exception in Scripture, both in the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament, a doxology always places the word "blessed" *before* the name of God. Here, Paul uses the reverse form, **God blessed**, indicating beyond doubt that the apostle intentionally equates **Christ** with **God**. The antecedent of **God** is **who**, and the antecedent of **who** is **Christ**.

He was the supreme blessing, yet they rejected Him! Tragic unbelief that grieved the heart of Paul and grieves the heart of God Himself.

THE MACARTHUR  
NEW TESTAMENT  
COMMENTARY

# 1 CORINTHIANS

*John MacArthur*

MOODY PUBLISHERS/CHICAGO



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# Called to Be Saints

(1 Corinthians 1:1-3)

1

**Paul, called as an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother, to the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (1:1-3)**

Rather than placing their names at the end of a letter, as is the modern custom, ancient Greeks put their names at the beginning, allowing readers to immediately identify the author. In a joint letter, the names of the others involved in sending the message were also given. **Paul** always gave his name at the beginning of his letters and frequently named other church leaders who, in some degree or other, joined him in writing. In 1 Corinthians he mentions **Sosthenes**, and in 2 Corinthians, Timothy (2 Cor. 1:1; cf. Phil. 1:1; Col. 1:1; 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1; Philem. 1).

Next was given the name of the addressee, the person or persons to whom the letter was sent, which for the present letter was **the church of God which is at Corinth**. Then words of greeting or blessing were often given, as in v. 3. Paul used such a threefold salutation in all of his New Testament letters.

Paul also generally referred to himself as **an apostle**, not for the purpose of identity—that is to distinguish himself from other Pauls in the church or simply

to inform his readers of his office—but to indicate at the very beginning that he was writing first of all as an emissary of the Lord. His apostleship established his authority. Even in his letters to Timothy, his close associate and “true child in the faith” (1 Tim. 1:2), Paul calls attention to his apostleship (1 Tim. 1:1; 2 Tim. 1:1). Only in Philippians, the Thessalonian letters, and Philemon does he not mention his apostleship in his opening words.

His description of himself as **an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God** was not a reflection of pride or self-glory. He was not flaunting his position of authority, as some speakers and writers often do with their titles, degrees, and accomplishments. Self-glory was the furthest thing from Paul’s intent. Later in this same epistle he refers to himself as “the least of the apostles, who am not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God” (15:9).

Sometimes, however, it is important to establish one’s right to speak authoritatively on a subject. A person, for instance, who has no medical degree or training or experience would never get a hearing at a conference on medicine. A person’s credentials give some indication as to whether or not what he has to say should be taken seriously. Paul did not mention his apostleship in order to gain honor as an individual but to gain respect as a teacher of God’s Word. He was not an apostle by his own appointment, or even by the church’s appointment, but by God’s appointment—**by the will of God**. At the outset he wanted to establish that what he had to say was said with God’s own authority. Since his message was so corrective, this was of great necessity.

#### FIVE REASONS FOR PAUL’S ASSERTING HIS APOSTLESHIP

I believe there are perhaps five reasons why Paul, unlike the other apostolic writers, was so careful to assert his apostleship in his letters. First of all, he was not a part of the twelve. He had not been called by Jesus during His earthly ministry to be one of the inner circle of disciples who accompanied Him “beginning with the baptism of John, until the day that He was taken up from us” (Acts 1:22). Of that original group, one (Judas) was disqualified and was later replaced by Matthias (Acts 1:21-26)—who, though identified by casting lots, was chosen by God (v. 24). With the selection of Matthias the apostolic ranks were again complete. Beginning at Pentecost the apostles were clearly the authoritative voice of the gospel. When Peter gave his message at that time, he did so “taking his stand with the eleven” (Acts 2:14; cf. v. 37), and the infant church in Jerusalem devoted itself to “the apostles’ teaching” (v. 42). The apostles were the Lord’s supreme earthly representatives, and they preached and taught with His authority. With Christ as the “corner stone,” the apostles were the foundation of the church (Eph. 2:20).

As far as we know, however, Paul never saw or heard Jesus during that time. Paul was first known to the church as a bitter enemy and persecutor, “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” (Acts 9:1; cf. 8:1). He not only had not chosen to be a follower of Christ but had chosen to oppose Christ’s followers with all his might. Even after his conversion there was no way he could retroactively be-

come one of the twelve. Yet he declared himself to be an apostle, based on the same foundational qualifications as those of the twelve. He, too, had seen the resurrected Christ (Acts 9:3-6, 17; 22:11-15; 1 Cor. 9:1; 15:8) and he, too, in unique revelations, had been specifically chosen by the Lord to be an apostle (1 Cor. 1:1). He was concerned to establish the fact that he was equal to the twelve as a foundational teacher of revealed truth.

Second, I believe that he emphasized his apostleship because of his dealings with detractors and false teachers, by whom he was continually being challenged and harassed. The Judaizers were particularly strong and persistent in opposing Paul's authority and doctrine and in questioning his motives. Even some who claimed to be his friends resisted his leadership and questioned his teaching. Such ridicule and persecution Paul considered to be badges of apostleship. "For," he said, "I think, God has exhibited us apostles last of all, as men condemned to death; because we have become a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men" (4:9). In spite of denials, Paul's teaching was true and reliable, for he was a divinely called apostle of Jesus Christ.

Third, Paul emphasized his apostleship because of his relationship to Christ. This emphasis was for the benefit of fellow believers. The Christians in Jerusalem, especially, had not been sure about the genuineness of Paul's faith. Having known him, or known of him, as Saul of Tarsus, the fierce persecutor of the church, they had difficulty believing that he could now be a reliable Christian leader, much less an apostle (Acts 9:26). Their fears were, of course, also fed by the accusations and detractions of the false teachers. It was not hard to believe the worst about him. Christians in other places also had misgivings. Legalistic Judaizers, for example, had confused many Christians in Galatia both about the gospel (Gal. 1:6; 3:1-5) and about Paul's authority in teaching it (1:11-2:10). He therefore carefully reminded the Corinthian church of his full apostolic authority in writing this letter to them, pointing out that, when he had ministered among them, he did so in God's power and wisdom (1 Cor. 2:1-7).

Fourth, Paul emphasized his apostleship to point up his special relationship to the church in Corinth itself, which was "a seal of [his] apostleship in the Lord" (9:2). They, of all people, should recognize his special calling and position. Their very existence as a body of believers was a proof of his right to address them with divine authority. He had been the instrument God used to bring them to salvation.

Fifth, Paul emphasized his apostleship in order to show his special relationship to God as His emissary. He was **an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God**. He was saying, in effect, "What I say to you is delegated by God. I am His apostle, and my message to you is God's message to you."

When the Jewish supreme court, the Sanhedrin, was asked to arbitrate a serious dispute or to give an interpretation regarding Jewish law or tradition, they would send their decision by an *apostolos* to the parties involved, who were often represented through a synagogue. As far as the message was concerned, the *apostolos* possessed the full authority of the Sanhedrin. He did not speak for himself, but for the Sanhedrin. Yet he was more than a messenger. He was an emissary, an envoy, an

ambassador. Paul was God's envoy, God's ambassador (cf. 2 Cor. 5:20; Eph. 6:20), God's **apostolos**. While among them he had not preached his own message to the Corinthians, but God's message. He was not now writing his own message to them, but God's message.

In light of the twelve, in light of false teachers, and in light of his relationship to Christ, to the Corinthian church, and to God the Father, Paul was fully an apostle. He was careful to establish the legitimacy of his apostleship in order to establish the legitimacy of his message.

#### THE PURPOSES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE APOSTLES

Apostles were chosen by God to work in the founding and forming of the church, after which time apostleship ceased. When all the apostles had died, the office of apostle no longer existed. They were selected, sent, and empowered by God for that period in the history of the church, which was over when their lives were over. As the human founders and foundation of the church, the apostles had particular purposes and responsibilities.

First, as eyewitnesses, they were to preach the gospel—the true, complete, and authoritative gospel of Christ's substitutionary atonement by His death and resurrection and of salvation by faith in Him (1 Cor. 1:17-18; cf. 9:14). Their teaching was equivalent to Christ's teaching. As will be developed in a later chapter, there is no distinction, as some interpreters maintain, between what Paul (or Peter or James or John) teaches in the New Testament and what God teaches. Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 7:12 ("I say, not the Lord"), for example, simply indicates that Jesus, during His earthly ministry, gave no specific teaching on the subject being discussed (that of a believer's remaining with an unbelieving spouse). As an apostle, Paul was qualified to teach in behalf of Christ, and his teaching was as authoritative as if spoken from Jesus' own lips.

The apostles also were to be devoted to prayer and to ministering the word (Acts 6:4) and to equipping believers for service in order to build up Christ's Body (Eph. 4:11-12). Finally, they were to evidence their apostleship by performing miracles (2 Cor. 12:12).

**Sosthenes our brother** may have been Paul's amanuensis, or secretary, at the time this letter was written. The fact that his name is included in the greeting, however, indicates that he not only penned the letter but fully agreed with Paul about its message.

This is no doubt the same Sosthenes mentioned in Acts 18, one who knew the Corinthian situation well. He had been a leader of the synagogue at Corinth, probably replacing Crispus, the former leader who had become a believer (Acts 18:8). On one occasion Sosthenes was beaten for his involvement in bringing Paul before the civil court at Corinth (Acts 18:12-17). Some ancient manuscripts of the text report that the Jews beat him and other manuscripts report that the Greeks beat him. If by the Jews, it no doubt was because he represented them so poorly at court. If by the Greeks, it was because they resented his taking up their court time with a matter that concerned only

Jewish religion.

Now, however, Paul could refer to Sosthenes as “our brother,” indicating that some time after the incident just mentioned—and perhaps partly because of it—this former opponent of the gospel, like Paul himself, had become a Christian. Having likely been converted under Paul’s preaching and having worked with the apostle for perhaps a year or more in Corinth, Sosthenes was known and respected by the Corinthian believers whom he now joined Paul in writing.

#### SAINTHOOD

**To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours. (1:2)**

The church to whom Paul was writing was not the church of the Corinthians but **the church of God** which was located at Corinth. The church is a body of people who belong not to themselves or to any leader or group but to God. Believers, whether pastors, officers, or ordinary members in the church, together compose Christ’s earthly Body and all are called to be stewards of it (Eph. 4:11-13). We are not our own, individually or collectively, but have all been bought with the price of Christ’s blood (1 Cor. 6:20).

#### POSITION AND PRACTICE

All believers **have been sanctified in Christ Jesus** and are **saints by calling**. A saint, as the term is used in the New Testament, is not a specially pious or self-sacrificing Christian who has been canonized by an ecclesiastical council. The Greek word translated **saint** is *hagios*, meaning “set apart one,” or “holy one.” The Corinthian believers were holy in God’s sight, regardless of their sinful living and distorted doctrine. They were saints because they had **been sanctified** (from *hagiazō*), set apart from sin, **made holy in Christ Jesus**. According to Scripture, every true believer in Jesus Christ—whether faithful or unfaithful, well known or unknown, leader or follower—is a set apart person, a holy person, a saint. In the biblical sense, the most obscure believer today is just as much a saint as the apostle Paul. This is the believer’s position in Christ.

Holiness, in that positional sense, is not a matter of good works, of holy living. As Christians we should live holy lives, but holy living does not make us holy. To the extent our living is holy, it is because, in Christ, we already *are* holy and have the counsel and power of His Holy Spirit. We are holy because the Sanctifier (the One who makes holy) has already sanctified us in response to our trust in Him (Heb. 2:11). Christ’s work, not our own, makes us holy. We are “saints by calling.” That refers to the efficacious call of God to salvation (1:24, 26).

Like all believers, the Corinthians were **saints** because God called them to

be saints (cf. Gal. 1:6; Eph. 4:1,4; Col. 3:15; 1 Tim. 6:12; 1 Pet. 2:9, 21; 3:9; 2 Pet. 1:3; Jude 1). “We have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (Heb. 10:10; cf. v. 14). By His own sacrificial work on the cross, Jesus Christ sanctifies those who believe in Him. He sets them apart (the root meaning of *hagiazō*) for Himself, cleanses them, and perfects them. God provides holiness through His Son. Man’s part is to claim holiness, to claim sainthood, by faith in the Son (Acts 26:18). We have a new nature, the divine nature, and have escaped the corruptions of the world, possessing all things related to life and godliness (2 Pet. 1:3-4).

Paul’s declaring all the Corinthian believers to be saints was quite a declaration in light of the things—very evident from the rest of this letter—that characterized their living. The Corinthian church was far from being saintly in the sense in which the term is often used. They were particularly worldly and immoral, yet in his opening words Paul stressed that every one of them who had truly believed in Jesus Christ was saved and was a saint. Not only are all saints saved, but all the saved are saints. Every believer has the right to call himself a saint. None of us is worthy of the title, but God has declared us to be saints because of our trust in His Son. Our practice, our behavior in our humanness, needs to be conformed to our “saintly” new divine nature.

Paul seems to have been especially determined to make that truth clear to the Corinthians. Virtually the entire letter of 1 Corinthians, beginning with 1:10, deals with wrong doctrine and wrong behavior. It seems that nearly every serious doctrinal and moral error imaginable could be found within that congregation. Yet Paul begins the letter by calling them saints. In practice they were gross sinners, but in position they were pure saints. We should note that there were, no doubt, some in the church who were not saints at all, who were unbelievers (16:22).

It is important for every Christian to keep in mind the great difference between his position and his practice, his standing and his state. God sees us as righteous, because He sees us through His righteous Son, who has taken our place, and because He has planted in us a righteous new nature. Without keeping this important and encouraging truth in mind, it is impossible to clearly understand 1 Corinthians or any other part of the New Testament.

Presidents do not always act presidentially, diplomats do not always act diplomatically, kings do not always act kingly—but they are still presidents, diplomats, and kings. Christians do not always act like Christians, but they are still Christians.

Some years ago a young boy, whose father was a pastor, was put in jail for stealing some merchandise from a department store. His father happened to be playing golf with some of the church leaders at the time and received a call while on the golf course to come down to the jail to get his son. Thinking it was a mistake, the pastor took the other men with him to the police station, where embarrassment abounded. The deepest impression of the incident left on the boy’s mind was made by the repeated reminders he received from those men, and from many others afterward, about who his father was. “Having a father like yours,” they would ask, “how could you have done what you did?” Yet as humiliating and painful as the experience was, the boy knew he was still his father’s son. He had not acted like a son of his father should have acted, but



he was still a son.

As Christians one of the strongest rebukes we can have when we sin is to be reminded of who our Father is. And reminding ourselves of whose we are should be one of our strongest deterrents to sin. Remembering our position can compel us to improve our practice.

Further, Paul increased the Corinthians' sense of responsibility by reminding them that they were linked in spiritual life to **all who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours**. This is added to heighten their sense of identity and responsibility with all "who have received a faith of the same kind as ours" (2 Pet. 1:1).

Before Paul took the Corinthians to task for their failures as Christians, he carefully and lovingly reminded them that they were Christians. They belonged to God and to each other in a far-reaching fellowship. That in itself should have been a rebuke to them and no doubt pierced the consciences of those who were at all spiritually sensitive. In 1:2-9 he summarizes their position and their blessings as believers in Jesus Christ, as children of God, as saints. "Look at what you are! Look at what you have!" Only then does he say, "Now I exhort you, brethren" (1:10).

### **Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (1:3)**

Paul used a common form of Christian greeting (cf. Rom. 1:7; Gal. 1:3; Eph. 1:2; 1 Pet. 1:2; 2 John 3; Rev. 1:4; etc.). **Grace** is favor, and **peace** is one of its fruits. Peace (Greek *eirēnē*) was used as the equivalent of the Hebrew *shālôm*, still the most common Jewish greeting today. The peace of which Paul speaks here is "the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension" (Phil. 4:7). It is the peace that only Christians can have, for only Christ can give it (John 14:27). The world does not have and cannot give that kind of peace. The greeting "grace and peace" is appropriate only for believer to believer, because it speaks of blessings that only they possess.

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COMMENTARY

# 2 CORINTHIANS

*John MacArthur*

MOODY PUBLISHERS/CHICAGO

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# Comfort in Trouble

## (2 Corinthians 1:1–11)

# 1

**Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to the church of God which is at Corinth with all the saints who are throughout Achaia: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ. But if we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; or if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which is effective in the patient enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer; and our hope for you is firmly grounded, knowing that as you are sharers of our sufferings, so also you are sharers of our comfort. For we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came to us in Asia, that we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life; indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead; who delivered us from so great a**

**peril of death, and will deliver us, He on whom we have set our hope. And He will yet deliver us, you also joining in helping us through your prayers, so that thanks may be given by many persons on our behalf for the favor bestowed on us through the prayers of many. (1:1-11)**

Trouble is an inescapable reality in this fallen, evil world. Eliphaz, one of Job's would-be counselors, declared, "Man is born for trouble, as sparks fly upward" (Job 5:7). With that sentiment Job, certainly no stranger to trouble, agreed: "Man, who is born of woman, is short-lived and full of turmoil" (Job 14:1). Jeremiah, the weeping prophet, lamented, "Why did I ever come forth from the womb to look on trouble and sorrow, so that my days have been spent in shame?" (Jer. 20:18). That life is filled with trouble, sorrow, pain, disappointment, disillusionment, and despair is the testimony of the rest of Scripture.

Adding to the pain of trouble is the disturbing reality that God sometimes seems distant and unconcerned. Job cried out despondently, "Why do You hide Your face and consider me Your enemy?" (Job 13:24). The psalmist asked pensively, "Why do You stand afar off, O Lord? Why do You hide Yourself in times of trouble?" (Ps. 10:1). Speaking for Israel, the sons of Korah asked God, "Why do You hide Your face and forget our affliction and our oppression?" (Ps. 44:24). The prophet Isaiah affirmed, "Truly, You are a God who hides Himself, O God of Israel, Savior!" (Isa. 45:15). Even David, "a man after [God's] own heart" (1 Sam. 13:14; cf. Acts 13:22) and "the sweet psalmist of Israel" (2 Sam. 23:1), had moments of doubt and discouragement. In Psalm 13:1 he asked despairingly, "How long, O Lord? Will You forget me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me?" while in Psalm 22:1 he expressed his anguish in words echoed by the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross: "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?" (cf. Matt. 27:46).

Many people today question why bad things happen to good people. But Scripture rejects the underlying assumption that people are truly good. The apostle Paul declared, "There is none righteous, not even one" (Rom. 3:10; cf. Pss. 14:1-3; 53:1-3) because "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23; cf. 1 Kings 8:46; Ps. 143:2; Prov. 20:9; Eccles. 7:20; Jer. 17:9). Consequently, because "God is a just judge, [He] is angry with the wicked every day" (Ps. 7:11 NKJV). Bad things happen to all people because they are sinners who live in a fallen, sin-cursed world.

Because believers are redeemed sinners who live in a fallen world, bad things even happen to them. In fact, God allows those things to happen for several important reasons.

First, God allows bad things to happen to His people to test the validity of their faith. According to Proverbs 17:3, "The Lord tests hearts."

Second Chronicles 32:31 says, "God left [Hezekiah] alone only to test him, that He might know all that was in his heart." Centuries earlier Moses told Israel, "The Lord your God has led you in the wilderness these forty years, that He might humble you, testing you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not" (Deut. 8:2). Peter wrote,

In this [salvation] you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 1:6-7)

Those tests are not for God's sake, because the omniscient God knows every person's heart. Instead, they reveal to those tested whether their faith is real. No trial, no matter how severe, can destroy genuine saving faith, because the saved "one . . . endures to the end" (Matt. 24:13).

Job, the most faithful man of his time, went through almost inconceivable suffering. He lost his wealth, all of his children were killed, and he was stricken with a painful, debilitating disease. Worse, those closest to him turned against him; his wife foolishly urged him to "curse God and die!" (Job 2:9), while his friends' inept counsel finally drove him to exclaim in exasperation, "Sorry comforters are you all. . . . How then will you vainly comfort me, for your answers remain full of falsehood?" (Job 16:2; 21:34). Most disconcerting of all, though Job knew of no major sin in his life, God seemed to be his implacable enemy. In Job 19:6-11, he cried out in despair and confusion,

Know then that God has wronged me and has closed His net around me. Behold, I cry, "Violence!" but I get no answer; I shout for help, but there is no justice. He has walled up my way so that I cannot pass, and He has put darkness on my paths. He has stripped my honor from me and removed the crown from my head. He breaks me down on every side, and I am gone; and He has uprooted my hope like a tree. He has also kindled His anger against me and considered me as His enemy.

Desperately seeking sympathy from his friends, Job pleaded with them, "Pity me, pity me, O you my friends, for the hand of God has struck me" (Job 19:21).

Yet despite his misery, suffering, and despair caused by Satan's violent assaults (cf. Job 1:6-12; 2:1-7), Job's faith in God remained intact. In Job 13:15 he confidently declared, "Though He slay me, I will hope in Him." Confronted by God's glorious, majestic holiness, Job expressed genuine repentance for having doubted Him:

I know that You can do all things, and that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted. “Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?” Therefore I have declared that which I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. “Hear, now, and I will speak; I will ask You, and You instruct me.” I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear; but now my eye sees You; therefore I retract, and I repent in dust and ashes. (Job 42:2-6)

The prophet Habakkuk also faced a dilemma that tested his faith. Distressed by the rampant sin in Israel, he cried out to God,

How long, O Lord, will I call for help, and You will not hear? I cry out to You, “Violence!” Yet You do not save. Why do You make me see iniquity, and cause me to look on wickedness? Yes, destruction and violence are before me; strife exists and contention arises. Therefore the law is ignored and justice is never upheld. For the wicked surround the righteous; therefore justice comes out perverted. (Hab. 1:2-4)

To his dismay, God’s answer was the opposite of what he had hoped for. Instead of bringing a spiritual revival in Israel, God was going to bring devastating judgment on the nation. Even more perplexing, He chose to use a godless, pagan nation as the instrument of that judgment:

Look among the nations! Observe! Be astonished! Wonder! Because I am doing something in your days—you would not believe if you were told. For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans, that fierce and impetuous people who march throughout the earth to seize dwelling places which are not theirs. They are dreaded and feared; their justice and authority originate with themselves. Their horses are swifter than leopards and keener than wolves in the evening. Their horsemen come galloping, their horsemen come from afar; they fly like an eagle swooping down to devour. All of them come for violence. Their horde of faces moves forward. They collect captives like sand. They mock at kings and rulers are a laughing matter to them. They laugh at every fortress and heap up rubble to capture it. Then they will sweep through like the wind and pass on. But they will be held guilty, they whose strength is their god. (Hab. 1:5-11)

Yet despite his confusion over a worse nation being the instrument of Israel’s judgment, Habakkuk’s faith endured. Though the dilemma did not change, he expressed his continued trust in God’s faithfulness, justice, and holiness:

Are You not from everlasting, O Lord, my God, my Holy One? We will not die. You, O Lord, have appointed them to judge; and You, O Rock, have



established them to correct. Your eyes are too pure to approve evil, and You can not look on wickedness with favor. Why do You look with favor on those who deal treacherously? Why are You silent when the wicked swallow up those more righteous than they? (Hab. 1:12-13)

Those whose faith is genuine will pass the tests God allows in their lives, bringing them assurance, confidence, and hope.

Second, God allows bad things to happen to His people to wean them from the world. Trials strip away the worldly resources that believers trust in, leaving them completely dependent on divine resources. Before He fed the five thousand “Jesus, lifting up His eyes and seeing that a large crowd was coming to Him, said to Philip, ‘Where are we to buy bread, so that these may eat?’” (John 6:5). Philip and the other disciples immediately took inventory, and the results were not promising: “Philip answered Him, ‘Two hundred denarii worth of bread is not sufficient for them, for everyone to receive a little.’ One of His disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, said to Him, ‘There is a lad here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are these for so many people?’” (John 6:7-9). But Philip and the others missed the point: “This He was saying to test him, for He Himself knew what He was intending to do” (John 6:6). Jesus used this incident to show the disciples the futility of trusting in human resources.

Third, God allows bad things to happen to His people to call them to their heavenly hope. To the Romans Paul wrote, “We also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint” (Rom. 5:3-5). Those who hope for heaven will never be disappointed in this life, and suffering is the first step in producing that hope. Paul expressed his heavenly hope when he wrote to the Corinthians, “Momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal” (2 Cor. 4:17-18). The greater the burden of trials that believers bear in this life, the sweeter their hope of heaven becomes.

Fourth, God allows bad things to happen to His people to reveal to them what they really love. Those who seek the proven character that suffering produces (Rom. 5:3-4), and to be fellow sufferers with the Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Acts 5:41; 1 Peter 4:13), will gladly endure trials. But those who focus on worldly things will react with anger and despair when trials strip them away.

The way Abraham faced the severe trial involving his son Isaac revealed his love for God. Genesis 22:1-2 says, “God tested Abraham, and said to him, ‘Abraham!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’ He said, ‘Take now your

son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you.” Abraham must have been shocked at this seemingly incomprehensible command. Isaac was the son he had longed for for decades. Then, when Abraham was old and his wife past her child-bearing years, the unbelievable announcement came that they were to have a son (Gen. 18:10, 14). So incredible was the news that their long-cherished hopes were to be realized that both Abraham (Gen. 17:17) and Sarah (Gen. 18:12) initially greeted it with laughter. Further, Isaac was the son of the covenant, through whom Abraham’s descendants were to come (Gen. 17:19; 21:12; Rom. 9:7).

All of God’s promises and Abraham’s hopes were bound up in Isaac. Yet when God commanded him to slay Isaac as a sacrifice, Abraham was ready to obey. God stopped him, then spared Isaac and provided another sacrifice. Abraham’s willingness proved that he loved God above all else, even more than his own son. And he also believed in God’s promise that through Isaac the nation would come—he believed that if he killed him, God would raise Isaac from the dead (Heb. 11:17–19).

Fifth, God allows bad things to happen to His people to teach them obedience. The psalmist acknowledged, “Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep Your word. . . . It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I may learn Your statutes” (Ps. 119:67, 71). The painful sting of affliction reminds believers that sin has consequences. God uses trials to bring believers to obedience and holiness, as the writer of Hebrews reveals:

You have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, “My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor faint when you are reprov’d by Him; for those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives.” It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness. All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness. (Heb. 12:5–11)

Sixth, God allows bad things to happen to His people so He can reveal His compassion to them. Believers’ suffering allows Him the

opportunity to display His loving-kindness, which, David declared, is better than anything else in life: “Because Your lovingkindness is better than life, my lips will praise You” (Ps. 63:3). Believers never know God more intimately than when He comforts them in their suffering. Isaiah exults, “Shout for joy, O heavens! And rejoice, O earth! Break forth into joyful shouting, O mountains! For the Lord has comforted His people and will have compassion on His afflicted” (Isa. 49:13; cf. 51:12; 52:9; 66:13). This revelation of God’s compassion enhances worship.

Seventh, God allows bad things to happen to His people to strengthen them for greater usefulness. The more they are tested and refined by trials, the more effective their service will be. “Consider it all joy, my brethren,” wrote James, “when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (James 1:2–4).

Finally, God allows bad things to happen to His people to enable them to comfort others in their trials. Jesus said to Peter, “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat; but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers” (Luke 22:31–32). After enduring his own trial and experiencing God’s comfort, Peter would be able to help others. As we will learn later in this chapter, Paul’s opening emphasis to the Corinthians is that God “comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God” (1:4).

As was customary in ancient letters, the epistle begins with the name of the sender, **Paul**. As he did in eight of his other epistles, he declared himself to be **an apostle of Christ Jesus** (cf. Rom. 1:1; 1 Cor. 1:1; Gal. 1:1; Eph. 1:1; Col. 1:1; 1 Tim. 1:1; 2 Tim. 1:1; Titus 1:1). Since false teachers invariably challenged his apostolic credentials, Paul states that he was not self-appointed, but an apostle **by the will of God** (cf. 1 Cor. 1:1; Eph. 1:1; Col. 1:1; 2 Tim. 1:1). Although he was not one of the Twelve, Paul was personally chosen to be an apostle by the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 26:15–18; 1 Cor. 15:7–10). As an apostle, the truths he wrote to the Corinthians are the inspired words of the living God. Thus, the false teachers’ attack on his credibility was also an attack on God’s divinely revealed truth.

**Timothy** was not an apostle but Paul’s beloved **brother** in Christ. He was a native of Lystra, a city in Asia Minor (modern Turkey). His mother and grandmother were devout Jewish believers (2 Tim. 1:5), but his father was a pagan Greek (Acts 16:1). After joining Paul on the apostle’s second missionary journey, Timothy became his protégé and cherished son in the faith. Paul wrote two inspired epistles to him, and he is mentioned in eight others, six of them in the salutation.

Timothy was such a faithful reproduction of Paul that the apostle confidently sent him as his representative to the churches in Macedonia (Acts 19:22), Philippi (Phil. 2:19–24), Thessalonica (1 Thess. 3:2), and Ephesus (1 Tim. 1:3). The Corinthians also knew him; he was there when the Corinthian church was founded (Acts 18:5) and later served as Paul’s personal emissary to that congregation (1 Cor. 4:17; 16:10).

As was his custom, Paul extended his greetings **to the church of God which is at Corinth**. They were a community of believers that belonged to God, since “He purchased [them] with His own blood” (Acts 20:28). Paul did not identify **the saints who are throughout Achaia** to whom he also extended his greetings. There was, however, a church at Cenchrea (Rom. 16:1), a city about eight miles away that served as Corinth’s port. As he did in the salutations of all his letters, Paul wished the Corinthians God’s **grace and** the divine **peace** that is one of its benefits. Both come only **from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ**.

As noted in the introduction to this volume, the major theme in this epistle is Paul’s defense of his apostleship against the many and varied attacks of the false teachers at Corinth. In this opening section of 2 Corinthians, Paul defended himself against the false charge that his trials were God’s punishment for his sin and unfaithfulness. The apostle made the point that God was comforting him in his suffering, not chastening him. In so doing, he penned what is undoubtedly the most significant passage on comfort anywhere in Scripture. In it Paul describes the person, promise, purpose, parameters, power, perpetuity, and participation of comfort.

#### THE PERSON OF COMFORT

**Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, (1:3)**

After the salutation Paul began the body of his epistle with the affirmation that God is to be **blessed**. *Eulogētos* (**blessed**) is the root of the English word “eulogy” and literally means, “to speak well of.” The Old Testament frequently refers to God as the “the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” (e.g., Ex. 3:6, 15, 16; 4:5; 1 Kings 18:36; 1 Chron. 29:18; 2 Chron. 30:6). But the New Testament identifies Him as **the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ** (cf. 2 Cor. 11:31; Rom. 15:6; Eph. 1:3, 17; 1 Peter 1:3), since “God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world” (Heb. 1:1–2).

Unlike Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the Old Testament prophets, **Jesus Christ** is the same essence as the Father; “He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature” (Heb. 1:3). Jesus shocked and outraged the Jewish authorities by boldly declaring, “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30). To His equally obtuse disciples Jesus stated plainly, “He who has seen Me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). Paul wrote to the Philippians that Jesus “existed in the form of God” (Phil. 2:6), and to the Colossians, “He is the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15) and, “In Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form” (Col. 2:9). The New Testament teaching that Jesus is God in human flesh is the central truth of the gospel (cf. John 1:1; 5:17–18; 8:58; 20:28; Rom. 9:5; Titus 2:13; Heb. 1:8; 2 Peter 1:1; 1 John 5:20), and those who reject it cannot be saved (John 8:24).

Some may wonder why, since they are fully equal, the Father is referred to as **the God . . . of our Lord Jesus Christ** (cf. Mark 15:34; John 20:17). In His deity Jesus is fully equal to the Father, but in His humanity He submitted to Him. Paul’s statement reflects Jesus’ submission to the Father during the Incarnation (cf. John 14:28), when He voluntarily gave up the independent use of His divine attributes (Phil. 2:6–7; cf. Matt. 24:36).

The title **Lord Jesus Christ** summarizes all of His redemptive work. **Lord** describes His sovereign deity; **Jesus** (the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew name Yeshua; “God saves”) describes His saving death and resurrection; **Christ** (“anointed one”) describes Him as the King who will defeat God’s enemies and rule over the redeemed earth and the eternal state.

Paul further described God using two Old Testament titles. He is **the Father of mercies** to those who seek Him. Faced with a choice of punishments, David said to Gad, “Let us now fall into the hand of the Lord for His mercies are great” (2 Sam. 24:14). In Psalm 86:15 he wrote, “But You, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness and truth.” “The Lord is compassionate and gracious,” he added in Psalm 103:8, “slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness.” Later in that same psalm David further praised God’s mercy, compassion, and lovingkindness: “Just as a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him. . . . The lovingkindness of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear Him” (vv. 13, 17). The prophet Micah described God’s mercy and compassion in forgiving sins:

Who is a God like You, who pardons iniquity and passes over the rebellious act of the remnant of His possession? He does not retain His anger forever, because He delights in unchanging love. He will again

have compassion on us; He will tread our iniquities under foot. Yes, You will cast all their sins into the depths of the sea. (Mic. 7:18–19)

The New Testament also reveals God's mercy. Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, spoke of "the tender mercy of our God, with which the Sunrise from on high will visit us" (Luke 1:78). To the Romans Paul wrote, "Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship" (Rom. 12:1). Later in that epistle he declared that "the Gentiles [would] glorify God for His mercy (Rom. 15:9). In Ephesians 2:4 he described God as "being rich in mercy." It was "His great mercy [that] has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1 Peter 1:3).

The Old Testament also reveals God to be the **God of all comfort**. In Isaiah God said of suffering Israel, "Comfort, O comfort My people," says your God" (Isa. 40:1). In Isaiah 49:13 the prophet exulted, "Shout for joy, O heavens! And rejoice, O earth! Break forth into joyful shouting, O mountains! For the Lord has comforted His people and will have compassion on His afflicted." "Indeed," he confidently asserts, "the Lord will comfort Zion; He will comfort all her waste places. And her wilderness He will make like Eden, and her desert like the garden of the Lord; joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and sound of a melody" (Isa. 51:3; cf. 52:9; 66:13).

In the New Testament Jesus promised, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted" (Matt. 5:4). To the Thessalonians Paul wrote, "Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself and God our Father, who has loved us and given us eternal comfort and good hope by grace, comfort and strengthen your hearts in every good work and word" (2 Thess. 2:16–17).

Paul had experienced much pain, suffering, and heartbreak, particularly because of the false teachers at Corinth. They slandered his character to discredit him in the minds of the people and, even more painful to the apostle, sought to deceive the Corinthian church with lies about the gospel. But in God's merciful comforting of him he received the strength he needed to carry on. For that Paul was deeply grateful and blessed God.

### THE PROMISE OF COMFORT

#### **who comforts us in all our affliction** (1:4a)

God comforts His people not only because He is by nature a merciful comforter but also because He has promised to comfort them.

The Lord is a “friend [who] loves at all times” (Prov. 17:17); “a friend who sticks closer than a brother” (Prov. 18:24), who promised, “I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you” (Heb. 13:5; cf. Deut. 31:6, 8; Ps. 37:28; Isa. 41:10).

The apostle Paul knew this blessed truth not only by divine revelation but also from his experience. Later in this epistle he wrote, “But God, who comforts the depressed, comforted us by the coming of Titus” (2 Cor. 7:6). In Romans 8:31–39 he wrote,

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? Who will bring a charge against God’s elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Just as it is written, “For your sake we are being put to death all day long; we were considered as sheep to be slaughtered.” But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Having paid the ultimate price to redeem believers, the death of His Son, God will be with them to love, strengthen, protect, and comfort them in every extremity. Paul previously had reminded the Corinthians, “No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it” (1 Cor. 10:13). To the Philippians he wrote, “He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus” (Phil. 1:6). It is God’s sovereign plan to be with His children and comfort them.

**Affliction** translates the Greek word *thlipsis*, which literally means, “pressure.” Throughout **all** the stress, persecution, and trials he experienced in his turbulent life, Paul experienced God’s comforting, strengthening presence. The apostle’s life was thus an amazing juxtaposition of **affliction** and comfort, a seeming paradox he expressed later in this letter:

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; we are

afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. (4:7–11)

Because God constantly comforted and protected him, Paul was indestructible until the time came in God's sovereign plan for him to die. Though his enemies repeatedly tried to kill him (cf. Acts 9:23; 14:19; 20:3; 21:30–31; 23:12–13), they were unsuccessful, because "there is no wisdom and no understanding and no counsel against the Lord" (Prov. 21:30). The promise to all believers is that God will faithfully sustain and strengthen them as long as they are obedient to His will, until His appointed time to bring them to Himself.

#### THE PURPOSE OF COMFORT

**so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. . . . But if we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; or if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which is effective in the patient enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer; and our hope for you is firmly grounded, knowing that as you are sharers of our sufferings, so also you are sharers of our comfort.**  
(1:4b, 6–7)

Paul viewed God's comforting of him not only as an end in itself to express His care and fulfill His promise but also as the means to an end. Suffering believers receive God's comfort **so that they will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction.** Believers receive comfort as a trust or stewardship to be passed on to others. This purpose of comfort is to equip the comforted to be comforters.

God had used Paul to confront, challenge, and convict the Corinthians. As noted in the introduction to this volume, 2 Corinthians is the fourth letter Paul wrote to them; in addition to 1 Corinthians, the apostle wrote them two noninspired letters. In those letters Paul rebuked them for their sin. Now, having confronted them, he was able to comfort them with the **comfort with which** he had been **comforted by God.** Paul viewed himself as a conduit through which God's comfort could flow to the Corinthians—a conduit widened by all the suffering he had endured. Those who experience the most suffering will receive the most



comfort. And those who receive the most comfort are thereby most richly equipped to comfort others.

An incident in Peter's life illustrates that truth. Knowing that he would soon face a severe trial (his denial of Christ), Jesus said to him in Luke 22:31–32, "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat; but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers." Having received divine comfort in his trial, Peter would then be able to draw from that to comfort and strengthen others.

Paul reminded the Corinthians that believers **are comforted by God**, who alone is the source of true comfort. As noted earlier, Paul wrote later in this epistle that it is God "who comforts the depressed" (2 Cor. 7:6). The early church experienced "the comfort of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 9:31). Paul reminded the Thessalonians that it is "God our Father who has loved us and given us eternal comfort and good hope by grace" (2 Thess. 2:16). Comfort based on human wisdom is short-lived, because it does not address the deep issues of the heart. The only true source of hope and strength is God's supernatural, transcendent comfort that comes by the Spirit and the Scriptures.

In the course of godly living and ministry, it is inevitable that believers will be **afflicted**. Paul warned Timothy that "all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Tim. 3:12). But in God's providence, even the apostle's suffering brought **comfort and salvation** to the Corinthians. Paul could have been referring to the time of their salvation, when he suffered much to bring them the gospel (cf. Acts 18:1–17). But more likely the apostle referred not to their justification but to his ongoing involvement in their sanctification. Perhaps no other church caused Paul more pain and grief than the Corinthian assembly. Even after the apostle had invested at least eighteen precious months of his life ministering in Corinth, the church remained divisive, worldly, and rebellious. But God comforted Paul in his affliction, enabling him to better comfort the very people who had caused part of his suffering.

Not all the Corinthians, of course, were suffering for their sins. Some were, like Paul, suffering for righteousness' sake. The apostle was able to extend to them **comfort, which was effective in** strengthening them for **the patient enduring of the same sufferings which** he and Timothy **also suffered**. And in the mutuality of ministry in the body of Christ, they were then enabled to comfort Paul. Believers are in a partnership with each other and must never view their suffering in isolation. When they suffer for Christ, God comforts them and equips them to comfort others.

Because righteous suffering for Christ is a mark of true believers (2 Tim. 3:12), Paul was able to say confidently to the faithful believers in

Corinth, **Our hope for you is firmly grounded, knowing that as you are sharers of our sufferings, so also you are sharers of our comfort.** They demonstrated the reality of their faith by their willingness to share Paul's and Timothy's **sufferings** for the gospel. Because of their faithful endurance, they **also** were **sharers of** the same **comfort** with which God comforted Paul and Timothy.

#### THE PARAMETERS OF COMFORT

**For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ.** (1:5)

Though God is the God of comfort who comforts His children, there is an important condition for receiving that comfort. God does not promise comfort to those who suffer for their unrepentant sin, but to those who suffer for Christ. Those who experience **the sufferings of Christ . . . in abundance** will find that God's **comfort is abundant through Christ.** Thus, God's promised comfort extends as far as believers' suffering is for the sake of Christ.

Peter stated the conditions for receiving God's comfort in 1 Peter 4:12–16:

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. Make sure that none of you suffers as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler; but if anyone suffers as a Christian, he is not to be ashamed, but is to glorify God in this name.

Believers will receive comfort in this life and rewards in eternity "to the degree that [they] share the sufferings of Christ." When they "are reviled for the name of Christ, [they] are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God" will strengthen and comfort them. But then Peter cautions, "Make sure that none of you suffers as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler," since the promise of divine comfort does not extend to such people. Sinning Christians can expect God's chastening instead of His comfort (cf. Heb. 12:5–11).

Paul counted it a privilege to share the **sufferings of Christ.** He wrote later in this epistle that

we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death works in us, but life in you. (4:8–12)

He reminded the Galatians, "I bear on my body the brand-marks of Jesus" (Gal. 6:17). To the Colossians he wrote, "I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body, which is the church, in filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions" (Col. 1:24). In Philippians 3:10 he expressed his longing to "know [Christ] and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death" (cf. Rom. 8:17). That believers will suffer for Christ is a constant New Testament theme (cf. Matt. 10:22; Luke 14:27; John 15:18–20; Acts 5:41).

#### THE POWER OF COMFORT

**For we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came to us in Asia, that we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life; indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead; who delivered us from so great a peril of death, (1:8–10a)**

To show the Corinthians the power of God's comfort, Paul reminded them of a serious, life-threatening situation from which God had delivered him. The apostle used the phrase **we do not want you to be unaware** or its equivalent six times in his epistles (cf. Rom. 1:13; 11:25; 1 Cor. 10:1; 12:1; 1 Thess. 4:13). It expressed his great concern that his readers not have inadequate information.

The situation that produced the **affliction which came to Paul in** the province of **Asia** is unknown. It may have involved Paul's being beaten (cf. 2 Cor. 11:23–25), imprisoned (cf. 11:23), or both. Since he gave them no details, the incident must have been well-known to the Corinthians. But though they were aware of the situation, they did not know its severity or how God had worked in it. It had evidently happened recently, after Paul wrote 1 Corinthians, since he did not mention it in that letter. Since it happened in **Asia**, before he came to Macedonia (2:13), it likely took place in Ephesus, the chief city of **Asia**. In 1 Corinthians 16:9,

Paul wrote to the Corinthians that he planned to remain in Ephesus, “for a wide door for effective service has opened to me, and there are many adversaries.” Possibly, one or more of those adversaries had come close to taking the apostle’s life.

So severe was the trial, Paul wrote, **that we were burdened excessively**. He was unbearably crushed to the point of depression by something **beyond** even his formidable **strength** to endure. The situation was so serious that Paul **despaired even of life**. The Greek word translated **despaired** literally means “no passage,” “no way out,” or “no exit.” Paul saw no escape from the desperate situation that threatened his **life**. **Indeed**, he added, **we had the sentence of death within ourselves**. *Apokrima* (**sentence**) appears only here in the New Testament. It refers to an official judgment, a legal decision, or resolution. In his own mind, Paul had passed the **sentence of death** on himself; he believed he would die for the gospel’s sake. He wrote to Timothy shortly before his execution, “I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come” (2 Tim. 4:6). But unlike the situation he refers to here, that future realization caused Paul no despair, because he knew his work was done (2 Tim. 4:7–8).

