

The B-I-B-L-E Sermon Series
What's in the New Testament?
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You may not agree with me on this, but I believe Christians have been disagreeing about things for millennia. We sometimes act as though arguing about theology is a uniquely modern invention. We fight about worship styles, politics, sexuality, immigration, and whether we sing that one hymn too much or not enough. But Christians in the first century were having their own arguments. Their controversies included things like whether you could eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols and whether or not being free in Christ meant freedom to do anything you wanted (hint: it doesn't).

The topics change. The arguments change. But underneath them is the same question: How do we faithfully follow Jesus in a world that is constantly challenging our faith or seducing us away from it? And that's one of the things that makes the Second Testament so fascinating. It isn't a book written by people who had everything figured out. It's a collection of writings from people who were trying to understand what it meant to authentically follow Jesus.

Last week, we talked about the First Testament as the story of the love between a compassionate, creative God and God's stubborn, stiff-necked people—that's you and me. Today we turn to the Second Testament, which tells us what God does next. God decides to stop sending other people to do God's work and instead comes to us personally in the form of Jesus Christ. The Second Testament tells the story of Jesus and the aftermath of his life, death, and resurrection. It also gives us some prime examples of how the first Christians struggled to know what it meant to have faith and how to live it out in their particular place and time, struggles which continue for us today.

That statement tells us that context plays a crucial role in how we understand the Bible. If you buy the claim that the Bible is divinely inspired and humanly written, then you have to take into consideration a book's context, because that can be a key that unlocks a deeper understanding of a passage. We'll talk more about this in a few weeks when we look at questions about the truth and authority of the Bible, but as we make our way into the Second Testament, we need to keep context on our radar screen.

The first four books are a great example of why this is important. One of the knocks against the authenticity of the Bible is that there are four different accounts of Jesus' life, and none of them quite match with the others. I remember seeing a cartoon where Jesus was speaking to a crowd and says, "Now pay attention, I don't want four different versions of this going around." The gospels tell the same stories in much different ways, they have events happening in a different order, and some tell stories that others leave out completely. If there's no consistency or agreement, how can this story be true?

I once heard someone say that the easiest way to prove four people can experience the same event and come away with four different stories is to ask four people what happened at a church potluck. Ask the person who brought the green bean casserole, and they'll tell you it was a great success. Ask the person who made the dessert, and they'll tell you nobody appreciated the amount of work that went into that rhubarb pie. Ask the person who was trying to get everyone to clean up afterward, and they'll tell you it was a complete disaster. And ask the person who got there late, and they'll tell you there wasn't any food left. Same potluck. Same people. Four very different accounts.

That's what's going on with the first four books of the Second Testament. The gospels – the word “gospel” means “good news” – were all written by different authors to different audiences with different purposes in mind. That's why the official title is “The Gospel according to...” It's the writer's version of the story. Mark was thought to have been written first, probably 30-40 years after Jesus was resurrected. Why not sooner? Why didn't someone say, “Hey, I should write this down, it might make a bestselling book someday?” Remember, back then literacy was a luxury. Most stories were passed down by word of mouth. It wasn't until following Jesus started to gain some traction that Mark decided some sort of recorded story was needed. In Mark's version, Jesus is a man of action, constantly healing, teaching, and moving toward the cross. Mark says, “Look what Jesus does.”

About 10-20 years later, Matthew and Luke come along and decide to write their version of Jesus' story, each for very different reasons. Matthew was one of the disciples, a tax collector Jesus called to follow him. Matthew is writing to a thoroughly Jewish audience, so his goal is to show his readers that Jesus is the Messiah, the savior that is promised by the First Testament prophets. The Messiah was believed to be the person God was going to send to save the Jews from the persecution of their enemies. In contrast to Mark's action hero, in Matthew Jesus is primarily a teacher (the Jewish word “rabbi” means teacher). In Matthew we get the Sermon on the Mount and the teaching of the Lord's Prayer. Matthew says, “Listen to what Jesus teaches.”

Luke's audience was much different than Matthew's. He wasn't writing to Jews; his audience was primarily Gentiles. Like Mark, Luke wasn't an eyewitness to Jesus' life, so he got his information second-hand, reportedly interviewing people close to Jesus. Luke's goal was to show readers that Jesus came for everyone. In Luke, Jesus reaches out to lepers, foreigners, women, children, the poor. Luke is saying to his Gentile audience, “Look at who Jesus includes.”

And then there's John. John is radically different from the other three Gospels, with about 90 percent of its material unique to John. John is less interested in simply telling us what Jesus did and more interested in telling us that Jesus was divine, that Jesus and God are one in the same. So, John begins his gospel, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” John's gospel says, “Understand who Jesus is.” These are the four stories of Jesus.

Yes, the four stories are different, so why do I think they're all true? For me, there's one piece of evidence that I can't argue with. In all four gospels, the first people to see Jesus after the resurrection are...women. In a society in which women are not valued and their voices don't matter, why would all four gospel writers make them the first witnesses to the resurrection? If these stories were made up, you think they would have made the guys the heroes. But it's the women, which tells me all four writers were simply telling a true story from their perspective.

We move from the Gospels to Acts, also written by Luke, the only history book in the Second Testament. The gospel of Luke tells the story of Jesus; Acts tells what happened next as the good news began to spread. And at the center of Acts is Paul, who went from persecuting Christians to becoming one of Christianity's greatest missionaries.

The rest of the Second Testament is a giant post office. Almost everything else is a letter that was written during the time period chronicled in Acts. Most of them are letters from Paul to churches. Paul would visit a town on his journey, say, Corinth, and while there he would start a church. He'd spend a year or so getting it off the ground, then he'd move onto another city, like Ephesus, to do the same thing. While in Ephesus, he'd get a letter from the church in Corinth asking for clarification about something or needing help settling a dispute. So, he'd write a letter back to them clarifying or explaining or reprimanding. Those letters were preserved and passed

down and voila! You have letters to the Corinthians, to the Ephesians, to the churches in Rome and Galatia, etc. It's like a first-century Sent Emails folder.

Paul also wrote letters to individuals—Timothy, Titus, and Philemon. The remaining letters come from James, Peter, John, Jude, and an unknown author of Hebrews. They're written to particular communities facing particular problems, but they keep returning to the same basic question: How do we remain faithful to Jesus?

Well, that's it! That's all the books in the New Testament. I don't think I left anything out...wait! What? There's still a book left? I hoped you wouldn't remember. The last book of the Bible, Revelation, is a fantastical vision written by John, either inspired by the Holy Spirit or some local medicinal herbs. It's a bizarre, sometimes disturbing, often unintelligible story about cosmic warfare and the end of time. A lot of people will tell you they know exactly what the dense symbolism means, but I'm not one of them. Trying to explain Revelation takes all the fun out of using it to predict the future and figure out who's going to Hell or what day the world is going to end and stuff like that. Underneath all the strange beasts, battles, numbers, and cosmic fireworks, Revelation is ultimately a book of hope: evil does not get the last word, God does.

Next week we're going to talk about how we got the Bible, which is a wonderful tale of lying and deception and bloodshed—a perfect bedtime story for the kiddos. But before we close this tour of the Second Testament, I want you to notice something. We started this sermon by talking about stubborn, stiff-necked people. That's us. We argue. We misunderstand. We get things wrong. We disagree about what it means to follow Jesus. We have been doing it for two thousand years.

And yet, after all the Gospels, all the stories, all the arguments, all the letters, all the warnings, all the strange beasts and cosmic battles of Revelation, this is where the Bible leaves us. The last words of the Bible are, “The one who testifies to these things says, “Surely I am coming soon.” Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen.

Jesus says, “Surely I am coming soon.” And the response is not, “We finally figured everything out.” It is: “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!” And then one final word: “The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints.” All the saints. Not the people who have everything figured out. Not the people who never disagree. Not the people who never get it wrong. Us. The stubborn ones. The doubters. The questioners. The people who are still trying to figure out what it means to follow Jesus.

The Bible begins with God creating us, and it ends with God offering us grace. That's the story. And that's why we're here—to keep reading it, keep wrestling with it, keep asking questions, keep discovering what it means for our lives, and keep trusting the grace of the Lord Jesus will be with all the saints. Even us.