God had a purpose for allowing Paul’s suffering: to teach him **not to trust in** himself. God took him to the extremity from which no human resources could deliver him because, as He said to Paul later in this epistle, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9). Only the **God who raises the dead** had the power to deliver Paul from his ordeal; man’s extremity is God’s opportunity. Thus, God’s power alone comforted Paul and **delivered** him **from his great peril of death**.

#### THE PERPETUITY OF COMFORT

**and will deliver us, He on whom we have set our hope. And He will yet deliver us, (1:10b)**

Paul was confident that God not only had delivered him in the past but also would **deliver** him in the future. Because God is faithful, He is always ready to comfort and deliver His children. In Lamentations 3:21–23 Jeremiah wrote, “This I recall to my mind, therefore I have hope. The Lord’s lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness.” As Paul’s life drew to a close, he confidently described God’s faithful comforting of him:

At my first defense no one supported me, but all deserted me; may it not be counted against them. But the Lord stood with me and strengthened me, so that through me the proclamation might be fully accomplished, and that all the Gentiles might hear; and I was rescued out of the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed, and will bring me safely to His heavenly kingdom; to Him be the glory forever and ever. Amen. (2 Tim. 4:16–18)

Paul knew that God would bring him safely through every circumstance until it was time for him to enter the Lord's presence. Peter wrote of the same reality in 2 Peter 2:9: "The Lord knows how to rescue the godly from temptation, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment for the day of judgment." The constancy of God's comfort led Paul to describe Him as **He on whom we have set our hope** (cf. Ps. 71:5; Rom. 15:13; 1 Tim. 1:1). The more believers suffer and experience God's comfort, the stronger their **hope** in Him grows (Rom. 5:3–5).

#### THE PARTICIPATION OF COMFORT

**you also joining in helping us through your prayers, so that thanks may be given by many persons on our behalf for the favor bestowed on us through the prayers of many. (1:11)**

As noted in the previous point, the apostle was confident that God would continue to comfort him in the future. But he urged the Corinthians to participate in that gracious work of God by **joining in helping** him **through** their **prayers**. Paul understood, as did James, that "the effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much" (James 5:16). Therefore he viewed the prayers of the saints as crucial to his ministry. He implored the believers at Rome, "Now I urge you, brethren, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God for me" (Rom. 15:30). To the Ephesians he wrote, "With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints, and pray on my behalf, that utterance may be given to me in the opening of my mouth, to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel" (Eph. 6:18–19; cf. Col. 4:3; 2 Thess. 3:1). He wrote confidently to the Philippians, "I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayers and the provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:19; cf. Philem. 22). In 1 Thessalonians 5:25 he said simply, "Brethren, pray for us." Paul understood the balance between God's sovereign purpose and believers' responsibility.

In prayer, human impotence casts itself at the feet of divine omnipotence. When God's people intercede for each other, His power and sovereign purposes are realized. Thus, the purpose of prayer is not to manipulate God but to exalt His power and submit to His will. When God answered the Corinthians' prayers for Paul, **thanks would be given by many persons on the apostle's behalf for the favor bestowed on him through the prayers of many.** Prayer, like everything else in a Christian's life, is to glorify God (cf. 1 Cor. 10:31).

Katharina von Schlegel's magnificent hymn "Be Still, My Soul" expresses the confident hope of every believer in God's comfort:

Be still my soul: the Lord is on thy side;  
 Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain.  
 Leave to thy God to order and provide;  
 In ev'ry change He faithful will remain.  
 Be still, my soul: thy best, thy heavenly Friend  
 Thro' thorny ways leads to a joyful end.

Be still, my soul: thy God doth undertake  
 To guide the future as He has the past.  
 Thy hope, thy confidence let nothing shake;  
 All now mysterious shall be bright at last.  
 Be still, my soul: the waves and winds still know  
 His voice who ruled them while He dwelt below.

Be still, my soul: the hour is hastening on  
 When we shall be forever with the Lord,  
 When disappointment, grief, and fear are gone,  
 Sorrow forgot, love's purest joys restored.  
 Be still, my soul: when change and tears are past,  
 All safe and blessed we shall meet at last.

THE MACARTHUR  
NEW TESTAMENT  
COMMENTARY  
**GALATIANS**

*John MacArthur*

MOODY PUBLISHERS/CHICAGO

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# The Salutation (1:1-5)

# 1

**Paul, an apostle (not sent from men, nor through the agency of man, but through Jesus Christ, and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead), and all the brethren who are with me, to the churches of Galatia: Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us out of this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forevermore. Amen.**

(1:1-5)

One way to deny the truthfulness of a message is to deny the authority of the one who gives it. The Galatian church had received the true gospel of grace from Paul and had believed it until some false teachers came in after he was gone. They not only attacked the validity of the message but also that of the messenger. Apparently the Judaizers had convinced some of the Galatian church members that Paul was a self-appointed apostle with no divine commission. So at the outset of the letter Paul dispensed with the usual personal greetings and immediately began to establish the genuineness of his apostolic authority, which he later (1:11–2:21) expands on in detail.

In this brief salutation Paul summarizes his authority (his right to speak), his message (the truths he speaks), and his motive (his reason for speaking).

## PAUL'S AUTHORITY

**Paul, an apostle (not sent from men, nor through the agency of man, but through Jesus Christ, and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead), and all the brethren who are with me, to the churches of Galatia: (1:1-2)**

Following the custom of his times, the apostle begins his letter by stating his name, **Paul**. He then establishes his authority as an apostle, first on the basis of his right to the title "apostle," second on the basis of the manner in which he was chosen for that office, and third on the basis of his relationship to fellow believers.

## THE TITLE APOSTLE

**an apostle (1:1a)**

An **apostle** ("one who is sent with a commission") was an envoy, ambassador, or messenger who was chosen and trained by Jesus Christ as His special emissary for proclaiming His truth during the formative years of the church. In its primary and technical usage, the term applied to the original twelve who were chosen at the beginning of Jesus' earthly ministry (Mark 3:14; Luke 6:13) and were set aside to lay the foundation of the early church and to be the channels of God's completed revelation (Acts 2:42; Eph. 2:20). They were also given power to perform healings and to cast out demons as verifying signs of their divine authority (Acts 2:43; 2 Cor. 12:12; Heb. 2:3-4). It should be noted that, shortly before Pentecost, Judas was replaced by Matthias (Acts 1:26).

In a wider sense, the term apostle is also used of men like Barnabas (Acts 14:14), Silas and Timothy (1 Thess. 1:1; 2:6), and other outstanding leaders (Rom. 16:7). Such men are more specifically called messengers (*apostoloi*) of the churches (see 2 Cor. 8:23; Phil. 2:25), whereas the Twelve and Paul were "apostles of Jesus Christ." Neither group was perpetuated. Except for Judas, there is no New Testament record of an apostle in either the primary or secondary group being replaced after he died.

Because he was not among the original twelve, Paul needed to defend his apostleship in ways that they did not. Because one of the qualifications was witnessing the risen Christ (Acts 1:22), Paul explained to the Corinthian church that between His resurrection and ascension Jesus first "appeared to Cephas [Peter], then to the twelve. After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time; . . . then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles; and last of all, as it were to one untimely born, He appeared to me also" (1 Cor. 15:5-8). Paul witnessed the resurrected Christ in a unique way. As he was traveling to Damascus to arrest and imprison Christians there, "suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him; and he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?' And he said, 'Who art Thou, Lord?' And He said, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting'" (Acts 9:3-5). Through the godly Ananias of Damascus, the Lord declared this former enemy

of the gospel to be “a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel” (v. 15). Just as the Lord “effectually worked for Peter in his apostleship to the circumcised [He] effectually worked for [Paul] also to the Gentiles” (Gal. 2:8).

Further personal appearances of the Lord to Paul are recorded in Acts 18:9; 22:17-21; 23:11; and 2 Corinthians 12:1-4 (cf. 1 Cor. 9:1).

#### THE MANNER IN WHICH HE WAS CHOSEN

**(not sent from men, nor through the agency of man, but through Jesus Christ, and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead), (1:1b)**

Because false teachers were accusing Paul of being a spurious, self-appointed apostle who had no authority to teach and to rule the churches, he emphatically stated that his was no human commission, that he was **not sent from men**. He had not appointed himself and had not even been divinely appointed **through the agency of men**. No human means of any sort was involved in his apostolic commissioning. No human source, no human ceremony, no laying on of hands by any group in Jerusalem, Antioch, or anywhere else was involved in his call to apostleship, though the elders at Antioch were a part of the sending process of his special mission tour to evangelize (Acts 13:1-3).

Paul's original call to apostleship was directly **through Jesus Christ, and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead**. Jesus called Paul and set him apart before he had contact with any of the other apostles. After several years of divine preparation (see Gal. 1:17-18), he was sent out to begin his work among the Gentiles directly by the Holy Spirit, whose divine appointment was acknowledged by the leaders of the church at Antioch (Acts 13:2-3). Paul's authority was not man-given or self-given but **God-given**, and his right to instruct the Galatians was grounded in that divine prerogative.

Paul never missed an opportunity to mention the resurrection, without which the gospel would be powerless. The God who appointed Paul an apostle was **God the Father, who raised His Son from the dead**.

Paul certainly had a vastly superior commissioning to any of the false-teaching, self-appointed Judaizers who were confusing the Galatians and trying to set themselves above his authority.

The apostle's frequent mention of **God** and **Father** in relation to **Jesus Christ** throughout the New Testament marks an emphasis that should not be missed. The intent is not for us to understand God as *our* Father (although that truth is mentioned in 1:4) but **the Father** in relation to the role He has in the Trinity, particularly His relation to the Son. The intent is to emphasize the significance of the relationship between the first and second members of the Trinity as to essential nature. The title is to express equality of deity between the two, a Father and Son who share the same nature (cf. Matt. 11:27; John 5:17-18, 22; 10:29-33; 14:9; 17:1-5; Rom. 15:6; 2 Cor. 1:3;

Eph. 1:3; 1 Pet. 1:3; 2 John 3). It asserts that **Jesus Christ** is the One who is of the nature of God and that the true God is the One who is **the Father of Jesus Christ**.

HIS ASSOCIATION

**and all the brethren who are with me, to the churches of Galatia:** (1:2)

A third basis of Paul's authority is implied by his referring to companions with him at the time of writing as **brethren**, in contrast to his own identification as apostle.

Liberal Bible scholars and theologians maintain that the apostles were no more significant or inspired than other human witnesses of Jesus Christ who happened to live at the same time He ministered on earth. What they taught and wrote was based on their own human insight and understanding and was not divinely authoritative or binding on other believers, either of their own day or of later ages. Every believer has his own experiences of what is often called "the Christ event."

Roman Catholic dogma maintains that the church wrote the Bible and is therefore a higher authority than the Bible. The church can therefore add to or modify Scripture as it sees fit, and its ecclesiastical pronouncements are held to have the same spiritual and moral authority as Scripture—even when they clearly contradict scriptural teaching.

Paul would have argued against both of those views with every breath in his body. If he and the other apostles of the New Testament were not divinely inspired in a unique and authoritative way, they were the most presumptuous of men, because they boldly and unequivocally claimed to speak and write in God's name. As apostles they spoke *to* the church, not on behalf of the church. The church derived its doctrine from the apostles, who received it directly from God (Eph. 3:5). They are never spoken of as apostles of the church but always as apostles of Jesus Christ.

Jesus told the Twelve, "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who receives whomever I send receives Me; and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me" (John 13:20). A short while later He said to them, "These things I have spoken to you, while abiding with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you" (14:25-26).

Because the apostles' teaching came directly from the Lord, the writings of Paul, Peter, John, and the others are every much as divinely inspired and authoritative as the words that Jesus spoke in person during His earthly ministry. It is for that reason that red letter Bibles may be misleading, because they suggest that the words Jesus spoke during His three-year earthly ministry are in some way more inspired and precious than other parts of Scripture. As Paul made clear to Timothy, however, "All Scripture is inspired by God" (2 Tim. 3:16), who is the Author of its every word, whether through the prophets, the Lord Jesus Christ, or the apostles.

Because the Bible is God's own Word, to be subject to God is to be subject to the Bible. It is not an amalgam of human opinion but the repository of divine truth.

As discussed in the Introduction, **the churches of southern Galatia** were in

the central Asia Minor cities of Antioch of Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe, where Paul had ministered on both his first and second missionary journeys (Acts 13:14–14:23; 16:1-5). The fact that Paul founded those **churches** certainly gave him some authority in dealing with them (cf. 1 Cor. 4:14-21, where Paul expresses his right to reprimand the Corinthians because he was their spiritual father).

The mention of these **churches** is brief and impersonal, and there is an apparent lack of the amenities usually found in Paul's epistles. His resentment of their defection from the gospel of grace forced him to dispense with any commendation or personal remarks, and he simply gave a gospel greeting before he rebuked them.

#### PAUL'S MESSAGE

**Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us out of this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, (1:3-4)**

As Paul explains later in the epistle, the gospel he preached was “not according to man. For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ” (Gal. 1:11-12). Two of the most precious words related to that God-given gospel are **grace** and **peace**. The first is the source of salvation and the second is the result. **Grace** is positional, **peace** is practical, and together they flow **from God our Father** through His Son and our Savior, **the Lord Jesus Christ**.

In the Greek culture of Paul's day the common greeting was *chara* (“joy”). But although joy is among the many blessings Christians receive from God and should reflect in their lives (Gal. 5:22), the distinctly Christian greeting of **grace . . . and peace** held special meaning and significance for Paul and for other believers in the early church.

Since it offered no grace and provided no peace, the law system being taught by the lying Judaizers is attacked even in this simple greeting. If being right with God and possessing salvation is by works, as those false teachers maintained, then it is not of grace (Rom. 4:4-5) and can bring no peace, since one never knows if he has enough good works to be eternally secure.

In verse 4 Paul gives a succinct summary of the true gospel of **grace** and **peace**, showing its nature, its object, and its source.

#### THE NATURE OF THE GOSPEL: CHRIST'S ATONING DEATH AND RESURRECTION

**who gave Himself for our sins, (1:4a)**

In turning from grace to a legalistic system of salvation by works, the Galatians had ignored the significance of the death of Christ.

The heart of the gospel is Christ's willing sacrifice of **Himself for our sins**. Salvation is not earned by one's efforts to eliminate sin, but by one's trust in God's

promise to forgive sin through the work of Jesus Christ. His atoning death was the most essential part of the divine plan of redemption, without which all of His teachings and miraculous works would have been meaningless and a mockery. Apart from Christ's sacrificial death, His earthly ministry would have portrayed the power and truth of a great and wonderful God—but a God with whom men could never be reconciled, because they had no way out of their sin. Since no man can eliminate sin by works (Rom. 3:20), it must be forgiven. That is why it was absolutely necessary that “He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness” (1 Pet. 2:24). If Christ had not died on our behalf, He could not have been raised on our behalf; and if He had not been raised, Paul says, then preaching the gospel would be vain, trusting in the gospel would be worthless, and all men would still be in their sins (1 Cor. 15:14-17).

The statement **who gave Himself for our sins** affirms that the purpose of Christ's coming was to be a sin offering (cf. 3:13).

THE OBJECT OF THE GOSPEL: TO DELIVER FROM THE PRESENT AGE

**that He might deliver us out of this present evil age, (1:4b)**

The purpose of the gospel is to **deliver** (the Greek subjunctive expresses purpose) those who believe in Christ from **this present evil age**. Jesus' death was a rescue operation, the only possible means of saving men from the doomed world and from eternal death by providing for them eternal life.

*Exaireō* (**deliver**) carries the idea of rescuing from danger. The word was used by Stephen in his sermon before the Sanhedrin as he described the divine deliverance of Joseph and the children of Israel from Egyptian affliction (Acts 7:10, 34). Peter used the word to describe God's deliverance of him from prison (Acts 12:11), and the Roman commander Claudius Lysias used it of his rescue of Paul from the belligerent mob in Jerusalem (23:27; cf. v. 10). Galatians 1:4 contains the only metaphorical use of the term in the New Testament.

**Age** (*aiōn*) does not refer to a period of time but to a passing, transitory system, in this case the **evil**, satanic world system that has dominated the world since the Fall and will continue to dominate it until the Lord's return. Although they are not removed from the earth until they die or are raptured, believers are rescued **out of this present evil age** the moment they receive Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. They are still in the world, but they are no longer of it (John 17:11, 14-18; Phil. 3:20-21; 1 John 5:5). The faithful Christian life is the heavenly life lived on earth.

THE SOURCE OF THE GOSPEL: THE WILL OF GOD

**according to the will of our God and Father, (1:4c)**

The source of the saving gospel of Jesus Christ is the sovereign, loving, compassionate, gracious **will of our God and Father**, who “so loved the world, that

He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

Jesus prayed in the Garden, “Father, if Thou art willing, remove this cup from Me; yet not My will, but Thine be done” (Luke 22:42). It was *not* the Father’s will for that cup to be removed, because otherwise the world could not be saved. It was the **will** of the **Father** for His precious Son to die in order that those who trust in Him might live. The Father sent the Son to die, and the Son willingly laid down His life.

Specifically, every rescued believer is delivered because of the sovereign, gracious will of God. “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:12-13). Salvation is thus removed from the will of man and is buried deep in the sovereign decree of God.

#### PAUL’S MOTIVE

**to whom be the glory forevermore. Amen. (1:5)**

Paul concludes his introduction with a doxology fitting for such a saving God. His motive for writing to the Galatian churches was that he might acknowledge that God is worthy of **glory forevermore**. The apostle’s supreme purpose was to glorify his Lord, and he calls all believers to do everything “to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31).

In these five opening verses of Galatians Paul covers the four stages of man’s salvation. The first stage was the sovereign decree of God to save, the second was the death of Christ for man’s sins, the third was the appointment of apostles to testify to that divine provision, and the fourth was the gift of God’s grace and peace to those who believe in Jesus Christ. In each of the stages the Father and the Son work together, because Their will and Their work are always one (John 5:30; 6:38; 10:30).

Paul and the other apostles were commissioned and sent out by the Father and the Son, and the grace that brings salvation and the peace that salvation brings are likewise both from the Father and the Son. Salvation is provided, preached, and granted by the common operation of God the Father and God the Son. Together They planned salvation, together They provide salvation, together They announce salvation, and together They grant salvation to every person who comes to Them in faith.

**Amen** expresses the affirmation fitting the worthiness of God to receive glory for such a wondrous provision of eternal, gracious salvation. Alan Cole writes of this word: “When the old-fashioned Cantonese-speaking Christian says at the end of a prayer *shing sam shoh uen* (“with all my heart this is what I wish”) he approaches very nearly the original Hebrew meaning” (*The Epistle of Paul to the Galatians* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970], p. 37).



THE MACARTHUR  
NEW TESTAMENT  
COMMENTARY  
**EPHESIANS**

*John MacArthur*

MOODY PUBLISHERS/CHICAGO

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# The Salutation



**Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints who are at Ephesus, and who are faithful in Christ Jesus: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (1:1-2)**

In his salutation, Paul presents the dual source of his apostolic authority, a dual description of believers, a dual blessing for believers, and the dual source of those blessings.

## THE DUAL SOURCE OF AUTHORITY

**Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, (1:1a)**

Paul wrote with the authority of an apostle. *Apostolos* means “sent one” and in the New Testament is used as an official title of the men God uniquely chose to be the foundation layers of the church and the receivers, teachers, and writers of His final revelation—the New Testament. The apostolic duties were to preach the gospel (1 Cor. 1:17), teach and pray (Acts 6:4), work miracles (2 Cor. 12:12), build up other leaders of the church (Acts 14:23), and write the Word of God (Eph. 1:1; etc.).

Besides the original twelve and Matthias (Acts 1:26), who replaced Judas, Paul was the only other **apostle**, “as it were . . . one untimely born” (1 Cor. 15:8). Yet he was not inferior to the other apostles, having met all the requirements for that office (1 Cor. 9:1).

Paul’s credentials were not his academic training or his rabbinical leadership but his being an **apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God**. Paul did not teach and write by his own authority but by the dual yet totally unified authority of the Son (**Christ Jesus**) and of the Father (**God**). In stating that truth Paul was not boasting of personal merit or elevating himself above other believers. He well remembered that he had been a blasphemer, a violent persecutor of the church, and an unworthy and ignorant unbeliever; and he still considered himself the foremost of sinners (1 Tim. 1:13, 15). Like every Christian, he was first of all “a bond-servant of Christ Jesus” his Lord (Rom. 1:1). By mentioning his apostleship, Paul simply established his undeserved but divinely-bestowed authority to speak in God’s behalf—which he states at the beginning of each of his epistles except Philippians and 1 and 2 Thessalonians.

#### THE DUAL DESIGNATION OF BELIEVERS

**to the saints who are at Ephesus, and who are faithful in Christ Jesus: (1:1b)**

From God’s side believers are those whom He has made holy, which is the meaning of **saints**. From man’s side believers are those who are **faithful**, those who have trusted in **Christ Jesus** as their Lord and Savior.

Every Christian is a saint, because every Christian has been set apart and made holy through the perfect righteousness of Christ that has been placed to his account (Rom. 3:21-22; 1 Cor. 1:30; Phil. 3:9; etc.). When a person acts in faith to receive Christ, God acts in grace to give that person Christ’s own righteousness. It is Christ’s perfect righteousness—not a person’s own character or accomplishments, no matter how great they may seem in men’s eyes—that establishes *every* believer as one of God’s **saints** through saving faith.

#### THE DUAL BLESSINGS OF BELIEVERS

**Grace to you and peace (1:2a)**

This was a common greeting among Christians in the early church. *Charis* (**grace**) is God’s great kindness toward those who are undeserving of His favor but who have placed their faith in His Son, Jesus Christ. To greet a Christian brother or sister in this way is much more than a wish for their general well-being. It is also an acknowledgment of the divine grace in which we stand and which has made us mutual members of Christ’s Body and of God’s divine family.

**Grace** is the fountain of which **peace** (*eirēnē*) is the stream. Because we

have grace from God we have peace *with* God and the peace *of* God, “which surpasses all comprehension” (Phil. 4:7). **Peace** is the equivalent of the Hebrew *shālôm*, which, in its highest connotation, signifies spiritual prosperity and completeness.

THE DUAL SOURCE OF BLESSING

**from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (1:2b)**

The dual source of blessing is the same as the dual source of authority—**God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ**. Those are not separate and distinct sources but two manifestations of the same Source, as indicated by the connective *kai* (**and**), which can indicate equivalence, and here indicates that the **Lord Jesus Christ** is deity just like **God our Father**.

Paul’s message throughout this epistle is that believers might understand and experience more fully all of the blessings granted by their heavenly Father and His Son and their Savior, Jesus Christ.

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# The Epistle of Joy (Philippians 1:1–2)

# 1

**Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (1:1–2)**

We live in a generally sad world, a fallen world well acquainted with despair, depression, disappointment, dissatisfaction, and a longing for lasting happiness that often never comes to pass. Moments of pleasure and satisfaction are scattered through the general pain and sorrow of life. Many people have little hope that their situation in life will ever change much, if any, for the better. Hopelessness tends to increase with age. Long years of life often become long years of sorrow, unfulfillment, loss of loved ones and friends, and often physical limitations and pain. Such decreasing times of happiness tend to produce a morbid sadness and lessening satisfaction with life.

Most people define happiness as an attitude of satisfaction or delight based on positive circumstances largely beyond their control. Happiness, therefore, cannot be planned or programmed, much less guaranteed. It is experienced only if and when circumstances are favorable. It is therefore elusive and uncertain.

Spiritual joy, on the other hand, is not an attitude dependent on chance or circumstances. It is the deep and abiding confidence that, regardless of one's circumstances in life, all is well between the believer and the Lord. No matter what difficulty, pain, disappointment, failure, rejection, or other challenge one is facing, genuine joy remains because of that eternal well-being established by God's grace in salvation. Thus, Scripture makes it clear that the fullest, most lasting and satisfying joy is derived from a true relationship with God. It is not based on circumstances or chance, but is the gracious and permanent possession of every child of God. Therefore it is not surprising that joy is an important New Testament theme. The verb *rejoice* (*chairō*) appears ninety-six times in the New Testament (including those times when it is used as a greeting) and the noun *joy* (*chara*) another fifty-nine times. The two words appear thirteen times in Philippians.

A biblical theology of joy includes many features. First, joy is a gift from God. David declared, "You have put gladness in my heart, more than when their grain and new wine abound. In peace I will both lie down and sleep, for You alone, O Lord, make me to dwell in safety" (Ps. 4:7-8); "You will make known to me the path of life; in Your presence is fullness of joy; in Your right hand there are pleasures forever" (Ps. 16:11).

Second, God grants joy to those who believe the gospel. Announcing Christ's birth to the shepherds, the angel said, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:10-11). Jesus told His disciples, "These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full" (John 15:11). Christ came to proclaim a gospel that would give true supernatural joy to those who receive Him as Savior and Lord.

Third, joy is produced by God the Holy Spirit. "For the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking," Paul said, "but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom 14:17). In his letter to the Galatian churches, the apostle wrote, "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Gal. 5:22-23).

Fourth, joy is experienced most fully as believers receive and obey God's Word. The prophet Jeremiah exulted, "Your words were found and I ate them, and Your words became for me a joy and the delight of my heart; for I have been called by Your name, O Lord God of hosts" (Jer. 15:16). The apostle John wrote his first letter so that, among other things, his and his readers' "joy may be made complete" (1 John 1:4).

Fifth, believers' joy is deepened through trials. The full reality of joy is experienced when it is contrasted with sadness, sorrow, and diffi-

culties. “You also became imitators of us and of the Lord,” Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, “having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit” (1 Thess. 1:6). In his second letter to the believers at Corinth, Paul spoke of being “sorrowful yet always rejoicing” (2 Cor. 6:10). James counseled believers to “consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials” (James 1:2), and Peter encouraged them with these words:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials. (1 Peter 1:3–6)

Sixth, believers’ joy is made complete when they set their hope on the glory of heaven. They are always to be “rejoicing in hope” (Rom. 12:12). Peter reminded them that, “though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory” (1 Peter 1:8). Later in that letter he exhorted, “To the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation” (1 Peter 4:13). Jude concluded his brief letter with the beautiful benediction: “Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen” (Jude 24–25).

The love bond between Paul and the Philippian believers may have been stronger than the one he had with any other church. It was in large measure because of the joy that their love brought to him that the theme of Paul’s letter to the Philippians is joy. The depth of their relationship with him encouraged the apostle during his imprisonment and added to his joy. He was concerned about their unity, their faithfulness, and many other important spiritual and practical matters. But his overriding concern was that their sorrow over his afflictions would be tempered by their joy over his faithfulness to the Lord and the great reward that awaited him in heaven. Paul wanted them not to be sad, but to share in the fullest measure his deep, abiding joy in Jesus Christ. It is a noteworthy testimony to the maturity of the Philippian believers that, although Paul warned and encouraged them, he made no mention of any theolog-

ical or moral problem in the church at Philippi. That also brought the apostle joy.

In the first two verses the apostle described himself and Timothy as servants of Jesus Christ, the Philippian believers as saints in Jesus Christ, and offered his salutation to them in the name of their Lord.

## THE SERVANTS

### **Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus** (1:1a)

**Paul** is the beloved apostle who wrote thirteen New Testament epistles and is arguably the most noble and privileged servant of Jesus Christ the world has ever known. Yet, he referred to himself and **Timothy** simply as **bond-servants of Christ Jesus**. He made no mention of his apostolic authority or his being chosen to record part of God's written Word. He viewed himself and every believer primarily as a slave of the Lord.

Perhaps the most concise and clear look at Paul anywhere in the New Testament comes from the apostle himself later in this letter. Speaking of his life in Judaism, he wrote,

I myself might have confidence even in the flesh. [But] if anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless. But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. (Phil. 3:4–11)

Paul's human credentials were remarkable. He was the epitome of Jewish manhood, an exemplary, traditional, zealous, and legalistic "Hebrew of Hebrews." In the eyes of his peers, he was blameless and righteous. But after his conversion he saw those things for what they were in God's eyes: mere rubbish. What he had considered to be positives before God he came to realize were actually destructive negatives. His former imagined

righteousness was really unrighteousness, which he gladly forsook to gain the true righteousness that comes only “through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith” (3:9).

**Timothy** shared that righteousness, as a fellow bond-servant of **Christ Jesus**. He was Paul’s son in the faith (1 Tim. 1:2), not only a protégé, but also a cherished companion, to whom the apostle would bequeath an extraordinary spiritual legacy and ministry. His two inspired letters to Timothy were written several years later, the first after the apostle had been released from his first imprisonment in Rome and the second during his second imprisonment there.

**Bond-servants** translates the plural of the oft-used Greek word *doulos*, which describes a person owned by someone else and thus subservient to and dependent on that person. Paul used it of himself at the beginning of three of his epistles (Rom. 1:1; Phil. 1:1; Titus 1:1), and in each case it precedes the mention of his apostleship. James (James 1:1), Peter (2 Peter 1:1), and Jude (Jude 1) use it in the same way.

When used in the New Testament of a believer’s relationship to Jesus Christ, *doulos* describes willing, determined, and devoted service. It reflects the attitude of an Old Testament slave who refused the opportunity for freedom and voluntarily resubmitted himself to his master for life. The Mosaic Law provided that “if the slave plainly says, ‘I love my master, my wife and my children; I will not go out as a free man,’ then his master shall bring him to God, then he shall bring him to the door or the doorpost. And his master shall pierce his ear with an awl; and he shall serve him permanently” (Ex. 21:5–6). Speaking of all faithful believers, Paul declared, “Now we have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound, so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter” (Rom. 7:6). To the Corinthians he explained, “For he who was called in the Lord while a slave, is the Lord’s freedman; likewise he who was called while free, is Christ’s slave” (1 Cor. 7:22).

In that spirit **Paul** and **Timothy** did not think of being **bond-servants of Christ Jesus** in anything but positive terms. Nor did they think of themselves as **bond-servants** of the church, of Rome, or of any other person or institution, but exclusively of **Christ Jesus**. Paul reminded the elders from the Ephesian church of that single-minded devotion when he met them near Miletus: “I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God” (Acts 20:24). That devotion is required of every believer, but especially of those called to the ministry. Even if a pastor’s or teacher’s primary devotion is to the church, it will inevitably bring some measure of compromise, disappointment, and spiritual failure. But devotion to **Christ**

**Jesus** can never be disappointing or in vain. If his ministry is concerned with other believers' standards and opinions, a pastor will invariably stray from the gospel to some form of compromise. But devotion and obedience to the Lord and to His Word will just as invariably keep him on a godly and faithful course.

Paul's physical bonds were not really marks of his bondage to Rome but to his Lord. His imprisonment *by* Rome symbolized his bondage *to* Jesus Christ. "My imprisonment in the cause of Christ," he explained, "has become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else, and . . . most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the word of God without fear" (1:13–14). It was Jesus Christ who would assign all his duties and meet all his needs. He had the same spirit of devotion to Christ that David's servants had to him as king: "Then the king's servants said to the king, 'Behold, your servants are ready to do whatever my lord the king chooses'" (2 Sam. 15:15). Jesus declared unambiguously that "no one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth" (Matt. 6:24). And because the Lord is such a loving Master, His servants can testify with Paul, "And He has said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.' Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me" (2 Cor. 12:9).

#### THE SAINTS

**to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons:** (1:1b)

Paul addresses his letter to **all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi**. Like *qodesh*, its Hebrew equivalent, *hagios* (**saints**) refers to someone who is set apart; specifically believers, who are set apart by God for Himself. Both words are often translated "holy."

Unfortunately, **saints** are often thought of as being a special, higher order of Christians who accomplished extraordinary good deeds and lived an exemplary life. In the Roman Catholic system, saints are revered people who are officially canonized after death because they have met certain demanding requirements. But Scripture makes it clear that all the redeemed, whether under the Old or New Covenant, are **saints**, set apart from sin to God.

When God commanded Ananias to lay his hands on the newly converted Saul (Paul) so that he would regain his sight, he answered,

“Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he did to Your saints at Jerusalem” (Acts 9:13). A few verses later Luke writes that “as Peter was traveling through all those regions, he came down also to the saints who lived at Lydda” (Acts 9:32). In both instances it is clear that **saints** refers to *all* believers in those cities (cf. Eph. 1:1; Col. 1:2). That Paul even referred to the worldly, immature believers at Corinth as saints indicates beyond dispute that the term has no relationship to spiritual maturity or character. To them he wrote, “To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours” (1 Cor. 1:2). Like all other believers, the Christians at Corinth were not saints because of their spiritual maturity (cf. 1 Cor. 3:1–3), but because they were “saints by calling,” a reference to their call to salvation (cf. Rom. 8:29–30).

All believers are **saints**, not because they are themselves righteous, but because they are **in** their Lord, **Christ Jesus**, whose righteousness is imputed to them (Rom. 4:22–24). A Buddhist does not speak of himself as *in* Buddha, nor does a Muslim speak of himself as *in* Mohammed. A Christian Scientist is not *in* Mary Baker Eddy or a Mormon *in* Joseph Smith or Brigham Young. They may faithfully follow the teaching and example of those religious leaders, but they are not *in* them. Only Christians can claim to be *in* their Lord, because they have been made spiritually one with Him (cf. Rom. 6:1–11). “But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us,” Paul wrote, “even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 2:4–6). To the Galatians he declared, “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me” (Gal. 2:20). In Paul’s letters, the phrase “in Christ Jesus” occurs fifty times, “in Christ” twenty-nine times, and “in the Lord” forty-five times. Being **in Christ Jesus** and therefore acceptable to God is the believer’s supreme source of joy.

**Overseers and deacons** are called to lead the church. As is clear from Acts 20:17, 28 and Titus 1:5, 7, *overseer* is another term for *elder*; the most common New Testament name for the office (cf. Acts 11:30; 14:23; 15:2, 4, 6, 23; James 5:14). Elders are also referred to as pastors (or shepherds; Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:1–2), pastor-teachers (Eph. 4:11), and bishops (cf. Acts 20:28, marg.; 1 Tim. 3:2, marg.). Their high qualifications are set forth in 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:6–9. **Overseers**, or elders, are first mentioned in relation to famine relief money sent by the church at Antioch to the elders in Judea by the hands of Barnabas and Saul (Acts 11:30). They mediate the rule of Christ in local churches by



preaching, teaching, setting godly examples, and giving Holy Spirit–guided leadership.

Although their role is primarily one of practical service rather than preaching and teaching, **deacons** are required to meet the same high moral and spiritual standards (1 Tim. 3:8–13) as elders. The distinction between the two offices is that elders are to be skilled teachers (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:9).

#### THE SALUTATION

### **Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.** (1:2)

Paul used this common greeting in several of his letters to churches (Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3; 2 Cor. 1:2; Eph. 1:2; Col. 1:2–3; 2 Thess. 1:2) as well as in one letter to an individual (Philem. 3). It is an expression of the apostle’s deep love for fellow believers, even the immature ones in Corinth who caused him such grief. But he must have felt an especially deep sense of joy and gratitude for the saints in Philippi who, in stark contrast to those in Corinth, had brought him immeasurable satisfaction and comfort.

The saving, eternal **grace** that is granted to penitent, believing sinners is the supreme divine gift, and everlasting **peace** is its greatest blessing. The source of both is **God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ**. This salutation expresses Paul’s abiding love and concern for the faithful believers in Philippi and serves as an introduction to the many specific causes for rejoicing that he mentions throughout this tenderest of all his epistles.

The common New Testament salutary connection of **God our Father** with the **Lord Jesus Christ** repeatedly emphasizes the oneness of nature between the two (Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3, 9; 2 Cor. 1:2–3; Gal. 1:1, 3; Eph. 1:1–2; Phil. 1:2; Col. 1:3; 1 Thess. 1:1, 3; 1 Tim. 1:1–2; 2 Tim. 1:2; Titus 1:4; Philem. 3; Heb. 1:1–3; James 1:1; 1 Peter 1:3; 2 Peter 1:1–2; 1 John 1:3; 2 John 3; Jude 1). **God the Father** shares His essential divine being with **the Lord Jesus Christ**. The emphasis on this equality establishes the deity of our Lord Jesus, which is the central truth of Christianity.

THE MACARTHUR  
NEW TESTAMENT  
COMMENTARY

**COLOSSIANS  
& PHILEMON**

*John MacArthur*

MOODY PUBLISHERS/CHICAGO

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# The Gospel Truth (Colossians 1:1-8)

# 1

**Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to the saints and faithful brethren in Christ who are at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father. We give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love which you have for all the saints; because of the hope laid up for you in heaven, of which you previously heard in the word of truth, the gospel, which has come to you, just as in all the world also it is constantly bearing fruit and increasing, even as it has been doing in you also since the day you heard of it and understood the grace of God in truth; just as you learned it from Epaphras, our beloved fellow bond-servant, who is a faithful servant of Christ on our behalf, and he also informed us of your love in the Spirit. (1:1-8)**

Scripture describes the gospel with several phrases. Acts 20:24 calls it “the gospel of the grace of God.” Romans 1:9 designates it “the gospel of His Son,” and 1 Corinthians 9:12 “the gospel of Christ.” Romans 15:16 refers to it as “the gospel of God,” 2 Corinthians 4:4 characterizes it as “the gospel of the glory of Christ,” Ephesians 6:15 as “the

gospel of peace,” and Revelation 14:6 as the “eternal gospel.”

The gospel is also described as the “word of truth” (Col. 1:5), or the “message of truth” (Eph. 1:13). Those descriptions have given rise to our common expression “the gospel truth.” People use that phrase when they want to stress their sincerity, so that what they say will be believed.

Although people often use that expression flippantly, there is a real gospel truth. **Gospel** (v.5) is the Greek word *euangelion*, from which we derive the English word *evangelize*. It literally means, “good news.” It was used often in classical Greek to speak of the report of victory brought back from a battle. The gospel is the good news of Jesus’ victory over Satan, sin, and death. It is also the good news that we, too, can triumph eternally over those enemies through Him.

First Corinthians 15:1-4 succinctly summarizes the historical content of the gospel: “Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.” The gospel is the good news that Jesus Christ died to provide complete forgiveness of sins and rose again that those who believe might live forever.

Such glorious, thrilling truth compels Christians to respond in several basic ways, all of which are noted by descriptive phrases using *gospel*. First, we should proclaim the good news, following the example of Jesus (Matt. 4:23), the apostles, prophets, evangelists, teachers, and believers of all ages.

Second, we are to defend its veracity. Paul described himself as one “appointed for the defense of the gospel” (Phil. 1:16). Peter told his readers to “make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you” (1 Pet. 3:15).

Third, we are to work hard for the advance of the gospel. Paul admonishes the Philippians to “[strive] together for the faith of the gospel” (Phil. 1:27). The gospel demands of us discipline and strenuous effort.

Fourth, we are to pursue the fellowship we share with others who have believed the gospel. Devotion to the fellowship of the gospel characterized the early church (Acts 2:42). Paul often expressed his gratitude for those who had received the gospel (cf. Phil. 1:3-5).

Fifth, we must be ready to suffer for the sake of the gospel. Paul exhorted Timothy, “Do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, or of me His prisoner; but join with me in suffering for the gospel” (2 Tim. 1:8).

Sixth, we are to make sure that our lives do not hinder the gospel. Paul told the Corinthians that he would waive his right to be paid for his ministry rather than cheapen the message of the gospel (1 Cor. 9:12).

Seventh, we must never be ashamed of the gospel. Paul said, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Rom. 1:16).

Finally, we are to realize the gospel carries with it divine empowerment. Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, "Our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit" (1 Thess. 1:5). The power of the gospel does not come from our cleverness or persuasiveness, but from the Holy Spirit.

This wonderful gospel is the reason for Paul's thanksgiving expressed in Colossians 1:3-8. Rejoicing at the report of their faith brought to him by Epaphras, the founder of the church at Colossae, he characteristically expresses thanks that the Colossians heard the gospel, and that it bore fruit in their lives.

Following the salutation in verses 1 and 2, Paul's words in verses 3-8 suggest seven aspects of the gospel: it is received by faith, results in love, rests in hope, reaches the world, reproduces fruit, is rooted in grace, and is reported by people. Before considering those aspects, let's take a brief look at the familiar terms of Paul's opening greeting that we find in his other epistles.

## THE SALUTATION

**Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to the saints and faithful brethren in Christ who are at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father. (1:1-2)**

Following the practice of correspondence in the ancient world, Paul begins the letter with his name. Paul was the most important and influential person in history since our Lord Jesus Christ. His personality was the remarkable combination of a brilliant mind, an indomitable will, and a tender heart. Of Jewish ancestry, a "Hebrew of Hebrews" (Phil. 3:5), he was a Pharisee (Phil. 3:5). Paul was educated under Gamaliel (Acts 22:3), one of the leading rabbis of that time. He was also by birth a Roman citizen (Acts 22:28) and exposed to Greek culture in his home city of Tarsus. Such a background rendered him uniquely qualified to communicate the gospel in the Greco-Roman world. It was largely his efforts that transformed Christianity from a small Palestinian sect to a religion with adherents throughout the Roman Empire. The church

would be blessed to have record of even one letter from such a man, let alone the thirteen found in the New Testament.

Lest anyone doubt his authority, Paul describes himself as **an apostle of Jesus Christ**. He is not simply a messenger, but an official representative of the One who sent him. What he writes in this letter is not merely his opinion, but God's authoritative Word.

Nor did he become an apostle through his own efforts. Neither was he nominated for the position by any human organization. Paul was an apostle **by the will of God**. God, having chosen him long before, brought His sovereign choice to realization with that most striking of conversions on the Damascus Road (Acts 9:1-9). It climaxed in his being set apart for missionary service by the Holy Spirit (Acts 13:2).

Paul, as was his custom, mentions a colaborer who was with him when he wrote: **Timothy our brother**. (Timothy is also included in the introductions to 2 Corinthians, Philippians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, and Philemon, being noted as the companion of Paul.) Such a reference does not indicate coauthorship of those epistles. Peter is certainly clear that the epistles bearing Paul's name were written by Paul (2 Pet. 3:15-16).

Paul had a unique and special confidence in and love for Timothy. Timothy had ministered to him for many years, ever since they first met on Paul's second missionary journey (Acts 19:22). Although Paul was now a prisoner, faithful Timothy was still with him. Perhaps no passage expresses Paul's feelings about his young friend more clearly than Philippians 2:19-22: "I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you shortly, so that I also may be encouraged when I learn of your condition. For I have no one else of kindred spirit who will genuinely be concerned for your welfare. For they all seek after their own interests, not those of Christ Jesus. But you know of his proven worth that he served with me in the furtherance of the gospel like a child serving his father."

Despite his many strengths, Timothy had a delicate constitution and was frequently sick (1 Tim. 5:23). He even had an experience in Ephesus when he was timid, hesitant, perhaps ashamed and disloyal to his gift and duty, and was in need of encouragement and strength (cf. 2 Tim. 1:5-14). Still, no one served Paul as faithfully in the spread of the gospel (Phil. 2:22). He was Paul's true child in the faith (1 Cor. 4:17). It was to Timothy that Paul wrote his final letter (2 Timothy) and passed the mantle of leadership (2 Tim. 4).

Paul addresses his readers as the **saints and faithful brethren . . . who are at Colossae**. **Saints and faithful brethren** are not two distinct groups; the terms are equivalent. **And** [*kai*] could be translated, "even." *Hagios*, which translates **saints**, refers to separation, in this case being separated from sin and set apart to God. **Faithful** notes the

very source of that separation—saving faith. Believing saints are the only true saints. **Grace to you and peace** was the greeting Paul used to open all thirteen of his letters. Inasmuch as God is the source of both, Paul says those two blessings derive from our great God and Father.

#### THE GOSPEL TRUTH IS RECEIVED BY FAITH

**We give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus (1:3-4a)**

Though he admires their true and continuing saving faith, which had separated them from sin to God, Paul certainly does not begin by flattering the Colossians. He gives **thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ**. Paul recognizes that God is the One who is owed thanks, because salvation in all its parts is a gift from Him (Eph. 2:8-9). **Always** should be considered in relation to the preceding phrase, **we give thanks to God**, not to **praying . . . for you**. Paul was not always praying for the Colossians. Rather, whenever he was praying for them, he always expressed his thanks to God.

Paul is thankful to God for their faith in Christ Jesus. The Colossians are not like those who distort the gospel (Gal. 1:7), or do not obey it (1 Pet. 4:17). Such people will face the terrifying experience of seeing “the Lord Jesus . . . revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. And these will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power” (2 Thess. 1:7-9). The Colossians are holy brothers in Christ, who have put faith in the Lord of the gospel.

#### FAITH’S DEFINITION

*Pistis* (**faith**) means to be persuaded that something is true and to trust in it. Far more than mere intellectual assent, it involves obedience. *Pistis* comes from the root word *peithō* (“obey”). The concept of obedience is equated with belief throughout the New Testament (cf. John 3:36; Acts 6:7; Rom. 15:18; 2 Thess. 1:8; Heb. 5:9; 1 Pet. 4:17). The Bible also speaks of the obedience of faith (Acts 6:7; Rom. 1:5; 16:26).

Biblical faith is not a “leap in the dark.” It is based on fact and grounded in evidence. It is defined in Hebrews 11:1 as “the assurance of



things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Faith gives assurance and certainty about unseen realities.

I often have occasion to drive on roads I have never driven on before. I do not know what is around the next bend; the road could end at a cliff with a five-hundred-foot drop. Nor do I know personally the people who built the road. However, I know enough about how highways are built to have confidence in the road. Likewise, I sometimes will eat at a restaurant I have never been to before. I trust the food is all right because I have confidence in the inspection and preparation procedures.

We trust that highways and restaurants are safe based on the evidence. And that is precisely the case with our faith in God. It is supported by convincing evidence, both from Scripture and from the testimony of those Christians who have gone before us.

Saving faith is carefully defined in Scripture and needs to be understood because there is a dead, non-saving faith that provides false security (James 2:14-26). True saving faith contains repentance and obedience as its elements.

Repentance is an initial element of saving faith, but it cannot be dismissed as simply another word for believing. The Greek word for “repentance” is *metanoia*, from *meta*, “after,” and *noeō*, “to understand.” Literally it means “afterthought” or “change of mind,” but biblically its meaning does not stop there. As *metanoia* is used in the New Testament, it always speaks of a change of purpose, and specifically a turning from sin. More specifically, repentance calls for a repudiation of the old life and a turning to God for salvation (1 Thess. 1:9). The repentance in saving faith involves three elements: a turning to God, a turning from evil, and an intent to serve God. No change of mind can be called true repentance without all three. Repentance is not merely being ashamed or sorry over sin, although genuine repentance always involves an element of remorse. It is a redirection of the human will, a purposeful decision to forsake all unrighteousness and pursue righteousness instead. And God has to grant it (Acts 11:18; 2 Tim. 2:25). In fact, God grants the whole of saving faith: “By grace you have been saved through *faith*; and that not of yourselves, it is *the gift of God*; not as a result of works, that no one should boast” (Eph. 2:8-9, italics added; cf. Phil. 1:29).

Although it is true that “he who believes has eternal life” (John 6:47), Jesus also said, “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him” (John 6:44). God effectually calls sinners to Christ and grants them the capability to exercise saving faith (cf. Matt. 16:17).

The faith that God grants is permanent. In all who receive it, faith will endure. Such passages as Habakkuk 2:4, Romans 1:17, Galatians 3:11, Philippians 1:6, and Hebrews 10:38 teach that genuine saving faith can never vanish.

Like repentance, obedience is also encompassed within the bounds of saving faith. The faith that saves involves more than mere intellectual assent and emotional conviction. It also includes the resolution of the will to obey God's commands and laws.

Obedience is the hallmark of the true believer. "When a man obeys God he gives the only possible evidence that in his heart he believes God" (W.E.Vine, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, [Old Tappan, N.J.: Revell, 1966], 3:124). Such obedience will of necessity be incomplete, since the flesh ever rears its ugly head (cf. Rom. 7:14-25). If not the perfection of the believer's life, however, it most certainly will be the direction.

Faith, then, must never be severed from good works. Martin Luther summed up the biblical view of the link between saving faith and good works in these words: "Good works do not make a man good, but a good man does good works" (cited in Tim Dowley, ed., *Eerdmans Handbook to the History of Christianity* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987], p. 362).

#### FAITH'S OBJECT

Any definition of faith is also incomplete without a consideration of its object. In contrast to the contentless faith so prevalent in our culture, saving faith has as its object Christ Jesus. The relationship of faith to Jesus Christ is expressed in the New Testament by various Greek prepositions. Acts 16:31 uses the preposition *epi*, which suggests resting on a foundation. In Acts 20:21, *eis* is used, with the meaning of "to find a dwelling place in," "to go into," "to abide in," or "to find a home." Here it translates *en* and has the connotation of coming to a place of security and anchor. With Christ as its object, our faith is as secure as a house on a solid foundation, or a boat safely at anchor.

Charles Spurgeon illustrated the importance of faith's object by telling of two men in a boat. Caught in severe rapids, they were being swept toward a waterfall. Some men on shore tried to save them by throwing them a rope. One man caught hold of it and was pulled to safety on the shore. The other, in the panic of the moment, grabbed hold of a seemingly more substantial log that was floating by. That man was carried downstream, over the rapids, and was never seen again. Faith, represented by the rope linked to the shore, connects us to Jesus Christ and safety. Good works apart from true faith, represented in the story by the log, leads only to ruin.

THE GOSPEL TRUTH RESULTS IN LOVE

**and the love which you have for all the saints; (1:4b)**

Genuine faith does not exist in a vacuum but will inevitably result in a changed life. One of the visible and strong fruits of true saving faith is love for fellow believers (cf. John 13:34-35). The apostle John emphasizes that truth repeatedly in his first epistle:

The one who says he is in the light and yet hates his brother is in the darkness until now. The one who loves his brother abides in the light and there is no cause for stumbling in him. But the one who hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going because the darkness has blinded his eyes. (2:9-11)

By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother. (3:10)

We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer; and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. (3:14-15)

If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. (4:20)

A true child of God will love fellow believers. Faith in Christ purges us of our selfishness and affinity for sinners and gives us a new attraction to the people of God. Our love for fellow Christians is a reflection of His love for us. It is also obedience to His command to "love one another, even as I have loved you" (John 13:34).

Paul gives thanks that the Colossians love all the saints. Their love was nonselective. Apparently there were no divisive cliques at Colossae, such as those that fractured the Corinthian church. Christ's love not only drew the Colossians to Himself, but also to each other.

That does not mean we are to feel the same emotional attachment toward everyone. True biblical love is so much more than an emotion; it is sacrificial service to others because they have need. We show godly love to someone when we sacrifice ourselves to meet that person's needs.

True godly love is illustrated in John 13. Verse 1 tells us that Jesus “having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end.” He then showed what that love meant by washing the disciples’ feet (vv. 4-5). God does not expect us to feel sentimental toward each other all the time. He does expect us to serve one another (Gal. 5:13).

There are two sides to the Christian life, both of which are crucial: faith and love. Genuine belief in the truth and experiential love for other believers characterizes every true believer. We are saved by faith; we are saved to love. True saving faith is more than a conviction of the mind. It transforms the heart to love.

### THE GOSPEL TRUTH RESTS IN HOPE

**because of the hope laid up for you in heaven, of which you previously heard in the word of truth, the gospel, (1:5)**

**Hope** is one component of the great triad of Christian virtues, along with faith and love. “But now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor. 13:13; cf. 1 Thess. 1:3; 5:8). Paul is thankful not only for the Colossians’ faith and love, but also for their hope. Faith and hope are inseparably linked. We believe, and so we hope.

Paul describes that hope as laid up for you in heaven. *Apokeimai* (**laid up**) means “in store,” or “reserved.” Peter speaks of “an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you” (1 Pet. 1:4). The writer of Hebrews speaks of “laying hold of the hope set before us. This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, a hope both sure and steadfast and one which enters within the veil” (Heb. 6:18-19). Hope is the Christian’s anchor chain, connecting him inseparably to God’s throne.

God established our hope by making us His sons. The Colossians became sons of God by believing the message they previously heard **in the word of truth, the gospel**. First John 3:1 says, “See how great a love the Father has bestowed upon us, that we should be called children of God.” He will fulfill our hope by making us like His Son: “Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we shall be. We know that, when He appears, we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him just as He is” (v. 2).

One result of our hope is a willingness to sacrifice the present on the altar of the future. That runs contrary to human nature. Young children, for example, have a difficult time waiting for something they want. My father warned me repeatedly while I was growing up not to

sacrifice the future on the altar of the immediate. The world wants what it wants now.

The Christian has a different perspective. He is willing to forsake the present glory, comfort, and satisfaction of this present world for the future glory that is his in Christ. In contrast to the “buy now—pay later” attitude prevalent in the world, the Christian is willing to pay now and receive it later. What makes Christians willing to make such sacrifices? Hope, based on faith that the future holds something far better than the present. Paul writes in Romans 8:18, “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.”

Moses serves as an example of one who willingly sacrificed the present because of the promise of his future hope. Hebrews 11:24-27 gives us his story: “By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter; choosing rather to endure ill-treatment with the people of God, than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin; considering the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he was looking to the reward. By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he endured, as seeing Him who is unseen.”

As the adopted son of Pharaoh’s daughter, Moses had access to all the wealth and power of Pharaoh’s court. Yet, he turned his back on it and identified with God’s suffering, poor, humbled people. Moses refused to seize the moment and enjoy the temporal pleasures of sin. He sacrificed his present prospects for a future hope. He took his stand with the oppressed Israelites, an act that led to his killing an Egyptian overseer and eventual flight from Egypt. He forfeited earthly power and glory and instead wound up herding sheep in the desert for his father-in-law to be, Jethro.

What made Moses willing to make such sacrifices? “He was looking to the reward” (Heb. 11:26). Why was he willing to turn his back on the riches and power that were his in Egypt? “He endured, as seeing Him who is unseen” (Heb. 11:27). Moses knew that though he suffered loss in the present, God would richly reward him in the future.

Like Moses, believers look for a hope that is in heaven. We live in the light of eternity, knowing that our citizenship is in heaven (Phil. 3:20). We serve the Lord, making sacrifices here to lay up treasure in heaven. Like Paul, we set aside our prerogatives, obeying God’s will and disciplining ourselves to win an incorruptible crown (cf. 2 Tim. 4:8). Like Jim Elliot, missionary and martyr to the Auca Indians, we must realize that “he is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose” (cited in Elisabeth Elliot, *Shadow of the Almighty* [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979], p. 108).

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THE GOSPEL TRUTH REACHES THE WORLD

**which has come to you, just as in all the world (1:6a)**

The gospel is also universal; it **has come to you, just as in all the world**. Christianity was not just another of the local sects of the Roman Empire. It was not merely one more cult like the others at Colossae. It was and is the good news for the whole world. The gospel transcends ethnic, geographic, cultural, and political boundaries.

This universality of the gospel is repeatedly emphasized in Scripture:

And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a witness to all the nations, and then the end shall come. (Matt. 24:14)

Again therefore Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world; he who follows Me shall not walk in the darkness, but shall have the light of life." (John 8:12)

First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, because your faith is being proclaimed throughout the whole world. . . . For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. (Rom. 1:8,16)

But I say, surely they have never heard, have they? Indeed they have; "Their voice has gone out into all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world." (Rom. 10:18)

For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything. (1 Thess. 1:8)

After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands; and they cry out with a loud voice, saying, "Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb." (Rev. 7:9-10)

The diffusion of the gospel throughout the Roman Empire foreshadowed its spread throughout the world. It is a message of hope for all people in all cultures. The true church, the Body of Christ, is made up of people from all over the world (cf. Rev. 4:9-11).

## THE GOSPEL TRUTH REPRODUCES FRUIT

**it is constantly bearing fruit and increasing, even as it has been doing in you also since the day you heard of it (1:6b)**

The gospel is not merely a stagnant system of ethics; it is a living, moving, and growing reality. It bears fruit and spreads. Hebrews 4:12 says, "The word of God is living and active." When the gospel enters a divinely prepared heart, it results in fruit (Matt. 13:3-8). It possesses a divine energy that causes it to spread like a mustard seed growing into a tree (Matt. 13:31-32). Peter says it brings spiritual growth (1 Pet. 2:2).

The gospel has both an individual and a universal aspect. It is both **bearing fruit and increasing**. Paul tells the Colossians he is thankful the gospel had done both among them **since the day you** [the Colossians] **heard of it**. He is grateful they believed the gospel message when Epaphras shared it with them.

The gospel produces fruit both in the internal transformation of individuals, and also in the external growth of the church. The two concepts are interrelated. The spiritual growth of individuals will lead to new converts being won to Christ. That was the pattern of the early church. Acts 9:31 tells us that "the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up . . . going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit," and as a result, "it continued to increase." First Thessalonians 1:6 speaks of the spiritual growth of the Thessalonians as they imitated Paul and the Lord. As a result, "the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything" (v.8).

The living gospel is the power that transforms lives. As it does so, the witness of those transformed lives produces fruit, including new converts. So as the gospel produces fruit in individual lives, its influence spreads.

## THE GOSPEL TRUTH IS ROOTED IN GRACE

**and understood the grace of God in truth. (1:6c)**

**Grace** is the very heart of the gospel. It is God's freely giving us the forgiveness of sin and eternal life, which we do not deserve and cannot earn. Christianity contrasts sharply with other religions, which assume man can save himself by his good works. Nothing is more clearly

taught in Scripture than the truth that “by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast” (Eph. 2:8-9).

After hearing Peter’s account of the conversion of Cornelius, the rest of the apostles exclaimed, “Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life” (Acts 11:18). Lydia was saved after “the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul” (Acts 16:14). Paul told the Thessalonians he was thankful “because God has chosen [them] from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth” (2 Thess. 2:13). He wrote to Titus that “the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age” (Titus 2:11-12). Salvation is a gracious act on God’s part (see also Acts 15:11; 18:27; Rom. 3:24; 4:1-8).

Paul describes saving grace as **the grace of God in truth**. The phrase **in truth** carries the sense of genuineness. It is truly **the grace of God** in contrast to all other claimants to the true gospel. God is freely, sovereignly merciful and forgiving. We can do nothing to cause our own salvation; God saves us freely by His grace. The hymn “Jesus Paid It All” expresses that thought in these familiar words:

For nothing good have I  
Whereby Thy grace to claim.  
I’ll wash my garments white  
In the blood of Calv’ry’s Lamb,

Jesus paid it all,  
All to Him I owe;  
Sin had left a crimson stain  
He washed it white as snow.

#### THE GOSPEL TRUTH IS REPORTED BY PEOPLE

**just as you learned it from Epaphras, our beloved fellow bond-servant, who is a faithful servant of Christ on our behalf, and he also informed us of your love in the Spirit.** (1:7-8)

Although salvation is solely by God’s grace, He uses humans as channels of that grace. Jesus told the disciples in Acts 1:8 that they, in the power of the Holy Spirit, were to be His witnesses. First Corinthians 1:21 speaks of those who believed through hearing the message preached. But perhaps no passage states this truth as forcefully as Romans



10:14: "How then shall they call upon Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?"

As noted in the introduction, Epaphras brought the good news of God's grace to the Colossian church. They learned it from him. Paul often referred to himself as a *doulos* (**bond-servant**) of Christ (Rom. 1:1; Phil. 1:1; Gal. 1:10; Titus 1:1). By referring to Epaphras as his **fellow bond-servant** (*sundoulos*), and calling him **a faithful servant of Christ on our behalf**, Paul connects Epaphras's ministry with his own. Epaphras was Paul's representative at Colossae, backed by his authority and that of the Lord Jesus. While Paul was imprisoned, unable to go to the Colossians, Epaphras ministered to them on Paul's behalf. He also informed Paul of the Colossians' **love in the Spirit**, a report that no doubt brought great joy to Paul's heart. Paul was thankful for the gospel, and for the Colossians' reception of it.

God gives us the wonderful privilege and sobering responsibility of being His agents in proclaiming the gospel of His grace. May we be faithful to share with others the gospel that has meant so much to us.

THE MACARTHUR  
NEW TESTAMENT  
COMMENTARY  
**1&2 THESSALONIANS**  
*John MacArthur*

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# Identifying the Elect

## (1 Thessalonians 1:1–10)

# 1

**Paul and Silvanus and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace. We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers; constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father, knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you; for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and in Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything. For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He**

**raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come. (1:1–10)**

The Thessalonians, like all believers, were the elect of God. That reality caused the apostle Paul to begin his first letter to them by simply pouring out his thanks for the divine gift of their saving faith. The only way believers can discern that someone is elect is after God has regenerated and sanctified that soul. Paul did not know the eternal, elective decree of God, but he could see whose lives gave evidence of genuine salvation (cf. 2:13).

Paul suffered constantly and extremely for the cause of Christ, and he carried on his shoulders an overwhelming burden of responsibility and care for all the churches. He described his burden to the Corinthian church this way:

Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure on me of concern for all the churches. (2 Cor. 11:24–28)

In view of such severe suffering amid heavy responsibilities, it must have been refreshing and exhilarating for Paul to minister to the Thessalonian elect, whom in this letter he deemed worthy of nothing but commendation and encouragement. In the situation he experienced at Thessalonica, the believers displayed many characteristics that reliably identify the elect. He began his first letter to them with a recognition of those virtues. He arranged them under two categories: the Thessalonians' present condition (a faith that works, a love that labors, a steadfastness of hope) and their past conversion (a reception of the gospel in power and the Holy Spirit, a genuine imitation of the Lord, a joyful endurance in tribulation, a behavior that exemplifies all believers, a proclamation of the Word everywhere, a total transformation from idolatry, and an expectant looking for the return of Christ). Between those two lists Paul paused in verse 4 to affirm his understanding that the church in Thessalonica was elect. Before that, as usual, he opened the letter with identifying words of greeting for his beloved friends.

## PAUL'S GREETING

**Paul and Silvanus and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace. We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers; (1:1–2)**

Though Paul was the most influential apostle of the early church, in his greeting to the Thessalonians, he did not identify himself as an apostle. Apparently in the Macedonian churches, his apostleship was never in question, because in neither of his letters to the church at Thessalonica, nor in his letter to Philippi, did he begin by identifying himself as an apostle. Those churches had not questioned his apostolic status, although he would later defend his integrity and sincerity (1 Thess. 2:1–6). Here he simply and humbly identified himself as **Paul**. And in the same attitude of humility he linked his co-laborers **Silvanus** (Silas) and **Timothy** to himself as if they were all equals.

Silas, probably a Hellenistic Jew, was a prominent member of the Jerusalem church who first accompanied Paul on the apostle's second missionary journey (Acts 15:40) and later was a scribe for Peter (cf. 1 Peter 5:12). **Timothy** was a native of Lystra (Acts 16:1–3), a city in Asia Minor. He was Paul's son in the faith (1 Cor. 4:17; Phil. 2:22; 1 Tim. 1:2; 2 Tim. 1:2; 2:1) and protégé. He toured with Paul on the second and third missionary journeys and remained near the apostle during Paul's first incarceration in Rome (cf. Phil. 1:1; Col. 1:1; Philem. 1). Later Timothy served the church at Ephesus (1 Tim. 1:3) and was himself imprisoned (Heb. 13:23). At the end of Paul's life, when Timothy was in Ephesus, he wrote the two inspired letters to him.

All three men knew the Thessalonian believers well. They founded the church in Thessalonica (Acts 17:4), and Timothy later checked on its well-being and brought back a positive report to Paul (1 Thess. 3:6). Because the Thessalonians were precious to all three of them, Paul included his coworkers' names in the greeting.

Paul's use of the Greek word translated **church** (*ekklēsia*) emphasizes the reality of the Thessalonians' election. *Ekklēsia* is related to the phrase *ek kaleō*, "to call out," and means "the called out ones," or it can mean "the elect ones," especially when connected with the phrase "His choice of you" (v. 4), which is specific. Paul was certain that the Thessalonians were among God's elect because he had seen the evidence of their transformation.

The apostle elaborated on the nature of the church with the somewhat unusual but wonderful expression **in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ**, which demonstrates the Thessalonians' vital

and inextricable union with God and Christ (cf. 2:14; 2 Thess. 1:1). They participated in the very life of God and the life of Christ. There is an indivisible spiritual union between Christ and His own. In his New Testament letters, Paul taught that believers do not simply believe facts *about* Jesus Christ, but that they are *in* Him. He told the Galatians, “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me” (Gal. 2:20). “For you have died,” he reminded the Colossians, “and your life is hidden with Christ in God” (Col. 3:3). That is the inexplicable and incomprehensible mystery of what it is to be a Christian—that God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:9, 11; 1 Cor. 3:16; 2 Tim. 1:14) live within the believer and the believer lives in them in a sharing of divine and eternal life.

Significantly, in this profound statement in verse 1, Paul used the preposition **in** just once. Modifying the phrase **God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ** with a single preposition emphasizes the equality of essence between Father and Son. It is also worth noting here that Paul used the Savior’s full title, **the Lord Jesus Christ**. That combines in one phrase all the major aspects of His redemptive work. **Lord** describes Him as creator and sovereign ruler, the One who made us, bought us, rules over us, and to whom we owe full allegiance. **Jesus** (“Jehovah saves”) refers to His humanity; it was the name given Him at His birth (Matt. 1:21, 25). **Christ** (“the anointed one”) is the Greek term for the Messiah, the one promised by God to fulfill His plan of redemption.

Paul continued the salutation with his common greeting **Grace to you and peace** (cf., for example, 1 Cor. 1:3; 2 Cor. 1:2; Gal. 1:3; Eph. 1:2; Phil. 1:2). **Grace** is God’s undeserved favor to the sinner in the form of complete forgiveness of sin and the granting of eternal life, and **peace** is the result of that amazing gift of love. Paul desired that the Thessalonians would continually experience the fullness of God’s **grace**. They would then possess not only an unending **peace** with God, but an experience of **peace** in their hearts that always surpassed their human understanding (Phil. 4:7). **Grace** and **peace** are Christians’ daily portion—every day they receive divine **grace** to cover their sins and divine **peace** to assuage their guilt.

Because of his sincere wish that the Thessalonians constantly know God’s grace and peace, it was understandable for the apostle Paul and his companions to **give thanks to God always for all of them, making mention of them in their prayers** (v.2). Paul, Silas, and Timothy thanked God continually **for all of them** because all the Thessalonian believers were the elect of God.

The Thessalonians, because they were elect, were living for the honor of Christ. The apostle underscored his thankfulness for that reality by listing the first three qualities that proved God’s sovereign choice of them, which were manifest in their sanctification.



## THEIR PRESENT CONDITION

**constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father, (1:3)**

Here begins Paul's litany of praise to God for the evidence of salvation the Thessalonians presently displayed. He thanked God for their faith that worked, labor that loved, and hope that endured. This trio of Christian virtues was a favorite of Paul's (cf. 1 Cor. 13:13; Col. 1:4–5; 1 Thess. 5:8).

## A FAITH THAT WORKED

**constantly bearing in mind your work of faith (1:3a)**

Paul was **constantly bearing in mind**, or remembering, in thankful prayer these foundational spiritual qualities, the first of which was the Thessalonians' **work of faith**. A true saving belief in Jesus Christ will always result in the mighty **work** of God that produces change in one's nature or disposition. A **work of faith** is action representative of the transforming power of regeneration (2 Cor. 5:17). Simply stated, the elect engage in holy, righteous deeds to the honor of God. **Work** is the Greek word *ergon*, which refers to the deed, achievement, or function itself. Paul was confident of the Thessalonians' election because their **faith**—the authentic saving and sanctifying gift from God—was producing righteous deeds in their lives.

Paul's words here, however, do not in any way contradict his clear teaching elsewhere that salvation is by faith alone, apart from any human works. For example, in Romans 3:20–21 he declares, "By the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin. But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested." Paul goes on to assert that sinners are "justified as a gift by His [God's] grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith" (vv. 24–25; cf. 4:4; 5:1; Eph. 2:8–9).

However, the New Testament also stresses the active side of faith—salvation will necessarily produce holy conduct. Such teaching is not opposed to justification by faith alone through grace alone and, when properly understood, actually complements that doctrine. Paul is unequivocal early in the book of Romans that works flow from saving faith: "[God] will render to each person according to his deeds: to those who

by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life” (2:6–7). This does not mean people can *earn* salvation because of their good works, but rather that those works *verify* the reality of their faith.

Paul instructed the Ephesians, “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them” (Eph. 2:8–10). And the reason believers perform good deeds is because God is at work in them (Phil. 2:13).

Paul described the believer’s transformation as going from one kind of slavery to another:

Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness? But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed, and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness. . . . Therefore what benefit were you then deriving from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the outcome of those things is death. But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification, and the outcome, eternal life. (Rom. 6:16–18, 21–22)

The apostle James also taught that good works must be present in the lives of those who profess faith in Christ; otherwise that profession is not genuine.

But someone may well say, “You have faith and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works.” You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder. But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected. . . . For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead. (James 2:18–22, 26)

Believers will sometimes disobey God’s commands and fail to do His will, but they will always long to obey (Rom. 7:18–20) and will manifest some true spiritual fruit of obedience (cf. John 15:5). Genuine saving faith is by definition powerfully inclined toward obedience to God, which leads inevitably to the **work of faith** Paul commended the Thessalonians for.

## A LOVE THAT LABORED

**and labor of love (1:3b)**

The second identifying mark of the elect is their **labor of love**. True Christians minister motivated by their love for others. Loving even one's enemies is an expression of the power of salvation (cf. Matt. 5:44; Gal. 6:10). Loving other believers is also evidence of salvation, as 4:9 explicitly states, "Now as to the love of the brethren, you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another." Peter affirmed this reality: "Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren, fervently love one another from the heart" (1 Peter 1:22). The apostle John expressed this truth also when he wrote, "The one who loves his brother abides in the Light and there is no cause for stumbling in him" (1 John 2:10). He went on to state that such love is definitive evidence of salvation: "We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death" (3:14; cf. John 13:35; 1 John 2:9, 11; 3:10; 4:20). This **love** is part of the fruit of the Spirit produced in those led by the Spirit (Gal. 5:22). **Labor** is the Greek word *kopos*, which denotes an arduous, wearying kind of toil, done to the point of exhaustion. Unlike *ergon* (**work**), which focuses on the deed itself, *kopos* looks at the effort expended in accomplishing a particular deed. It is an effort that strains all of one's energies to the maximum level. The noblest, most altruistic and selfless form of **love** (*agapē*) motivates this kind of spiritual effort. The apostle Paul referred to the spiritual effort believers make as they work to advance divine truth and the kingdom of the Lord because they sincerely love people.

Furthermore, beyond loving unbelievers and believers, Romans 8:28 identifies the elect—people included in God's eternal, saving purpose—as "those who love God." That is a basic characteristic of anyone who savingly worships the true and living God and the Lord Jesus Christ, and it is the real reason they love others:

Also the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to Him, and to love the name of the Lord, to be His servants, every one who keeps from profaning the sabbath and holds fast My covenant. (Isa. 56:6)

But just as it is written, "Things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard, and which have not entered the heart of man, all that God has prepared for those who love Him." (1 Cor. 2:9)

But if anyone loves God, he is known by Him. (1 Cor. 8:3)

Grace be with all those who love our Lord Jesus Christ with incorruptible love. (Eph. 6:24)

Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him. (James 1:12)

For a detailed discussion of this love for God, see *Romans 1–8*, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago:Moody,1991),483–85.

Authentic Christianity has always been defined by loving Christ. In 2 Corinthians 5:14 Paul says, “The love of Christ controls us” (cf. Gal. 5:6). Those who are indifferent to that concern are on their way to hell, unless they repent: “If anyone does not love the Lord, he is to be accursed” (1 Cor. 16:22). The Thessalonian believers’ **labor of love** was therefore another mark of their election (cf. 2 Thess. 1:11).

#### A HOPE THAT ENDURED

### **and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father, (1:3c)**

The third evidence of election is **steadfastness of hope**. All Christians have a **hope in the Lord Jesus Christ**—a persevering anticipation of seeing His future glory and receiving their eternal inheritance.

The redeemed look for the glorious future appearance of the **Lord Jesus Christ** (see the discussion of 1:10 later in this chapter). Paul stated that salvation instructs believers in that **hope**: “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus” (Titus 2:11–13).

The apostle could encourage and teach others regarding this great **hope** (Rom. 5:1–2; Eph. 1:11; Col. 1:27) because he was so confident of it in his own life: “In the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing” (2 Tim. 4:8).

Peter opened his first epistle with announcement of the blessing of God that transcends all blessings—“a living hope, ... an inheritance ... in heaven for you, ... protected by the power of God, ... at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 1:3–7). This hope is the same hope Paul referred to when he wrote, “For in hope we have been saved” (Rom. 8:24).

**Steadfastness** is from the Greek word *hupomonē*, which conveys the idea of endurance or perseverance; literally, it denotes the condition of staying under pressure. It is closely related to the theological concept the Reformers called “the perseverance of the saints” (cf. Rom. 2:7; 2 Thess. 1:4; Rev. 14:12)—that is, Christians will hold fast to their hope until the end. There is nothing that should cause a true Christian to lose his trust in God’s promises: “For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. Who is the one who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?” (1 John 5:4–5). For believers, true hope is a strong longing and groaning to “be at home with the Lord” (see 2 Cor. 5:2–8).

The Thessalonians’ **hope** (*elpis*) was firm because it was anchored **in** the unchangeable **Lord Jesus Christ**. The writer of Hebrews richly expressed the security of this **hope** when he wrote:

so that by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have taken refuge would have strong encouragement to take hold of the hope set before us. This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, a hope both sure and steadfast and one which enters within the veil, where Jesus has entered as a forerunner for us, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek. (Heb. 6:18–20)

The context indicates that the “two unchangeable things” are God’s promise and His oath (v. 17), which make the believer’s hope in the gospel impossible to change. Further, his hope is secured by the intercession of Christ, the eternal High Priest, and kept safe within the impregnable heavenly sanctuary where He stands guard over His own (7:25; cf. 4:15–16). **Hope** transcends mere human, wishful anticipation and rests confidently in the consummation of redemption that Scripture says will certainly occur when Christ returns. Such **hope** will inevitably cause believers to triumph over the struggles of life because it derives from the type of true faith the Thessalonians received from God.

The **steadfastness** of those who have been given that **hope** fulfills Jesus’ promise in Matthew 24:13, “The one who endures to the end, he will be saved.” That was not a novel concept, but one solidly based on Old Testament teachings, such as Proverbs 4:18, “The path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, that shines brighter and brighter until the full day” (cf. Jer. 32:40). The spiritual path of the righteous does not go from light to darkness; it goes from dim light to full light. It becomes ever brighter as the person’s work of faith increases, his labor of love intensifies, and his hope perseveres more and more. Like the Thessalonian believers, those whose faith is genuine are those whose **hope** the Savior secures in heaven and, by the Holy Spirit, empowers to persevere to the

end (cf. Job 17:9; John 8:31; Phil. 1:6; Col. 1:21–23; Heb. 3:6, 14). Hebrews 6:10–11 compares with what Paul wrote here: “For God is not unjust so as to forget your work and the love which you have shown toward His name, in having ministered and in still ministering to the saints. And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope until the end.”

#### AN UNDERSTANDING OF ELECTION

### **knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you; (1:4)**

Verse 4 signals the transition from the preceding statement (v.3), which describes Paul’s confidence in the Thessalonians’ present spiritual condition, to the following section, which focuses on their past conversion (vv.5–10).

**Knowing**, from a form of the Greek verb *oida*, could also be translated “seeing,” or “perceiving.” Here Paul used it to express his perception that the assembly in Thessalonica was genuine.

The phrase **brethren beloved by God** contains some familiar New Testament terminology. **Brethren** (*adelphoi*) is a common word for the children of God in Christ. **Beloved by God** translates a perfect passive participial phrase in the Greek (*ēgapēmenoi hupo [tou] theou*), explaining the reality that Christians are recipients of the sovereign love of God (cf. Deut. 7:7–8).

When Paul told the Thessalonians he was certain of God’s **choice of** them, his words were in perfect harmony with New Testament usage (cf. Matt. 24:22, 24, 31; Luke 18:7; Rom. 8:33; Col. 3:12; 2 Tim. 2:10). Christians are the elect, chosen of God solely by His sovereign, loving purpose, apart from any human merit or wisdom. God in eternity past sovereignly chose all believers to salvation, drawing them to Himself in time, by the work of the Holy Spirit (John 6:37, 44; Rom. 9:15–16; 1 Cor. 1:9; Eph. 1:4–6, 11; 2 Thess. 2:13; 2 Tim. 1:9; cf. Acts 13:46–48; Rev. 13:8; 17:8). Jesus instructed the disciples, “You did not choose Me but I chose you, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit” (John 15:16). The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit elected not only the apostles but also all who have believed throughout history. In His High Priestly Prayer, Jesus prayed, “I ask on their behalf; I do not ask on behalf of the world, but of those whom You have given Me; for they are Yours” (John 17:9).

As 1 Thessalonians 1:6 and 9 suggest, man’s will participates in conversion in response to God’s promptings. Thus true evangelism is a call to repent and believe (e.g., Acts 20:21).

## THEIR PAST CONVERSION

**for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything. For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come. (1:5–10)**

Paul's certainty regarding the Thessalonians' election encompassed his memories of their past conversion. The apostle confidently set forth those memories in verses 5–10 as reasons affirming their salvation.

## A RECEPTION OF THE GOSPEL IN POWER AND THE HOLY SPIRIT

**for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. (1:5)**

The first past indicator (and the fourth one overall) from the Thessalonians' conversion that attested to the genuineness of their election was the divine power revealed in the preaching of the gospel to them. When Paul said the **gospel came in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction**, he was not just describing the Thessalonians' experience but his, Silas's, and Timothy's, when they first declared the saving news in Thessalonica. Paul and the others were so deeply identified with the message of salvation and its power that he called it **our gospel** (cf. 2 Thess. 2:14), though it was from God (Rom. 1:1; 1 Thess. 2:2, 9) and concerned the atoning work of Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 15:1–4).

First, Paul asserted that **power** was revealed because the message **did not come to** the Thessalonians **in word only**—it was not merely talk. It was not simply the words themselves that mattered, although any message—including the gospel—by definition has to con-



sist of words setting forth the message (cf. Rom. 10:8, 14; 1 Peter 1:22–25). Faith does come by hearing those words of truth, but the transformation process involves far more than that. Regardless of the erudition, the compelling logic, the soaring rhetoric, or the clever and interesting communication style, if the truth spoken is not accompanied by the power of God, it accomplishes nothing. But when empowered by God as it enters the prepared soul, the gospel truth saves (cf. 1 Peter 1:23–25).

Jesus indicated the inability of all sinners to believe the truth when He said, “This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed” (John 3:19–20). Along those lines, Paul taught the Corinthians, “And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ” (2 Cor. 4:3–4; cf. Eph. 2:1). He had already told them that the “natural man” cannot understand the gospel (1 Cor. 2:14). Barren words of truth alone, no matter how well presented, cannot penetrate such spiritual blindness and deadness. “For the kingdom of God does not consist in words but in power” (1 Cor. 4:20). God has to powerfully awaken the dead soul and open the blind eyes so the truth can regenerate (Eph. 2:4–5).

Such obvious **power** to quicken the spiritually dead comes from **the Holy Spirit**. Genuine soul-transforming power accompanying gospel preaching is the work of the Spirit energizing both the preacher and the hearer. Jesus alluded to this truth when He promised the apostles just prior to His ascension, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

Paul knew the preaching at Thessalonica bore divine power because of the **full conviction** (“much assurance,” NKJV) he had as he delivered it. Commentator Leon Morris gives a helpful perspective on what Paul meant here:

The third point is that the gospel came “in much assurance.” There is no repetition of the “in” in the Greek. The effect is to link these words very closely with the foregoing. Assurance [*plêrophoria*] is not some human device whereby men persuade themselves. Rather it is the result of the activity of the Holy Spirit working within believers. Some have felt that the assurance meant here is that which came to the converts as they put their trust in Christ, and this may not be out of the Apostle’s mind. But his primary meaning is the assurance that the Spirit gave to the preachers, for Paul is dealing with the way he and his companions



came to know the election of the Thessalonians. They had the assurance in their own hearts that, as they were preaching, the power of God was at work. The Spirit was working a work of grace. (*The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989], 57–58)

Paul and his fellow preachers were Spirit-empowered, confident, assured, and bold men who depended on God's **power** working through them and in their hearers to effect salvation.

To emphasize his point about the power of the missionaries' preaching, Paul closed verse 5 with these words: **just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake**. He told the Thessalonian believers that the spiritual power manifest in his life and the lives of his fellow ministers affirmed the accuracy of their preaching. The apostle (and no doubt Silas and Timothy, as well) was truthful, humble, selfless, gentle, caring, passionate, and compassionate toward the Thessalonians. He worked among them with his own hands so that he would not have to accept any money from them (2 Thess. 3:7–8). The Thessalonians had not only heard the gospel preached, they had seen it lived out in Paul, whose life was a rich example of the power of the gospel he preached (see 2 Cor. 1:12).

#### A GENUINE IMITATION OF THE LORD

### **You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, (1:6a)**

The fifth identifying mark proving the Thessalonians' election was that they **became imitators of Paul and of the Lord**. **Imitators** (*mimētai*) is the word from which the English term *mimics* derives. This transforming work occurred at the moment of salvation when the Thessalonian believers became new creations (cf. 2 Cor. 5:17). Patterns of holy living immediately began replacing the old sinful ones (cf. Eph. 4:22, 24). The Thessalonians, in the middle of a pagan environment, without any veteran church leadership, had in the power of the Holy Spirit become **imitators** of the apostle, his co-laborers, and—most important—Christ. Salvation starts the work of sanctification (cf. 1 Peter 1:1–2). As Paul reminded the Romans, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom. 6:3–4; cf. 2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15).

The Thessalonian believers' lifestyles started becoming far different from the sordid, idolatrous paganism of their past and from the legalistic self-righteousness of the Jews in their city. They had become **imitators** of Jesus Christ. Paul commanded believers to pursue that reality as a way of life: "Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ" (1 Cor. 11:1). He told the Corinthians that it was a progressive experience of sanctification by the Holy Spirit that moved them upward to increasing levels of glory, more and more into the image of Christ (2 Cor. 3:18).

#### A JOYFUL ENDURANCE IN TRIBULATION

### **having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit, (1:6b)**

A sixth identifying mark that confirmed the Thessalonians were truly elect was their **joy** in the midst of suffering and hardship. No matter how difficult circumstances become, true Christians do not lose their ultimate **joy** because the Holy Spirit dispenses it to the elect. The kingdom of God *is joy* (Rom. 14:17).

Paul again noted that the Thessalonians had **received the word**, which was simply a reiteration that they had believed the gospel and been converted. But they did so **in much tribulation**, that is, in severe suffering that began when Paul first preached. As recorded in Acts 17:1–4, and noted earlier, Paul and his fellow missionaries launched an effective evangelistic ministry spanning three Sabbaths in the Thessalonian synagogue, after which they continued their work in another location for several months—long enough to receive two collections from Philippi (cf. Phil. 4:16), be employed (1 Thess. 2:9; 2 Thess. 3:8), and care for the church in depth (1 Thess. 2:7–11). As a result of the transforming impact of that gospel ministry, the Jews hurled tremendous persecution and opposition against the apostle:

But the Jews, becoming jealous and taking along some wicked men from the market place, formed a mob and set the city in an uproar; and attacking the house of Jason, they were seeking to bring them out to the people. When they did not find them, they began dragging Jason and some brethren before the city authorities, shouting, "These men who have upset the world have come here also; and Jason has welcomed them, and they all act contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus." They stirred up the crowd and the city authorities who heard these things. And when they had received a pledge from Jason and the others, they released them. The brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea. (Acts 17:5–10)

After Paul and his company had left Thessalonica, it is likely the unbelieving Jews and pagan Gentiles intensified the persecution. Paul later reflected on that assault: “For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they did from the Jews, who both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out” (1 Thess. 2:14–15).

The Greek word rendered **tribulation** is *thlipsis*, which means “intense pressure,” as opposed to something mild. So the new believers in Thessalonica experienced severe persecution, but the genuineness of their salvation transcended that affliction so that they never lost their **joy** (cf. 1 Thess 3:4; 2 Thess. 1:4; in contrast, see Ps. 51:12).

The Thessalonians’ responding to persecution and suffering **with the joy of the Holy Spirit** was reminiscent of the apostles’ reaction early in the book of Acts. After the Sanhedrin flogged them, ordered them not to preach the gospel again, and released them, “they went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name” (Acts 5:41).

But one should not consider those Spirit-filled responses of joy strange or incomprehensible—joy is a divine benefit of the Christian’s standing in Christ, one of the “spiritual blessing(s) in the heavenly places in Christ” (Eph. 1:3). Romans 5:1–4 declares:

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God. And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope. (Cf. Acts 16:22–25; Gal. 5:22; Phil. 4:4.)

Mere human joy will die under persecution; **the joy of the Holy Spirit** will transcend it and grow. Yet again, though such joy is a fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22), all believers are called on to pursue greater and greater joy (Phil. 4:4).

A BEHAVIOR THAT IS EXEMPLARY

**so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. (1:7)**

A seventh indicator of the Thessalonians’ election, and an extension of the others, was their exemplary conduct. They went from commendable

imitators of Paul and Christ to those whose own Christian lives became worthy of imitation. The church had become **an example to all the believers**, a model for even older, more mature Christians to follow. **Example** is the Greek word *tupos* (“exact reproduction”), from which the English *type* derives. The Thessalonians became like blueprints for others throughout the region to build their lives on (cf. 1 John 2:6). **Macedonia** was the province in northern Greece that contained Thessalonica, as well as Philippi and Berea. **Achaia** was the southern province of Greece that included such prominent cities as Athens and Corinth.

To illustrate this specifically, the Thessalonians were among those believers Paul cited to the Corinthians as models for giving and financial stewardship. The Thessalonians were in deep poverty, likely because of the persecution they underwent. Yet they gave liberally and sacrificially to help the needy believers in Jerusalem (2 Cor. 8:1–5), thus demonstrating a pattern of godliness, and again in a sacrificial way proving the reality of their election.

#### A PROCLAMATION OF THE WORD EVERYWHERE

**For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything. For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, (1:8–9a)**

Another characteristic that verified salvation’s power in the Thessalonian saints was their faithfulness in the proclamation of the gospel. **The word of the Lord**, the divine saving truth of the gospel, **sounded forth** from the church in Thessalonica. **Sounded forth** (*exēchētai*) is used only here in the New Testament and means “to blast forth” or “to sound forth very intensely.” Outside the New Testament, the term was used to refer to a blaring trumpet, or rolling thunder. The perfect tense form of *exēchētai* indicates the church’s bold, continual trumpeting of the gospel message.

From the time the church was founded, its proclamation of the gospel trumpeted out, **not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place**. Because Thessalonica was a hub of travel and trade, people coming through **Macedonia** from east and west along the Egnatian Highway heard **the word of the Lord** from true believers, as did those who visited the city by ship and used its port facilities. Apparently the Thessalonians who ventured out from the city also carried the gospel with them to **Achaia** and to **every place**. Paul pictured their proclamation as a

constant sound, increasing and echoing into a wider and wider circle as the church made the most of a strategic location from which to proclaim the truth.

Their influence was so clear and extensive that Paul said he had **no need to say anything**. In fact, news of the Thessalonians' salvation and subsequent powerful witness was so convincing that Paul said the people who heard the testimony of the church could **themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you**. Rather than Paul telling people he met in his travels about what God had done in that city, people were telling him what was becoming commonly known. Every church could wish for such an impact and reputation.

#### A TOTAL TRANSFORMATION FROM IDOLATRY

### **and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, (1:9b)**

A sure evidence of the Thessalonians' election was that they submitted to a new Master. Salvation meant a decisive break with pagan religion and a redirecting of one's whole life. The Thessalonians abandoned all polytheism and embraced only God and the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul expressed this change as their having **turned to God from idols**. **Turned** is from the verb *epistrephō*, which is used in the New Testament to indicate the fact that in the sinner's conversion there is a turning in the absolute opposite direction (Acts 9:35; 11:21; 26:18,20; 2 Cor. 3:16; cf. Luke 1:16; James 5:20). Such conversion entails repentance, a turning **from idols** and in faith submitting to the Savior alone (Acts 20:21). Such turning is far more than merely changing one's belief about who Christ is—it is a complete reversal of allegiance, **from idols to serve a living and true God**. The word Paul chose for **serve** (*douleuein*) means to serve as a bond-slave, which was the most demanding form of servitude. Paul knew that the Thessalonians had turned from slavish devotion to false, dead, demonic **idols** to a new and welcome slavery to the one **living and true God** (cf. Rom. 6:16–18).

#### AN EXPECTANT LOOKING FOR THE RETURN OF CHRIST

### **and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come. (1:10)**

A tenth and final mark that indicated the church in Thessalonica was truly God's elect was that its members waited **for His Son from heaven . . . that is Jesus.**

Those who love Christ long for and anticipate His return. The apostles displayed such a desire when they saw Jesus' ascension:

He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. And as they were gazing intently into the sky while He was going, behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them. They also said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven." (Acts 1:9–11)

Paul unquestionably affirmed that the One who once ascended to heaven is also the One believers **wait** for, the One **whom He** [God] **raised from the dead, that is Jesus.** The reference to the Resurrection establishes the ground for the return of Jesus Christ. God **raised Him from the dead** because He was pleased with His sacrifice for sin and because He wanted to exalt Him to the heavenly throne from which He will return to exercise His sovereign right to rule as King of Kings (Acts 2:24, 32; 3:15; 4:10–12; 5:30–32; 13:33–35; 17:31; cf. Rom. 1:3–4; 2 Cor. 13:4; Eph. 1:19–23). The word for **wait** is used only here in the New Testament and refers to expectant waiting—sustained, patient, trusting waiting.

To have an expectant looking for Jesus' return from heaven is just one more important aspect in this first chapter that defines a Christian. Waiting is a recurring theme in the Thessalonian letters (1 Thess. 2:17, 19; 3:13; 4:15–17; 5:8, 23; 2 Thess. 3:6–12). In two of his other letters, Paul described this attitude of waiting as follows:

In the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing. (2 Tim. 4:8)

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus. (Titus 2:11–13)

The true believer eagerly looks forward to Christ's return because he knows it brings to fulfillment and satisfaction God's eternal purpose, which is, as Paul stated it, to rescue **us from the wrath to come.** **Rescues** denotes the deliverance the Lord provides. He is the Rescuer,

Deliverer, and Savior of those otherwise headed for divine judgment and eternal punishment. In the ancient world, the idea of divine wrath was accepted, but there was no genuine hope of rescue from it. By contrast, in the postmodern world the idea of divine wrath is rejected, so the Rescuer is not needed or heeded. *Orgē* (**wrath**) describes God's settled opposition to and displeasure with sin. In this context the **wrath** is God's eternal judgment against sin. Some believe **the wrath to come** refers to the Great Tribulation, and see this rescue as the promise of the pretribulation Rapture, expounded upon later in this epistle (see chapter 11 of this volume). But the immediate context of Paul's discussion of election and salvation rather than eschatology rules out temporal wrath and points to eternal **wrath**, as does the wrath mentioned in 5:9—"For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ."

These ten marks of the elect are true of every genuine follower of Christ. But from time to time it is possible for even true believers to lose touch with those realities in their lives and to live sinfully inconsistent with their position in the body of Christ. Peter urged his readers, "Therefore, brethren, be all the more diligent to make certain about His calling and choosing you" (2 Peter 1:10). It is not that they need to convince God—He already knows who constitutes the elect. But there is nothing more assuring for those who profess faith in Christ than to know their true spiritual condition by means of these ten spiritual benchmarks.

THE MACARTHUR  
NEW TESTAMENT  
COMMENTARY

**1 TIMOTHY**

*John MacArthur*

MOODY PUBLISHERS/CHICAGO



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# A True Child in the Faith (1 Timothy 1:1-2)

# 1

**Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus according to the commandment of God our Savior, and of Christ Jesus, who is our hope; to Timothy, my true child in the faith: Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord. (1:1-2)**

The supreme joy for any parent is to see their child grow into a mature, well-developed adult. For that they pray, labor, and hope. The same is true in the spiritual realm. There is no greater joy for a spiritual parent than to beget a true child in the faith and lead him to maturity.

Paul desired, as every Christian should, to reproduce in his spiritual children his virtues of Christlikeness. He sought to lead others to Christ, then nurture them to maturity, so they would then be able to repeat the same process. He describes that process through four generations in 2 Timothy 2:2, “The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, these entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also.” To so reproduce himself was a central goal in the apostle’s life.

The degree to which he was used by God in producing genuine spiritual children is astonishing. While many of his companions, such as Barnabas, Silas, John Mark, Apollos, and Luke were not his spiritual

offspring, many others were. Dionysius, Damaris, Gaius, Sopater, Tychicus, Trophimus, Stephanas, Clement, Epaphras, the Corinthians (1 Cor. 4:15), and many others, including probably most of those mentioned in Romans 16, were in all likelihood the fruit of the apostle's evangelistic efforts. Some he reached personally, others were saved through his public preaching. Still others were reached indirectly through those Paul himself had reached.

Of all those who were saved before Paul met them, and those who were the fruit of his labors, only two does he call "true child in the faith." One is Titus (Titus 1:4), and the other is Timothy. That unique description was reserved for these key men in the apostle's life. Of the two, Timothy most reflected Paul. Paul wrote of him,

But I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you shortly, so that I also may be encouraged when I learn of your condition. For I have no one else of kindred spirit who will genuinely be concerned for your welfare. For they all seek after their own interests, not those of Christ Jesus. But you know of his proven worth that he served with me in the furtherance of the gospel like a child serving his father. (Phil. 2:19-22)

For this reason I have sent to you Timothy, who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, and he will remind you of my ways which are in Christ, just as I teach everywhere in every church. (1 Cor. 4:17)

Timothy was Paul's protege, his spiritual son, the most genuine reflection of the apostle.

This letter to Timothy (as well as the second one) is first and foremost a letter from one man in the ministry to another, from the beloved mentor to his most cherished pupil. We must therefore first understand it in terms of what was happening in the lives of Paul and Timothy, and the situation at Ephesus. Only then can we apply its truths to our own day.

#### THE AUTHOR

### **Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus according to the commandment of God our Savior, and of Christ Jesus, who is our hope; (1:1)**

**Paul** is certainly a name familiar to any student of the New Testament. Paul (Paulus in Latin) was a common name in Cilicia, in which his home city of Tarsus was located. It means "little," or "small," and may be an indication that he was small from birth. He was not a man of striking stature or marked appearance. A second-century writer described

him as “a man small of stature, with a bald head and crooked legs, in a good state of body, with eyebrows meeting and nose somewhat hooked, full of friendliness; for now he appeared like a man, and now he had the face of an angel” (cited by R. N. Longenecker, “Paul, The Apostle,” in Merrill C. Tenney, ed., *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977], 4:625). His demeaning opponents at Corinth said of him, “His letters are weighty and strong, but his personal presence is unimpressive, and his speech contemptible” (2 Cor. 10:10).

Whatever his physical stature may have been, his spiritual stature is unsurpassed. He was one of a kind in the history of redemption, responsible for the initial spread of the gospel message through the Gentile world.

This unique man was born into a Jewish family (Phil. 3:5), and held Roman citizenship (Acts 22:25-28). His Hebrew name was Saul, after the most prominent member of his tribe of Benjamin, King Saul. The New Testament refers to him as “Saul” until his first missionary journey (Acts 13:9), after which he is called “Paul.”

He had a traditional, orthodox upbringing. He described himself as “circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee” (Phil. 3:5). He was a fanatically committed, zealous devotee of Judaism. In Galatians 1:14, he described himself as “advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions.” His fiery zeal was seen in his willing participation in Stephen’s murder (Acts 8:1), and his subsequent persecution of the church (Acts 8:3; 9:1-2; 26:9-11).

He was on his way to Damascus to carry out further persecutions when his life was suddenly, dramatically changed forever. The risen, ascended, glorified Christ appeared to him and his terrified companions. All in a brief time, he was struck blind, saved, called to the ministry, and shortly afterward baptized (Acts 9:1-18). Following a period of solitary preparation in the Nabatean (Arabian) wilderness near Damascus, he returned to that city and began proclaiming the gospel. After his fearless preaching aroused the hostility of both the Jewish and Gentile leaders (Acts 9:22-25; 2 Cor. 11:32-33), he escaped and went to Jerusalem. The church in that city was naturally hesitant to accept the one who had persecuted them so violently. Eventually, through the efforts of Barnabas, Paul was accepted. He later became one of the pastors of the church at Antioch (Acts 13:1ff.). It was from that ministry that the Holy Spirit sent him to his life’s work as the apostle to the Gentiles (Acts 22:14-15; 26:16-18).

The verb *apostellō*, from which the noun *apostolos* (**apostle**) derives, means “to send off on a commission to do something as one’s

personal representative, with credentials furnished” (Kenneth S. Wuest, *The Pastoral Epistles in the Greek New Testament*, vol. 2 of *Word Studies in the Greek New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978], 22). We could translate *apostolos* as “envoy,” or “ambassador,” someone who goes on a mission bearing the credentials of the one who sent him.

An apostle in the New Testament was one sent to carry the gospel to sinners. In the broadest sense, many individuals were called apostles. Barnabas (Acts 14:14), Epaphroditus (Phil. 2:25), Andronicus and Junius (Rom. 16:7), and James the Lord’s brother (Gal. 1:19) all bore the title, though they were not among the twelve chosen by our Lord. They are what 2 Corinthians 8:23 calls “messengers [apostles] of the churches.”

In its more restricted and common New Testament usage, “apostle” refers to an apostle **of Christ Jesus**. Those apostles included the original twelve (with the deletion of Judas and the addition of Matthias after Judas’s defection) and Paul. In contrast to the apostles of the churches, these men were commissioned by Christ Himself. They were personally chosen by Him (cf. Luke 6:13; Acts 9:15), and learned the gospel from Him, not other men (cf. Gal. 1:11-12). The apostles of Christ were witnesses of His words, deeds, and especially His resurrection (Acts 1:21-22). Paul qualified on that count since he met the risen Christ on the way to Damascus, and on three other occasions (Acts 18:9-10; 22:17-18; 23:11).

Apostles of Christ were also gifted by the Holy Spirit to receive and impart divine truth. It was to them that Jesus said, “But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you” (John 14:26). They also had the power to cast out demons and heal the sick, performing those signs, wonders, and miracles that constituted the “signs of a true apostle” (2 Cor. 12:12; cf. Heb. 2:3-4). According to Ephesians 2:20, they are the foundation upon which the rest of the church is built. The church from its birth studied “the apostles’ doctrine” (Acts 2:42).

The word order **Christ Jesus**, instead of the more usual “Jesus Christ,” is unique to Paul. “Christ Jesus” appears in only one place in the New Testament outside of Paul’s writings. That reference, Acts 24:24, occurs in Luke’s description of the apostle’s testimony to Felix and Drusilla. While Paul also uses the word order “Jesus Christ,” the other apostolic writers (Peter, James, and John) do so exclusively. A possible explanation is that the other apostles knew first the man Jesus, and only later understood that He was the divine Christ. On the other hand, Paul’s first exposure to Him was as the risen, glorified Christ.

It may seem unnecessary for Paul to emphasize his apostolic authority to Timothy, who certainly didn’t question it. Timothy, however,

faced a difficult situation in Ephesus, and needed the full weight of Paul's apostolic authority backing him. This letter, as it was read and enforced in the church, would strengthen Timothy's hand.

The use of *epitagē* (**commandment**) instead of the more usual *thelēma* ("will") further stresses Paul's apostolic authority. Paul had a direct charge from God the Father and Jesus Christ to carry out his ministry. That mandate included the writing of this letter, which put on Timothy and the church a heavy burden to obey its injunctions. *Epitagē* refers to a royal command that is not negotiable, but mandatory. Paul, Timothy, and the congregation at Ephesus were all under orders from the Sovereign of the universe. Paul also may have chosen this stronger term because of the false teachers at Ephesus, who likely questioned his authority.

Paul's orders came from **God our Savior** and **Christ Jesus, who is our hope**. Someone has well said that Christianity is a religion of personal pronouns. We do not worship a distant, impersonal deity, but God our Savior and Christ Jesus our hope. By linking God the Father and Jesus Christ as the source of his divine commission, Paul alludes to the deity of Christ. Jesus frequently linked Himself with God the Father in the Gospels (cf. Matt. 11:27; John 5:17-18; 10:30; 17:1-5, 11, 21-22). Christ's deity may well have been under attack at Ephesus (cf. 1 Tim. 3:16).

**God our Savior** is a title that appears only in the Pastoral Epistles, though it has roots in the Old Testament (cf. Pss. 18:46; 25:5; 27:9; Mic. 7:7; Hab. 3:18). God is the deliverer from sin and its consequences; He is the source of salvation, and planned it from eternity (cf. 2 Thess. 2:13). The liberal notion that the God of the Old Testament is a wrathful, vengeful God whom the gentle, loving Christ placated is both false and blasphemous.

God the Father's plan for salvation was carried out by **Christ Jesus, who is our hope**. We have hope for the future because of what Christ has done in the past and is doing in the present. In Colossians 1:27 Paul says, "Christ in you, [is] the hope of glory." The apostle John wrote,

Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we shall be. We know that, when He appears, we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him just as He is. And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure. (1 John 3:2-3)

There were no doubt some errorists in the Ephesian assembly trying to rob believers of salvation's hope. Paul responds by stressing both as-

pects of Christ's work (cf. 1:11,14-17; 2:3; 4:10) as he writes to Timothy, so Timothy can confront such attacks.

#### THE RECIPIENT

#### to Timothy, my true child in the faith (1:2a)

The name **Timothy** means "one who honors God." He was named by his mother and grandmother, Eunice and Lois, who were no doubt devout Jews before they became believers in the Lord Jesus. They taught Timothy the Scriptures from the time he was a child (2 Tim. 3:15). His father was a pagan Greek (Acts 16:1), and may well have been dead by this time. As the son of a Jewish mother and a Greek father, Timothy had credentials that gave him access to both cultures.

Timothy was Paul's disciple, friend, co-worker, and dear son spiritually. By the time 1 Timothy was written, he had been with Paul for about fifteen years as the apostle's constant companion. He remained behind in Berea with Silas after persecution forced Paul to leave for Athens (Acts 17:13-15), but later joined Paul there (cf. Acts 17:15). He was with Paul in Corinth (Acts 18:5), was sent by Paul into Macedonia (Acts 19:22), and accompanied him on his return trip to Jerusalem (Acts 20:4). He was with Paul when he wrote Romans (Rom. 16:21), 2 Corinthians (2 Cor. 1:1), Philippians (Phil. 1:1), Colossians (Col. 1:1), the Thessalonian epistles (1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1), and Philemon (Philem. 1). He frequently served as Paul's troubleshooter, being sent by him to the churches at Corinth (1 Cor. 4:17), Thessalonica (1 Thess. 3:2), and Philippi (Phil. 2:19), and now Ephesus.

*Gnēsios* (**true**) refers to a legitimate child, one born in wedlock. It is the opposite of *nothos*, which means "bastard," or "illegitimate child." Timothy was a *gnēsios* child of Paul, while Demas was a *nothos*. Timothy's faith was genuine. The use of *teknon* (**child**) instead of *huios* ("son") speaks of Paul's giving birth to Timothy spiritually. Since **in the faith** is anarthrous (lacking the definite article) in the Greek, it could be translated "in faith." In that sense, Paul would be saying Timothy is his son in the sphere of faith. The NASB translation **in the faith** refers to the objective body of the Christian faith. Both senses are possible, and consistent with Paul's usage elsewhere.

The phrase **true child in the faith** gives insight into Timothy's character. Paul sets Timothy up as an example of what a true child in the faith is like. His authenticity is thus verified, and the Ephesian church called to follow his example. Five characteristics implied in this opening section marked Timothy as a true child in the faith. Examining them provides a brief overview of the epistle.



## SAVING FAITH

It is obviously impossible to be a true child in the faith without experiencing divine salvation in Jesus Christ. Paul testifies throughout the epistle to the genuineness of Timothy's conversion. In 1:1-2, he suggests through the use of the plural pronouns that Timothy has the same God and the same Christ as he does (cf. 4:10). In 6:11, Paul calls him "you man of God," then exhorts him to "fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called, and you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses" (6:12). Timothy was not only called to eternal life by God, but also publicly professed his faith in Christ. Unmistakable affirmation of Timothy's salvation comes in 2 Timothy 1:5, where Paul speaks of his "sincere faith."

The circumstances of Timothy's conversion are not recorded in Scripture. It is likely connected, however, with the ministry of Paul and Barnabas in Lystra (Timothy's hometown) on the first missionary journey (Acts 14:6-23). After seeing Paul heal a lame man, the people decided he and Barnabas were gods, and attempted to sacrifice to them. Shortly afterward, however, some of Paul's Jewish opponents from nearby cities came and turned the crowds against him. They stoned Paul, dragged him out of the city, and left him for dead. Timothy, Eunice, and Lois must have been aware of those events, and may have been converted then. Timothy thus had a very dramatic introduction to Paul. When Paul revisited Lystra on his second missionary journey, he chose Timothy to minister with him.

Unfortunately, not all those associated with the church at Ephesus may have had genuine faith. Some may have questioned the deity of Christ, prompting Paul to write, "By common confession great is the mystery of godliness: He who was revealed in the flesh, was vindicated in the Spirit, beheld by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory" (3:16). No one who rejects Christ's deity can be saved. Our Lord said in John 8:24 that "unless you believe that I am He, you shall die in your sins." Salvation, according to Paul, comes from confessing Jesus as Lord and believing that God raised Him from the dead (Rom. 10:9). Evidently there were those in Ephesus not committed to those essential truths. Some, likely even among the leadership, were openly teaching false doctrine (1:3), the very thing Paul warned the Ephesian elders against (Acts 20:29-30). Such men had strayed from the truth, and had "turned aside to fruitless discussion" (1:6).

In chapter 4 Paul warns,

But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons,

by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron, men who forbid marriage and advocate abstaining from foods, which God has created to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth. (4:1-3)

Since the “later times” began with the coming of Christ (cf. 1 Peter 1:20), some in Ephesus fell short of true saving faith, believing instead demonic lies. They listened to hypocrites, with seared and deadened consciences, teaching a false asceticism.

According to 6:20-21, some at Ephesus had fallen prey to “worldly and empty chatter and the opposing arguments of what is falsely called ‘knowledge.’” As a result, they had “gone astray from the faith.” They had missed the mark regarding saving faith, and were lost.

Timothy’s genuine faith stood out in sharp contrast with the false faith of many at Ephesus.

#### CONTINUING OBEDIENCE

The New Testament teaches repeatedly that the hallmark of a true believer is a life-pattern of obedience. Our Lord said in John 14:15, “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments” (cf. vv. 21, 23). In John 8:31 He told those who had professed faith in Him, “If you abide in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine.” Paul wrote in Ephesians 2:10, “We are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” Good works are not the grounds of salvation, but the evidence of it. As Martin Luther put it, “Good works do not make a good man, but a good man does good works” (“The Freedom of a Christian,” in John Dillenberger, ed., *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings* [Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1961], 69).

The pattern of Timothy’s life was obedience. When Paul returned to Lystra on his second missionary voyage, he found that Timothy was “well spoken of by the brethren who were in Lystra and Iconium” (Acts 16:2). Paul testified of Timothy’s loyal devotion in 4:6: “In pointing out these things to the brethren, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, constantly nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound doctrine which you have been following.”

Others at Ephesus did not have that pattern of continual obedience. In 1:19 Paul writes of those who, having rejected “faith and a good conscience,” had “suffered shipwreck in regard to their faith.” They had started on the right course, but had been lost before they reached safe harbor.

In chapter 5, Paul advises younger widows to remarry, because “some have already turned aside to follow Satan” (5:15). Such women exemplified the truth of 1 John 2:19, “They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, in order that it might be shown that they all are not of us.”

In chapter 6, Timothy was told to warn those who pursued riches that

those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith, and pierced themselves with many a pang. (6:9-10)

Timothy’s unwavering obedience was truly “an example of those who believe” (4:12). He had been a persevering believer in a church riddled with defectors.

#### HUMBLE SERVICE

A true child in the faith is a servant. Paul described the conversion of the Thessalonians in these words: “you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God” (1 Thess. 1:9). The Christian life is to be lived as a stewardship of service to the sovereign lordship of Jesus Christ. The disciples left everything to follow and serve Jesus (Matt. 19:27). True salvation is marked by a servant’s heart.

Humble service characterized Timothy’s life. At Paul’s urging, he willingly remained in the difficult post at Ephesus (1:3). Although in his late teens or early twenties at the time, he endured circumcision to better serve with Paul (Acts 16:3). As already noted, he served Paul for many years, through difficult circumstances. No wonder, then, that Paul called him “my fellow worker” (Rom. 16:21). There is no higher praise.

There were others at Ephesus who were not interested in humble service. Paul warned in 3:6 against making a recent convert an elder because of the danger of pride. Apparently some in the Ephesian assembly sought leadership roles only to exalt themselves (1:6-7). Those elders marked by humble, diligent service were to be rewarded (5:17). Those who proudly continued in sin were to be publicly confronted (5:19-20). The false teachers at Ephesus were characterized by conceit, not humility (6:4).

Timothy's humble service made him a fitting heir to the unselfish, sacrificial apostle himself.

#### SOUND DOCTRINE

A true child in the faith will adhere to sound doctrine. Jesus said to the Pharisees, "He who is of God hears the words of God; for this reason you do not hear them, because you are not of God" (John 8:47). The early church devoted itself to the apostles' teaching (Acts 2:42).

Timothy was a student and a teacher of sound doctrine. He was "constantly nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound doctrine" which he had been following (4:6). Paul exhorted Timothy to teach the truths he had learned (4:11; 6:2), confident that Timothy was doctrinally sound.

Ephesus was plagued by false teachers. Some had turned aside from the truth to fruitless discussion (1:6). They presumed to be teachers of the law, though they did not understand it (1:7). Paul disciplined two of them, Hymenaeus and Alexander (1:20). Paul describes the false teaching at Ephesus as "worldly fables fit only for old women" (4:7), "disputes about words, out of which arise envy, strife, abusive language, evil suspicions" (6:4). Its perpetrators were conceited and understood nothing (6:4).

In contrast to the false teachers, Paul was confident of Timothy's orthodoxy. He trusted Timothy to "give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching" until he arrived in Ephesus (4:13).

#### COURAGEOUS CONVICTION

Those who make an impact for the cause of Christ must have the courage of their convictions. Any dead fish can float downstream; it takes a live one to fight the current. Strong conviction comes from spiritual maturity and knowledge of the Word, and is an essential element in any effective ministry.

Timothy was to be a fighter. Paul put him in Ephesus to "instruct certain men not to teach strange doctrines" (1:3). He was to "fight the good fight" (1:18), and guard what had been entrusted to him (6:20).

Many in the Ephesian congregation lacked the convictions of their pastor. They were compromisers. Such men were not qualified to be elders (3:2), or deacons (3:10), since they were not above reproach. Some of the younger widows were in danger of renegeing on their commitment to Christ (5:11-12). Still others in the congregation had com-

promised with money and “pierced themselves with many a pang” (6:10).

In contrast, Timothy maintained his convictions, even when that cost him his life. According to tradition, he was martyred in Ephesus some thirty years later for opposing the worship of the goddess Diana (Artemis; Acts 19:24, 27-28, 34-35). He “[held] fast the beginning of [his] assurance firm until the end” (Heb. 3:14).

#### THE SALUTATION

**Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.** (1:2b)

**Grace** and **peace** is the familiar Pauline greeting, appearing in all of his epistles. Only here and in 2 Tim. 1:2 does he add **mercy**. Timothy would need all three in dealing with the situation at Ephesus. **Grace** refers to God’s undeserved favor, love, and forgiveness that frees sinners from the consequences of sin. **Mercy** frees us not from the consequences of sin, but from the misery that accompanies it. **Peace** is the result of grace and mercy. It refers not only to harmony with God but also to tranquility of soul. Grace, mercy, and peace are needed throughout the Christian life, not merely at salvation.

Once again Paul links **God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord**, thus stressing Christ’s deity and equality with the Father. As already noted, part of the heresy at Ephesus involved a rejection of Christ’s deity.

In these two short, seemingly perfunctory verses, Paul reveals his passion for the Ephesian church, a passion kindled during his three years of ministry there. To help Timothy combat the heresy threatening the church, he throws the full weight of his apostolic authority behind him. He also asks God to pour out on Timothy, his true child in the faith, the grace, mercy, and peace he needs to handle the situation. These verses thus serve as a fitting introduction to this important letter.

THE MACARTHUR  
NEW TESTAMENT  
COMMENTARY

**2 TIMOTHY**

*John MacArthur*

MOODY PUBLISHERS/CHICAGO

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# Motivating a Spiritual Son

## 2 Timothy 1:1-5

# 1

**Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, according to the promise of life in Christ Jesus, to Timothy, my beloved son: Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.**

**I thank God, whom I serve with a clear conscience the way my forefathers did, as I constantly remember you in my prayers night and day, longing to see you, even as I recall your tears, so that I may be filled with joy. For I am mindful of the sincere faith within you, which first dwelt in your grandmother Lois, and your mother Eunice, and I am sure that it is in you as well. (1:1-5)**

As mentioned in the Introduction, Paul's primary instruction to Timothy begins with verse 6 of chapter 1. The first five verses are motivational and constitute a beautiful and moving salutation to the apostle's **beloved son** in the faith. Yet even these very personal comments reflect principles pertinent not only to Paul's discipling of Timothy but also to Christian parents, Sunday school teachers, youth leaders, pastors, counselors, neighbors, and friends—to any believer who is helping another grow toward maturity in Jesus Christ and effectiveness in ministry.



These six implicit, but easily discernable, principles of motivation are: authority (1:1-2a), altruism (v. 2b), appreciation (v. 3a), appeal (v. 3b), affection (v. 4), and affirmation (v. 5).

#### AUTHORITY

**Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, according to the promise of life in Christ Jesus, to Timothy, my beloved son: (1:1-2a)**

The first principle of godly and successful motivation is that of authority, as seen in the opening declaration by **Paul** that he was **an apostle of Christ Jesus**. As explained in the Introduction, Paul's apostleship already was well understood by Timothy. It is mentioned here by way of reminder that, despite their close and loving relationship, Paul ranked above Timothy in spiritual authority because he brought the Word of the Lord and was writing in that capacity.

Intimacy does not preclude authority. The relationship of love that parents have with their children does not preclude their authority over their children. A parent-child relationship of love without authority is doomed to tragedy for the entire family. No matter how cordial a working relationship may exist, a business cannot succeed if employees refuse to recognize and submit to the employer's authority over them.

Although they shared a deep friendship, Paul's loving salutation to Timothy carried the full weight of his apostleship. *Apostolos* (**apostle**) literally means one who is sent out, "a messenger," as it is sometimes translated (see, e.g., 2 Cor. 8:23; Phil. 2:25). But in the New Testament it more commonly carries the connotation of ambassador, a representative who carries with him the authority of the one he represents. It is used in that sense of the twelve disciples Jesus called during His earthly ministry (Luke 6:13; 9:10) and of Paul, whom Christ called from heaven after His ascension (see Acts 9:3-15; 22:6-14; 26:13-18). The Lord used the verb form of *Himself*, as "Jesus Christ whom Thou [the Father] hast sent [*apostellō*]" (John 17:3), and in the book of Hebrews Jesus is called "the Apostle and High Priest of our confession" (3:1).

As **an apostle of Jesus Christ**, Paul stood in the place of Christ and spoke the Word of Christ, and he did so **by the will of God** the Almighty Father. Paul writes Timothy not merely as a dear friend but as a divinely commissioned ambassador of God the Father and God the Son. He is not offering brotherly counsel but declaring divine truth with firm authority.

He does so **according to**, meaning “in conformity to,” the gospel, here called **the promise of life in Christ Jesus**. Paul’s calling to serve the will of God as a messenger of the Savior was to be discharged by proclaiming the saving good news that those who are dead in sin can find life **in Christ Jesus**. A favored phrase of Paul was **in Christ Jesus**, which signified his own and every believer’s union with our Lord and Savior through participation in His death, resurrection, and eternal life. Jesus is Himself “the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6), and He gives the divine **promise** that “whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:16) and “have it abundantly” (10:10). Those who claim that promise in faith can claim with Paul that Christ “is our life” (Col. 3:4, emphasis added).

Every worthy father deeply desires an unbreakable and rich relationship with his children. In the same way, Paul not only desired but experienced and expressed the intimacy of bonding love that he shared with **Timothy, his beloved son**. And just as this intimacy did not preclude authority, neither did authority preclude intimacy. As a loving spiritual father, Paul spoke with apostolic authority to his son in the faith. That authority gave Timothy a strong incentive for obedience.

#### ALTRUISM

### **Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord. (1:2b)**

Although commonly expressed as a greeting, these were not just words but the expression of a genuine desire for God’s best to be reality in the young preacher’s life. Timothy was to be motivated by Paul’s altruism, his unselfish concern for and devotion to the welfare of others. Like every believer, his young protege was saved by divine **grace**, the unmerited favor of God’s providing forgiveness and justification. The apostle wanted his son in the faith to continually live in divine **mercy**, the inexpressible blessing of deliverance from the misery that sin deserves and creates. He also wanted Timothy to continue in full **peace** of mind and heart, the inner tranquillity produced by divine grace and mercy. He wanted Timothy to have the best that **God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord** offer to redeemed sinners: grace to cover sin, mercy to overrule misery, and peace to dominate life.

If we want to truly motivate other believers, we must, like Paul, have genuine, loving, and unqualified concern for their full spiritual blessing. In addition to their recognizing our authority under God, we want our brothers and sisters in Christ to know that they are loved by us without reservation. This, too, elicits response.

## APPRECIATION

**I thank God, whom I serve with a clear conscience the way my forefathers did, (1:3a)**

A third principle of godly and successful motivation is appreciation. Not only was Paul a blessing to Timothy, but Timothy was a blessing to Paul. **I thank God** for you, the apostle assured him, saying in effect, "I am grateful for what **God** has done for me through you." While Paul was incarcerated in the dark, damp, dangerous, filthy, and stinking Roman prison, he nevertheless rejoiced that the Lord had given him the privilege of knowing and disciplining Timothy. He was not bitter or resentful. He had no anger or hatred for those who placed him in prison or for the hardened and brutal criminals who were beside him. He did not lament the unjust and cruel execution he knew soon awaited him. His thoughts were on his sovereign **God** and on memories of his beloved son in the spirit, with whom he had spent so many blessed hours in mutual service of **God** and whom he likely would never see again in the flesh. Only the Lord could give such an unbelievably beautiful perspective!

To be appreciated, encouraged, and told that God has wonderful plans for them is a great motivation for young men and women who serve the Lord, and Paul's statement of appreciation for Timothy must have given that young servant of the Lord great confidence. Timothy knew Paul's words were not empty. First of all, he knew that Paul's integrity would not allow him to flatter. Timothy also was well aware that he and Paul had come to know each other intimately in their many years together. They had traveled together, eaten together, ministered together, and doubtless suffered together for the sake of the gospel. At the time this letter was written, Paul doubtless knew Timothy better than any other person.

The appreciation that Paul spoke from his own heart must therefore have profoundly touched Timothy and placed on him a great sense of responsibility to live up to the high expectations of his spiritual mentor. The young disciple knew that this dear friend and peerless saint in the cause of Christ was facing imminent death. Yet, even during his last painful and uncertain hours, he thanked God and held up before Him a young pastor who, although incomparably trained in the gospel, had yet to fully prove himself in the difficult areas of the Lord's service.

In the midst of unimaginable physical misery, Paul not only continued to praise God but did so with deep gratitude from a guiltless mind and heart. With full conviction and truthfulness he could testify, "**I serve the Lord and continually stand before Him with a clear conscience the way my forefathers did.**" *Latreō* (serve) was sometimes

used of godly worship or even priestly service. Standing falsely accused by the Jewish leaders before Felix, the Roman governor in Caesarea, Paul said, “According to the Way which they call a sect I do serve [*latreuō*] the God of our fathers” (Acts 24:14). Speaking of true children of God, whether Jew or Gentile, Paul assured the Philippian believers: “We are the true circumcision, who worship [*latreuō*] in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh” (Phil. 3:3).

As the aging apostle stood near death, he could testify that his **conscience** did not accuse or condemn him. His guilt was forgiven, and his devotion was undivided. “After careful self-examination,” he said, in effect, “I can say with sincerity that, although I am not perfect, I am living in holiness before the Lord.” He wanted Timothy to have no doubt that he endured his present physical afflictions, as he had countless others, because of his unswerving faithfulness to the Lord, not as a consequence of unfaithful, ungodly living.

Although even the most spiritual believer cannot know his own heart with complete certainty or understanding, it not only is possible but expected that, like Paul, every Christian have a **clear conscience**. This was a vital matter to Paul, who often refers to his conscience. When defending himself against the lying attacks he experienced in Corinth, he responded with an appeal to the highest human court, the conscience. His defense was: “For our proud confidence is this, the testimony of our conscience, that in holiness and godly sincerity, not in fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God, we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you” (2 Cor. 1:12; cf. Acts 23:1).

In his first letter to Timothy he wrote, “The goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith” (1 Tim. 1:5), and we are to hold “to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience” (3:9). In that same epistle he said that “the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron” (4:1-2). To continually reject God’s truth causes the conscience to become progressively less sensitive to sin, as if covered with layers of unspiritual scar tissue. Paul’s conscience was very clear and very sensitive, and he responded readily to its convicting voice.

Paul does not explain whom he meant by **forefathers**, but he obviously was speaking of godly men who had lived in former times. Unlike Timothy, Paul had no godly heritage from his immediate family. He had an impressive *religious* heritage, but he utterly discounted that as so much rubbish (Phil. 3:4-8). It therefore seems more probable that he was referring to the patriarchs, prophets, and other Old Testament saints. It is also possible that he had in mind the other apostles and the

many other godly believers in the early church who preceded him in faith.

#### APPEAL

**as I constantly remember you in my prayers night and day, (1:3b)**

A fourth element of motivation was Paul's constant appeal to the Lord on Timothy's behalf. It is hard to imagine the strength and encouragement that Paul's intercession gave to his young friend as he ministered in Ephesus and other parts of Asia Minor without Paul's companionship.

The adverb *adialeiptōs* (**constantly**) refers to that which is unceasing, without interruption. We can be sure that Paul's saying **I constantly remember you** was not hyperbole. The apostle had used the same word in exhorting Thessalonian believers to "pray *without ceasing*" (1 Thess. 5:17, emphasis added), and he was himself accustomed to doing no less. He already had assured those believers of his unceasing prayers and concern for them (1:2-3). Using the same word, he assured the church at Rome that "God, whom I serve in my spirit in the preaching of the gospel of His Son, is my witness as to how *unceasingly* I make mention of you, always in my prayers" (Rom. 1:9-10, emphasis added). He gave similar assurance to believers in Corinth (1 Cor. 1:4), in Philippi (Phil. 1:3-4), in Colossae (Col. 1:3), and to his dear friend Philemon (Philem. 4).

**Prayers** is from *deēsis*, which in the New Testament always carries the idea of genuine entreaty and supplication before God. It was used by the angel who assured the godly father of John the Baptist, "Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your petition [*deēsis*] has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will give him the name John" (Luke 1:13). Later in that gospel the word is used of the disciples of John the Baptist, who were said to "often fast and offer prayers" (5:33). It was used by Paul of his "prayer to God" for the salvation of his fellow Israelites (Rom. 10:1) and by James of "the effective prayer of a righteous man [which] can accomplish much" (James 5:16).

At first glance, the reference to **night and day** seems redundant and somewhat inappropriate. It seems redundant because, by definition, **constantly** means around-the-clock, and inappropriate because it is likely that Paul and his fellow prisoners could not distinguish one hour from another in that dungeon. But he doubtless used the phrase **night and day** in the way it is often used today, as a figure of speech expressing continuity. He simply wanted to reinforce his devotion to Timothy.

There is no better way to motivate other believers to consider their accountability to be faithful and to move their hearts in service of

Christ than to continually hold them up before the Lord in prayer—and to tell them of it.

#### AFFECTION

**longing to see you, even as I recall your tears, so that I may be filled with joy. (1:4)**

A fifth principle for motivating other believers, especially those we may be discipling, is to love them and to express genuine affection for them. Paul greatly missed Timothy's companionship and was **longing to see** him. **Longing** is from *epipotheō*, a verb denoting intense desire or yearning for. Later in the letter he reflects the same aching desire, imploring Timothy, "Make every effort to come to me soon" (4:9), and "When you come bring the cloak which I left at Troas with Carpus . . . [and] make every effort to come before winter" (vv. 13, 21).

**I recall your tears**, the apostle says, perhaps referring to their time of last parting, following a brief visit to Ephesus sometime after writing his first letter to Timothy and before he was arrested at Nicopolis and taken prisoner to Rome. Paul had a similar bond with the elders in Ephesus. When they came out to meet him on the beach near Miletus, "he knelt down and prayed with them all. And they began to weep aloud and embraced Paul, and repeatedly kissed him, grieving especially over the word which he had spoken, that they should see his face no more" (Acts 20:36-38).

Although he doubtless realized he might never see Timothy again, even the remote prospect of such a reunion **filled Paul with joy**. Knowing the apostle's deep love and yearning to see him again surely filled Timothy with joy as well and inspired still greater commitment to follow in the footsteps of his beloved teacher and friend.

#### AFFIRMATION

**For I am mindful of the sincere faith within you, which first dwelt in your grandmother Lois, and your mother Eunice, and I am sure that it is in you as well. (1:5)**

The final principle of motivation Paul alludes to is that of affirmation. In the two previous verses Paul mentions his remembering Timothy in prayer and recalling his tears. Now again he reflects on their intimate association, this time being **mindful of the sincere faith within** Timothy.

*Anupokritos* (**sincere**) is a compound word, composed of a negative prefix attached to *hupokritēs*, from which we get the obviously related English word *hypocrite*. Timothy's **faith** was completely genuine, unhypocritical, without pretense or deceit. In his previous letter to Timothy, Paul had written, "The goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere [*anupokritos*] faith" (1 Tim. 1:5). In his second letter to the church at Corinth, Paul used the term to describe his "*genuine love*" (2 Cor. 6:6, emphasis added). Peter used it in his admonition to all believers scattered throughout the Roman Empire: "Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a *sincere love* of the brethren, fervently love one another from the heart" (1 Peter 1:22, emphasis added). James used it as the final qualification of "the wisdom from above [which] is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, *without hypocrisy*" (James 3:17, emphasis added).

Timothy had a heritage of **sincere faith within [him], which first dwelt in [his] grandmother Lois, and [his] mother Eunice**. The reference to **Lois and Eunice** suggests that Paul knew those women personally and perhaps was instrumental, along with Barnabas, in winning them to Christ during his first missionary journey, which had taken him through Timothy's home area of Galatia (see Acts 13:13-14:21). They probably were Jewish believers under the Old Covenant who immediately received Jesus as their Messiah, Savior, and Lord when they first heard the gospel from the lips of Paul. By the time of Paul's second journey, the women had led their grandson and son to the Lord, and he already had become "well spoken of by the brethren who were in Lystra and Iconium" (Acts 16:2). Timothy was Paul's indirect son in the faith who had come to belief through the witness of his **grandmother Lois** and his **mother Eunice**, who had been led to faith directly by the apostle. Through them, he had "from childhood . . . known the sacred writings which are able to give [him] the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 3:15).

Some years ago I was involved in a discussion regarding the choice of a man to take up the leadership of a well-known Christian organization. In looking over the list of prospects, I commented that it was interesting that every one of those men had a godly pastor for a father. The Lord has, of course, raised up many faithful leaders, including Paul, from ungodly and even godless families. But a high percentage of the great men throughout church history have come from godly homes. Timothy's father was an unbelieving Gentile (Acts 16:3), but his mother and grandmother were believers of great godliness. Paul commends them for the immense influence for good they had on Timothy and for the **sincere faith** that the apostle was **sure** to be **in** Timothy as well.



THE MACARTHUR  
NEW TESTAMENT  
COMMENTARY

**TITUS**

*John MacArthur*

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# Commitments of a Faithful Leader

(Titus 1:1–4)

# 1

**Paul, a bond-servant of God, and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the faith of those chosen of God and the knowledge of the truth which is according to godliness, in the hope of eternal life, which God, who cannot lie, promised long ages ago, but at the proper time manifested, even His word, in the proclamation with which I was entrusted according to the commandment of God our Savior; to Titus, my true child in a common faith: grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Savior. (1:1–4)**

The first four verses of this letter, which form the salutation, comprise one long, involved, and poignant sentence. The greeting is somewhat more formal than those in either letter to Timothy, but the purpose of all three letters was much the same—to encourage and strengthen a young pastor who had succeeded the apostle in a difficult ministry. As will become apparent throughout this epistle, the emphasis is on God’s saving work (both God and Christ are repeatedly called Savior: 1:3, 4; 2:10,13; 3:4, 6). The opening greeting sets this theme by centering on the nature of gospel ministry.

Because Paul had spent much less time himself in founding and establishing the churches on the island of Crete than he had spent with

the single congregation in Ephesus (where Timothy now pastored), it was particularly important that believers in the Cretan churches understood that Titus was not operating on his own but ministered with the designated authority of Paul. Titus was the direct legate, envoy, or ambassador of the apostle, sent to Crete to strengthen the churches for the purpose of effective evangelism in that pagan culture. Anyone, therefore, who attacked the authority and teaching of Titus would be attacking the divinely delegated authority and teaching of Paul himself.

But Paul's opening statement about himself (one of the clearest representations of his ministry anywhere in the New Testament) is much more than a dogmatic declaration of apostolic authority. Although he had deep personal feelings and even certain personal objectives in ministry—such as his desire to bring the gospel to Bithynia (Acts 16:7) and to Spain (Rom. 15:24)—he did not write under the impetus of emotion or personal desire, much less of impulse, but under the compulsion of divinely revealed absolutes from the Lord in the power of the Spirit. God, who desires to save sinners, wanted to prepare Titus for the building of congregations able to reach the lost.

In this rich salutation to Titus, Paul reveals five core features that guided his living and his service to the Lord, foundational principles on which the service of every dedicated leader in Christ's church must be built.

### COMMITTED TO GOD'S MASTERY

#### **Paul, a bond-servant of God, and an apostle of Jesus Christ, (1:1a)**

The first feature is that of commitment to God's mastery. Above all else, the apostle saw himself as a man totally under divine authority, as expressed in the phrase **a bond-servant of God**.

The apostle Paul's Hebrew name was Saul, after the first king of Israel. Soon after his miraculous conversion and calling by Christ, however, he came to be known exclusively by his Greek name, *Paulos* (**Paul**).

With full truthfulness, **Paul** could have identified himself as a brilliant scholar, a highly educated Jewish leader who also was learned in Greek literature and philosophy. He could have flaunted his inherited Roman citizenship, an extremely valuable advantage in that day. He could have boasted of his unique calling as apostle to the Gentiles, who was granted full privilege and authority alongside the Twelve. He could have boasted of being "caught up to the third heaven, . . . into Paradise" (2 Cor. 12:2, 4), of his gift of miracles, and of being chosen as the human author of a great part of the Scriptures

of the new covenant. He chose, rather, to identify himself foremost as a **bond-servant of God**.

*Doulos* (**bond-servant**) refers to the most servile person in the culture of Paul's day and is often translated "slave." Paul was in complete, but willing, bondage to **God**. He had no life that he called his own, no will of his own, purpose of his own, or plan of his own. All was subject to his Lord. In every thought, every breath, and every effort he was under the mastery of **God**.

Because Paul refers to himself as a **bond-servant of God** only here—at all other times referring to himself as a bond-servant of *Christ* (see, e.g., Rom. 1:1; Gal. 1:10; Phil. 1:1)—he may have intended to place himself alongside Old Testament men of God. John calls Moses "the bond-servant of God" (Rev. 15:3), and the Lord Himself spoke of "Moses My servant" (Josh. 1:2). His successor, Joshua, is called "the servant of the Lord" (Josh. 24:29). Amos declared, "Surely the Lord God does nothing unless He reveals His secret counsel to His servants the prophets" (Amos 3:7). Through Jeremiah, God said, "Since the day that your fathers came out of the land of Egypt until this day, I have sent you all My servants the prophets" (Jer. 7:25).

Because many of the false teachers in the churches on Crete were Judaizers, "those of the circumcision" (Titus 1:10; cf. v. 14), Paul may have desired to affirm his authority as the **bond-servant of Yahweh** (Jehovah), the covenant name of the **God** of Israel.

There is a general sense in which every believer in the Lord Jesus Christ has "been freed from sin and enslaved to God," a bondage that results "in sanctification, and the outcome, eternal life" (Rom. 6:22). To be a Christian is to be a **bond-servant of God**. We are not our own but "have been bought with a price" (1 Cor. 6:20), being "redeemed [not] with perishable things like silver or gold,...but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ" (1 Pet. 1:18–19). And because we no longer belong to ourselves, we "should no longer live for [ourselves], but for Him who died and rose again on [our] behalf" (2 Cor. 5:15).

Paul's specific duty to God was to fulfill his servanthood by being **an apostle of Jesus Christ** (cf., e.g., Rom. 1:1; 1 Cor. 1:1; 2 Cor. 1:1; Eph. 1:1). Even as he neared the end of an extraordinarily blessed and fruitful life, he was still driven by the desire to be an obedient bond-servant. His apostleship, in fact, had brought increased duties of servanthood, demanding greater faithfulness, greater submission, and often greater sacrifice.

Nevertheless, Paul counted his bondage to God and his escalating suffering to be a blessing. He testified to believers at Philippi that "even if I am being poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I rejoice and share my joy with you all" (Phil. 2:17).

He reminded the elders from Ephesus, “I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, in order that I may finish my course, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God” (Acts 20:24).

*Apostolos* (**apostle**) carries the basic meaning of “messenger” and was sometimes used of even the lowliest person who carried a message on behalf of someone else. But the term was used most often of a special messenger, a type of ambassador, who was sent with a specific message and spoke with the authority of the one who sent him. The authority of the message, therefore, did not derive from the messenger but from the sender.

Above all things, Paul was an ambassador of his divine Lord and Savior, **Jesus Christ** (cf. Acts 9:15–16; 22:14–15; 26:15–18). Just as calling himself a **bond-servant of God** may have been meant to establish his authority with Jews in the churches on Crete, his referring to himself as **an apostle of Jesus Christ** may have been meant to establish his authority with Gentiles in the churches there.

All effective, fruitful, and genuinely spiritual leaders in Christ’s church have a deep awareness that they are under divine authority. That awareness becomes the controlling reality of their lives. They do not seek to fulfill personal agendas, create personal fame, or build personal empires. They are content and feel honored for the privilege of being wholly subject to the Master who has chosen and sent them.

### COMMITTED TO GOD’S MISSION

**for the faith of those chosen of God and the knowledge of the truth which is according to godliness, in the hope of eternal life, (1:1b–2a)**

Because of Paul’s devotion to God’s mastery, he had unswerving commitment to God’s mission. It is the same mission that binds every preacher and teacher and, in a more general sense, every church leader and even every believer. As seen in this text, that mission includes evangelization, edification, and encouragement.

### EVANGELIZATION

**for the faith of those chosen of God (1:1b)**

Paul first recognized his responsibility to help bring God’s elect, **those** who are **chosen of God**, to saving **faith** in Jesus Christ. About

a year after he wrote this letter, the apostle told Timothy, “I endure all things for the sake of those who are chosen, that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus and with it eternal glory” (2 Tim. 2:10). Paul was called as a divine bond-servant and apostle to proclaim the message of the gospel in order that the elect might be brought by the Holy Spirit to **faith**, which is required to activate, as it were, their election by **God**. As he explained to believers in Rome, “Faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17).

Faith actuates justification, God’s gracious act by which He considers and declares as righteous those who have placed their trust in His Son, Jesus Christ. “To the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness” (Rom. 4:5). Yet even “faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe . . . [is] a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 3:22, 24). “By grace you have been saved through faith,” the apostle explains in his letter to the Ephesian church; “and [even] that [faith is] not of yourselves, it is the gift of God” (Eph. 2:8).

Paul himself rejoiced in his own reception of this grace when he wrote that he was found in Christ “not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith” (Phil. 3:9). All the other aspects of salvation attend this justification by faith—including regeneration and conversion, by which the believer not only is declared righteous but is transformed into a new creature (2 Cor. 5:17).

We sometimes hear even evangelical preachers and teachers say that the simple biblical gospel is not “relevant” to modern man and needs to be bolstered and adorned by various cultural adaptations to make it more attractive and acceptable. But how presumptuous it is to think that an imperfect, sinful human instrument could improve on God’s own message for bringing men to Himself! When the gospel is clearly preached to those who have been chosen, at some point the Holy Spirit will awaken them and they will believe and enter into the full benefit of their election.

Even as an apostle, Paul knew that the saving **faith** that he was called to preach could not be produced or enhanced by his own wisdom, cleverness, persuasiveness, or style. In his first letter to the immature and worldly church in Corinth, he reminded them that “we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men” (1 Cor. 1:23–25). “When I came to you, brethren,” he added a few verses later, “I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the

testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:1–2). The simple but infinitely powerful truth of the gospel of “Jesus Christ, and Him crucified” will never fail to elicit saving **faith** at the appropriate time in **those chosen by God**. The reality of divine election is all through the New Testament. It is the foundation of the whole building of the redeemed.

Jesus told the Twelve, “You did not choose Me, but I chose you, and appointed you” (John 15:16). Because Jews were the original chosen people of God to evangelize the nations under the old covenant, “It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first,” Paul and Barnabas told unbelieving Jews in Pisidian Antioch. But “since you repudiate” the gospel, they continued, “and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles. For thus the Lord has commanded us, ‘I have placed You as a light for the Gentiles, that You should bring salvation to the end of the earth.’ And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed” (Acts 13:46–48). The church, taken from all nations (not excluding individual Jews), has replaced Israel as God’s chosen people until “the fulness of the Gentiles” has been completed and Israel is restored (Rom. 11:25–27). God has chosen sinners from all nations to save and to bring to Himself eternally, a vast gathering of elect individuals.

As divine sovereign of the universe He created, God is able to say with perfect justice and righteousness, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion” (Rom. 9:15; cf. v. 18). To those who ask, “Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?” the apostle replies, “Who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, ‘Why did you make me like this,’ will it? Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use, and another for common use?” (Rom. 9:19–21).

Paul reminded believers in Ephesus that God “chose us in [Christ] before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will” (Eph. 1:4–5). To believers in Thessalonica he said, “God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth” (2 Thess. 2:13). He told Timothy, “Join with me in suffering for the gospel according to the power of God, who has saved us, and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity” (2 Tim. 1:8–9).

Peter addressed his first letter “to those who reside as aliens, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia,

who are chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit” (1 Pet. 1:1–2). Later in that letter he refers to them as “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession” (1 Pet. 2:9). From eternity past, every believer’s name has been “written in the Lamb’s book of life” (Rev. 21:27).

The duty of evangelization can be summarized as preaching the gospel clearly, because of which the Holy Spirit will sovereignly and miraculously cause the elect to believe and be saved. That is the priority ministry of all who are servants of God and messengers of Jesus Christ.

#### EDIFICATION

### **and the knowledge of the truth which is according to godliness, (1:1c)**

Paul’s second responsibility in fulfilling his commitment to God’s mission was to edify those who believed by teaching them the full counsel of God’s Word so that they might be sanctified by **the knowledge of the truth**.

**Knowledge** translates *epignōsis*, which refers to the clear perception of a **truth**. Paul has in mind saving **truth**, the truth of the gospel that leads to salvation. It is that aspect of the truth that he mentions in his first letter to Timothy, in which he assures us that “God our Savior... desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim. 2:3–4; 2 Tim. 2:25). By contrast, a person who does not genuinely seek God or His way of salvation is “always learning [but] never able to come to the knowledge of the truth” that saves (2 Tim. 3:7).

Upon salvation, the believer is given an appetite for this **truth**, which causes him to desire to know more and to grow and mature **according to godliness**. Saving **truth** leads through salvation to sanctification as it produces increasing **godliness**, without which salvation cannot be considered genuine. **Godliness** is the manifestation of the Spirit’s work of sanctification. “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men,” Paul later explains, “instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age” (Titus 2:11–12; 1 Tim. 4:7–8). Divine **truth** and **godliness** are inextricably related. No matter how sincere our intentions might be, we cannot obey God’s will if we do not know what it is. We cannot be godly if we do not know what God is like and what He expects of those who belong to Him.



Paul told the Ephesian elders that it was the Word that would build them up (Acts 20:32). Jesus summed up the relation between the truth and sanctification when He said to His Father, “Sanctify them in the truth; Thy word is truth” (John 17:17).

There is therefore no way to exaggerate the importance of sound doctrine. “If anyone advocates a different doctrine and does not agree with sound words, those of our Lord Jesus Christ, and with the doctrine conforming to godliness, he is conceited and understands nothing” (1 Tim. 6:3–4). “God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in sanctification,” Paul declares (1 Thess. 4:7). As always, God’s grace provides that which His righteousness demands. “His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the *true knowledge* of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence” (2 Pet. 1:3, emphasis added).

D. Edmond Hiebert writes, “There is an intimate connection between truth and godliness. A vital possession of truth is inconsistent with irreverence. . . . Real truth never deviates from the path of piety. A profession of the truth which allows an individual to live in ungodliness is a spurious profession” (*Titus and Philemon* [Chicago: Moody, 1957], p. 21).

In his first letter, Peter admonishes: “Therefore, putting aside all malice and all guile and hypocrisy and envy and all slander, like newborn babes, long for the pure milk of the word, that by it you may grow in respect to salvation, if you have tasted the kindness of the Lord” (1 Pet. 2:1–3). In his second letter, he calls us to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 3:18). Every pastor and teacher has divine responsibility “for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fulness of Christ” (Eph. 4:11–13).

Like 1 and 2 Timothy, the epistle of Titus contains numerous warnings against false teachers and false teaching. In addition to being proved wrong when held against the truths of Scripture, false teaching also is exposed by the ungodliness that inevitably follows in its wake. “Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing,” Jesus warned, “but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes, nor figs from thistles, are they? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit; but the bad tree bears bad fruit” (Matt. 7:15–17). Both truth and falsehood can be discerned by what they produce. God’s **truth** produces **godliness**. The transformation wrought through saving faith is visibly manifest in holy conduct.

As noted above, God “chose us in [Christ] before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him” (Eph. 1:4). God’s very purpose for choosing and saving us is to make us like Himself—holy, pure, blameless, righteous, and perfect. The evidence of our election is found in our justification. The evidence of our justification is found in our sanctification. And one day the evidence of our sanctification will be manifested in our glorification.

The spiritual leader and messenger of Christ is devoted to proclaiming the Word, which by the Spirit edifies the believer and trains him in godliness.

## ENCOURAGEMENT

### in the hope of eternal life, (1:2a)

Paul’s third responsibility in fulfilling his commitment to God’s mission was to bring biblical encouragement to believers, based on their divinely guaranteed **hope of eternal life**, of one day being glorified, wholly perfected in Christ’s own righteousness. That is the marvelous encouragement of **hope** about which every minister of God can assure God’s people and, in fact, all of God’s people can assure one another. Later in this letter he speaks of our “blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus” (2:13) and still later of our “being justified by His grace [that] we might be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life” (3:7).

Paul is not speaking of a wistful desire for something that is possible but uncertain. **The hope of eternal life** is the believer’s deepest longing for that which is affirmed and unalterably guaranteed by God’s own Word. Jesus will raise up His own on the last day, and no one who belongs to God will fall short of that promise (see John 6:37–40). The “Holy Spirit of promise” not only seals us in Jesus Christ but also is “given as a *pledge of our inheritance*, with a view to the redemption of God’s own possession, to the praise of His glory” (Eph. 1:13–14, emphasis added; cf. 2 Cor. 1:22). “For indeed while we are in this tent, we groan,” Paul reminded Corinthian believers, “being burdened, because we do not want to be unclothed, but to be clothed, in order that what is mortal may be swallowed up by [eternal] life. Now He who prepared us for this very purpose is God, who gave to us *the Spirit as a pledge*” (2 Cor. 5:4–5, emphasis added).

**Eternal life** is the pervading reality of salvation, and the **hope** of that **life** gives believers encouragement in a multitude of ways. It is an encouragement to holiness. “Beloved, now we are children of God,” John says, “and it has not appeared as yet what we shall be. We know

that, when He appears, we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him just as He is. And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure” (1 John 3:2–3).

**The hope of eternal life** gives encouragement for service. We are assured that “if any man builds upon the foundation [Jesus Christ] with gold, silver, precious stones, . . . he shall receive a reward” (1 Cor. 3:12,14). By far the greatest reward will be to hear our Master say, “Well done, good and faithful slave” (Matt. 25:21). Every believer should be able to say with Paul, “I press on in order that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. . . . I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:12, 14). The “prize” when we are called up is Christlikeness (1 John 3:2–3), and while we are on the earth it is the “goal” that we strive for (1 John 2:6).

**The hope of eternal life** also gives encouragement to endure whatever suffering we may experience for the sake of Christ. Again, every believer should be able to sincerely say with Paul, “I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, . . . that I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead” (Phil. 3:8, 10–11). We know “that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us. . . . And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, *waiting eagerly* for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body” (Rom. 8:18, 23, emphasis added). Whomever God has chosen He will justify, and whomever He justifies He will glorify and make into the image of His Son (vv. 29–30). This glorious, eternal hope transcends all temporary pain.

#### COMMITTED TO GOD’S MESSAGE

**which God, who cannot lie, promised long ages ago, but at the proper time manifested, even His word, (1:2b–3a)**

That contemplation of the content of gospel ministry leads Paul to a third foundational principle of ministry, namely, uncompromising commitment to God’s message, to divinely revealed Scripture. That commitment is an obvious corollary of the first two. Understanding of God’s sovereign mastery and mission comes exclusively through Scripture. We know about His chosen people, about His requirement of faith for salvation, about knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness,

and about the hope of eternal life only through His gracious revelation. And we know certain profound realities regarding the eternal plan of redemption of sinners because God inspired men to write down those realities.

That **God . . . cannot lie** is self-evident as well as scripturally attested. The prophet Samuel reminded the disobedient King Saul that God, “the Glory of Israel, will not lie” (1 Sam. 15:29). Because God is the source and measure of all truth, it is, by definition, “impossible for God to lie” (Heb. 6:18). Just as “whenever [the devil] speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature; for he is a liar, and the father of lies” (John 8:44), so it is that, whenever God speaks the truth, He speaks from His own nature, because He is the Father of truth.

The **God** of truth **promised long ages ago** that those whom He has chosen, those who come to faith in Him through His truth that leads to godliness, have the certain hope of eternal life. **Long ages ago** does not refer to ancient human history. It actually means “before time began.” God reiterated His plan of salvation and eternal life to such godly men as Abraham, Moses, David, and the prophets, but the original promise was made and ratified in eternity past. Our gracious God “called us with a holy calling . . . in Christ Jesus from all eternity” (2 Tim. 1:9). “He chose us in Him [Christ] before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His [eternal] will” (Eph. 1:4-5). His eternal will was manifested in His “eternal covenant [through] Jesus our Lord” (Heb. 13:20).

The plan of redemption for sinners did not come after men fell but before man was even created. The Father showed His perfect love to the Son (cf. John 17:23-24, 26) by promising Him a redeemed humanity who would serve and glorify Him forever. The Son’s role was to be the sacrifice for the sins of the elect so that they could be redeemed and brought to glory. Before God provided the marvelous promise of forgiveness and heaven to sinful mankind, He had given a promise to His beloved Son. That is the promise of which Jesus reminded the Father in His prayer on our behalf: “Father, I desire that they also, whom Thou hast given Me, be with Me where I am, in order that they may behold My glory, which Thou hast given Me; for Thou didst love Me before the foundation of the world” (John 17:24). A year or so earlier, Jesus affirmed that promise of the gift of redeemed souls when He publicly proclaimed: “All that the Father gives Me shall come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out. . . . For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him, may have eternal life; and I Myself will raise him up on the last day” (John 6:37, 40). One glorious day in eternity future, when our Lord Jesus has received the full promise of the Father to Him and all the

saved are glorified and made like Jesus to serve and praise Him forever, the Son, in a gesture of divine love, will give everything back to the Father. Paul records that future moment: “When all things are subjected to Him, then the Son Himself also will be subjected to the One who subjected all things to Him, that God may be all in all” (1 Cor. 15:28).

It is astonishing to consider that those who are redeemed are caught up in this magnificent eternal covenant that two members of the Godhead have made with each other in order to demonstrate the infinite scope of their love for each other. **At the proper time**, that is, when the Bible was being written, that eternal covenant, together with its related truths, was **manifested, even His Word**. The only source of this monumental truth, the one true message about God, the only effective way of finding Him, the only way of pleasing Him, and the only hope of being forever with Him are **manifested in His Word**.

One wonders, therefore, how a preacher or teacher who names the name of Christ can proclaim anything other than God’s own **Word**. Whatever truth we need for evangelism is found in **His Word**. That **Word** is the only seed that gives eternal life (1 Pet. 1:23). Whatever truth we need to edify believers is found in **His Word** (cf. 1 Pet. 2:1–2). All of the truth we are to teach is found in **His Word** (John 17:17; Acts 20:32). Those absolute truths and all others related to spiritual life are found there and nowhere else.

#### COMMITTED TO GOD’S MEANS

**in the proclamation with which I was entrusted according to the commandment of God our Savior; (1:3b)**

A fourth basic principle of Paul’s life and ministry was his commitment to God’s own means for fulfilling the ministry to which he was called—the **proclamation** of His complete and inerrant Word.

**Proclamation** translates *kērugma*, which was used of the message that a herald would give on behalf of the ruler or town council under whom he served. In the New Testament, this term (often rendered “preaching”) is always used of the public **proclamation** of God’s Word, which, as the apostle has just pointed out, brings men to saving faith, builds them up in divine truth, and strengthens them for godly living.

It is for that reason that expository preaching—preaching that systematically and thoroughly explains the meaning of Scripture—is the only legitimate way to preach. The preacher’s responsibility is not to create messages from his own wisdom or cleverness or to manipulate or sway his listeners by means of his own persuasiveness or charisma but

to interpret, explain, and apply God's Word as clearly and completely as possible.

In his excellent book *Toward an Exegetical Theology*, Walter C. Kaiser writes,

It is no secret that Christ's Church is not at all in good health in many places of the world. She has been languishing because she has been fed, as the current line has it, "junk food"; all kinds of artificial preservatives and all sorts of unnatural substitutes have been served up to her. As a result, theological and Biblical malnutrition has afflicted the very generation that has taken such giant steps to make sure its physical health is not damaged by using foods or products that are carcinogenic or otherwise harmful to their physical bodies. Simultaneously, a worldwide spiritual famine resulting from the absence of any genuine publication of the Word of God (Amos 8:11) continues to run wild and almost unabated in most quarters of the Church. ([Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981], p. 7)

Although the full gospel truth had not yet been revealed in Jonah's day, Jesus said that it was through "the preaching" (*kērugma*) of that ancient prophet that "the men of Nineveh . . . repented" (Matt. 12:41). Throughout his first imprisonment and trial in Rome, "The Lord stood with me, and strengthened me," Paul testified, "in order that through me the proclamation [*kērugma*] might be fully accomplished, and that all the Gentiles might hear" (2 Tim. 4:17). He reminded believers in Corinth that "since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe" (1 Cor. 1:21; "message preached" translates the single Greek word *kērugma*). Later in that epistle Paul again reminded readers that his "message and [his] preaching [*kērugma*] were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power" (2:4).

Jesus Himself began His public ministry by preaching (Matt. 4:17), exactly as the prophet Isaiah had predicted (see Luke 4:17–21). The Lord called His earliest followers to "proclaim everywhere the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:60). After Pentecost, the apostles "kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ" (Acts 5:42), just as the Lord had instructed (10:42). Paul told Timothy to "preach the Word" (2 Tim. 4:2).

Paul **was entrusted** with a unique apostolic commission to proclaim God's Word according to **the commandment of God our Savior**. God "set me apart, even from my mother's womb, and called me through His grace," he testified, and "was pleased to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles" (Gal. 1:15–16). Both

as “a bond-servant of God [the Father] and as an apostle of Jesus Christ [the Son]” (Titus 1:1), Paul was under **the commandment of God** to preach the gospel of salvation. “I was made a minister according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit,” he told believers at Colossae, “that I might fully carry out the preaching of the word of God” (Col. 1:25; cf. 1 Tim. 2:7). “I am under compulsion,” he said in his first letter to the church at Corinth, “for woe is me if I do not preach the gospel. . . . I have a stewardship entrusted to me” (1 Cor. 9:16–17).

Paul here speaks of **God** as **our Savior** rather than as **God** the Father, as in the following verse. He refers to **God** as **Savior** five other times in the pastoral epistles—in 1 Timothy 1:1; 2:3; 4:10; and two other times in the present letter (2:10; 3:4). God is not reluctant to save, as are some imaginary deities who must be appeased by their devotees and begged to be merciful. Jesus declared that “God [the Father] so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world should be saved through Him” (John 3:16–17; cf. 1 John 4:14). Jesus also declared that “unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” (John 3:5). The unfolding saga of salvation is the plan and the work of the entire Trinity. It is the joy of God to save sinners (see Luke 15:7, 10, 20–24) and the sorrow of God when they are lost (see Luke 19:21–24).

#### COMMITTED TO GODS PEOPLE

**to Titus, my true child in a common faith: grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Savior. (1:4)**

A fifth foundational principle of Paul’s life that is illustrated here was his commitment to God’s people. He had loyal devotion to those such as **Titus, his true child in a common faith**. He used almost identical words of Timothy (1 Tim. 1:1; cf. 2 Tim. 1:2).

**True** translates *gnēsios*, which has the basic meaning of “being lawfully begotten.” **Child** translates *teknon*, which was used of a legitimate child, in contrast to one born out of wedlock. The two words together, therefore, intensify Paul’s statement of his close relationship to Titus, his spiritual son in the fullest sense. The apostle was likely the human agent used to bring Titus to salvation, and he clearly had the major responsibility for nurturing him in spiritual growth and for training him for spiritual service.

The phrase **common faith** can be interpreted subjectively or objectively. Subjectively it would refer to saving faith, which Titus



shared in **common** with Paul and all other believers. Objectively it would refer to the truths of the Christian **faith**, which Titus shared in **common** with the apostle and with all other believers who are sound in doctrine. Although Paul was here probably stressing the subjective aspect of Titus's **faith**, it is obvious from this epistle and from accounts in 2 Corinthians that Paul considered Titus to be sound in doctrine. He would not have left any church in the hands of a leader who was not thoroughly grounded in the Word.

Paul had trusted Titus even to work with the worldly and troublesome church at Corinth. In his second letter to that congregation he speaks of Titus nine times, always favorably. "But God, who comforts the depressed, comforted us by the coming of Titus," he rejoices, "and not only by his coming, but also by the comfort with which he was comforted in you, as he reported to us your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me; so that I rejoiced even more" (2 Cor. 7:6-7). A few verses later he praises the young pastor, saying, "Thanks be to God, who puts the same earnestness on your behalf in the heart of Titus" (8:16) and calling him "my partner and fellow worker among you" (v. 23).

Throughout history, the most powerful and effective leaders in the church have been involved in developing partners and fellow workers who extend and perpetuate the ministry of Jesus Christ. Although Paul was the most highly gifted of the apostles, he never ministered alone, never attempted to carry on a single-handed ministry. Until his death, he was intimately associated with an amazingly large network of preachers, teachers, and other leaders in the church with whom he was a partner in service. He extended himself through others, knowing that the Lord did not call him to function alone. He realized the importance of delegating responsibility and of preparing others to carry on the ministry.

All of Paul's letters carry greetings from and to friends and fellow workers. In the last chapter of his letter to the church at Rome he sends greetings to twenty-seven men and women by name and commends many others who are unnamed. He genuinely loved his fellow believers and workers and built deep personal relationships with them wherever he went. He continually encouraged them and gave himself sacrificially to meeting their needs.

Like Timothy, however, Titus was especially dear to Paul, his spiritual father and mentor. We can but imagine the apostle's profound feeling as he wrote assuringly to his beloved Titus, **grace and peace [to you] from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Savior.**

**Grace** is the wondrous gift of God that brings salvation, and **peace** is the wondrous blessing that He bestows on those whom He graciously saves. For that reason the phrase **grace and peace** became



a common greeting among early Christians, a practice perhaps begun by Paul.

To this greeting he added **from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Savior**, a simple but profound creed that testifies to the source of the believer's **grace and peace**. The apostle has just spoken of "God our Savior" in the previous verse, and now, at the end of the same sentence, he speaks of **Christ Jesus our Savior**.

Although God becomes the heavenly **Father** of all who place their faith in **Christ Jesus**, Paul's emphasis here is on the Father's unique relationship to "His only begotten Son" (John 3:16) and on the truth, mentioned above, that the **Father** and the Son, **Christ Jesus**, are inseparably bound in the work of salvation.

THE MACARTHUR  
NEW TESTAMENT  
COMMENTARY  
**HEBREWS**

*John MacArthur*

MOODY PUBLISHERS/CHICAGO

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# The Superiority Of Christ

(Hebrews 1:1-2)

# 1

**God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world. (1:1-2)**

The writer does not delay in getting to his point. He makes it in the first three verses. These verses are very simple. They tell us Christ is superior to everyone and everything. The three primary features of His superiority are: preparation, presentation, and preeminence. Keep in mind that all through the book Christ is presented as being better than the best of everyone and everything that was before Him—absolutely better than anything the Old Testament, the Old Covenant, provided.

## THE PREPARATION FOR CHRIST

**God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways. (1:1)**

Here is an indication of how God wrote the Old Testament. Its

purpose was to prepare for the coming of Christ. Whether by prophecy or type or principle or commandment or whatever, it made preparation for Christ.

The senses of man, marvelous as they are, are incapable of reaching beyond the natural world. For us to know anything about God, He must tell us. We could never know God if He did not speak to us. Thus, in the Old Testament, the writer reminds us, “God . . . spoke.”

### MAN’S WAYS TO GOD

Man lives in a natural “box,” which encloses him within its walls of time and space. Outside of this box is the supernatural, and somewhere deep inside himself man knows it is out there. But in himself he does not know anything certain about it. So someone comes along and says, “We must find out about the supernatural, the world ‘out there.’” And a new religion is born. Those who become interested run over to the edge of the box, get out their imaginative mental chisels and start trying to chip a hole in the edge of the box—through which they can crawl, or at least peer, out and discover the secrets of the other world.

That, figuratively, is what always happens. The Buddhist says that when you have worked and thought yourself into Nirvana, all of a sudden you are out of the box. You have transcended the natural and have found your way into the supernatural. The Muslim says basically the same thing, though in different words. So do all the other religions—Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, Confucianism, or whatever it may be. These are all attempts by man to escape from the natural to the supernatural, to get out of the box. But the problem is, he cannot get himself out.

### GOD’S WAY TO MAN

By definition, natural man cannot escape into the supernatural. We cannot go into a religious phone booth and change into a superman. We cannot in ourselves or by ourselves transcend our natural existence. If we are to know anything about God, it will not be by escaping, or climbing, or thinking, or working our way to Him; it will only be by His coming to us, His speaking to us. We cannot, by ourselves, understand God any more than an insect we may hold in our hand can understand us. Nor can we condescend to its level, or communicate with it if we could. But God can condescend to our level and He can communicate with us. And He has.

God became a man Himself and entered our box to tell us about Himself, more fully and completely than He was able to do even through His prophets. This not only was divine revelation, but personal divine revelation of the most literal and perfect and wonderful sort. All of man’s

religions reflect his attempts to make his way out of the box. The message of Christianity, however, is that “the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10).

When God burst into the box, He did it in human form, and the name of that human form is Jesus Christ. That is the difference between Christianity and every other religion in the world. That is why it is so foolish for people to say, “It doesn’t make any difference what you believe or what religion you follow.” It makes every difference. Every religion is but man’s attempt to discover God. Christianity is God bursting into man’s world and showing and telling man what He is like. Because man by himself is incapable of identifying, comprehending, or understanding God at all, God had to invade the world of man and speak to him about Himself. Initially, He told us He would be coming.

#### BY THE PROPHETS: MANY WAYS

This He did through the words of the Old Testament. He used men as instruments, but was Himself behind them, enlightening and energizing them. The deists teach that God started the world going and then went away, leaving it to run by itself. But God is not detached from His creation; He is not uninvolved in our world. The true and living God, unlike the false gods of man’s making, is not dumb or indifferent. The God of Scripture, unlike the impersonal “First Cause” of some philosophers, is not silent. He speaks. He first spoke in the Old Testament, which is not a collection of the wisdom of ancient men but is the voice of God.

Now notice how God spoke: **in many portions and in many ways**. The writer uses a play on words in the original language: “God, *polumerōs* and *polutropōs* . . .” These two Greek words are interesting. They mean, respectively, “in many portions” (as of books) and “in many different manners.” There are many books in the Old Testament—thirty-nine of them. In all those **many portions** (*polumerōs*) and in **many ways** (*polutropōs*) God spoke to men. Sometimes it was in a vision, sometimes by a parable, sometimes through a type or a symbol. There were many different ways in which God spoke in the Old Testament. But it is always God speaking. Even the words spoken by men and angels are included because He wants us to know them.

Men were used—their minds were used and their personalities were used—but they were totally controlled by the Spirit of God. Every word they wrote was the word that God decided they should write and delighted in their writing.

**Many ways** includes many literary ways. Some of the Old Testament is narrative. Some of it is poetry, in beautiful Hebrew meter. The “many ways” also includes many types of content. Some is law; some is

prophecy; some is doctrinal; some is ethical and moral; some is warning; some is encouragement; and so on. But it is all God speaking.

## PROGRESSIVE REVELATION

### TRUE BUT INCOMPLETE

Yet, beautiful and important and authoritative as it is, the Old Testament is fragmentary and incomplete. It was delivered over the course of some fifteen hundred years by some forty-plus writers—in many different pieces, each with its own truths. It began to build and grow, truth upon truth. It was what we call progressive revelation. Genesis gives some truth, and Exodus gives some more. The truth builds and builds and builds. In the Old Testament God was pleased, for that time, to dispense His gracious truth to the Jews by the mouths of His prophets—in many different ways, developing His revelation progressively from lesser to greater degrees of light. The revelation did not build from error to truth but from incomplete truth to more complete truth. And it remained incomplete until the New Testament was finished.

Divine revelation, then, going from the Old Testament to the New Testament, is progressive revelation. It progressed from promise to fulfillment. The Old Testament is promise; the New Testament is fulfillment. Jesus Christ said, “Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets,” that is, the Old Testament, “. . . but to fulfill” (Matt. 5:17). His revelation progressed from promise to fulfillment. In fact, the Old Testament itself clearly indicates that the men of faith who wrote it were trusting in a promise they had not yet understood. They trusted in a promise that was yet to be fulfilled.

Let me give a few supporting verses. Hebrews 11 speaks about many of the great saints of the Old Testament. “And all these, having gained approval through their faith, did not receive what was promised” (v. 39). In other words, they never saw the fulfillment of promise. They foresaw what was going to happen without seeing it fully realized. Peter tells us that the Old Testament prophets did not understand all of what they wrote. “As to this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that would come to you made careful search and inquiry, seeking to know what person or time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating as He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves, but you, in these things which now have been announced to you through those who preached the gospel to you” (1 Pet. 1:10-12).

We must, of course, clearly understand that the Old Testament was not in any way erroneous. But there was in it a development, of



spiritual light and of moral standards, until God's truth was refined and finalized in the New Testament. The distinction is not in the validity of the revelation—its rightness or wrongness—but in the completeness of it and the time of it. Just as children are first taught letters, then words, and then sentences, so God gave His revelation. It began with the “picture book” of types and ceremonies and prophecies and progressed to final completion in Jesus Christ and His New Testament.

#### FROM GOD, THROUGH HIS MESSENGERS

Now the picture is set for us. Long ago God spoke to **the fathers**, the Old Testament people, our spiritual ancestors—also our physical ancestors if we are Jewish. He even spoke to some of our Gentile predecessors. He spoke to them by the prophets, His messengers. A prophet is one who speaks to men for God; a priest is one who speaks to God for men. The priest takes man's problems to God; the prophet takes God's message to men. Both, if they are true, are commissioned by God, but their ministries are quite different. The book of Hebrews has a great deal to say about priests, but its opening verse speaks of prophets. The Holy Spirit establishes the divine authorship of the Old Testament, its accuracy and its authority, through the fact that it was given to and delivered by God's prophets.

Throughout the New Testament this truth is affirmed. Peter, for example, tells us that “no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God” (2 Pet. 1:21). “Prophecy” in that text refers to the Old Testament. No human writer of the Old Testament wrote of his own will, but only as he was directed by the Holy Spirit.

Paul also tells us that “all Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16). All Scripture is given by inspiration of God. The *American Standard Version* reads, “Every scripture inspired of God is also profitable,” implying that not all Scripture is inspired. But all Scripture is fully, not simply in part, inspired by God. God has not hidden His Word within man's words, leaving His creatures to their own devices in deciding which is which. The Old Testament is only a part of God's truth, but it is not partially His truth. It is not His complete truth, but it is completely His truth. It is God's revelation, His progressive revelation preparing His people for the coming of His Son, Jesus Christ.

#### BY THE SON: ONE WAY

**In these last days [God] has spoken to us in His Son, whom He ap-**

**pointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world.**  
(1:2)

God's full, perfect revelation awaited the coming of His Son. God, who used to speak in many different ways through many different people, has finally spoken in one way, through one Person, His Son Jesus Christ.

The whole New Testament is centered around Christ. The gospels tell His story, the epistles comment on it, and the Revelation tells of its culmination. From beginning to end the New Testament is Christ. No prophet had been given God's whole truth. The Old Testament was given to many men, in bits and pieces and fragments. Jesus not only brought, but was, God's full and final Revelation.

#### COMING IN THESE LAST DAYS

There are several ways to interpret the phrase, **in these last days**. It could refer to the last days of revelation. It could mean that this is the final revelation in Christ, there being nothing else to add to it. Or it could mean that in the last days of revelation it came through God's Son. But I think the writer is making a messianic reference. The phrase "the last days" was very familiar to the Jews of that day and had a distinctive meaning. Whenever a Jew saw or heard these words he immediately had messianic thoughts, because the scriptural promise was that in the last days Messiah would come (Jer.33:14-16; Mic. 5:1-4; Zech. 9:9, 16). Since this letter was written first of all to Jews, we will interpret the phrase in that context.

The woman at the well, though a Samaritan, told Jesus, "I know that the Messiah is coming (He who is called Christ); when that One comes, He will declare all things to us" (John 4:25). She knew that when Messiah arrived, He would unfold the full and final revelation of God, as indeed He did.

The writer, then, is saying, "In these promised Last Days Messiah (Christ) has come and has spoken the final revelation of God." Jesus came in these last days. Unfortunately, Messiah's own people rejected Him and His revelation, and so the fulfillment of all of the promises of the last days has yet to be fully realized.

#### TRUE AND COMPLETE

The Old Testament had been given in pieces. To Noah was revealed the quarter of the world from which Messiah would come. To Micah, the town where He would be born. To Daniel, the time of His birth. To Malachi, the forerunner who would come before Him. To Jonah, His resurrection was typified. Every one of those pieces of revela-

tion was true and accurate; and each one related to the others in some way or another. And each one in some way or another pointed to the Messiah, the Christ. But only in Jesus Christ Himself was everything brought together and made whole. In Him the revelation was full and complete.

Since the revelation is complete, to add anything to the New Testament is blasphemous. To add to it The Book of Mormon, or Science and Health, or anything else that claims to be revelation from God is blasphemous. "God has in these last days finalized His revelation in His Son." It was finished. The end of the book of Revelation warns that if we add anything to it, its plagues will be added to us, and that if we take anything away from it, our part in the tree of life and the holy city will be taken away from us (Rev. 22:18-19).

In the first verse and a half of Hebrews, the Holy Spirit establishes the preeminence of Jesus Christ over all the Old Testament, over its message, its methods, and its messengers. It was just what those Jews, believing and nonbelieving, needed to hear.

And so is established the priority of Jesus Christ. He is greater than the prophets. He is greater than any revelation in the Old Testament, for He is the embodiment of all that truth, and more. God has fully expressed Himself in Christ.

THE MACARTHUR  
NEW TESTAMENT  
COMMENTARY

**JAMES**

*John MacArthur*

MOODY PUBLISHERS/CHICAGO

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# The Man and His Message (James 1:1)

# 1

**James, a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad: Greetings. (1:1)**

Counterfeiting is a major problem in our society. Forged money, credit cards, jewelry, works of art, and virtually everything else of value are passed off as genuine to deceive the unwary. Consequently, valuable commodities must be carefully examined to determine their genuineness.

That is also true of the most valuable commodity of all—saving faith. A right relationship to the living, holy God of the universe with the promise of eternal heaven is incomparably priceless. Those who think they have it should carefully examine and test it to determine its validity. To be deceived by counterfeit money or a counterfeit work of art results only in temporal loss; to be deceived by a counterfeit faith results in eternal tragedy.

The master counterfeiter of saving faith is Satan. Disguising themselves as “angels of light” (2 Cor. 11:14–15), he and his servants deceive the unwary through false systems of religion, including false forms of Christianity. Thinking they are on the narrow path leading to heaven, those who are trapped in counterfeit religion, or who simply trust in their personal concept of salvation, are actually on the way to eternal damnation.

That deception extends to those within biblical Christianity who are deluded about their salvation.

To be deceived about one's relationship to God is the most dangerous and frightening delusion possible. Near the end of the Sermon on the Mount our Lord graphically portrayed that tragedy:

Not everyone who says to Me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. Many will say to Me on that day, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?" And then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness." (Matt 7:21–23)

Because of the ever-present danger of counterfeit faith, God's Word continually calls for professed salvation to be tested for validity. In Psalm 17:3 David declared the results of God's testing his faith: "You have tried my heart; You have visited me by night; You have tested me and You find nothing." In Psalm 26:1–2 he pleaded, "Vindicate me, O Lord, for I have walked in my integrity, and I have trusted in the Lord without wavering. Examine me, O Lord, and try me; test my mind and my heart." He echoed that plea in the familiar words of Psalm 139: "Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my anxious thoughts; and see if there be any hurtful way in me, and lead me in the everlasting way" (vv. 23–24). Amid the chaos and desolation following the destruction of Jerusalem, Jeremiah cried out to his fellow Israelites, "Let us examine and probe our ways, and let us return to the Lord" (Lam. 3:40).

Through Ezekiel, the Lord says of the genuinely repentant man: "Because he considered and turned away from all his transgressions which he had committed, he shall surely live; he shall not die" (Ezek. 18:28; cf. Ps. 119:59). Through the prophet Haggai, the Lord exhorted His people, "Consider your ways!" (Hag. 1:5, 7).

The New Testament also repeatedly stresses the necessity of testing faith. John the Baptist challenged the religious leaders of his day to "bear fruit in keeping with repentance" (Matt. 3:8). Describing his ministry to King Agrippa, Paul related how he "kept declaring both to those of Damascus first, and also at Jerusalem and then throughout all the region of Judea, and even to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance" (Acts 26:20). He admonished the Galatians, "Each one must examine his own work" (Gal. 6:4), and the Corinthians, "Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you—unless indeed you fail the test?" (2 Cor. 13:5).

The intended and inevitable result of saving faith is a life of good works, and it was for that very purpose that Christ redeemed the church.



After declaring that salvation is by grace alone, the apostle Paul reminds believers that “we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them” (Eph. 2:8–10). “For the grace of God has appeared,” Paul wrote to Titus, “bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age” (Titus 2:11–12; cf. v. 14). The writer of Hebrews warned his readers: “Let us fear if, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any one of you may seem to have come short of it” (Heb. 4:1; cf. 12:15). The fearful possibility of missing out on salvation calls for stringent self-examination. When the writer of Hebrews illustrated the essence of saving faith, he described the courageous obedience of Old Testament believers who demonstrated their salvation in lives of loyalty and faithfulness to God (11:1–39).

The first epistle of John mentions many marks of genuine faith. It must go beyond mere verbal profession (1:6–10; 2:4, 9) and must include obedience to God (2:3, 5–6; 3:24; 5:2–3). The redeemed are marked by not loving the world (2:15), by living a righteous life (2:29), by forsaking and avoiding sin (3:6, 9), and by loving fellow believers (3:14; 4:7, 11).

But no passage of Scripture more clearly presents the tests of true and living faith than the Sermon on the Mount. Here Jesus sets forth an extensive series of tests aimed at showing self-righteous Jews—typified by the proud, boastful, self-satisfied scribes and Pharisees (see 5:20)—how far short of genuine salvation they fell. By so doing, He unmasked their false religion, hypocrisy, and counterfeit salvation.

The sermon begins with the Beatitudes (Matt. 5:3–12), which delineate the attitudes that are to accompany genuine saving faith. Those attitudes include meekness, mercy, joy in persecution, humility, a sense of sinfulness, and a deep longing for righteousness.

The next section (5:13–16) reveals the outworking of Beatitude virtues in the lives of the truly redeemed, who are as “salt and light” in the evil, dark, fallen world. Instead of being an influence for evil, they influence the world with God-given righteousness.

True salvation will be marked by genuine commitment to the Word of God (5:17–20), by external righteous behavior that stems from internal righteousness of the heart (5:21–48), by proper worship (6:1–18), by a correct view of money and material possessions (6:19–34), and by right personal relationships (7:1–12).

Jesus concludes the sermon by describing two paths to eternal destiny—the broad one that leads to damnation, and the narrow one that leads to life, which He exhorted His hearers to enter (7:13). He warned them to avoid false prophets, who sought to divert them onto the broad path that leads to destruction (vv. 15–20), and described the fright-

ening consequences of empty profession in light of certain coming judgment (vv.21–27).

It seems clear that James was profoundly influenced by the Sermon on the Mount—the truths of which he doubtless heard in person from Jesus, either on that occasion or others—and many of its themes have parallels in his epistle. In fact, the book of James may well be viewed as a practical commentary on that sermon. Like his Lord before him, James presents a series of tests by which the genuineness of salvation can be determined.

### HIS BIOGRAPHY

The first verse of this epistle introduces us to the human author, **a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ**. As explained in the Introduction, the James who penned this epistle was the half brother of the Lord. Contrary to Roman Catholic dogma, Joseph and Mary had other children after Jesus was born. That truth is implied in Matthew's statement that Joseph kept Mary a virgin *until* the birth of Jesus (Matt. 1:25) and is explicit in Luke's description of Jesus as Mary's *firstborn* son (Luke 2:7, emphasis added). Those children were His half brothers and half sisters (cf. Matt. 12:46–47; Mark 3:31–35; Luke 8:19–21; John 2:12). Matthew 13:55 and Mark 6:3 list Jesus' half brothers as James, Joseph (Joses), Simon, and Judas. Paul explicitly calls James "the Lord's brother" (Gal. 1:19). Mark also refers to Jesus' half sisters, although not by name. That both Matthew and Mark list James first implies that he was the eldest of Jesus' half brothers.

Surprisingly, although they grew up with Him and observed firsthand His sinless, perfect life, Jesus' brothers did not at first believe in Him. John records their unbelief exhibited by challenging Jesus to reveal Himself openly:

Now the feast of the Jews, the Feast of Booths, was near. Therefore His brothers said to Him, "Leave here and go into Judea, so that Your disciples also may see Your works which You are doing. For no one does anything in secret when he himself seeks to be known publicly. If You do these things, show Yourself to the world." For not even His brothers were believing in Him. (John 7:2–5)

Their unbelief bore sad testimony to the truth of Jesus' declaration that "a prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and among his own relatives and in his own household" (Mark 6:4). So strong was His brothers' unbelief that they even thought Jesus had taken leave of His senses (Mark 3:21). (It is worth noting that His brothers' unbelief

disproves the apocryphal accounts of Jesus' alleged childhood miracles—as does the direct statement of John 2:11 that changing the water into wine at Cana was the “*beginning* of His signs,” emphasis added.) Their unbelief apparently lasted throughout Jesus' earthly life and ministry.

But by the time those who believed in Him gathered in Jerusalem after His resurrection, something remarkable had happened. Acts 1:13 notes that the apostles were there, and verse 14 adds: “These all [the apostles] with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer, along with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, *and with His brothers*” (emphasis added). What happened to change His skeptical, unbelieving brothers into devoted followers? Paul gives the answer in 1 Corinthians 15:7, noting that after Jesus' resurrection, “He appeared to James.” Doubtless as a result of that personal, post-resurrection appearance, James came to saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The church was born on the Day of Pentecost and James, although not an apostle, soon became one of its key leaders. When Paul visited Jerusalem, he discovered that James, as well as Peter and John, were pillars of the church there (Gal. 2:9–12). Because the apostles were frequently away preaching the gospel, James eventually became the pre-eminent leader of the Jerusalem church. To borrow a contemporary term, he was its senior pastor. Following his miraculous release from Herod's jail, Peter ordered the astounded believers to “report these things to James and the brethren” (Acts 12:17), clearly indicating that James had become the one to whom important news was to be first reported.

James presided over the pivotal Jerusalem Council (Acts 15), which had been convened to decide the momentous question of whether salvation required obedience to the Mosaic Law or was by grace alone working through faith. After much debate, Peter, Paul, and Barnabas reported God's gracious salvation of Gentiles through their ministries (vv. 6–12). James then reinforced Peter's point, handed down the council's decision (vv. 12–21), and most likely composed the resulting letter to Gentile believers (vv. 23–29). Many years later, when Paul returned to Jerusalem at the end of his third missionary journey, James again appears in the presiding role. Luke reports that “after we arrived in Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly. And the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present” (Acts 21:17–18). The plurality of elders did not negate James's primary leadership role, as equality of apostolic office did not negate Peter's leadership of the Twelve.

Also known as James the Just because of his righteous life, he was martyred about A.D. 62, according to Josephus.

## HIS CHARACTER

**a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, (1:1b)**

In spite of his prominence, what stands out in the first verse of his epistle is James's humility. He does not describe himself as Mary's son and the Lord's brother, refer to his position as head of the Jerusalem church, or mention that the resurrected Christ personally appeared to him. Instead, he describes himself simply as **a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ**. *Doulos* (**bond-servant**) depicts a slave, a person deprived of all personal freedom and totally under the control of his master. Absolute obedience and loyalty to his master (who provided him with food, clothing, and housing) was required of every *doulos*. In contrast to the *andrapodon*, who was made a slave, the *doulos* was born a slave. James had become a *doulos* by his new birth through faith in Jesus Christ.

To be a *doulos* of God was considered a great honor in Jewish culture. Such Old Testament luminaries as Abraham (Gen. 26:24), Isaac (Gen. 24:14), Jacob (Ezek. 28:25), Job (Job 1:8), Moses (Ex. 14:31), Joshua (Josh. 24:29), Caleb (Num. 14:24), David (2 Sam. 3:18), Isaiah (Isa. 20:3), and Daniel (Dan. 6:20) are described as God's servants. In the New Testament, Epaphras (Col. 4:12), Timothy (Phil. 1:1), Paul (Rom. 1:1), Peter (2 Pet. 1:1), Jude (Jude 1), John (Rev. 1:1), and our Lord Himself (Acts 3:13) all bore the title of *doulos*. By taking that title, James numbered himself with those honored not for who they were, but whom they served—the living God.

## HIS MINISTRY

**to the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad: Greetings. (1:1c)**

In addition to his vital leadership role in the Jerusalem church, James also had a wider ministry. The term **twelve tribes** was a title commonly used in the New Testament to refer to the nation of Israel (cf. Matt. 19:28; Acts 26:7; Rev. 21:12). Although the twelve tribes split into two nations (Israel, the northern kingdom, and Judah, the southern kingdom), God's chosen people always consisted of the Jews from all twelve tribes, which one day God will sovereignly reunite (Ezek. 37:15–22). When the kingdom split after Solomon's reign, ten tribes made up the northern kingdom of Israel, and Benjamin and Judah formed the southern kingdom of Judah. After the fall and deportation of Israel to Assyria (722 B.C.), some of the remnant of the ten tribes moved south, thus pre-

serving the twelve tribes in Judah's land. Although tribal identity could not be established with certainty after Judah was conquered and Jerusalem and temple records were destroyed by Babylon (586 B.C.), God will restore the nation and delineate each person's tribal identity in the future (Isa. 11:12–13; Jer. 3:18; 50:19; Ezek. 37; Rev. 7:5–8).

James was therefore addressing *all* Jews **who [were] dispersed abroad**, regardless of their tribal origins. In this context, **abroad** refers to any place in the world outside of Palestine. Over the previous several hundred years, various conquerors (including the Romans in 63 B.C.) had deported Jews from their homeland and spread them throughout the known world. In addition, many other Jews had voluntarily moved to other countries for business or other reasons (cf. Acts 2:5–11). By New Testament times, many Jews lived **abroad**. The Greek word *diaspora* (“scattering”) became a technical term to identify Jews living outside Palestine (cf. 1 Pet. 1:1).

From the message of the letter itself, as well as from James's frequent addressing of his readers as brothers, it is clear that he is writing to Jewish Christians. It is likely that most of those believers were converted in or near Jerusalem and may have once been under James's pastoral care to some degree. James's primary audience were those Jews who had fled because of persecution and were still suffering trials because of their faith (1:2). To give them confidence, hope, and strength to endure those trials, James gave them a series of tests (see the Introduction) by which they could determine the genuineness of their faith.

## HIS GREETING

### **Greetings.** (1:1d)

*Chairein* (**greetings**) means “rejoice,” or “be glad,” and was a common secular greeting. But to James the word was no mere formality; he expected what he wrote to gladden his readers' hearts by giving them means to verify the genuineness of their salvation. That, James knew, would provide great comfort to them in their trials, which Satan persistently uses to try to make Christians doubt they are indeed God's children and fellow heirs with Jesus Christ.

THE MACARTHUR  
NEW TESTAMENT  
COMMENTARY

**1 PETER**

*John MacArthur*

MOODY PUBLISHERS/CHICAGO

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# The Elements of Election (1 Peter 1:1–2)

# 1

**Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who reside as aliens, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, who are chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood: May grace and peace be yours in the fullest measure. (1:1–2)**

Even though it is the starting point of redemptive history, it may seem startling to begin an epistle with reference to the doctrine of election, yet that is exactly what the apostle Peter does (cf. Eph. 1:1–5 and Titus 1:1–2, where Paul begins the same way). And he does so unhesitatingly, after the opening identifications, with the phrase **who are chosen** (v. 1). He thus opens his letter by writing of one of the most controversial and hated doctrines and doing so with no self-consciousness, no apology, no effort to palliate, and no explanation of or deferral to opposing arguments. He states this truth of sovereign election for what it is, a reality recognized and believed among the apostles and in the church. Still, today this unquestionably true doctrine is questioned by many and despised by many others. Arthur W. Pink, the British-born Bible teacher and prolific theological writer who died in 1952, wrote this about

people's views of God's sovereignty and, by implication, the subsidiary doctrine of divine election:

We are well aware that what we have written is in open opposition to much of the teaching that is current both in religious literature and in the representative pulpits of the land. We freely grant that the postulate of God's Sovereignty with all its corollaries is at direct variance with the opinions and thoughts of the natural man, but the truth is, the natural man is quite *unable* to think upon these matters: he is not competent to form a proper estimate of God's character and ways, and it is because of this that God has given us a revelation of *His* mind, and in that revelation He plainly declares, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts" (Isa. 55: 8, 9). In view of this scripture, it is only to be expected that much of the contents of the Bible *conflicts* with the sentiments of the carnal mind, which is *enmity* against God. Our appeal then is not to the popular beliefs of the day, nor to the creeds of the churches, but to the Law and Testimony of Jehovah. All that we ask for is an impartial and attentive examination of what we have written, and that, made prayerfully in the light of the Lamp of Truth. (*The Sovereignty of God*, rev. ed. [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1961], 19; italics in original)

As Pink's still-relevant analysis reveals, it is imperative that Christians fully understand and appreciate this most vital and crucial teaching. Peter unfolds the theological and practical implications of divine election under seven headings: the condition of election, the nature of election, the source of election, the sphere of election, the effect of election, the security of election, and the advantages of election.

#### THE CONDITION OF ELECTION

**Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who reside as aliens, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, (1:1a)**

**Peter**, the inspired author, identifies himself as **an apostle of Jesus Christ**. Other New Testament verses also identify Peter as an apostle and furthermore, by placing his name at the head of each list of Jesus' apostles (Matt. 10:2; Mark 3:16; Luke 6:14; Acts 1:13), emphasize that he was the leader of the Twelve.

Peter's intention in this first part of his salutation was not only to

identify his readers as to their heavenly origin, as the elect of God, but also in relation to their condition as earthly residents. The apostle describes his readers in their earthly condition as **aliens**. *Parepidēmois* (**aliens**) can denote those who are temporary residents, or who are foreigners or refugees (cf. Gen. 23:4; Ex. 2:22; 22:21; Ps. 119:19; Acts 7:29; Heb. 11:13). The apostle further identifies them as people who were **scattered throughout** various locales. **Scattered** translates *diaspora*, from which root another English term, *dispersion*, derives. Commentaries, theological works, and works on Bible history often transliterate *diaspora* and use it interchangeably with dispersion. In its other two New Testament appearances, *diaspora* is a technical term referring to the dispersing of the Jews throughout the world by the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities. Both times the word has the definite article (John 7:35; James 1:1). However here Peter does not include the definite article; therefore it is best to interpret the term as a non-technical reference to believers widely distributed geographically.

Though God called Peter to be the **apostle** to the Jews (Gal. 2:7), the absence of the definite article with *diaspora* argues that Peter was not addressing Jews as such in his salutation. Another passage supports that interpretation. In 2:11 he identifies his readers, not racially or nationally, but spiritually: “Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul.” Thus the apostle addressed not only Jews who were dispersed from their native land, but Gentile believers, both of whom spiritually were **aliens** in the world.

The church is composed of strangers and pilgrims **scattered throughout** the earth, away from their true home in heaven (cf. Phil. 3:20; Heb. 11:13–16; 13:14). Specifically, he was addressing the church in **Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia**, all provinces in Asia Minor (modern Turkey) at the time. **Pontus** was in the far north, and Jewish pilgrims from there were in Jerusalem during the extraordinary events of Pentecost (Acts 2:9). The province was also the home of Aquila (Acts 18:2), the Jew who with his wife Priscilla became Christians in Rome and subsequently ministered with Paul (Acts 18:18). **Galatia** was in central Asia Minor and contained the towns of Derbe, Lystra, and Iconium where Paul ministered several times (Acts 14:1–13; 16:1–5; 18:23). **Cappadocia** was located in the east portion of Asia Minor, north of Cilicia, and is also mentioned in connection with the Acts 2:9 pilgrims. **Asia** included most of western Asia Minor and contained such subdivisions as Mysia, Lydia, Caria, and much of Phrygia. The province was the site of extensive ministry by Paul on his third journey: “all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks” (Acts 19:10) and is mentioned twelve other places in Acts. **Bithynia** was located in northwest Asia Minor near the Bosphorus, the strait separating the European

and Asian sections of modern Turkey. This province is mentioned only one other place in the New Testament, when the Holy Spirit, during Paul's second missionary journey, forbade him from entering it (Acts 16:7).

As the geographical areas Peter mentioned in his salutation indicate, this letter had a very wide circulation. No doubt, in each of those areas, churches received and read the letter. For example, there were at least seven churches in Asia Minor (Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea) that thirty years later received special revelation from the risen Christ Himself (Rev. 1:11; chaps. 2–3). And there were other notable places in Asia Minor, such as Colossae, that Peter did not even mention. So he was writing to a large number of believers scattered as spiritual aliens throughout a hostile, pagan region.

Peter addressed such a wide audience because the Roman persecution of Christians had swept across the Empire. Believers in every place were going to suffer (cf. Luke 21:12; Phil. 1:29; James 1:1–3). The apostle wanted those believers to remember that, in the midst of potentially great suffering and hardship, they were still the chosen of God, and that as such they could face persecution in triumphant hope (cf. 4:13, 16, 19; Rom. 8:35–39; 2 Tim. 3:11; Heb. 10:34–36).

## THE NATURE OF ELECTION

### **who are chosen** (1:1b)

As spiritual aliens, the most important thing for Peter's readers was not their relationship to earth but their relationship to heaven. Describing Abraham's hope, the writer of Hebrews said, "He was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (11:10; cf. vv. 13–16; John 14:1–3; Phil. 3:20).

Understanding that truth, Peter identifies his audience as those **who are chosen** (*eklektos*). The apostle reiterates this concept in 2:9, "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light." Peter's Old Testament allusions in that verse make it plain that he knew God had sovereignly chosen Israel: "For you are a holy people to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth" (Deut. 7:6; cf. 14:2; Pss. 105:43; 135:4).

God's sovereign love also prompted His choice of the church. The apostle Paul told the church at Ephesus, "We have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all

things after the counsel of His will” (Eph. 1:11). He told the Thessalonians, “But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth” (2 Thess. 2:13; cf. John 15:16; Rom. 8:29–30; 1 Cor. 1: 27; Eph. 1:4–5; 2:10; Col. 3:12; 1 Thess. 1:4; Titus 1:1).

Jesus also did not hesitate to unambiguously and unapologetically teach the truth of election: “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day” (John 6:44); “I do not speak of all of you. I know the ones I have chosen” (13:18; cf. Luke 10:20; 18:7; John 17:6, 9). The Lord assumed the truth of divine election in His Olivet Discourse, making indirect reference to it three times: “Unless those days had been cut short, no life would have been saved; but for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short” (Matt. 24:22; see also vv. 24, 31; Mark 13:20).

God has chosen people out of all the world (Rev. 5:9; 7:9; cf. John 10:16; Acts 15:14) to belong to Him, and the church is that people (cf. Rom. 8:29; Eph. 5:27). Throughout the New Testament this critical truth of election is clearly presented (2:8–9; Matt. 24:22, 24, 31; Luke 18:7; Col. 3:12; Titus 1:1–2; James 2:5). The apostle John repeatedly quotes Jesus saying that the Father gives whomever He chooses to the Son:

“All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. This is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him will have eternal life, and I Myself will raise him up on the last day.” Therefore the Jews were grumbling about Him, because He said, “I am the bread that came down out of heaven.” They were saying, “Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does He now say, ‘I have come down out of heaven?’” Jesus answered and said to them, “Do not grumble among yourselves. No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day. It is written in the prophets, ‘And they shall all be taught of God.’ Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father, comes to Me. (John 6:37–45)

I have manifested Your name to the men whom You gave Me out of the world; they were Yours and You gave them to Me, and they have kept Your word. . . . While I was with them, I was keeping them in Your name which You have given Me; and I guarded them and not one of them perished but the son of perdition, so that the Scripture would be fulfilled. . . . Father, I desire that they also, whom You have given Me, be with Me

where I am, so that they may see My glory which You have given Me, for You loved Me before the foundation of the world. (17:6, 12, 24)

The chosen are expressions of the Father's love for the Son. All whom the Father gives, the Son receives; and the Son keeps them and raises them to eternal life. In principle, Jesus revealed it to His disciples in the Upper Room: "You did not choose Me but I chose you, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit, and that your fruit would remain, so that whatever you ask of the Father in My name He may give to you" (John 15:16). John 5:21 says, "For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son also gives life to whom He wishes." Luke chronicled God's sovereign election of the church in Pisidian Antioch during Paul's first missionary journey:

Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly and said, "It was necessary that the word of God be spoken to you [Jews] first; since you repudiate it and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles. For so the Lord has commanded us, 'I have placed You as a light for the Gentiles, that You may bring salvation to the end of the earth.'" When the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed. And the word of the Lord was being spread through the whole region. (Acts 13:46-49)

Paul wrote clearly the truth that election is completely the result of God's sovereign purpose and grace: "who [the Lord] has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity" (2 Tim. 1:9). The great apostle further defines this truth in Romans 8:28-30,

And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified.

John further emphasizes the eternity of election at the end of the New Testament when he notes that the Book of Life existed before the foundation of the world (Rev. 13:8; 17:8; cf. 3:5; 20:12, 15; 21:27). From eternity past, God has had a large body of believers in mind whom He chose to love (1 John 4:10; cf. Rom. 10:20), to save from their sin (Eph. 2:1-5; Col. 2:13), and conform to the image of His Son (Rom. 8:29; 1 Cor. 1:7-9; 2 Cor.

3:18; Jude 24–25). And each one of those names, from every nationality and every era of history, God specifically secured in eternal purpose before the world began.

## THE SOURCE OF ELECTION

### **according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, (1:2a)**

One popular explanation for election by those who cannot accept God's sovereign choice based on nothing but His own will stems from a faulty understanding of **foreknowledge**. According to that understanding, the term merely means foresight or supernatural knowledge of the future. Proponents say that God in His omniscience looked down the corridors of time and saw who would believe the gospel and who would not. He then chose for salvation all those He knew would choose to believe and guaranteed that they would reach heaven. But there are at least three reasons such an interpretation of **foreknowledge** is unscriptural. First of all, it makes man sovereign in salvation instead of God, though Jesus affirmed His and the Father's sovereignty when He told the disciples, "You did not choose Me but I chose you" (John 15:16; cf. Rom. 9:11–13, 16). Second, it gives man undue credit for his own salvation, allowing him to share the glory that belongs to God alone. The familiar salvation passage, Ephesians 2:8–9, shatters that notion: "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the *gift* of God; not as a result of works, so that *no one may boast*" (italics added; cf. 1 Cor. 1:29, 31). Third, it assumes fallen man can seek after God. Romans 3:11, quoting from Psalms 14:1–3 and 53:1–3, clearly states, "There is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God" (cf. Eph. 2:1). The apostle John accurately defines God's saving initiative this way: "In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1 John 4:10; cf. Rom. 5:8).

Any sort of man-centered definition of foreknowledge is incompatible with God's absolute sovereignty over all things: "Remember the former things long past, for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, 'My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure'" (Isa. 46:9–10; cf. 14:24, 27; Job 42:1–2; Pss. 115:3; 135:6; Jer. 32:17).

The usage of the Greek word rendered **foreknowledge** in verse 2 also proves it cannot mean simply knowledge of future events and attitudes. *Prognōsis* (**foreknowledge**) refers to God's eternal, predetermined,



loving, and saving intention. In 1:20, Peter used the related verb “was fore-known,” a form of *proginōskō*, in reference to God’s knowledge from eternity past that He would send His Son to redeem sinners. Usage of this verb cannot mean He looked into future history and saw that Jesus would choose to die, so He made Him the Savior. In the same way that God the Father foreknew His plan for Christ’s crucifixion from before the foundation of the world (Acts 2:23; cf. 1 Peter 2:6), He foreknew the elect. In neither case was it a matter of mere prior information about what would happen. Therefore **foreknowledge** involves God’s predetermining to have a relationship with some individuals, based on His eternal plan. It is the divine purpose that brings salvation for sinners to fulfillment, as accomplished by Jesus Christ’s death on the cross, not merely an advance knowledge that observes how people will respond to God’s offer of redemption.

In the Old Testament, “knowing” someone could indicate a sexual relationship (Num. 31:18, 35; Judg. 21:12; cf. Gen. 19:8). Long before Peter articulated the nature of God’s foreknowledge, “The Lord said to Moses, ‘I will do this thing of which you have spoken; for you have found favor in My sight and I have known you by name’” (Ex. 33:17). Regarding Christ the Servant, Isaiah 49:1–2 declares, “Listen to Me, O islands, and pay attention, you peoples from afar. The Lord called Me from the womb; from the body of My mother He named Me. He has made My mouth like a sharp sword, in the shadow of His hand He has concealed Me; and He has also made Me a select arrow, He has hidden Me in His quiver.” God had a predetermined relationship with the prophet Jeremiah: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I have appointed you a prophet to the nations” (Jer. 1:5). Amos wrote about God’s foreknowledge of Israel: “You only have I known of all the families of the earth” (Amos 3:2, NKJV). With all of the foregoing references, the point is not simply God’s having information *about* someone, but His establishing an intimate relationship *with* someone. And **foreknowledge** was God establishing that by divine decree before time began.

In accord with the continuity of Scripture, the Old Testament’s understanding of foreknowledge appears again in the Gospels. Jesus, in making clear the true nature of salvation in His Sermon on the Mount, declared this about the pseudo-elect: “Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness’” (Matt. 7:22–23). Certainly, Jesus knew who such people were, but He never “knew” them in the sense that He had predetermined a saving relationship with them. That sort of relationship is reserved for



His sheep: “I am the good shepherd, and I know My own and My own know Me” (John 10:14; cf. vv. 16, 26–28; 17:9–10, 20–21). Salvation **fore-knowledge**, then, involves God predetermining to know someone by having an intimate, saving relationship, so choosing them from eternity past to receive His redeeming love.

## THE SPHERE OF ELECTION

### by the sanctifying work of the Spirit (1:2b)

The outworking of God’s choice of the elect made in eternity past begins in time **by the sanctifying work of the Spirit**. The **sanctifying work** encompasses all that **the Spirit** produces in salvation: faith (Eph. 2:8), repentance (Acts 11:15–18), regeneration (Titus 3:5), and adoption (Rom. 8:16–17). Thus election, the plan of God, becomes a reality in the life of the believer through salvation, the work of God, which the Holy Spirit carries out.

**Sanctifying work** (*hagiasmō*) refers to separation, consecration, and holiness. First Peter 2:9–10 illustrates the principle: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; for you once were not a people, but now you are the people of God; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” At salvation **the sanctifying work of the Spirit** sets believers apart from sin to God, separates them from darkness to light, sets them apart from unbelief to faith, and mercifully separates them from a love of sin and brings them to a love of righteousness (John 3:3–8; Rom. 8:2; 2 Cor. 5:17; cf. 1 Cor. 2:10–16; Eph. 2:1–5; 5:8; Col. 2:13).

Years earlier, at the Jerusalem Council, Peter expressed the same principle:

After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe. And God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us; and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith.” (Acts 15:7–9)

The Holy Spirit by faith cleansed the hearts of the Gentile converts. That underscores again that salvation is the Spirit’s work (John 3:3–8; cf. Rom. 15:16; 1 Cor. 6:11; 1 Thess. 1:4–6; 2 Thess. 2:13; Titus 3:5).

Once the Holy Spirit at salvation separates believers from sin, He continues to make them more and more holy (cf. Phil. 1:6) in the life-long, progressive separation process of sanctification (Rom. 12:1–2; 2 Cor. 7:1; 1 Thess. 5:23–24; Heb. 12:14; cf. Eph. 4:24, 30; 2 Tim. 4:18). Paul says that God chose believers “that [they] would be holy and blameless before Him” (Eph. 1:4). That begins at salvation and is completed at glorification. The sanctifying process is the working out of God’s elective purpose in the earthly lives of Christians (cf. Rom. 6:22; Gal. 4:6; Phil. 2:12–13; 2 Thess. 2:13; Heb. 12:14).

### THE EFFECT OF ELECTION

#### **to obey Jesus Christ** (1:2c)

Obedience to Jesus Christ is the effect or by-product of divine election. Ephesians 2:10 says, “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.” For one **to obey Jesus Christ**, then, is the equivalent of being saved. Paul called it “the obedience of faith” (Rom. 1:5). Believers do not obey perfectly or completely (1 John 1:8–10; cf. Rom. 7:14–25), but nonetheless there is a pattern of obedience in their lives as they through Christ become servants of righteousness (Rom. 6:17–18; cf. Rom. 8:1–2; 2 Cor. 10:5*b*).

Paul was thankful for the believing Thessalonians because he saw in their lives many examples of obedience to Christ.

We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers; constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father, knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you; for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything. For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come. (1 Thess. 1:2–10)

All of those examples—their faith, love, and hope in Christ; their imitation of Paul and the Lord; their exemplary behavior before others; their proclamation of the Word; their turning from idols; their waiting for Christ—demonstrated their genuine regeneration. (John’s first epistle makes an even more extensive case for true salvation resulting in obedience to Christ [2:3–5; 3:6–10, 24; 5:2–3].)

In glorification comes the realization of the purpose of election and of the ultimate work of sanctification, when believers become completely conformed to Christ (Rom. 8:29; 1 John 3:2). Until then, obedience is the effect of election.

### THE SECURITY OF ELECTION

#### **and be sprinkled with His blood:** (1:2d)

Another profoundly important, practical component of election is security for the believer. That is affirmed in the passage quoted earlier (John 6:37–40), in which Jesus said He would not cast out or lose those who genuinely trust in Him, but raise them all on the final day. God indicates that security in that the elect are **sprinkled with His blood**. Peter’s metaphor here looks back to the time in the Old Testament when blood was sprinkled on the people of Israel. That event is significant enough that the letter to the Hebrews mentions it once specifically and once by allusion (9:19–20; 12:24). The following passage in Exodus describes the remarkable event:

Then Moses came and recounted to the people all the words of the Lord and all the ordinances; and all the people answered with one voice and said, “All the words which the Lord has spoken we will do!” Moses wrote down all the words of the Lord. Then he arose early in the morning, and built an altar at the foot of the mountain with twelve pillars for the twelve tribes of Israel. He sent young men of the sons of Israel, and they offered burnt offerings and sacrificed young bulls as peace offerings to the Lord. Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and the other half of the blood he sprinkled on the altar. Then he took the book of the covenant and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, “All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient!” So Moses took the blood and sprinkled it on the people, and said, “Behold the blood of the covenant, which the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words.” (24:3–8)

Moses had just returned from Mount Sinai and orally reviewed to the people God’s law received there. As the text says, they responded

very dutifully by pledging to obey all God required. This began the covenant-making agreement between God and His people (cf. Ex. 19:3–20:17). Under the Spirit’s inspiration, Moses recorded all the words of the law just recited. When he finished the next morning, he built an altar at the foot of the mountain to symbolize the sealing of the covenant between God and the people. To represent the entire nation’s involvement, the altar consisted of twelve stacks of stones (pillars), one for each of the twelve tribes. To further provide the people an opportunity to express their determination to obey the Law, Moses offered burnt offerings and peace offerings of young bulls. Moses placed half the blood from the slain sacrificial animals in large basins, and the other half he splashed on God’s altar. Then Moses read for the people the words of the Law he had recorded the previous night and they again pledged their obedience. After that, Moses splattered the people with the remaining blood from the basins, thereby visually and ceremonially making the people’s obedience promise and pledge to God official. Shed blood was a tangible demonstration that two parties had made a binding commitment (cf. Gen. 15:9–18; Jer. 34:18–19). Israel made a promise of obedience to God, mediated through sacrifice. The blood splattered on the altar represented God’s agreement to reveal His law, and the blood sprinkled on the people signified their consent to obey.

The Holy Spirit compares that unique pledge to the inherent covenant in saving faith in Jesus Christ, which entails a similar promise to obey the Word of the Lord. When believers trust in Christ’s atoning sacrifice for them, they are not just accepting the benefit of His death on their behalf. They are also submitting to His sovereign lordship (cf. Matt. 7:24–27; 1 Thess. 1:9; 2:13; James 1:21–23). And Christ’s blood, shed at the cross, acts like a seal to that covenant. In fact, the night before He died, when He instituted the Lord’s Supper, Jesus echoed Moses’ words in Exodus 24:8, “And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you; for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins’” (Matt. 26:27–28). Inherent in the New Covenant was the promise that the Lord would come and redeem sinners and they would respond by keeping His Word.

Peter states that when believers were spiritually **sprinkled with Christ’s blood**, they entered into a covenant of obedience. Years earlier, Peter and the other apostles referred to the truth of obedience when they told the Jewish leaders, “He is the one whom God exalted to His right hand as a Prince and a Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses of these things; and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him” (Acts 5:31–32).

To recapitulate the Old Testament analogy: the blood sprinkled

on God's altar symbolized His commitment to forgiveness (fully realized in the sacrificial death of Christ), and the blood sprinkled on the people symbolized their intention to obey God's law (more fully realized when Christians walk in the Spirit and obey the Word). First John 2:3–6 is unambiguous about this submission:

By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. The one who says, "I have come to know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him; but whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected. By this we know that we are in Him: the one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked.

As a coin has two sides, the new covenant has two sides: salvation and obedience. As a result of divine election, God's children are saved from sin and given the desire to obey Him, and He promises to forgive them when they do not do so. The same blood of Jesus Christ that sealed the new covenant keeps on spiritually cleansing the sins of Christians when they disobey (cf. Heb. 7:25; 9:11–15; 10:12–18; 1 John 1:7).

#### THE ADVANTAGES OF ELECTION

**May grace and peace be yours in the fullest measure.** (1:2e)

The salutations of many other New Testament epistles (e.g., Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3; Gal. 1:3; Phil. 1:2; 2 Thess. 1:2; Titus 1:4; Rev. 1:4) repeat Peter's wish for his readers. That idea of wishing here derives from the optative mood of the verb *plēthuntheiē*, **may . . . be . . . in the fullest measure**. The apostle wished for his audience God's **grace** and its resultant **peace** (Rom. 5:1) in maximum allotment or quantity. He wished for them all the best that God can offer believers, and that it would repeatedly increase to their advantage.

Peter wanted the recipients of his letter to experience all the rich and varied blessings of being God's elect. Today, however, the tendency is usually to avoid election's profound implications. Christians often justify such an attitude by claiming the doctrine is too deep, too confusing, and too divisive. But believers ought to rejoice over the glorious advantages that an understanding of election provides, and this verse points toward a few of those.

First of all, the doctrine of election is the most humbling truth in all of Scripture. For believers it is most sobering to realize they had absolutely nothing to do with God's choice of them (John 1:12–13; Rom.

9:16). When properly understood, election crushes one's moral and religious pride, which is a blessing because God gives grace to the humble (5:5; Prov. 3:34).

Second, election is a God-exalting, worship-enhancing doctrine because it gives all the glory to Him. Election makes it clear that the sinner's faith, repentance, and ability to obey God come from Him (cf. Ps. 110:3, *κῆ*; Eph. 2:8–9). Only God can grant forgiveness to His people when they sin (Prov. 20:9; Mic. 6:7; Eph. 1:7; 1 John 1:7; 3:5). The psalmist declares, "Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to Your name give glory because of Your lovingkindness, because of Your truth" (Ps. 115:1).

A third advantage of election is that it produces ultimate joy. Those whom God chooses rejoice because they know they would have no hope for salvation apart from His electing grace (John 6:44; Acts 4:12; 1 Tim. 2:5–6). The elect would ultimately perish forever like all other sinners if God had not chosen them (cf. Rom. 9:29). Psalm 65:4 says in part, "How blessed is the one whom You choose and bring near to You to dwell in Your courts." It is a supreme joy for the elect to consider that the Lord has loved them with an everlasting love (cf. Luke 10:20), from before the foundation of the world and on into eternity future.

Fourth, election is advantageous because it promises Christians an eternity of spiritual privileges. The apostle Paul's prayerful expression of praise and gratitude to God, which opens his letter to the Ephesians, is a fitting summary of many of those privileges.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace which He lavished on us. In all wisdom and insight He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth. In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will, to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ would be to the praise of His glory. In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation—having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God's own possession, to the praise of His glory. (Eph. 1:3–14; cf. 1 Peter 2:9–10)

Finally, the doctrine of election is a powerful incentive to holy living. Knowing God has set them apart because of His own special love for them is a most effective motivation for believers to live to the glory of God. That principle was undoubtedly on Paul's mind when he exhorted the Colossians, "So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you" (Col. 3:12–13). Their gratitude to God for His election of them should compel believers to a life of obedience and holiness.

If Christians ignore the doctrine of election, they fail to understand the glories of redemption, they fail to honor the sovereignty of God and Christ, and they fail to appreciate the immense spiritual privileges that are theirs. Present-day believers, just as those in Peter's time, need not be ignorant of election, because God wants them to know what His grace has provided, and because every scriptural teaching is cause to offer Him the praise He deserves (cf. Pss. 19:7–9; 119:7, 14–16).

Election is such a powerful truth that when Christians understand it, the practical ramifications of election will transform the way they live their daily lives. Knowing the condition of their election (they reside on earth as spiritual aliens to reach those around them), the nature of their election (it is completely the result of God's sovereign choice), the source of their election (God set His love on them from eternity past), the sphere of their election (it becomes a reality by the Holy Spirit's sanctifying work), the effect of their election (loving obedience to Jesus Christ), the security of their election (the covenant of obedience, which ensures divine forgiveness), and the advantages of their election (the many spiritual blessings and privileges available) produces power in believers' lives that they would otherwise never be able to fully appreciate.

THE MACARTHUR  
NEW TESTAMENT  
COMMENTARY  
**2 PETER & JUDE**

*John MacArthur*

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# The Believer's Precious Faith—Part 1: Its Source, Substance, and Sufficiency (2 Peter 1:1–4)

# 1

**Simon Peter, a bond-servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who have received a faith of the same kind as ours, by the righteousness of our God and Savior, Jesus Christ: Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord; seeing that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence. For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust. (1:1–4)**

John Murray, one of the foremost Reformed theologians of the twentieth century, wrote the following about the profound and superlative significance of the atonement:

The Father did not spare his own Son. He spared nothing that the dictates of unrelenting rectitude demanded. And it is the undercurrent of the Son's acquiescence that we hear when he says, "Nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done" (Luke 22:42). But why? It was in order that eternal and invincible love might find the full realization of its urge and purpose in redemption by price and by power. Of Calvary the spirit is

eternal love and the basis eternal justice. It is the same love manifested in the mystery of Gethsemane's agony and of Calvary's accursed tree that wraps eternal security around the people of God. "He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?" (Rom. 8:32). "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?" (Rom. 8:35). "For I am persuaded that neither death nor life nor angels nor principalities nor things present nor things to come nor powers nor height nor depth nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:38, 39). That is the security which a perfect atonement secures and it is the perfection of the atonement that secures it. (*Redemption—Accomplished and Applied* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955], 78)

Without question, God's redemption of sinners unto eternal life through the atoning work of His Son Jesus Christ is, for all those who believe, God's most precious gift. With salvation's certainty in view, Peter opens his second letter by enriching his readers concerning three great truths about it: its source, its substance, and its sufficiency.

#### SALVATION'S SOURCE

**Simon Peter, a bond-servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who have received a faith of the same kind as ours, by the righteousness of our God and Savior, Jesus Christ: (1:1)**

According to the custom of his day, the apostle opened his epistle with a standard salutation, appropriately identifying himself as the author. **Simon**, the Greek form of the Hebrew "Simeon," the father of one of the twelve tribes of Israel, was a common Jewish name (cf. Matt. 13:55; 26:6; 27:32; Acts 1:13; 8:9; 9:43). **Peter** is from a Greek word that means "rock" (Cephas is its Aramaic equivalent; see John 1:42; 1 Cor. 1:12; 3:22; 9:5; 15:5; Gal. 1:18; 2:9, 11, 14). The apostle used both names to ensure that the letter's recipients knew exactly whom it was from.

Identifying himself as a **bond-servant**, Peter humbly and gratefully placed himself in the position of submission, duty, and obedience. Some of the greatest leaders in the history of redemption bore the title *servant* (e.g., *Moses*, Deut. 34:5; Ps. 105:26; Mal. 4:4; *Joshua*, Josh. 24:29; *David*, 2 Sam. 3:18; Ps. 78:70; *all the prophets*, Jer. 44:4; Amos 3:7; *Paul*, Rom. 1:1; Phil. 1:1; Titus 1:1; *James*, James 1:1; *Jude*, Jude 1), and it eventually became a designation suitable for every believer (cf. 1 Cor. 7:22; Eph. 6:6; Col. 4:12; 2 Tim. 2:24). In Peter's day, to willingly call oneself a **bond-**

**servant** (*doulos*, “slave”) was to severely lower oneself in a culture where slaves were considered no better than animals. Whereas that practice may have been demeaning socially, it was honorable spiritually. It was to acknowledge that one was duty bound to obey his master, no matter what the cost. Of the sense in which this is true of Christians, William Barclay explains:

(i) To call the Christian the *doulos* of God means that he is inalienably possessed by God. In the ancient world a master possessed his slaves in the same sense as he possessed his tools. A servant can change his master; but a slave cannot. The Christian inalienably belongs to God.

(ii) To call the Christian the *doulos* of God means that he is unqualifiedly at the disposal of God. In the ancient world the master could do what he liked with his slave. He had the same power over his slave as he had over his inanimate possessions. He had the power of life and death over his slave. The Christian belongs to God, for God to send him where He will, and to do with him what He will. The Christian is the man who has no rights of his own, for all his rights are surrendered to God.

(iii) To call the Christian the *doulos* of God means that the Christian owes an unquestioning obedience to God. Ancient law was such that a master's command was a slave's only law. Even if a slave was told to do something which actually broke the law, he could not protest, for, as far as he was concerned, his master's command was the law. In any situation the Christian has but one question to ask: “Lord, what wilt *Thou* have me to do?” The command of God is his only law.

(iv) To call the Christian the *doulos* of God means that he must be constantly in the service of God. In the ancient world the slave had literally no time of his own, no holidays, no time off, no working-hours settled by agreement, no leisure. All his time belonged to the master. (*The Letters of James and Peter*, rev. ed. [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976], 345–46; emphasis in the original)

Although Peter viewed himself humbly as a bond-servant, he also represented himself nobly as an **apostle of Jesus Christ**, one officially sent forth by Christ Himself as a divinely commissioned witness of the resurrected Lord, with authority to proclaim His truth (Matt. 10:1; Mark 3:13; 16:20; Luke 6:13; Acts 1:2–9, 22; 1 Cor. 9:1; 1 John 1:1; cf. Matt. 28:19–20; John 14:26; 16:13). Peter, in presenting himself in these terms, sets a pattern for all in spiritual leadership: the submissive, sacrificial anonymity of a slave, combined with the dignity, significance, and authority of an apostle.

The apostle sent this letter **to those** same believers who received his first one. They were part of God's elect scattered in the Gentile

regions of “Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia” (1 Peter 1:1). Those believers were predominantly Gentiles, but certainly Jewish Christians were also among the recipients of the letter, which Peter most likely wrote in A.D. 67 or 68, about one year after writing his first epistle (for details, see the Introduction to this volume).

The manner in which Peter described his readers is theologically rich, albeit brief, and points to the divine source of salvation. **Have received** implies believers’ salvation is a gift. The verb (*lagchanō*) means “to gain by divine will” or “given by an allotment” (as in the biblical practice of casting lots to learn God’s will; cf. Lev. 16:8–10; Josh. 7:14; 1 Sam. 14:38–43; 1 Chron. 25:8–31; Prov. 16:33; 18:18; Jonah 1:7; Acts 1:16–26). Clearly it refers to something not obtained by human effort or based on personal worthiness but issued from God’s sovereign purpose. Peter’s readers received **faith** because God graciously willed to give it to them (cf. Acts 11:15–17; Gal. 3:14; Eph. 1:13; Phil. 1:29).

**A faith** here could mean *the* objective faith, as in the doctrines of the Christian faith, or it could denote subjective belief. But it is best to understand it in this context without the definite article (in contrast to Jude 3) as subjective faith, the Christian’s power to believe the gospel for salvation. Even though belief in the gospel is commanded of all, so that all are responsible for their obedience or disobedience—and in that sense it is the human side of salvation—God still must supernaturally grant sinners the ability and power to believe unto salvation (Eph. 2:8–9; cf. 6:23; Rom. 12:3; 1 Cor. 2:5). Peter began his first epistle writing about divine choice and election in salvation, whereas here he refers to the human response of faith. God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility form the essential elements of salvation. Only when the Holy Spirit awakens someone’s dead soul in response to hearing or reading the gospel is saving faith initiated so the sinner can embrace redemption (cf. Acts 11:21; 16:14).

Further evidence that faith here is subjective comes from Peter’s description of his readers’ faith as **of the same kind as ours**. The word rendered **same kind** (*isotimon*) means “equally valuable,” or “of equal privilege.” It designated that which was equal in rank, position, honor, standing, price, or value. This would make no sense if referring to the body of gospel truth, since that truth has no equal. Each believer has received faith as a personal gift, a faith that is the same in nature, the precious gift of God, which brings equal spiritual privileges in salvation to all who receive it (cf. John 17:20; Acts 11:15–17; 13:39). Among the faithful, God sees no distinctions among Christians; as Paul wrote, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28; cf. v. 26; Rom. 10:12–13).

All the elect have received, as a gift, the faith that saves. Ephesians

2:8–9 says, “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.” These verses have profound meaning and far-reaching application.

Our response in salvation is **faith**, but even that is **not of ourselves** [but is] **the gift of God. Faith** is nothing that we do in our own power or by our own resources. In the first place we do not have adequate power or resources. More than that, God would not want us to rely on them even if we had them. Otherwise salvation would be in part by our own **works**, and we would have some ground to **boast** in ourselves. Paul intends to emphasize that even faith is not from us apart from God’s giving it.

Some have objected to this interpretation, saying that **faith** (*pistis*) is feminine, while **that** (*touto*) is neuter. That poses no problem, however, as long as it is understood that **that** does not refer precisely to the noun **faith** but to the act of believing. Further, this interpretation makes the best sense of the text, since if **that** refers to **by grace you have been saved through faith** (that is, to the whole statement), the adding of **and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God** would be redundant, because grace is defined as an unearned act of God. If salvation is of grace, it has to be an undeserved gift of God. Faith is presented as a gift from God in 2 Peter 1:1, Philippians 1:29, and Acts 3:16. . . .

When we accept the finished work of Christ on our behalf, we act by the **faith** supplied by God’s **grace**. That is the supreme act of human faith, the act which, though it is ours, is primarily God’s—His **gift** to us out of His **grace**. When a person chokes or drowns and stops breathing, there is nothing he can do. If he ever breathes again it will be because someone else starts him breathing. A person who is spiritually dead cannot even make a decision of faith unless God first breathes into him the breath of spiritual life. **Faith** is simply breathing the breath that God’s **grace** supplies. Yet, the paradox is that we must exercise it and bear the responsibility if we do not (cf. John 5:40). (John MacArthur, *Ephesians*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary [Chicago: Moody, 1986], 60–61)

Peter’s use of the pronoun **ours** most likely had in view the conflict between Jews and Gentiles in the church. The book of Acts records that he was heavily involved in that issue in the early days of the church. Peter explained to separatist Jewish brethren his encounter with the Gentile Cornelius’ household:

But Peter began speaking and proceeded to explain to them in orderly sequence, saying, “I was in the city of Joppa praying; and in a trance I saw a vision, an object coming down like a great sheet lowered by four

corners from the sky; and it came right down to me, and when I had fixed my gaze on it and was observing it I saw the four-footed animals of the earth and the wild beasts and the crawling creatures and the birds of the air. I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' But I said, 'By no means, Lord, for nothing unholy or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' But a voice from heaven answered a second time, 'What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy.' This happened three times, and everything was drawn back up into the sky. And behold, at that moment three men appeared at the house in which we were staying, having been sent to me from Caesarea. The Spirit told me to go with them without misgivings. These six brethren also went with me and we entered the man's house. And he reported to us how he had seen the angel standing in his house, and saying, 'Send to Joppa and have Simon, who is also called Peter, brought here; and he will speak words to you by which you will be saved, you and all your household.' And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as He did upon us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how He used to say, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' Therefore if God gave to them the same gift as He gave to us also after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?" (Acts 11:4–17; cf. 10:1–48)

At the Jerusalem Council Peter reiterated the truth that God plays no favorites concerning the salvation and spiritual privileges of Jews and Gentiles:

But some of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed stood up, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them [the Gentiles] and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses." The apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter. After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe. And God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us; and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith. Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are." (Acts 15:5–11)

Therefore it should not be surprising that Peter referred to that same truth here. Among His elect, God makes no favored distinctions based on ethnicity—He gives all Christians the same saving faith with all its privileges (cf. Eph. 2:11–18; 4:5).

Believers' saving faith is available because of **the righteousness**



**of . . . Jesus Christ.** Sinners are given eternal life because the Savior imputes His perfect **righteousness** to them (2 Cor. 5:21; Phil. 3:8–9; 1 Peter 2:24), covering their sins and rendering them acceptable to Him. Romans 4:4–8 says,

Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness, just as David also speaks of the blessing on the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: “Blessed are those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven, and whose sins have been covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account.” (cf. Acts 13:38–39)

This immensely important doctrine of imputed righteousness is at the very heart of the Christian gospel. Salvation is a gift from God at all points. Both the faith to believe and the righteousness to satisfy God’s holiness come from Him. On the cross Christ bore the full wrath of God against all the sins of those who would believe (2 Cor. 5:18–19). Those sins were imputed to Christ so that God could impute to believers all the righteousness that was His. His righteousness fully covers the redeemed, as the prophet Isaiah beautifully expresses it, “I will rejoice greatly in the Lord, my soul will exult in my God; for He has clothed me with garments of salvation, He has wrapped me with a robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels” (Isa. 61:10).

It is noteworthy that Peter does not refer to God **our** Father here but to **our God and Savior, Jesus Christ**. Righteousness here does proceed from the Father, but it reaches every believer through the Son, Jesus Christ (cf. Gal. 3:8–11; Phil. 3:8–9). The Greek construction places just one article before the phrase **God and Savior**, which makes both terms refer to the same person. Thus Peter identifies Jesus, not just as Savior, but as God (cf. 1:11; 2:20; 3:2, 18; Isa. 43:3, 11; 45:15, 21; 60:16; Rom. 9:5; Col. 2:9; Titus 2:13; Heb. 1:8), the author and agent of salvation. The apostle made the same relation clear in his Pentecost sermon, in which he took the Old Testament truth of God and applied it to Jesus (Acts 2:21–36; cf. Matt. 1:21; Acts 4:12; 5:31).

#### SALVATION’S SUBSTANCE

**Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord; (1:2)**

In Peter's version of this familiar salutation, he reminds readers that true saints live in the realm of **grace and peace**, as the apostle Paul taught the Roman Christians: "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God" (Rom. 5:1–2). God wants the substance of salvation **grace and peace** to **be multiplied**, to come in unending, abundant streams to His children. Similar statements fill the epistles (e.g., 1 Cor. 1:3; 2 Cor. 1:2; Gal. 1:3; Eph. 1:2). **Grace** (*charis*) is God's free, unmerited favor toward sinners, which grants those who believe the gospel complete forgiveness forever through the Lord Jesus Christ (Rom. 3:24; Eph. 1:7; Titus 3:7). **Peace** (*eirēnē*) with God and from Him in all life's circumstances is the effect of grace (Eph. 2:14–15; Col. 1:20), flowing out of the forgiveness God has given to all the elect (cf. Ps. 85:8; Isa. 26:12; 2 Thess. 3:16). "Grace upon grace" (John 1:16) is an expression that defines the boundless flow of divine favor, while peace comes with such fullness that it is divine and beyond human understanding (John 14:27; Phil. 4:7). Believers receive surpassing **grace** for every sin (Ps. 84:11; Acts 4:33; 2 Cor. 9:8; 12:9; Heb. 4:16) and abundant **peace** for every trial (John 14:27; 16:33).

All this grace and peace comes **in** (through) **the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord**. It is not available to those who do not know and wholeheartedly embrace the gospel. **Knowledge** (*epignōsis*; cf. 1:8; 2:20) is a strengthened form of the basic Greek word for "knowledge" (*gnōsis*; cf. 1:5, 6; 3:18). It conveys the idea of a full, rich, thorough knowledge, involving a degree of intimate understanding of a specific subject (cf. Rom. 3:20; 10:2; Eph. 1:17). The substance of one's salvation is this kind of rational, objective knowledge of God through His Word (cf. John 8:32; 14:6; 17:17; 2 John 2). This fundamental concept of knowing was first of all an Old Testament one (cf. Ex. 5:2; Judg. 2:10; 1 Sam. 2:12; Prov. 2:5; Hos. 2:20; 5:4). Paul often used the same word in relation to divine truth (Eph. 1:17; 4:13; Phil. 1:9; Col. 1:9, 10; 2:2; 3:10; 1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Tim. 2:25; 3:7; Titus 1:1). The knowledge that brings salvation derives not from feelings, intuition, emotion, or personal experience, but only from the revealed truth, based on the gospel preached in and from the Word: "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17; cf. v. 14).

Salvation requires a genuine knowledge of the person and work of Jesus Christ (cf. Gal. 2:20; Phil. 3:10). It involves not merely knowing the truth *about* Him, but actually *knowing* Him through the truth of His Word (cf. John 20:30–31; 21:24; 2 Tim. 3:15–17; 1 John 5:11–13). Hence Peter closed this letter by exhorting his believing readers, who already possessed that saving **knowledge**, to "grow in the grace and knowledge

of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (3:18). Knowing the Lord in salvation is the starting point. The rest of the believer's life is a pursuit of greater knowledge of the glory of the Lord and His grace. Paul said that was his passionate pursuit: “that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death” (Phil. 3:10). He also made it clear that being consumed with the glory of His Lord was the means by which the Holy Spirit transformed him into Christlikeness (2 Cor. 3:18).

### SALVATION'S SUFFICIENCY

**seeing that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence. For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust. (1:3–4)**

In 2 Corinthians 9:8, the apostle Paul makes an amazing statement of the overwhelming, generous sufficiency of God's salvation: “God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that always having all sufficiency in everything, you may have an abundance for every good deed.” The word rendered “sufficiency” (*autarkeia*) refers to self-sufficiency, which means having all that is necessary. It further means to be independent of external circumstances and from what outside sources may provide. Believers' spiritual resources, provided lavishly by divine grace, are sufficient to meet life's demands (Phil. 4:19; cf. 2 Chron. 31:10).

But in spite of God's revelation of His tremendous generosity (cf. 1 Chron. 29:10–14), Christians often think He was somehow miserly in dispensing His grace. He may have given them enough enabling grace for justification (Rom. 3:24), but not enough for sanctification. Or some believers have been taught that they received enough grace for justification and sanctification, but not enough for glorification, and thus fear they may lose their salvation. Even if they believe there is enough grace for final glorification, many Christians still feel there is not enough for them to handle life's problems and trials. But there is no reason for any believer to doubt the sufficiency of God's grace or to look elsewhere for spiritual resources (cf. Ex. 34:6; Pss. 42:8; 84:11; 103:11; 107:8; 121:1–8; Lam. 3:22–23; John 1:16; 10:10; Rom. 5:15, 20–21; 8:16–17, 32; 1 Cor. 2:9; 3:21–23; Eph. 1:3–8; 2:4–7; 3:17–19; 1 Peter 5:7). Paul admonished the Colossians:

See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ. For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority. (Col. 2:8–10)

Jesus compared salvation to a wedding feast: “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son. . . . ‘Behold, I have prepared my dinner; my oxen and my fattened livestock are all butchered and everything is ready; come to the wedding feast’” (Matt. 22:2, 4; cf. Luke 15:17–24; Rev. 19:6–9). He used that analogy because in first-century Jewish culture the wedding feast epitomized lavish celebration. In the same way, when He redeemed His own, God lavishly dispensed through the indwelling Holy Spirit all the grace and spiritual resources (Rom. 12:5–8; 1 Cor. 12:8–10; Eph. 3:20–21) they would ever need. Four essential components reminded Peter’s audience of the reality of their sufficient salvation: divine power, divine provision, divine procurement, and divine promises.

#### DIVINE POWER

### **seeing that His divine power has granted to us** (1:3a)

Whatever spiritual sufficiency believers have is not because of any power they possess in themselves (cf. Matt. 19:26; Rom. 9:20–21; Eph. 1:19; Phil. 3:7–11; 1 Tim. 1:12–16; Titus 3:5) but derives from **His divine power**. Paul expressed it this way: “Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us” (Eph. 3:20). The **power** that operates in believers is of the same divine nature as that which resurrected Christ (cf. Rom. 1:4; 1 Cor. 6:14; 15:16–17; 2 Cor. 13:4; Col. 2:12). That power enables saints to do works that please and glorify God (cf. 1 Cor. 3:6–8; Eph. 3:7) and accomplish spiritual things they cannot even imagine (see again Eph. 3:20).

**His** refers back to the Lord Jesus. If the personal pronoun modified God, Peter probably would not have used the descriptive word **divine** since deity is inherent in God’s name. His use of **divine** pointing to the Son underscores that Jesus is truly God (cf. John 10:30; 12:45; Phil. 2:6; Col. 1:16; 2:9; Heb. 1:3) and also refutes any lingering doubt some readers may have had concerning that reality (cf. 1 John 5:20). Peter himself had been an eyewitness to Christ’s divine power (1:16; cf. Mark 5:30; Luke 4:14; 5:17).

God’s supply of spiritual power for believers never fails. They

may distance themselves from the divine source through sin, or fail to minister and use what is available, but from the moment they experienced faith in Jesus Christ, God **has granted** His power to them. **Has granted** (*dedōrēmenēs*) is a perfect, passive participle meaning that in the past, with continuing results in the present, God permanently bestowed His power on believers.

#### DIVINE PROVISION

### **everything pertaining to life and godliness, (1:3b)**

Because of their constant sins and failures as Christians, many find it hard not to think that even after salvation something is missing in the sanctification process. This faulty idea causes believers to seek “second blessings,” “spirit baptisms,” tongues, mystical experiences, special psychological insights, private revelations, “self crucifixion,” the “deeper life,” heightened emotions, demon bindings, and combinations of various ones of all those in an attempt to attain what is supposedly missing from their spiritual resources. All manner of ignorance and Scripture twisting accompanies those foolish pursuits, which at their corrupt roots are failures to understand exactly what Peter says here. Christians have received **everything** in the form of divine power necessary to equip them for sanctification—they have no lack at all. In view of that reality, the Lord holds all believers responsible to obey all the commands of Scripture. Christians cannot claim that their sins and failures are the result of God’s limited provision. There is no temptation and no assault of Satan and demons that is beyond their resources to overcome (1 Cor. 10:13; 12:13; 1 Peter 5:10). To stress the extent of the divine power given each believer, Peter makes the amazing statement that saints have received from God **everything pertaining to life and godliness**. Syntactically, the term **everything** is in the emphatic position because the Holy Spirit through Peter is stressing the extent of believers’ self-sufficiency.

The great power that gave Christians spiritual life will sustain that **life** in all its fullness. Without asking for more, they already have every spiritual resource needed to persevere in holy living. **Life and godliness** define the realm of sanctification, the living of the Christian life on earth to the glory of God—between initial salvation and final glorification. With the gift of new life in Christ (John 3:15–16; 5:24; 6:47; Titus 3:7; 1 John 2:25) came everything related to sustaining that **life**, all the way to glorification. That is why believers are eternally secure (John 6:35–40; 10:28–29; 2 Cor. 5:1; 1 John 5:13; Jude 1, 24–25) and can be assured God will empower them to persevere to the end (Matt. 24:13; John 8:31; Heb.

3:6, 14; Rev. 2:10), through all temptations, sins, failures, vicissitudes, struggles, and trials of life.

The word translated **godliness** (*eusebeia*) encompasses both true reverence in worship and its companion—active obedience. Saints should never question God’s sufficiency, because His grace that is so powerful to save is equally powerful to sustain them and empower them to righteous conduct (Rom. 8:29–30; Phil. 1:6).

#### DIVINE PROCUREMENT

**through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence.** (1:3c)

In light of the divine power and provision available to Christians, the question then arises, “How does one experience those to the fullest?” The apostle indicates that it is **through the true knowledge of Him.** **Knowledge** (*epignōsis*) refers to a knowledge that is deep and genuine. The word is sometimes used interchangeably with the more basic term *gnōsis*, which means simply knowledge. But Peter is referring to more than a superficial knowledge of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. Christ Himself warned of the peril of an inadequate knowledge of Him, even for those who minister in His name:

Not everyone who says to Me, “Lord, Lord,” will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. Many will say to Me on that day, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?” And then I will declare to them, “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.” (Matt. 7:21–23; cf. Luke 6:46)

Personal saving knowledge of the Lord is the obvious beginning point for believers, and as with everything in the Christian life, it comes from **Him who called** them (John 3:27; Rom. 2:4; 1 Cor. 4:7; cf. Jonah 2:9). Theologically, God’s call comprises two aspects: the general call and the effectual call. Theologian Charles M. Horne succinctly defined the two aspects as follows:

The general call is a call which comes through the proclamation of the gospel: it is a call which urges sinners to accept salvation. “On the last day, the great day, of the feast, Jesus stood and cried aloud, ‘If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink’” (Jn 7:37, Williams; cf. Mt 11:28; Is 45:22; etc.).

This message (*kerygma*), which is to be authoritatively proclaimed—not optionally debated—contains three essential elements: (1) It is a story of historical occurrences—an historical proclamation: Christ died, was buried, and rose (1 Co 15:3–4). (2) It is an authoritative interpretation of these events—a theological evaluation. Christ died for our sins. (3) It is an offer of salvation to whosoever will—an ethical summons. Repent! Believe!

The general call is to be freely and universally offered. “Jesus came up . . . and said, ‘Full authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go then and make disciples of all the nations’” (Mt 28:18–19, Williams).

The effectual call is efficacious; that is, it always results in salvation. This is a *creative* calling which accompanies the external proclamation of the gospel; it is invested with the power to deliver one to the divinely intended destination. “It is very striking that in the New Testament the terms for calling, when used specifically with reference to salvation, are almost uniformly applied, not to the universal call of the gospel, but to the call that ushers men into a state of salvation and is therefore effectual.” [John Murray, *Redemption—Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), p. 88.]

Perhaps the classic passage on the effectual call is found in Romans 8:30: “Whom he did predestinate, them he also called” (κλῆ). Other pertinent references include: Romans 1:6–7; 1 Corinthians 1:9, 26; 2 Peter 1:10.

The efficacious call is immutable, thereby insuring our perseverance. “For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (Ro 11:29, NASB). (*Salvation* [Chicago: Moody, 1971], 47–48; italics in original. See also these other New Testament references: John 1:12–13; 3:3–8; 6:37, 44–45, 64–65; Acts 16:14; Eph. 2:1, 5, 10; Col. 2:13; 1 Thess. 1:4–5; 2 Tim. 1:9; Titus 3:5.)

As in all appearances of this call in the epistles, Peter’s use of **called** here clearly refers to the effectual and irresistible call to salvation.

God effects His saving call through the revealed majesty of His own Son. Sinners are drawn **by** the **glory and excellence** of Jesus Christ. In Scripture **glory** always belongs to God alone (cf. Ex. 15:11; Deut. 28:58; Pss. 8:1; 19:1; 57:5; 93:1; 104:1; 138:5; 145:5; Isa. 6:3; 42:8, 12; 48:11; 59:19; Heb. 1:3; Rev. 21:11, 23). Thus when sinners see the glory of Christ they are witnessing His deity (cf. Luke 9:27–36; John 1:3–5, 14). Unless through the preaching of the gospel (Rom. 10:14–17) they realize who Christ is (the glorious Son of God who is Savior; cf. John 20:30–31; 2 Peter 1:16–18), and understand their need for repentance, so as to come to Him in faith, pleading for salvation, sinners cannot escape hell and enter heaven.

So, when God draws sinners to Himself, they see not only Christ’s



glory as God, but also His **excellence** as man. That refers to His morally virtuous life and His perfect humanity (cf. Matt. 20:28; Luke 2:52; 22:27; 2 Cor. 8:9; Phil. 2:7; Heb. 2:17; 4:15; 7:26; 1 Peter 2:21–23; 1 John 3:3). All salvation blessings, power, and provision come only to those who see and believe the words and acts of the sinless God/Man (cf. John 14:7–10; Acts 2:22; 1 Cor. 15:47; 1 John 1:1–2; 5:20).

#### DIVINE PROMISES

**For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust.** (1:4)

Christ's glory as God and His excellence as the perfect Man attract people to a saving relationship with Him. **By these** attributes of glory and excellence **He has** accomplished all that is necessary for believers' salvation, so that He also **granted to** them **His precious and magnificent promises**. The term rendered **has granted** is from the same verb (*dōreomai*) that occurs in verse 3, again in the perfect tense, describing past action with continuing effects.

Peter describes all the salvation promises in Christ as **precious** (*timios*) **and magnificent** (*megistos*), meaning "valuable" and "greatest," respectively. These words include all the divine **promises** for God's own children contained in the Old and New Testaments (cf. 2 Cor. 7:1), such as: spiritual life (Rom. 8:9–13), resurrection life (John 11:25; 1 Cor. 15:21–23), the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:33; Eph. 1:13), abundant grace (John 10:10; Rom. 5:15, 20; Eph. 1:7), joy (Ps. 132:16; Gal. 5:22), strength (Ps. 18:32; Isa. 40:31), guidance (John 16:13), help (Isa. 41:10, 13–14), instruction (Ps. 32:8; John 14:26), wisdom (Prov. 2:6–8; Eph. 1:17–18; James 1:5; 3:17), heaven (John 14:1–3; 2 Peter 3:13), eternal rewards (1 Tim. 4:8; James 1:12).

The Lord bestows all these **so that** believers **may become** full **partakers of the divine nature**. First, **may become** is not intended to present merely a future possibility, but a present certainty. The verb builds on all Peter has written. He has said that in salvation saints are called effectually by God through the true knowledge of the glory and excellence of Christ, and thus they receive everything related to life and godliness, as well as priceless spiritual promises. It is because of all that that believers **may become**, here and now, possessors of God's own eternal life (cf. John 1:12; Rom. 8:9; Gal. 2:20; Col. 1:27). **Partakers** (*koinōnos*) is often translated "fellowship," and means "sharer" or "part-



ner.” Believers are in this life partners in the very life that belongs to God (Col. 3:3; 1 John 5:11; cf. John 6:48–51).

From what they do partake in, Peter turns to what believers do not partake in, **the corruption that is in the world by lust**. Those who share the eternal life of God and Christ have completely **escaped** the effects of sin (Phil. 3:20–21; 1 John 3:2–3; cf. Titus 1:2; James 1:12; 1 John 2:25; Rev. 2:10b–11). **Corruption** (*phthora*) denotes an organism decomposing or rotting, and its accompanying stench. The world’s moral decomposition is driven by sinful **lust** (*epithumia*), “evil desire” (1 John 2:16; cf. Eph. 2:3; 4:22). **Having escaped** depicts a successful flight from danger, in this case the effects of one’s fallen nature, the sinfulness of the decaying world, and its final destruction (cf. Phil. 3:20–21; 1 Thess. 5:4, 9–10; Rev. 20:6). At glorification, believers will be redeemed completely so that they possess eternal life in perfect holiness in a new heaven and new earth where no sin or corruption will ever exist (cf. Rev. 21:1–4; 22:1–5).

It is noteworthy that Peter borrows from the terminology of mystical, pantheistic religion that called for its adherents to recognize the divine nature within them and lose themselves in the essence of the gods. Ancient false teachers (the Gnostics) and more recent ones (Eastern mystics and New Age gurus of all sorts) have often emphasized the importance of personally attaining transcendent knowledge. The apostle Peter, however, stressed to his readers the need to recognize that only by being spiritually born anew (John 3:3; James 1:18; 1 Peter 1:23) can anyone attain true divine knowledge, live righteously as God’s children (Rom. 8:11–15; Gal. 2:20), and thereby share in God’s nature (cf. 2 Cor. 5:17). The false prophets of Peter’s day believed that transcendent knowledge elevated people above any need for morality. But Peter countered that notion by asserting that genuine knowledge of God through Christ gives believers all they need to live godly lives (cf. 2 Tim. 3:16–17).

THE MACARTHUR  
NEW TESTAMENT  
COMMENTARY  
**1-3 JOHN**

*John MacArthur*

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# Certainties of the Word of Life (1 John 1:1–4)

# 1

**What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life—and the life was manifested, and we have seen and testify and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us—what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ. These things we write, so that our joy may be made complete. (1:1–4)**

We live in an era that looks with suspicion on any type of certainty or conviction about the truth. Our society has abandoned the idea of absolutes, choosing instead to arbitrarily grant equal validity to every opinion and philosophical musing. Sadly, today's church, influenced by the surrounding culture, has fallen prey to an inclusivism that tolerates seemingly any and every viewpoint, except dogmatism. In the realm of biblical interpretation, for instance, a significant new movement is gaining ground that says that no one can know for sure what the Bible means. According to this emerging viewpoint, the Bible is so obscure that anyone who exegetes Scripture should offer nothing more than a

cautious, “humble,” open-minded opinion regarding the text’s meaning. But such radical, unwarranted skepticism blatantly ignores the Bible’s own teaching that Christians not only can, but must, know the truth (John 8:32; cf. Pss. 19:8; 119:105; Prov. 22:21; Isa. 29:24; Luke 1:4; 1 Tim. 4:3; 2 Peter 1:12, 19; 1 John 2:21; 4:6; 2 John 1). Thus, to claim that the meaning of Scripture is unknowable is to directly attack the divinely designed clarity of the Bible; it is, in essence, to accuse God of being unable to clearly reveal Himself and His truth to humanity. The inevitable result of such arrogance—for those who embrace it—is the loss of certainty and confidence about the rich and essential doctrinal truths of the Christian faith.

The writers of Scripture, on the other hand, were absolutely certain of what they believed and, under the Holy Spirit’s inspiration, wrote with a clarity and boldness that makes the message of salvation in its fullness understandable to the regenerated and illuminated mind. Still, the proper sense of dogmatism is utterly contrary to today’s relativistic attitudes, and those who hold it are consistently condemned as insensitive, unloving, and anti-intellectual. The reality is that those who deny Scripture’s clarity are likely motivated by rebellion against its clear message of sin and righteousness (cf. John 3:20). Denying that the Bible can be understood gives false comfort to those who do not like the truth it reveals. In contrast, those who love the truth are quick to seek it out and apply it to their lives (John 3:21). Such God-honoring adherence to divine, absolute truth is precisely what the apostle John exalts in his first epistle as the evidence of genuine salvation.

The teaching of this epistle may be divided into three categories: theological certainty regarding the gospel and the person of Jesus Christ (2:1–2, 22; 5:1, 20), moral certainty regarding the commandments of God (2:4, 7, 29; 3:9, 22), and relational certainty regarding love (2:10; 4:7, 21; 5:2–3). (For a complete overview of John’s themes in his first letter, see the Introduction to 1 John at the beginning of this volume.)

Consistent with his firm commitment to the certainty of divine truth, John dispensed with all introductory amenities—he did not even name himself as the author, nor did he identify his audience. Rather, he immediately launched into writing the Spirit-inspired truth. He began by presenting five certainties about the person and work of Christ: The Word of Life is unchangeable, historical, communicable, relational, and joyful.

## THE WORD OF LIFE IS UNCHANGEABLE

### **What was from the beginning, (1:1a)**

The message of redemption is unchanging. **From the beginning** of the proclamation of the gospel it has been the same. Those who preach the true gospel have always commanded faith and repentance (Matt. 4:17; John 3:16–18; Acts 2:38; 17:30), declared that the kingdom of God is at hand (Matt. 3:2; Acts 19:8), announced the merciful and gracious availability of divine forgiveness (Acts 10:43; Eph. 1:7), and urged sinners to be reconciled to God through Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 5:18–21). When the apostle John wrote this epistle, an incipient Gnosticism was already threatening the churches of Asia Minor. Its proponents denied the full deity and humanity of Jesus Christ and, therefore, His true nature essential to the gospel. They further claimed to have attained, apart from the gospel, a transcendent knowledge of the divine, available only to the “spiritual” elite and otherwise beyond the reach of the common believer.

Such false teachers threatened the church in John’s day, just as they still do today; and they will continue to do so until the end of the age. Jesus warned, “For false Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect” (Matt. 24:24). They threaten to undermine the church (Acts 20:29–30; 2 Tim. 3:1–9), seeking to lure it away from the apostolic body of faith (cf. Acts 2:42; 13:8; 14:22; 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:13; 2 Cor. 13:5; Eph. 4:4–6; Col. 1:23; 1 Tim. 4:1, 6; 6:10, 21; 2 Tim. 3:8; 4:7; Titus 1:13; 3:15; 2 Peter 1:20–21; Jude 3, 4, 20)—the inspired truth that nothing can ever supersede (cf. Heb. 13:8–9).

Any alteration of this heavenly revelation, whether by adding to it or taking from it, constitutes an attack on the truth and its sovereign Author. All preachers, teachers, and witnesses for the gospel—in any generation or location, for any reason, including making the message more acceptable or marketable—should know they cannot freely change with impunity any element of God’s revelation.

The apostle Paul also earlier warned in unambiguous words of those who propagate an altered or false gospel:

I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; which is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed! As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed! (Gal. 1:6–9)

With a simple opening statement John establishes that the gospel message concerning the Word of Life is permanent and unalterable (cf. Rev. 22:18–19).

## THE WORD OF LIFE IS HISTORICAL

**what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life—and the life was manifested, (1:1b-2a)**

Contrary to what the false teachers taught, experiencing Christ and His gospel is not some mystical, spiritually transcendent, secret insight reserved only for those elite who ascend to some higher understanding. John told his readers—even those who were young in their faith (cf. 2:12)—that they could apprehend the actual, historical truth about **the Word of Life** (the person and work of Jesus Christ as proclaimed in the gospel). In his record of the life and ministry of Christ, John wrote that “the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14; cf. Rom. 1:3; Gal. 4:4; Heb. 1:1-3; 1 Tim. 3:16; Rev. 19:13). Jesus Christ was the God-man (John 10:30), fully divine (Phil. 2:6; Col. 2:9); and fully human (Luke 1:31; Phil. 2:7-8; Heb. 2:14; 4:15). John had experienced that reality through his natural senses and was a true witness to the incarnation in its completeness.

John listed four ways he had actually perceived the Word of Life with his senses. First he had **heard** the Lord speak. John heard the parables (e.g., Matt. 13:3-33; Mark 4:26-29; Luke 15:11-32), sermons (Matt. 4:23; 5-7), and private words of instruction and counsel from Jesus (Matt. 10:5-42; John 13:12-17; 14-16). **Have heard** translates a perfect tense form of the verb *akouō*, indicating a completed occurrence in the past with an impact in the present. John did not merely hear something from Jesus on a single occasion. He was present throughout Jesus’ earthly ministry (cf. John 20:30-31; 21:24-25). Though John wrote this letter some sixty years later, what he had heard firsthand was still a vivid truth in his heart.

Not only had John heard the Lord; he had also seen Him. The verb translated **have seen** is also in the perfect tense, again suggesting a past, completed action with a present, ongoing impact. John added **with our eyes** to make it clear that he was referring to the physical experience of seeing; he was not referring to some kind of spiritual vision that was only in his mind. Christ was not a mystical, phantom image, as some have alleged, but a real man whom John had observed daily for three years by means of normal eyesight.

Third, reinforcing the truth that he had actually seen Jesus, John added the term **looked at**. That word involves more than a mere glance or quick look; instead, it denotes a long, searching gaze (cf. 4:14; Matt. 11:7; Luke 23:55). It is the same verb (*theaomai*) that the *New King James*



*Version* translates “beheld” in John 1:14. Beyond the works that Jesus performed, John and the other apostles watched Him intently for several years and saw the stunning and unmistakable realities of who He is (cf. Matt. 13:16–17)—the Lord and God, Messiah and Savior (Luke 2:25–32; John 1:29, 41), with supernatural power over demons, disease, nature, and death (Matt. 4:23–24; 8:28–32; Mark 1:23–27; Luke 5:4–6; 7:12–15; John 2:6–10; 4:46–53; 5:5–9; 9:1–7; 11:38–45), and the authority to forgive sins (Mark 2:5, 9; Luke 7:48) and grant eternal life (Luke 19:10; John 11:24–27). As intimate and constant eyewitnesses to His earthly ministry, they had ample proof that Jesus Christ was God in human flesh (John 14:8–11).

Finally, John told his readers that he had **touched with his hands** the Word of Life. The word rendered **touched** (*psēlaphaō*) means “to feel after,” or “grope” (like a blind man). Jesus used the same word in Luke 24:39, “Touch Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” The apostles would have touched Jesus all the time in the daily course of their companionship with Him. John even described himself as one who leaned on Jesus’ chest (John 13:23, 25; 21:20). The Lord encouraged Thomas to touch Him on that postresurrection occasion, “Reach here with your finger, and see My hands; and reach here your hand and put it into My side; and do not be unbelieving, but believing” (John 20:27).

With the incarnation of Jesus Christ **the life was manifested**. The verb translated **was manifested** (*phaneroō*) means “to reveal,” or “to make visible what was hidden.” God did not reveal Himself in human flesh until Christ’s earthly ministry when the divine or eternal **life** became visible to mankind. As Jesus said, “For just as the Father has life in Himself, even so He gave to the Son also to have life in Himself” (John 5:26; cf. 1:1–4; 5:39–40; 11:25–26; 1 John 5:12). The Father and the Son have the same divine life, and both can grant eternal life (John 6:37–40).

#### THE WORD OF LIFE IS COMMUNICABLE

**and we have seen and testify and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us—what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, (1:2b–3a)**

For John, that which **was manifested to** him—the Word of Life—became the basis for his proclamation of truth. His privileged life in the presence of the Lord Christ was not a private experience to elevate him above others who were not so blessed, as if he were somehow one of God’s “favorite sons.” Rather, his privilege became the platform for his

responsibility and mandate, as an apostle and eyewitness, to bear witness (**testify**) of the truth (John 20:30–31; 21:24; cf. 1:41–42; 2 Cor. 5:14–15) and **proclaim** the gift of **eternal life** in Him (cf. Ps. 145:11–12; 1 Cor. 2:2; 9:16) to those, including his readers, who had never seen Jesus. Because of his widespread reputation as one who had been with Jesus as an apostle (cf. John 1:14, 16–18, 37–51), John was a true and credible witness (John 19:35–37). Other New Testament books written by apostles or their associates also present eyewitness accounts of Jesus and the truth of the gospel. The other Gospels do that (cf. Luke 1:1–4), as does the book of Acts (cf. 1:1–3) and the epistles (e.g., 2 Peter 1:16–21).

The apostle John knew that the matter of communicating the Word of Life was not an option but a command. The content of the message was not to be hoarded but its unchanging truth declared far and wide. Commenting on this passage, John R. W. Stott provided this key perspective:

The historical manifestation of the Eternal Life was proclaimed, not monopolized. The revelation was given to the few for the many. They were to dispense it to the world. . . . He [Christ] not only manifested Himself to the disciples to qualify them as *eyewitnesses*, but gave them an authoritative commission as *apostles* to preach the gospel. The author [John] insists that he possess these necessary credentials. Possessing them, he is very bold. Having heard, seen and touched the Lord Jesus, he bears witness to Him. Having received a commission, he proclaims the gospel with authority, for the Christian message is neither a philosophical speculation, nor a tentative suggestion, nor a modest contribution to religious thought, but a dogmatic affirmation by those whose experience and commission qualified them to make it. (*The Epistles of John*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964], 61, 62–63, emphases in original)

#### THE WORD OF LIFE IS RELATIONAL

**so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ. (1:3b)**

John proclaimed the Word of Life **so that** (*hina*, “in order that”) all believers would realize they have **fellowship** (an authentic partnership) **with** Jesus Christ and fellow believers (cf. Acts 1:14; 2:42, 44–47; 1 Cor. 12:26–27; Eph. 4:1–3; Heb. 10:25; 12:22–24). The word rendered **fellowship**, the familiar Greek term *koinonia*, signifies a mutual participation in a common cause or shared life (cf. Gal. 2:9; 6:6; 1 Tim. 6:18; Titus 1:4; Philem. 6; 1 Peter 4:13; Jude 3). It is far more than a mere partnership

of those who have the same beliefs and are thus drawn together. Rather, it is the mutual life and love of those who are one in spirit (1 Cor. 6:17; cf. Eph. 5:30–32).

The aim of gospel preaching is to produce faith that rests in Christ (John 6:29; Acts 20:21). Those who believe savingly in Jesus enter into a genuine union with **the Father, His Son Jesus Christ**, and the Holy Spirit. The apostle Paul wrote,

God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. (1 Cor. 1:9; cf. Gal. 2:20)

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. (2 Cor. 13:14; cf. John 17:21)

Even sinning Christians who lose the joy of their fellowship with God never lose the reality of that eternal life from Him (1 Cor. 1:9; 2 Cor. 13:14; Phil. 2:1; Heb. 12:10), given them through their union with Christ (Rom. 6:3–5; Eph. 2:5; Col. 3:3). Jesus said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life” (John 5:24; cf. Eph. 5:26; Titus 3:5). The new birth produces new life, so that believers are regenerated into everlasting fellowship with the triune God (cf. John 3:5–8).

#### THE WORD OF LIFE IS JOYFUL

**These things we write, so that our joy may be made complete.** (1:4)

Because it is transforming truth, John’s message is one that brings consummate **joy**, produces full satisfaction and **complete** fulfillment that can never be lost (John 10:28–29; Rom. 8:35–39; Phil. 1:6; 2 Peter 1:10–11). Jesus told the apostles in the upper room, “These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full” (John 15:11; cf. 16:22, 33; Luke 2:10). As the apostle Paul explained, “For the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14:17; cf. Phil. 4:4; 1 Thess. 5:16).

The secular, dictionary definition of **joy**—“the emotion evoked by well-being, success, or good fortune or by the prospect of possessing what one desires”—is thoroughly inadequate when applied to the Christian life. Martyn Lloyd-Jones correctly observed,

Another thing we must bear in mind, in any definition we may give of New Testament joy, is that we do not go to a dictionary; we go to the New Testament instead. This is something quite peculiar which cannot be explained; it is a quality which belongs to the Christian life in its essence, so that in our definition of joy we must be very careful that it conforms to what we see in our Lord. The world has never seen anyone who knew joy as our Lord knew it, and yet He was “a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.” So our definition of joy must somehow correspond to that. (*Life in Christ: Studies in 1 John* [Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2002], 28)

Lloyd-Jones went on to appropriately summarize the sort of joy of which the apostle John was speaking:

Joy is something very deep and profound, something that affects the whole and entire personality. In other words it comes to this; there is only one thing that can give true joy and that is contemplation of the Lord Jesus Christ. He satisfies my mind; He satisfies my emotions; He satisfies my every desire. He and His great salvation include the whole personality and nothing less, and in Him I am complete. Joy, in other words, is the response and the reaction of the soul to a knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. (*Life in Christ*, 30)

John wanted his readers to experience the **joy** that comes from understanding the reality of Christ, the saving truth of the gospel, and the fellowship that each Christian has with God and fellow believers. It is then that all true followers of Jesus will have His “joy made full in themselves” (John 17:13; cf. 15:11; 16:24; Ps. 16:11).

THE MACARTHUR  
NEW TESTAMENT  
COMMENTARY

**REVELATION 1-11**

*John MacArthur*

MOODY PUBLISHERS/CHICAGO

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# Back to the Future (Revelation 1:1–6)

# 1

**The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants, the things which must soon take place; and He sent and communicated it by His angel to His bond-servant John, who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near. John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace, from Him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To Him who loves us and released us from our sins by His blood—and He has made us to be a kingdom, priests to His God and Father—to Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen. (1:1–6)**

Many people are fascinated, even obsessed with the future. They faithfully read their horoscopes, seek out Tarot card readers, have their palms read, feed on futuristic science fiction material, or call one of the many “psychic hot lines” advertised on TV. Some people delve more



deeply into the occult, seeking out mediums (as did King Saul), futilely and sinfully attempting to obtain information about what is to come by “consult[ing] the dead on behalf of the living” (Isa. 8:19). The dead cannot, of course, respond to such efforts at contact, but demons do, masquerading as the dead and propagating lies.

All such attempts to discern the future, however, are in vain. There is only One who knows and declares the future: God (Isa. 44:7; 45:21; 46:9–10). Only in Scripture can truth about the future be found. The Old Testament prophets, particularly Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and Zechariah, provide glimpses of the future. So did our Lord in His Olivet Discourse, along with Peter and Paul in their inspired writings. But the book of Revelation provides the most detailed look into the future in all of Scripture. The fitting capstone of God’s revelation to man in the Bible, the book of Revelation unveils the future history of the world, all the way to history’s climax in the return of Christ and the setting up of His glorious earthly and eternal kingdom.

By way of introduction, John lists eleven characteristics of this marvelous book: its essential nature, central theme, divine source, human recipients, prophetic character, supernatural delivery, human author, promised blessing, compelling urgency, Trinitarian benediction, and exalted doxology.

#### ITS ESSENTIAL NATURE

### **The Revelation** (1:1a)

These two words are essential to understanding this book. Many people are confused by the book of Revelation, viewing it as a mysterious, bizarre, indecipherable mystery. But nothing could be further from the truth. Far from *hiding* the truth, the book of Revelation *reveals* it. This is the last chapter in God’s story of redemption. It tells how it all ends. As the account of the Creation in the beginning was not vague or obscure, but clear, so God has given a detailed and lucid record of the ending. It is unthinkable to believe that God would speak with precision and clarity from Genesis to Jude, and then when it comes to the end abandon all precision and clarity. Yet, many theologians today think Revelation is not the precise record of the end in spite of what it says. They also are convinced that its mysteries are so vague that the end is left in confusion. As we shall see in this commentary, this is a serious error that strips the saga of redemption of its climax as given by God.

*Apokalupsis* (**Revelation**) appears eighteen times in the New Testament, always, when used of a person, with the meaning “to become

visible.” In Luke 2:32, Simeon praised God for the infant Jesus, describing Him as “a Light of revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel.” Simeon exulted that the Messiah had been made visible to men. Paul spoke in Romans 8:19 of the manifest transformation of believers in glory as “the revealing of the sons of God.” Both Paul (1 Cor. 1:7) and Peter (1 Pet. 1:7) used *apokalupsis* to refer to the revelation of Christ at His second coming.

The book of Revelation contains truths that had been concealed, but have now been revealed. Though it nowhere directly quotes the Old Testament, 278 of its 404 verses refer or allude to Old Testament prophetic truth, and it amplifies what was only initially suggested in the Old Testament.

The Apocalypse reveals a great many divine truths. It warns the church of the danger of sin and instructs it about the need for holiness. It reveals the strength Christ and believers have to overcome Satan. It reveals the glory and majesty of God and depicts the reverent worship that constantly attends His throne. The book of Revelation reveals the end of human history, including the final political setup of the world, the career of Antichrist, and the climactic Battle of Armageddon. It reveals the coming glory of Christ’s earthly reign during the millennial kingdom, the Great White Throne judgment, and depicts the eternal bliss of the new heaven and the new earth. It reveals the ultimate victory of Jesus Christ over all human and demonic opposition. The book of Revelation describes the ultimate defeat of Satan and sin, and the final state of the wicked (eternal torment in hell) and the righteous (eternal joy in heaven). In short, it is a front-page story of the future of the world written by someone who has seen it all.

But supremely, overarching all those features, the book of Revelation reveals the majesty and glory of the Lord Jesus Christ. It describes in detail the events associated with His second coming, revealing His glory that will one day blaze forth as strikingly and unmistakably as lightning flashing in a darkened sky (Matt. 24:27).

#### ITS CENTRAL THEME

#### **of Jesus Christ, (1:1b)**

While all Scripture is revelation from God (2 Tim. 3:16), in a unique way the book of Revelation is *the* revelation—the revelation of Jesus Christ. While this book is certainly revelation *from* Jesus Christ (cf. 22:16), it is also the revelation *about* Him. The other New Testament uses of the phrase *apokalupsis Iēsou Christou* (**Revelation of Jesus Christ**)

suggest that John's statement in this verse is best understood in the sense of revelation about Jesus Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 1:7; Gal. 1:12; 2 Thess. 1:7; 1 Pet. 1:7). The Gospels are also about Jesus Christ, but present Him in His first coming in humiliation; the book of Revelation presents Him in His second coming in exaltation. Every vision and description of Him in Revelation is one of majesty, power, and glory.

Christ's unveiling begins in 1:5–20, where He is revealed in His ascended majesty. Those verses also provide a preview of His second coming glory. In chapters 2 and 3, as exalted Lord of the church, He reproves and encourages His church. Finally, chapters 4–22 provide a detailed look at His second coming; the establishing of His millennial kingdom, during which He will personally reign on earth; and the ushering in of the eternal state.

W.A. Criswell, long-time pastor of the First Baptist Church of Dallas, gave the following explanation as to why Christ must yet be revealed in glory:

The first time our Lord came into this world, He came in the veil of our flesh. His deity was covered over with His manhood. His Godhead was hidden by His humanity. Just once in a while did His deity shine through, as on the Mount of Transfiguration, or as in His miraculous works. But most of the time the glory, the majesty, the deity, the wonder and the marvel of the Son of God, the second person of the Holy Trinity, were veiled. These attributes were covered over in flesh, in our humanity. He was born in a stable. He grew up in poverty. He knew what it was to hunger and to thirst. He was buffeted and beaten and bruised. He was crucified and raised up as a felon before the scoffing gaze of the whole earth. The last time that this world saw Jesus was when it saw Him hanging in shame, misery and anguish upon the cross. He later appeared to a few of His believing disciples, but the last time that this unbelieving world ever saw Jesus was when it saw Him die as a malefactor, as a criminal, crucified on a Roman cross. That was a part of the plan of God, a part of the immeasurable, illimitable grace and love of our Lord. "By His stripes we are healed."

But then is that all the world is ever to see of our Saviour—dying in shame on a cross? No! It is also a part of the plan of God that some day this unbelieving, this blaspheming, this godless world shall see the Son of God in His full character, in glory, in majesty, in the full-orbed wonder and marvel of His Godhead. Then all men shall look upon Him as He really is. They shall see Him holding in His hands the title-deed to the Universe, holding in His hands the authority of all creation in the universe above us, in the universe around us, and in the universe beneath us; holding this world and its destiny in His pierced and loving hands. (*Expository Sermons on Revelation* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1969], 1:16–17)

Even a cursory glance through the book of Revelation reveals that Jesus Christ is its main theme. He is “the faithful witness” (1:5); “the firstborn of the dead” (1:5); “the ruler of the kings of the earth” (1:5); “the Alpha and the Omega” (1:8; 21:6); the one “who is and who was and who is to come” (1:8); “the Almighty” (1:8); “the first and the last” (1:17); “the living One” (1:18); “the One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands” (2:1); “the One who has the sharp two-edged sword” (2:12); “the Son of God” (2:18); the One “who has eyes like a flame of fire, and . . . feet . . . like burnished bronze” (2:18); the One “who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars” (3:1); the One “who is holy, who is true” (3:7); the holder of “the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, and who shuts and no one opens” (3:7); “the Amen, the faithful and true Witness” (3:14); “the Beginning of the creation of God” (3:14); “the Lion that is from the tribe of Judah” (5:5); “the Root of David” (5:5); the Lamb of God (e.g., 5:6; 6:1; 7:9–10; 8:1; 12:11; 13:8; 14:1; 15:3; 17:14; 19:7; 21:9; 22:1); the “Lord, holy and true” (6:10); the One who “is called Faithful and True” (19:11); “The Word of God” (19:13); the “King of kings, and Lord of lords” (19:16); Christ (Messiah), ruling on earth with His glorified saints (20:6); and “Jesus . . . the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star” (22:16). The book of Revelation reveals the majesty and glory of the Lord Jesus Christ in song, poetry, symbolism, and prophecy. In it the heavens are opened and its readers see, as did Stephen (Acts 7:56), visions of the risen, glorified Son of God.

#### ITS DIVINE SOURCE

#### **which God gave Him** (1:1c)

In what sense is the book of Revelation a gift from the Father to Jesus Christ? Some interpret the phrase **which God gave Him** in connection with Jesus’ words in Mark 13:32: “But of that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone.” In the humiliation of His incarnation, when He “emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant” (Phil. 2:7), Jesus restricted the independent use of His divine attributes. In the book of Revelation, those holding this view argue, the Father finally gave Jesus the information He lacked in His incarnation and humiliation.

There are two insurmountable difficulties with that view, however. The most obvious one is that the book of Revelation nowhere gives the day or hour of Christ’s return. Thus, it does not contain the very information the Father was supposedly revealing to the Son. Further, the glorified,

ascended Son resumed the full use of His divine attributes more than half a century before the book of Revelation was written. Being fully God and omniscient, He had no need for anyone to give Him any information.

In reality, the book of Revelation is the Father's gift to the Son in a far deeper, more marvelous sense. As a reward for His perfect, humble, faithful, holy service, the Father promised to exalt the Son. Paul explains,

Christ Jesus, . . . although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore also 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. (Phil. 2:5–11)

Christ's exaltation, promised in the last three verses (9–11) of that passage, is described in detail in the book of Revelation. It thus contains the full disclosure of the glory that will be Christ's at His return—His ultimate reward from the Father for His faithfulness during His humiliation. The first token of the Father's pleasure with the obedient Son was His resurrection; the second was His ascension; the third was the sending of the Holy Spirit; and the last was the gift of the book of Revelation, which promises and reveals the glory that will be Christ's at His second coming.

The book of Revelation, then, details the Son's inheritance from the Father. Unlike most human wills, however, this document can be read because it is not a sealed, private document. But not everyone has the privilege of understanding it, only those to whom God unveils it by His Spirit.

#### ITS HUMAN RECIPIENTS

##### **to show to His bond-servants, (1:1d)**

To further exalt and glorify His Son, the Father has graciously granted to a special group of people the privilege of understanding the truths found in this book. John describes those people as **His** [Christ's] **bond-servants**. *Doulois* (**bond-servants**) literally means "slaves" (cf. Matt. 22:8; Mark 13:34). The *doulos* (bond-servant), however, was a special type of slave—one who served out of love and devotion to his master.

Exodus 21:5–6 describes such slaves: “But if the slave plainly says, ‘I love my master, my wife and my children; I will not go out as a free man,’ then his master shall bring him to God, then he shall bring him to the door or the doorpost. And his master shall pierce his ear with an awl; and he shall serve him permanently.”

This is why unbelievers find the book of Revelation incomprehensible; it was not intended for them. It was given by the Father to the Son to **show** to those who willingly serve Him. Those who refuse to acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord cannot expect to comprehend this book. “A natural man,” explains Paul, “does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised” (1 Cor. 2:14). To His disciples, when on earth, Jesus said, “To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted. . . . Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand” (Matt. 13:11, 13). Unbelievers couldn’t grasp what Jesus meant when He was teaching about present spiritual realities. Neither can they grasp the future realities. Divine truth is hidden from the worldly-wise. The unbelieving skeptic finds in the book of Revelation nothing but chaos and confusion. But to the loving, willing **bond-servants** of Jesus Christ, this book is the understandable unveiling of prophetic truth about the future of the world.

### ITS PROPHETIC CHARACTER

#### **the things which must soon take place; (1:1e)**

The book of Revelation’s emphasis on future events sets it apart from all other New Testament books. While they contain references to the future, the Gospels primarily focus on the life and earthly ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ. Acts chronicles the history of the church from its beginnings on the day of Pentecost until the imprisonment at Rome of the apostle Paul. The New Testament epistles, like the Gospels, contain glimpses of the future. Their primary emphasis, however, is explaining the meaning of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and applying it to the life of the church in the present. Thus, the first five books of the New Testament are about the past, and the next twenty-one about the present. The last book, though it contains some information about the past (chap. 1) and the present (the seven churches in chaps. 2–3; although actual historical churches of John’s day, they depict the types of churches found throughout the church age), focuses on the future (chaps. 4–22).

As in all prophetic literature, there is a dual emphasis in the book of Revelation. It portrays Jesus Christ in His future glory along with the blessedness of the saints. It also depicts the judgment of unbelievers in Jesus Christ leading to their eternal damnation. Commentator Charles Erdman notes:

This is a book of judgments and of doom. The darker side of the picture is never for a moment concealed. God is just. Sin must be punished. Impenitence and rebellion issue in misery and defeat. Here is no sentimental confusion of right and wrong. Here is no weak tolerance of evil. There is mention of "the Lamb that hath been slain," but also of "the wrath of the Lamb." There is a "river of water of life," but also a "lake of fire." Here is revealed a God of love who is to dwell among men, to wipe away all tears, and to abolish death and sorrow and pain; but first his enemies must be subdued. Indeed, The Revelation is in large measure a picture of the last great conflict between the forces of evil and the power of God. The colors are lurid and are borrowed from the convulsions of nature and from the scenes of human history, with their battles and their carnage. The struggle is titanic. Countless hordes of demonic warriors rise in opposition to him who is "King of Kings, and Lord of Lords." Upon them "woes" are pronounced, "bowls" of wrath are poured out, and overwhelming destruction is visited. A brighter day is to come, but there is thunder before the dawn. (*The Revelation of John* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966], 12)

The profound and compelling truths in the book of Revelation are thus bittersweet (cf. 10:9–10).

**Soon** translates *tachos*, which can mean "in a brief time," or "quickly." It is true that there is a certain brevity to the future events depicted in this book. The unprecedented, unimaginable judgments that sweep the earth do so in a brief period of time. In just seven years, the evil world system is deluged by the horrific wrath of God. Even the thousand-year earthly kingdom is brief by God's standards (cf. 2 Pet. 3:8). It is also true that the Rapture, when Christ returns for His church, takes place "in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye" (1 Cor. 15:52).

But that is not the primary meaning of *tachos* in this context. The idea is not the speed with which Christ moves when He comes, but the nearness of His coming. The use of *tachos* and related words in Revelation supports the understanding of its meaning here as "soon." In 2:16, Jesus warned the church at Pergamum to "repent; or else I am coming to you quickly," while in 3:11 He comforted the faithful church at Philadelphia by telling them, "I am coming quickly." Chapter 11, verse 14, declares, "The second woe is past; behold, the third woe is coming quickly." An angel told John that "the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, sent His angel to show to His bond-servants the things which must soon take



place” (22:6). The Lord Jesus Christ three times declared, “I am coming quickly” (22:7, 12, 20). In all those cases *tachos* (or words related to it) clearly refers to the imminence or nearness of an event, not the speed at which it happens. The *tachos* word group is used in a similar sense throughout the New Testament (e.g., Acts 17:15; 25:4; Rom. 16:20; 1 Cor. 4:19; Phil. 2:19, 24; 1 Tim. 3:14; 2 Tim. 4:9; Heb. 13:19, 23; 2 Pet. 1:14). Thus, **the things which must soon take place** about which John wrote do not happen in a brief time span, but are imminent (cf. 1:3; 22:6).

Believers are not to try to set the “times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority” (Acts 1:7). Instead, they are at all times to heed their Lord’s warning to “be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming” (Matt. 24:42). The knowledge that the events depicted in the book of Revelation are **soon take place** has and should motivate Christians to live holy, obedient lives (2 Pet. 3:14).

#### ITS SUPERNATURAL DELIVERY

#### **and He sent and communicated it by His angel (1:1f)**

The book of Revelation is unique in New Testament literature because it is the only book **sent and communicated** to its human author by angels. In 22:16 Jesus reaffirmed the truth taught here, declaring, “I, Jesus, have sent My angel to testify to you these things for the churches.” Angels were involved in the giving of the book of Revelation to John just as they were in the giving of the Law to Moses (Acts 7:53; Gal. 3:19; Heb. 2:2). Not only were angels involved in transmitting the book of Revelation to John, but they also play a prominent role in the scenes it depicts. Angels appear in every chapter of Revelation except 4 and 13. The words *angel* or *angels* are used seventy-one times in the book of Revelation—more than in any other book in the Bible. In fact, one out of every four uses in Scripture of those words is in the book of Revelation. This book, then, is an important source of information on the ministry of angels.

#### ITS HUMAN AUTHOR

#### **to His bond-servant John, who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. (1:1g-2)**

The human agent to whom the angelic messengers communicated the book of Revelation is here identified as **His** [Christ’s] **bond-**



**servant John.** As noted in the Introduction, this was John the apostle, the son of Zebedee and brother of James. As also noted in the Introduction, John wrote the book of Revelation while in exile on the island of Patmos (1:9).

The enormity of the visions John received on that barren island staggered him. Throughout his gospel, John never directly referred to himself. Yet here he bookends his vision with the statement, “I, John” (1:9; 22:8)—an exclamation that expressed his amazement that he was receiving such overwhelming visions.

As he had loyally **testified** to the first coming of Christ (John 19:35; 21:24; 1 John 1:2; 4:14), so John faithfully, under the Spirit’s inspiration, testified **to all that he saw** concerning His second coming. Specifically, John bore witness **to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ.** Those phrases appear together again in 1:9 (cf. 12:17), and are used synonymously, since “the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy” (19:10). The **word of God** expressed in the book of Revelation is **the testimony** about the coming glory of **Jesus Christ** given to His church (cf. 22:16) and recorded by His faithful witness, John.

#### ITS PROMISED BLESSING

**Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; (1:3a)**

The book of Revelation is bracketed by promises of blessing (beatitudes, as in Matt. 5:3–12) to those who read and obey it (cf. 22:7; Luke 11:28). But those are only two of the seven promises of blessing the book contains; the rest are equally wonderful: “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on! ‘Yes,’ says the Spirit, ‘so that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow with them’” (14:13). “Behold, I am coming like a thief. Blessed is the one who stays awake and keeps his clothes, so that he will not walk about naked and men will not see his shame” (16:15); “blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb” (19:9); “blessed and holy is the one who has a part in the first resurrection” (20:6); “blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter by the gates into the city” (22:14).

The three participles translated **reads, hear, and heed** are in the present tense. Reading, hearing, and obeying the truths taught in the book of Revelation (and in the rest of Scripture) are to be a way of life for believers. The change from the singular **he who reads** to the plural **those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things**

**which are written in it** depicts a first-century church service. It was common practice when the church gathered for one person to read the Scriptures aloud for all to hear (cf. 1 Tim. 4:13). Dr. Robert L. Thomas explains that “because writing materials were expensive and scarce, so were copies of the books that were parts of the biblical canon. As a rule, one copy per Christian assembly was the best that could be hoped for. Public reading was the only means that rank-and-file Christians had for becoming familiar with the contents of these books” (*Revelation 1–7: An Exegetical Commentary* [Chicago: Moody, 1992], 60). Since only Scripture was to be publicly read, John’s “obvious intention that the Apocalypse was to be read publicly argued strongly from the start that it be included among those books that eventually would be recognized as part of the NT canon” (Thomas, *Revelation 1–7*, 62–63).

The book of Revelation is God’s final word to man, the culmination of divine revelation. Its writing marked the completion of the canon of Scripture (cf. 22:18–19), and its scope encompasses the entire future sweep of redemptive history (1:19). Therefore it is imperative that believers pay diligent heed to the truths it contains.

#### ITS COMPELLING URGENCY

#### **for the time is near.** (1:3b)

This phrase reiterates the truth taught in 1:1, that the events depicted in the book of Revelation are imminent. **Time** does not translate *chronos*, which refers to time on a clock or calendar, but *kairos*, which refers to seasons, epochs, or eras. The next great era of God’s redemptive history is **near**.

That the return of Christ is imminent, the next event on God’s prophetic calendar, has always been the church’s hope. Jesus commanded His followers to watch expectantly for His return:

Be dressed in readiness, and keep your lamps lit. Be like men who are waiting for their master when he returns from the wedding feast, so that they may immediately open the door to him when he comes and knocks. Blessed are those slaves whom the master will find on the alert when he comes; truly I say to you, that he will gird himself to serve, and have them recline at the table, and will come up and wait on them. Whether he comes in the second watch, or even in the third, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves. But be sure of this, that if the head of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have allowed his house to be broken into. You too, be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour that you do not expect. (Luke 12:35–40)

“The night is almost gone,” wrote Paul to the Romans, “and the day is near” (Rom. 13:12). The apostle thought that he might be alive when the Lord returns, as his use of the plural pronoun *we* in such passages as 1 Corinthians 15:51–58 and 1 Thessalonians 4:15–18 indicates. The writer of Hebrews exhorted his readers to “[encourage] one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near” (Heb. 10:25). James encouraged struggling believers with the reality that Christ’s return was imminent: “Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. . . . You too be patient; strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. . . . Behold, the Judge is standing right at the door” (James 5:7–9). “The end of all things is near,” Peter reminded his readers (1 Pet. 4:7), while in 1 John 2:18 the apostle John added, “Children, it is the last hour.”

Despite the skepticism of the scoffers, who demand, “Where is the promise of His coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all continues just as it was from the beginning of creation” (2 Pet. 3:4), the Lord Jesus Christ will return. And His return is **near**.

#### ITS TRINITARIAN BENEDICTION

**John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace, from Him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.** (1:4–5a)

Unlike modern letters, in which the senders put their names at the end of the letter, ancient letters sensibly named their writers at the beginning. Thus **John** identifies himself as the writer and names **the seven churches** (listed in 1:11) **that are** in the Roman province of **Asia** (modern Turkey) as the recipients. **Grace to you and peace** was a standard greeting in New Testament letters (cf. Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3; 2 Cor. 1:2; Gal. 1:3; Eph. 1:2; Phil. 1:2; Col. 1:2; 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:2; Philem. 3), but this greeting introduces a benediction from the exalted Trinity (cf. 2 Cor. 13:14).

The phrase **Him who is and who was and who is to come** identifies the first Person of the Trinity, God the Father, described here in anthropomorphic terms. Because it is the only way we can understand, the threefold description (cf. 1:8; 4:8) views God in time dimensions (past, present, and future), although He is timeless. The eternal God is the source of all the blessings of salvation, all grace, and all peace.

**The seven Spirits who are before His throne** refers to the Holy Spirit. Obviously, there is only one Holy Spirit; the number **seven**

depicts Him in His fullness (cf. 5:6; Isa. 11:2; Zech. 4:1–10). The Holy Spirit in all His glory and fullness sends grace and peace to believers; He is the spirit of grace (Heb. 10:29) and produces peace in believers' lives (Gal. 5:22). Here He is seen in the glory of His place in the Father's presence in heaven.

Grace and peace also flow **from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth**. He, too, is seen in the glory of His exaltation. It is only fitting that John mentions Christ last, and gives a fuller description of Him, since He is the theme of the book of Revelation. A **faithful witness** is one who always speaks and represents the truth, and that certainly characterizes the Lord Jesus Christ. He was a perfect witness to the nature of God. Revelation 3:14 calls Him "The Amen, the faithful and true Witness." "For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world," He declared to Pilate, "to testify to the truth" (John 18:37). Jesus Christ, the faithful witness who cannot lie and lived and spoke flawlessly the will of God, promises believers salvation's grace and peace.

The second description of Jesus, **the firstborn of the dead**, does not mean He was chronologically the first one to be raised from the dead. There were resurrections before His in the Old Testament (1 Kings 17:17–23; 2 Kings 4:32–36; 13:20–21), and He Himself raised others during His earthly ministry (Matt. 9:23–25; Luke 7:11–15; John 11:30–44). *Prōtokos* does not mean **firstborn** in time sequence, but rather first in preeminence. Of all who have ever been or ever will be resurrected, He is the premier one. God declares of the Messiah in Psalm 89:27, "I also shall make him My firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth." The book of Revelation records the unfolding of that promise.

The third title, **the ruler of the kings of the earth**, depicts Christ as absolutely sovereign over the affairs of this world, to which He holds the title deed (cf. 5:1ff.). That Jesus Christ is the sovereign King of the earth is repeatedly taught in Scripture (e.g., 19:16; Ps. 2:6–8; Jer. 23:5; Zech. 9:9; Matt. 2:2; 21:5; Luke 19:38; 23:3; John 1:49). He is Lord, having a name "above every name" (Phil. 2:9–11), who, according to the Father's plan and the Spirit's work, grants believers His royal blessing of grace and peace.

#### ITS EXALTED DOXOLOGY

**To Him who loves us and released us from our sins by His blood—and He has made us to be a kingdom, priests to His God and Father—to Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen. (1:5b–6)**

The work of Christ on behalf of believers caused John to burst forth in an inspired doxology of praise to Him. In the present, Christ loves believers with an unbreakable love (Rom. 8:35-39). The greatest expression of that love came when He **released us from our sins by His blood**—a reference to the atonement provided by His sacrificial death on the cross on our behalf.

Here is the heart of the gospel. Sinners are forgiven by God, set free from sin, death, and hell by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross. God made Him our substitute, killing Him for our sins, so that the penalty was fully paid for us. God's justice was satisfied and God was able then to grant righteousness to repentant sinners for whom Christ died.

Christ's love also caused Him to make **us to be a kingdom** (not the millennial kingdom, but the sphere of God's rule which believers enter at salvation; cf. Col. 1:13) in which we enjoy His loving, gracious rule and almighty, sovereign protection. Finally, He made us **priests to His God and Father**, granting us the privilege of direct access to the Father (cf. 1 Pet. 2:9-10).

John concludes his doxology with the only proper response in light of the magnitude of the blessings Christ has given believers: **To Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen.** That is to be the response of all who read this marvelous book in which that future glory and dominion is clearly presented.

THE MACARTHUR  
NEW TESTAMENT  
COMMENTARY  
**REVELATION 12-22**

*John MacArthur*

MOODY PUBLISHERS/CHICAGO

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# The War of the Ages— Part 1: The Prelude (Revelation 12:1–6)

# 1

**A great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars; and she was with child; and she cried out, being in labor and in pain to give birth. Then another sign appeared in heaven: and behold, a great red dragon having seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads were seven diadems. And his tail swept away a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she gave birth he might devour her child. And she gave birth to a son, a male child, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron; and her child was caught up to God and to His throne. Then the woman fled into the wilderness where she had a place prepared by God, so that there she would be nourished for one thousand two hundred and sixty days. (12:1–6)**

The Bible warns that “pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before stumbling” (Prov. 16:18). The most notorious and tragic illustration of that principle, the one with the most far-reaching consequences, was Satan’s prideful rebellion against God. By it Lucifer, having fallen from heaven like lightning (Luke 10:18), was cast down

from his exalted position as the “anointed cherub who covers” (Ezek. 28:14). He forfeited his place as the highest created being and became the supreme enemy of God. Satan’s rebellion touched off a cosmic war throughout the universe—a war dwarfing any other war in human experience. Satan’s war against God is a two-front war. By leading a mutiny against God among the angels, Satan attempted unsuccessfully to destroy the paradise of heaven. By leading a mutiny against God among men, Satan destroyed the earthly paradise of the Garden of Eden, plunged the whole human race into decay and corruption, and usurped (temporarily) the role of the “ruler of this world” (John 12:31; 16:11).

The opening campaign of Satan’s war of the ages took place in heaven. When he rebelled (Isa. 14:12–15; Ezek. 28:12–17), one-third of the angels foolishly and wickedly cast their lots with him (see the discussion of v. 4 below). None of them could have known what the eternal consequences of their choice would be. Wanting to be like God, they became as much unlike Him as possible. These fallen angels (or demons) became Satan’s storm troopers, doing the bidding of their evil commander. They fight against divine purpose, making war with both the holy angels and the human race.

When Adam and Eve plummeted into corruption by choosing to listen to Satan’s lies and disobey God, the human race became embroiled in the cosmic war of the ages. In fact, since the Fall the earth has been the primary theater in which that war has been fought. Though already fallen, every member of the human race faces the same choice as the angels did in eternity past: to fight on God’s side or on Satan’s. Remaining neutral is not an option, for in Matthew 12:30 Jesus declared, “He who is not with Me is against Me; and he who does not gather with Me scatters.”

The final battles of Satan’s long war against God are yet to be fought. They will take place in the future, during the last half of the seven-year tribulation period, the time Jesus called the Great Tribulation (Matt. 24:21). At that time Satan, aided by the absence of the raptured church and the presence of increased demon hordes (9:1–11), will mount his most desperate assaults against God’s purposes and His people. But despite the savage fury with which those assaults will be carried out, they will not succeed. The Lord Jesus Christ will effortlessly crush Satan and his forces (19:11–21) and send him to the abyss for the duration of the millennial kingdom (20:1–2). After leading a final rebellion at the close of the Millennium, Satan will be consigned to eternal punishment in the lake of fire (20:3, 7–10).

The sounding of the seventh trumpet will proclaim the triumphant victory of the Lord Jesus Christ over the usurper, Satan: “Then the seventh angel sounded; and there were loud voices in heaven, say-

ing, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ; and He will reign forever and ever” (11:15). There will be joy in heaven because Christ has defeated Satan and established His eternal kingdom. Thus, the outcome of the war between Satan and God is not in doubt. Christ’s ultimate triumph is certain.

Though chapter 11 records the sounding of the seventh trumpet, the effects it produces are not described until chapters 15–18. The seventh trumpet will sound near the end of the Tribulation, launching the brief, but final and devastating bowl judgments just before Christ’s return in power and glory. Chapters 6–11 describe the events of the Tribulation up to the sounding of the seventh trumpet; chapters 12–14 recapitulate that same period, describing events from Satan’s vantage point. In addition, the latter section takes the reader all the way back to the original rebellion of Satan (12:3–4). The chronological narrative of the Tribulation events then resumes in chapter 15.

The Tribulation will feature both the unprecedented judgments of God’s eschatological wrath and the desperate fury of Satan’s efforts to thwart God’s purposes. That deadly combination will make the Tribulation the most devastating period in human history (Matt. 24:21–22). During that time, horrifying events will take place, caused both by God’s judgments and by Satan’s fury.

Before describing that final war, the inspired apostle John first introduces the main characters involved in it: the woman (Israel), the dragon (Satan), and the male child (Jesus Christ).

## THE WOMAN

**A great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars; and she was with child; and she cried out, being in labor and in pain to give birth.** (12:1–2)

The first thing John saw in this vision was a **great sign**—the first of seven signs in the last half of Revelation (cf. v. 3; 13:13, 14; 15:1; 16:14; 19:20). *Mega* (**great**) appears repeatedly in this vision (cf. vv. 3, 9, 12, 14); everything John saw seemed to be huge either in size or in significance. *Sēmeion* (**sign**) describes a symbol that points to a reality. The literal approach to interpreting Scripture allows for normal use of symbolic language, but understands that it points to a literal reality. In this case, the description plainly shows that the woman John saw was not an actual woman. Also, the reference to “the rest of her children,” those “who keep

the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus” (v. 17), shows that this **woman** is a symbolic mother.

The **woman** is the second of four symbolic women identified in Revelation. The first, though an actual woman, had the symbolic name Jezebel (2:20). She was a false teacher and symbolizes paganism. Another symbolic woman, depicted as a harlot, appears in 17:1-7. She represents the apostate church. The fourth woman, described in 19:7-8 as the bride of the Lamb (cf. 2 Cor. 11:2), represents the true church. Some argue that the **woman** in this present vision represents the church, but as the context makes clear (cf. v. 5), she represents Israel. The Old Testament also pictures Israel as a woman, the adulterous wife of the Lord (Jer. 3:1, 20; Ezek. 16:32-35; Hos. 2:2) whom God will ultimately restore to Himself (Isa. 50:1). A reference to the ark of the covenant (11:19) adds further support for identifying the **woman** as Israel.

That Israel will play a key role in the end-time drama is not surprising. The seventieth week of Daniel’s prophecy (the Tribulation) will primarily concern Israel, just as the first sixty-nine did (cf. Dan. 9:24-27). Israel’s presence in the end times is consistent with God’s emphatic promises of her continued existence as a nation:

Thus says the Lord,  
 Who gives the sun for light by day  
 And the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light by night,  
 Who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar;  
 The Lord of hosts is His name:  
 “If this fixed order departs  
 From before Me,” declares the Lord,  
 “Then the offspring of Israel also shall cease  
 From being a nation before Me forever.”  
 Thus says the Lord,  
 “If the heavens above can be measured  
 And the foundations of the earth searched out below,  
 Then I will also cast off all the offspring of Israel  
 For all that they have done,” declares the Lord.  
 (Jer. 31:35-37; cf. 33:20-26; 46:28; Amos 9:8)

Further, Israel’s presence during the seventieth week of Daniel’s prophecy is in keeping with God’s promises to her of a kingdom (Isa. 65:17-25; Ezek. 37:21-28; Dan. 2:44; Zech. 8:1-13) and national salvation (Zech. 12:10-13:1; 13:8-9; Rom. 11:26).

Often as an instrument of God’s judgment, Satan has persecuted the Jewish people throughout their history. He knows that to destroy Israel would make it impossible for God to fulfill His promises to the Jewish people. God will not allow him to do that, but will use Satan to chas-

ten Israel. It comes as no surprise that the devil will intensify his persecution of Israel as the establishment of the millennial kingdom draws near. As previously noted, the seventh trumpet will sound near the end of the Tribulation. Only weeks, or perhaps a few months at most, will remain after it sounds until the return of the Lord Jesus Christ. With his time running out (cf. v. 12), Jewish people will become the special target of Satan's hatred and destructive attacks.

John saw that the **woman was clothed with the sun, and had the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars**. That fascinating description reflects Joseph's dream, recorded in Genesis 37:9–11:

Now he had still another dream, and related it to his brothers, and said, "Lo, I have had still another dream; and behold, the sun and the moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me." He related it to his father and to his brothers; and his father rebuked him and said to him, "What is this dream that you have had? Shall I and your mother and your brothers actually come to bow ourselves down before you to the ground?" His brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the saying in mind.

In the imagery of Joseph's dream, the sun represents Jacob, the moon Rachel, and the eleven stars Joseph's brothers. The allusion to Joseph's dream is fitting, since his life parallels Israel's history. Both endured the indignity of captivity in Gentile nations, yet were in the end delivered and exalted to a place of prominence in a kingdom.

That the **woman was clothed with the sun** reflects redeemed Israel's unique glory, brilliance, and dignity because of her exalted status as God's chosen nation (cf. Deut. 7:6; 14:2; 1 Kings 3:8; Pss. 33:12; 106:5; Isa. 43:20). It also links her with Jacob (the sun in Joseph's dream), an heir in the Abrahamic covenant; Israel's continued existence as a nation reflects the ongoing fulfillment of that covenant (cf. Gen. 12:1–2). The reference to **the moon under her feet** may be a further description of Israel's exalted status. It could also include the concept of God's covenantal relationship with Israel, since the **moon** was part of the cycle of Israel's required times of worship (cf. Num. 29:5–6; Neh. 10:33; Ps. 81:3; Isa. 1:13–14; Col. 2:16). The **crown** (*stephanos*; the crown associated with triumph in the midst of suffering and struggle) **of twelve stars** (Joseph being the twelfth) on the woman's **head** refers to the twelve tribes of Israel.

Having described the woman's attire, John noted her condition: **she was with child**. That also is familiar Old Testament imagery describing Israel (cf. Isa. 26:17–18; 66:7–9; Jer. 4:31; 13:21; Mic. 4:10; 5:3). That

the woman is pregnant further confirms her identity as Israel; the church cannot be a mother since she is not yet married (19:7–9; 2 Cor. 11:2). Being pregnant, the woman **cried out, being in labor and in pain to give birth**. Just like a pregnant woman in labor feels pain, so the nation of Israel was in pain, waiting for Messiah to come forth. The cause of some of the pain is the persecution by Satan, who attempts to destroy the mother. The nation was in pain when the Messiah came the first time. So will it be at His second coming. Ever since the first promise of a Redeemer who would come to destroy him (Gen. 3:15), Satan has attacked Israel. For centuries, Israel agonized and suffered, longing for the Child who would come to destroy Satan, sin, and death, and establish the promised kingdom. No nation in history has suffered as long or as severely as Israel has—both from God’s chastening, and also from Satan’s furious efforts to destroy the nation through whom the Messiah would come.

Having described the woman’s agonizing labor pains, John introduces the cause of her suffering.

#### THE DRAGON

**Then another sign appeared in heaven: and behold, a great red dragon having seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads were seven diadems. And his tail swept away a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she gave birth he might devour her child.** (12:3–4)

With the second sign, a new character emerges on the scene: the woman’s mortal enemy, dramatically portrayed by **another sign** that **appeared in heaven**. Verse 9 clearly identifies the **great red dragon** as Satan (cf. 20:2). Satan, of course, is not an actual **dragon** (any more than Israel is an actual woman) but a malevolent spirit being, a fallen angel. The symbolic language used to describe him pictures the reality of his person and character. Only in Revelation is Satan referred to as a **dragon**; before that he is called (among other names) a serpent (Gen. 3:1ff.; 2 Cor. 11:3). A dragon is a far more terrifying symbol. In the Old Testament the same Hebrew word translated *dragon* (Isa. 27:1; 51:9) is also translated *monster* or *sea monster* (Gen. 1:21; Job 7:12; Pss. 74:13; 148:7; Jer. 51:34; Ezek. 29:3; 32:2). It pictures a large, ferocious, and terrifying animal. **Red**, the color of fiery destruction and bloodshed, further stresses Satan’s vicious, deadly, destructive nature. In the words of Jesus, “He was a murderer from the beginning” (John 8:44). The Hebrew word for “ser-

pent” (*nachash*) used in Genesis 3:1 is used interchangeably in some texts with the Hebrew word for dragon (*tannin*) (cf. Ex. 7:9, 15). So the animal Satan used in the Garden of Eden was a reptile, but one not yet cast down to its belly (Gen. 3:14). Likely, it was more upright—a dragon standing upon two legs, cursed to walk on four legs close to the ground, or slither like a snake. **Red** is a fitting color for the **dragon**, since he attacks both the woman and her child.

Ezekiel 29:1–5, which describes Pharaoh as the enemy of God, captures the essence of this frightening imagery used to describe Satan:

In the tenth year, in the tenth month, on the twelfth of the month, the word of the Lord came to me saying, “Son of man, set your face against Pharaoh king of Egypt and prophesy against him and against all Egypt. Speak and say, ‘Thus says the Lord God,

“Behold, I am against you, Pharaoh king of Egypt,

The great monster that lies in the midst of his rivers,

That has said, ‘My Nile is mine, and I myself have made it.’

I shall put hooks in your jaws

And make the fish of your rivers cling to your scales.

And I shall bring you up out of the midst of your rivers,

And all the fish of your rivers will cling to your scales.

I shall abandon you to the wilderness, you and all the fish of your rivers;

You will fall on the open field; you will not be brought together or gathered.

I have given you for food to the beasts of the earth and to the birds of the sky.””

The **dragon** is further described as **having seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads were seven diadems**. He is depicted as a seven-headed monster that rules the world. Satan has been allowed by God to rule the world since the Fall and will continue to do so until the seventh trumpet sounds (11:15). The **seven heads** with their **seven diadems** (*diadema*; royal crowns symbolizing power and authority) represent seven consecutive world empires running their course under Satan’s dominion: Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, Rome, and Antichrist’s future empire (17:9–10). The final kingdom, ruled by Antichrist, will be a ten-nation confederacy; the **ten horns** represent the kings who will rule under Antichrist (17:12; cf. 13:1; Dan. 7:23–25). The shifting of the **diadems** from the dragon’s **heads** to the beast’s horns (13:1) reveals the shift in power from the seven consecutive world empires to the ten kings under the final Antichrist.

Satan’s pervasive, evil influence is not limited to the human realm, but extended first into the angelic realm. In the picturesque language of



John's vision, the dragon's **tail swept away a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth**. The references to the dragon's angels in verses 7 and 9 indicate that the **stars of heaven** are angels. The genitive case offers further support for that interpretation: these are **stars** belonging to **heaven**; that is their proper abode. Angels are depicted symbolically as **stars** elsewhere in Scripture (9:1; Job 38:7).

When Satan fell (Isa. 14:12-15; Ezek. 28:12-17), he **swept away a third of the** angelic host with him. Along with their defeated leader, those evil angels were cast from heaven **to the earth**. (It should be noted that although he was cast from his dwelling in heaven, Satan, in this present age, has access to God's presence; see 12:10; Job 1, 2. As noted in the discussion of 12:7-9 in chapter 2 of this volume, he will be permanently barred from heaven after his defeat by Michael and the holy angels during the Tribulation.)

The number of angels who joined Satan in his rebellion is not revealed, but is vast. Revelation 5:11 says that the number of the angels around God's throne numbered "myriads of myriads, and thousands of thousands." *Myriad* does not represent an exact number; it was the highest number the Greeks expressed in a word. Since one-third of the angels fell, and 9:16 reveals that two hundred million demons will be released from captivity near the Euphrates River, there must be at least four hundred million holy angels. Uncounted thousands of other demons will have already been released from the abyss earlier in the Tribulation (9:1-3). In addition to those two groups of bound demons, there are millions of others who are currently free to roam the earth and the heavenly realm (cf. Eph. 6:12; Col. 2:15). They, along with evil men under his control, assist Satan in his unholy war against God. Adding the (unrevealed) number of these unbound demons to the calculations given above increases the numbers of both the holy angels and the demons.

As the next event in his dramatic vision unfolded, John noted that **the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she gave birth he might devour her child**. Throughout history, Satan has bent all of his efforts toward persecuting the people of God. Abel was a righteous, obedient man; Satan prompted Cain to kill him. In his first epistle, John wrote, "Cain . . . was of the evil one and slew his brother. And for what reason did he slay him? Because his deeds were evil, and his brother's were righteous" (1 John 3:12). Seeking to produce a mongrel, half-human half-demon and thus unredeemable race of men, Satan sent demons ("sons of God"; the same Hebrew phrase refers to angels in Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7; Pss. 29:1; 89:6) to cohabit with human women (Gen. 6:1-4).

Because they were the chosen people through whom the Messiah was to come, and by whom the good news of forgiveness was to be



proclaimed, Satan reserved his special hatred for Israel. After Joseph's death, the Israelites became slaves in Egypt. In that place, the fates both of the nation and of its human deliverer hung by a slender thread.

Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, "Behold, the people of the sons of Israel are more and mightier than we." . . .

Then the king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other was named Puah; and he said, "When you are helping the Hebrew women to give birth and see them upon the birthstool, if it is a son, then you shall put him to death; but if it is a daughter, then she shall live." But the midwives feared God, and did not do as the king of Egypt had commanded them, but let the boys live. So the king of Egypt called for the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this thing, and let the boys live?" The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not as the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife can get to them." So God was good to the midwives, and the people multiplied, and became very mighty. It came about because the midwives feared God, that He established households for them. Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, saying, "Every son who is born you are to cast into the Nile, and every daughter you are to keep alive."

Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a daughter of Levi. The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was beautiful, she hid him for three months. But when she could hide him no longer, she got him a wicker basket and covered it over with tar and pitch. Then she put the child into it and set it among the reeds by the bank of the Nile. His sister stood at a distance to find out what would happen to him.

The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the Nile, with her maidens walking alongside the Nile; and she saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid, and she brought it to her. When she opened it, she saw the child, and behold, the boy was crying. And she had pity on him and said, "This is one of the Hebrews' children." Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and call a nurse for you from the Hebrew women that she may nurse the child for you?" Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Go ahead." So the girl went and called the child's mother. Then Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child away and nurse him for me and I shall give you your wages." So the woman took the child and nursed him. The child grew, and she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter and he became her son. And she named him Moses, and said, "Because I drew him out of the water." (Ex. 1:8–9; 1:15–2:10)

From a human perspective, Pharaoh attempted to destroy the Israelites because he believed them to be a threat to his power. But in

reality, Pharaoh was an operative of Satan, who sought to wipe out the people from whom the Messiah would come. It is also true to say that Satan was acting within the purposes of God for Israel. The courage of the Hebrew midwives and God's sovereign protection of Moses, whom He would later use to deliver Israel from Egyptian bondage, thwarted Satan's schemes.

During the period of the judges, Satan used Israel's pagan neighbors in an attempt to destroy them. Yet God preserved His people through all of those assaults, raising up judges to rescue them from their oppressors. Later, Satan tried to use Saul to murder David and thus eliminate the messianic line (cf. 1 Sam. 18:10-11). During the days of the divided kingdom, the messianic line twice dwindled to one fragile child (2 Chron. 21:17; 22:10-12). Still later, Satan inspired Haman to undertake his genocidal mission against the Jewish people (Est. 3-9). But God used Esther to save her people from disaster. Throughout their history, the devil incited the Israelites to murder their own children as sacrifices to idols (cf. Lev. 18:21; 2 Kings 16:3; 2 Chron. 28:3; Ps. 106:37-38; Ezek. 16:20).

Having failed to wipe out the people of God and the messianic line, Satan desperately attempted to murder the Messiah Himself before He could do His saving work. John saw that **the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she gave birth he might devour her child** (Christ). Satan attacked Jesus first through Herod, who attempted to kill the baby Jesus:

An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up! Take the Child and His mother and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is going to search for the Child to destroy Him." . . .

Then when Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, he became very enraged, and sent and slew all the male children who were in Bethlehem and all its vicinity, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the magi. (Matt. 2:13, 16)

At the outset of our Lord's earthly ministry, Satan tempted Him to mistrust God (Matt. 4:1-11). But the devil's efforts to get Jesus to abandon His mission did not succeed. Satan tried to use the people of Nazareth to kill Jesus (Luke 4:28-30), but their enraged attempt to "throw Him down the cliff" (v. 29) ended in failure when He calmly "pass[ed] through their midst, [and] went His way" (v. 30). Satan's other attempts to cut short Jesus' earthly ministry also ended in failure, "because His hour had not yet come" (John 7:30; 8:20). Even the devil's seeming victory at the Cross was in reality his ultimate defeat (Col. 2:15; Heb. 2:14; 1 Pet. 3:18-20; 1 John 3:8).

## THE MALE CHILD

**And she gave birth to a son, a male child, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron; and her child was caught up to God and to His throne. Then the woman fled into the wilderness where she had a place prepared by God, so that there she would be nourished for one thousand two hundred and sixty days.** (12:5–6)

In spite of all of Satan's relentless efforts to prevent it, the woman (Israel) **gave birth to a son**. The incarnation of the **male child**, the Lord Jesus Christ, "who was born of a descendant of David according to the flesh" (Rom. 1:3; cf. Rom. 9:5), was the fulfillment of prophecy (cf. Gen. 3:15; Isa. 7:14; 9:6; Mic. 5:2). Israel brought forth the Messiah. The Bible emphasizes that Jesus was of Jewish lineage. He was a son of Abraham (Matt. 1:1), a member of the tribe of Judah (Gen. 49:10; Mic. 5:2; Rev. 5:5), and a descendant of David (Matt. 1:1; cf. 2 Sam. 7:12–16).

Nor will Satan be able to hinder Christ's coronation; He will **rule all the nations with a rod of iron** during His earthly, millennial kingdom (v. 10; 2:26–27; 11:15; 19:15). Psalm 2:7–9 indicates that this rule is a breaking, shattering work of judgment. In fact, the verb *poimainō* (**rule**) carries the connotation of "destroy," as it does in 2:27. The Messiah will come and destroy **all the nations** (19:11–21) and in His kingdom have dominion over the nations that enter to populate that kingdom. An iron rod is also one that cannot be broken. Just as all of Satan's past efforts to hinder Christ have failed, so also will his future efforts fail (cf. 11:15). The phrase **rod of iron** speaks of the resoluteness of Christ's rule; He will swiftly and immediately judge all sin and put down any rebellion.

Between Christ's incarnation and His coronation came His exaltation, when He **was caught up to God and to His throne** at His ascension. Christ's exaltation signifies the Father's acceptance of His work of redemption (Heb. 1:3). Satan could not stop Christ from accomplishing redemption and therefore being exalted to the right hand of the Father as a perfect Savior. In his sermon on the Day of Pentecost, Peter declared, "God raised [Christ] up again, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power" (Acts 2:24).

But though he is a defeated foe, Satan will not give up. Unable to stop Christ's birth, ascension, or rule, Satan still assaults His people. He has already instigated the genocidal massacre of Jews in Europe, as well as the death of countless thousands throughout history. During the Tribulation, Satan will increase his efforts to destroy the Jewish people, so that the nation cannot be saved as the Bible promises (Zech. 12:10–13:1;

Rom. 11:25-27). And so that there will be none left alive to enter the millennial kingdom, he will seek to kill believing Jews. As always, Israel will be his prime target. In a brief glimpse of what will be described more fully in verses 13-17, John noted that **the woman fled into the wilderness where she had a place prepared by God, so that there she would be nourished for one thousand two hundred and sixty days** (cf. v. 14). God will frustrate Satan's attempt to destroy Israel during the Tribulation by hiding His people, just as the Lord Jesus Christ predicted:

"Therefore when you see the abomination of desolation which was spoken of through Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), then those who are in Judea must flee to the mountains. Whoever is on the housetop must not go down to get the things out that are in his house. Whoever is in the field must not turn back to get his cloak. But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days! But pray that your flight will not be in the winter, or on a Sabbath. For then there will be a great tribulation, such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever will." (Matt. 24:15-21)

Antichrist's desecration of the temple will send the Jewish people fleeing **into the wilderness**. The exact location where God will hide them is not revealed, but it is probably somewhere east of the Jordan River and south of the Dead Sea, in the territory formerly occupied by Moab, Ammon, and Edom (cf. Dan. 11:40-41). Wherever their hiding place will be, they will be **nourished** and defended by God (cf. vv. 14-16), just as their ancestors were during the forty years of wandering in the wilderness. The length of Israel's stay in hiding, **one thousand two hundred and sixty days** (three and a half years; cf. 11:2-3; 12:14; 13:5) corresponds to the last half of the Tribulation, the period Jesus called the Great Tribulation (Matt. 24:21). Those Jews who remain behind in Jerusalem will come under the influence of the two witnesses, and many in that city will be redeemed (11:13). Eventually, in spite of Satan's efforts, "all Israel will be saved" (Rom. 11:26).

The great cosmic war of the ages between God and Satan that began with Satan's rebellion is set to reach its climax. In this passage John provided important background information on that war and introduced its key figures. Then his vision turned to a description of the war, both in its heavenly and earthly phases, and its inevitable outcome.